

Iranian EFL Students' Perceptions and Preferences for Teachers' Written Feedback: Do Students' ideas Reflect Teachers' Practice?

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Abstract

The present study--both qualitative and quantitative--explored fifty EFL learners' preferences for receiving error feedback on different grammatical units as well as their beliefs about teacher feedback strategies. The study also examined the effect of the students' level of writing ability on their views about the importance of teacher feedback on different error types. Data was gathered through the administration of a questionnaire, verbal protocol analysis, and students' writing scores. The results of repeated measures, multivariate analysis of variance, and frequency counts revealed that the majority of the students expect and value teachers' written feedback on the following surface-level errors: transitional words, sentence structure, verb tenses, adverbs, punctuation, prepositions, and spelling, respectively. The results of think-aloud protocol analysis indicated that students' beliefs about the importance of feedback on different grammatical units are formed as a result of the teacher's practice and his emphasis on certain types of feedback and feedback strategies. Finally, the findings of the study showed that the L2 learners' level of writing ability influences their views about the importance of feedback on errors pertinent to particular grammatical units.

Keywords: 1. Feedback 2. Error 3. Perception 4. Preferences 5. Writing.

1. Introduction

Hendricson (1978) states, “making errors is a necessary and natural process of language learning. Inevitably, learner errors and feedback towards errors have been of great interest to language teachers and researchers” (387). However, to date there has been little agreement on how teachers should react to the errors made by L2 learners. In fact, researchers and educators have taken different positions with respect to teacher feedback.

A group of researchers consider error correction as harmful, time consuming, and ineffective (Truscott, 2007, 1996, 1999; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992; Kepner, 1991); another group defend the use of error feedback and believe that correcting students’ written errors would help them improve the quality and accuracy of their writing (Rahimi, 2009; Ferris, 1999, 2003, 2004; Lee, 1997, 2004; Hedgcok & Lefkowitz, 1994). Research, moreover, addresses the impact of different types of feedback (direct vs. indirect, for instance) on the improvement of L2 learners’ writing accuracy (Bitchener, 2005; Ferris, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Fathman and Whalley, 1990).

Nonetheless, while students’ views about feedback and error correction are very crucial factors in developing their writing skills (Diab, 2005), so far, there has been little research in this area. The present study, hence, aims to examine students’ beliefs about teacher feedback, their preferences for feedback on different types of grammatical errors, and whether there is any relationship between these preferences and their writing ability.

1.1 Literature review

Previous studies on students’ views about error feedback (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcok & Lefkowitz, 1994; Komura, 1999; Leki, 1991; Roberts, 1999) have consistently showed that L2 learners really expect and value teacher feedback on their writing. Some of these studies have also investigated students’ preferences for different types of feedback. For instance, Komura (1999) and Leki (1991) have shown that students

prefer indirect feedback with error codes or specified labels to direct teacher correction (that is, providing the learner with the correct form of the error) or errors which have been marked but not labeled.

With respect to the students' preferences for receiving feedback on certain writing aspects, Hedgecock & Lefkowitz' (1994) study of EFL and ESL college students revealed that EFL college students prefer and value teacher feedback and corrections on grammatical, lexical, and surface-level features more than those on content and style, whereas ESL students prefer feedback on content to feedback on form. Their participants also expressed moderate preferences for the use of error codes, and both disliked the teachers' use of the red pen.

Radecki & Swales (1988) surveyed 59 ESL students' attitudes towards feedback on their written work. They concluded that ESL students expect their teachers to correct all of their surface errors; otherwise, they would lose their credibility with their students.

In a survey of 100 ESL students' preferences for error correction, Leki (1991) found that learners believe that good writing is an error-free task. The results of the study also showed that the learners expect and want all their errors to be corrected.

Satio (1994) & Ferris (1995) also reached similar conclusions based on their surveys of students' attitudes towards feedback in an ESL context. Their survey showed that students considered surface-level error correction as an effective way of reducing errors in their subsequent writings.

Regarding students' preferences, Ferris & Roberts (2001) investigated 72 university ESL students' preferences and attitudes toward error feedback. The majority of the students stated that they had problems with verbs (81%), word choice (68%) or sentence structure (68%). However, only about 30% of the students said that they had serious problems with noun endings or article usage. More than half of the students (56%) believed that their grammar problems were quite serious and would hurt their writing. However, just 10% had a different idea and stated that their grammatical problems were not serious and

other issues such as writing organization were more important to them. As for feedback preferences, all the respondents found error correction necessary.

In his survey, Chandler (2003) compared four different teacher response methods (correction, underlining, underlining and description, description). The students were asked to express their views about which correction method made it easiest for them to correct their mistakes; which way helped them most in their future writing; and which way they liked the most. The majority of the students (more than two-third) considered correction the most helpful method; nearly 50% of the students regarded description and underlining more effective at reducing errors in subsequent writing and half said that they liked correction the most.

Lee (2004) explored the existing error correction practices in the Hong Kong secondary writing classroom from both the teachers' and the students' perspectives. The analysis of the data collected through questionnaires showed that most students (82%) expressed their desire for teacher feedback. However, 67% of the students said that, in spite of receiving teacher feedback, they were making the same errors again, and only 9% believed that they were making good progress. In a subsequent think aloud retrospection, the students asserted that they liked to receive feedback mainly to know what type of errors they had made.

Gram (2005) investigated 33 Saudi university students' perceptions about their teachers' written feedback. Findings of the study showed that the students had a strong desire for receiving feedback from their writing teachers and found it crucial and quite helpful. Similarly, Zacharias (2007), exploring teachers' and students' attitudes to feedback, found that generally the students find their teacher feedback necessary, which, as the students stated, originated from their awareness that teachers would control grades. The data also indicated that students preferred teacher feedback to other methods of correction such as peer feedback. Finally, the results indicated that the students considered feedback on language more helpful than feedback on content.

Taken together, studies on teacher feedback have surveyed the students' attitudes to error correction practice in general, correction of grammatical errors versus content or style, or different types of feedback. Nonetheless, no study has investigated L2 learners' preferences for receiving feedback on specific surface-level errors such as punctuation, spelling, adverb, etc. In fact, the majority of feedback studies have focused on very general and macro-level grammatical categories, which include smaller subcategories; for instance, word category includes subcategories like the wrong use of a word, inappropriate pronoun, and wrong connector, etc. However, the studies have just reported the findings pertinent to the main category, without pointing to the students' views about feedback on their subdivisions.

In addition, as Leki (1991) argues, attitude toward error feedback and preference for a particular type of feedback is strongly culture bound. In other words, due to the teachers' practices in class and the overall attitude of people to teacher feedback in a particular culture, students' views about the importance of feedback on certain grammatical aspects in different cultures can be different. However, no study has investigated Iranian EFL learners' preferences for teacher feedback on different surface-level errors and their beliefs about different correction strategies.

Finally, the survey studies on L2 learners' perception about feedback, conducted so far, have not investigated the impact of the students' level of writing ability on their views about error feedback. In other words, no study has ever attempted to see if the students with, say, a high level of writing ability have different views about what errors must be corrected than those at a lower level. The present study is an attempt to address these under-researched areas.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The present study sets out to inquire about the Iranian EFL learners' preferences for teacher feedback on different types of surface-level errors and the relationship between their preferences and their level of writing ability; the study, in addition, aims at identifying the students' attitude

towards different feedback strategies. The article, accordingly, seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Iranian EFL students' preferences for receiving different types of surface- level feedback?
2. Does the students' writing ability affect their preferences for receiving feedback on different surface-level errors?
3. What are Iranian EFL students' beliefs about the efficacy of different kinds of error correction practices and strategies?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The study was conducted in the department of English Language in an Iranian university, where all courses are taught in English. Fifty English majors, both males (15) and females (35), with an average age of 22, participated in the present study. Since the purpose of the study was to inquire about the students' ideas regarding error feedback, data was collected from those who were participating in an essay writing course. The initial sample consisted of 86 students participating in two essay writing classes taught by the same teacher; however, 50 students volunteered to participate in the present study and showed their willingness for taking part in the study by signing an agreement statement appearing at the bottom of the questionnaire.

2.2 Instruments

To answer research questions one and three, a survey questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consisted of two parts; the two parts were adopted from two questionnaires used in two different studies, but were modified for the purposes of the present study. The first part of the questionnaire was adopted from Gram (2005). It contains seven questions, which inquire about the students' opinions regarding different types of surface-level error feedback (transitional words, adverbs, punctuation, verb tenses, spelling, and prepositions). The students were asked to rate their ideas about correction of each type of surface-level

errors on a five-point likert scale; strongly disagree, disagree, no idea, agree, and strongly agree. The questions were followed by a sample of teacher feedback on the surface-level errors mentioned above to make sure that all the students had the same idea about the grammatical units mentioned in the questionnaire and the type of teacher feedback intended for the present study (direct feedback). Of course, their writing teacher ensured the researchers that the specified categories were among the ones she had taken care of throughout the term while giving error feedback on the students' drafts and that she gave direct feedback on the students' errors, *i.e.*, she wrote the correct form of the errors on the students' papers.

The second section of the questionnaire, adopted from Lee (2004), was used to address research question two, which asks about students' beliefs and perceptions regarding error correction practice and strategies. This section consists of seven dichotomous questions with two options, *i.e.* agree or disagree. The reliability of each part of the questionnaire was computed through Cronbach's alpha. The estimated reliability for the first part of the questionnaire was 0.78 and that of the second part 0.72. For a questionnaire with 7 or 8 items, these indexes are acceptable. The validity of the questionnaire was approved by reached consensus of three experienced EFL researchers.

Right after the students responded to the questionnaires, retrospective think-aloud method was used to have the participants provide reasons for their responses to the items of the questionnaire. Thirty two of the participants volunteered to take part in the think-aloud phase of the study.

To answer research question two, the students' essays written in their final writing exam were collected to be reviewed and marked to provide the necessary information about their writing ability. Ten percent of the essays were corrected by the researcher and an experienced writing teacher to ensure the inter-rater reliability of the scores given to the essays. The obtained reliability was 0.92. The rest of the essays were corrected by the researcher.

2.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was administered in the last session of the essay writing class at the end of the winter term of 2008-2009. It was administered to all the students in the two classes (86 students), but, as mentioned above, only the questionnaires with the signed agreement were taken into account for the purpose of the study.

Immediately after the students responded to the questionnaire, the think-aloud protocol was conducted. As mentioned, 32 students volunteered to take part in the think-aloud phase of the study. The think-aloud protocol was conducted in Persian so that the students would express themselves precisely and clearly without leaving out any important points. This phase of the study was conducted in the language lab where it was possible to record the voice of all the participants at the same time and shortly after they had responded to the questionnaire.

In the following week, the students sat for their final writing exam. They were given a topic and were required to write an argumentative essay of about 250 words. The exam session was conducted by the teacher as a part of the class procedure. The students' essays were then corrected by the researcher and their scores were used as indicators of their writing ability. Of course, the students' papers were corrected by their teacher, too; however, since the teacher had her own criteria for correction, different from those of the researcher, the essays were corrected once more by the researcher for the purpose of the present study. The essays were scored using Ashwell's (2000) multi-faceted content scoring guide. As this guide recommends, an essay is evaluated based on such aspects as its ability to communicate, the organization, the statement of the main ideas, and the flow of ideas.

3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics for the two parts of the questionnaire were calculated. In addition, in order to see if there were significant differences among the means of the students' preferences for teachers' correction of different surface-level errors, a test of repeated measures of

ANOVA was conducted. In addition, the percentages of the students' responses indicating their preferences for any one of the correction categories were calculated. In this regard, scales 1 and 2 were considered negative, 3 neutral, and 4 and 5 positive attitude. In addition, multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to investigate the effect of the students' writing ability, as indicated by their writing scores, on their preferences for feedback on grammatical errors. Then, the percentages of the students' responses pertinent to their beliefs about the effectiveness of error correction practices and strategies were calculated. Finally, the students' retrospections, recorded on tapes, were transcribed and analyzed.

4. Results and Discussion

Research question one: What are Iranian EFL students' preferences for receiving different types of surface-level feedback?

Descriptive statistics for the students' responses to the first part of the questionnaire were calculated. The means and standard deviations of the students' preferences for each type of surface-level feedback are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means of students' preferences for correction of error type

| | Type of surface-level errors | Mean | SD |
|---|------------------------------|------|------|
| 1 | Transitional Words | 4.22 | 0.73 |
| 2 | Sentence Structure | 4.20 | 0.71 |
| 3 | Verb Tenses | 4.16 | 1.05 |
| 4 | Adverbs | 4.12 | 1.14 |
| 5 | Punctuation | 4.02 | 1.11 |
| 6 | Prepositions | 3.60 | 1.05 |
| 7 | Spelling | 3.30 | 1.28 |

According to the data presented in Table 1, the highest mean belongs to transitional words and the lowest to spelling (4.22 and 3.30, respectively); the mean for sentence structure (4.20) is almost as high as that of transitional words. Then, come verb tenses, adverbs, punctuation,

and prepositions, respectively.

In order to see if differences between the means are significant, a repeated measures test of ANOVA was conducted. Then, *Bonferonni post hoc* analysis was applied to see which pairs of means were significant. The results, as illustrated in Table 2, indicate that from among 21 possible comparisons, nine differences are significant.

Table 2: Results of repeated measures for the students' preferences for correction of error type

| Pair | T | Sig. |
|---------------|------|------|
| Trans.>Prep | 4.53 | 0.00 |
| Trans.>Spell. | 4.86 | 0.00 |
| Struc.> Prep. | 3.09 | 0.00 |
| Struc.>Spell. | 4.02 | 0.00 |
| Tense>Prep. | 3.62 | 0.00 |
| Tense> Spell. | 3.63 | 0.00 |
| Adv.>Prep. | 2.47 | 0.01 |
| Adv.> Spell. | 3.25 | 0.00 |
| Punct.>Spell. | 2.67 | 0.00 |

According to Table 2, the highest mean, that is, the mean belonging to transitional words shows significant difference with prepositions and spelling. The same is true with respect to the means of structure, verb tenses, and adverbs; that is, they all show significant difference with spelling and prepositions. The ninth significant difference can be observed between the means of punctuation and spelling. No significant difference was observed between the other pairs. The surface-level errors according to their importance as reported by the participants can be summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Priority of the students' preferences for types of error feedback

| Type of surface- level errors | Priority |
|---|----------|
| Transitional words, Sentence structure, Verb tenses, Adverba, | 1 |
| Punctuation | 2 |
| Prepositions, Spelling | 3 |

As Table 3 reveals, the seven grammatical features can be classified into three groups with respect to their priority for receiving teacher's error feedback. The first group comprises transitional words, sentence structure, verb tenses, and adverbs, all showing significant difference with the two lowest ones, *i.e.*, prepositions and spelling. The second one is punctuation, which shows significant difference only with spelling. Finally, the third category includes prepositions and spelling, which show significant difference with almost all the other categories, but not with each other.

In order to show the results more clearly, the percentages of the students' responses belonging to the above categories were calculated. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Percentages of students' preferences for receiving feedback on error type

| Type of surface-level errors | Negative(1-2) | Neutral(3) | Positive(4-5) |
|------------------------------|---------------|------------|---------------|
| 1 Transitional words | — | 24% | 86% |
| 2 Sentence structure | 2% | 14% | 84% |
| 3 Verb tenses | 10% | 12% | 78% |
| 4 Adverbs | 12% | 14% | 74% |
| 5 Punctuation | 14% | 14% | 72% |
| 6 Prepositions | 28% | 20% | 52% |
| 7 Spelling | 52% | 2% | 46% |

As the results indicate, the majority of the students considered feedback on errors related to transitional words and sentence structure quite useful (86% and 84%, respectively), whereas only about half of the students stated that they liked to receive feedback on prepositions and spelling (52% and 46%, respectively). Interestingly, none of the students surveyed gave a negative response to the question if they preferred to receive feedback on their errors on transitional words, while more than 50% of the students did not consider feedback on spelling important.

A likely explanation for the above results might be that sentence structure and transitional words deal with units which are larger and/or

more meaning carrying formal linguistic features than such aspects as spelling and prepositions. The results are, to some extent, in line with those of Ferris and Roberts (2001) in that their study showed that word choice and sentence structure were the most problematic grammatical elements in writing for L2 learners.

The results of the verbal protocol analysis confirm the above justifications to some extent. The majority of the students stated that they had a strong preference for comments on transitional words since their teachers always emphasize that an essay with appropriate transitional words is more comprehensible and coherent and looks more sophisticated. In addition, they believed that errors in sentence structure would usually lead to ambiguity and miscomprehension, or worse, lack of comprehension on the part of the reader. As for the correction of spelling and prepositions, they mostly believed that spelling mistakes do not generally block communication of ideas and do not influence the clarity of the text. Interestingly, they stated that their teachers do not usually correct their spelling mistakes. They had the same idea about correction of errors related to the use of prepositions. With respect to punctuation, however, they had different views; some considered it important and some not so important. For example, one of them stated,

Sometimes, as our teacher maintains, replacing a full stop with a comma would cause ambiguity and make the reader confused. Punctuation is very important in such cases.

There are occasions where the presence or absence of a comma would not influence the clarity of the writing.

Accordingly, it seems that teachers' instructions and the errors they usually correct have a strong impact on the students' opinion about the importance of errors. As Liu and Hansen (2005) argue, there are some factors that affect the students' ideas about what the right feedback is. One of them is the students' educational background. In effect, the teacher's emphasis on certain aspects of writing would affect the students' perception of what is important and what is not. Of course, it must be noted that even spelling, the least important error in the view of

the students, enjoys the positive attitude of 50% of the students. Thus, it can be concluded that, in general, students have positive attitudes to their teacher's correction of their surface-level errors.

On the whole, the results of the study indicate that the students had a strong desire for receiving feedback on their grammatical errors. The results, in this respect, support the studies that have investigated the EFL/ESL students' attitude to the correction of grammatical errors by their teacher (Radecki & Swales, 1988; Leki, 1991; Satio, 1994; Ferris, 1995; Komura, 1999; Ferris & Robert, 2001; Gram, 2005; Zacharias, 2007).

Research question two: Does the students' writing ability affect their preferences for receiving feedback on different surface-level errors?

In order to answer this question, as mentioned before, the students' writing scores were taken as indicators of their writing ability. The students were divided into three groups, based on their writing scores, in following manner: the scores were sorted from high to low; then the top 27% were regarded high; the low 27% were considered low; and the remaining 46% were taken as mid. Table 5 presents the results of a multivariate analysis of variance.

Table 5: The impact of writing ability on students' preferences for feedback on surface-level errors

| Error | F | Sig | Effect size |
|--------------------|-------|------|-------------|
| Transitional words | 0.12 | 0.88 | 0.00 |
| Sentence structure | 1.10 | 0.33 | 0.04 |
| Verb tenses | 32.06 | 0.00 | 0.57 |
| Adverbs | 70.09 | 0.00 | 0.74 |
| Punctuation | 76.21 | 0.00 | 0.76 |
| Prepositions | 1.43 | 0.24 | 0.05 |
| Spelling | 2.92 | 0.06 | 0.11 |

As the results show, the students views about the two grammatical units they considered the most important (transitional words and sentence structure) and the two least important ones (prepositions and spelling)

have not been influenced by their level of writing ability. That is, no difference is observed between the views of the students with a high and those with a lower level of writing ability. These results confirm the idea that the importance attached to these errors is very likely to be affected by the teachers' instructions and practices in class.

Nonetheless, as the data presented in Table 5 indicate, the participants' writing ability has significantly influenced their views about receiving feedback on the remaining formal units, *i.e.*, verb tenses ($F=32.06$, $p<0.01$), adverb ($F=70.09$, $p<0.01$), and punctuation ($F=76.21$, $p<0.01$). The results of the *post hoc scheffe test* for these three units revealed that in all the three cases, the students at a high and mid writing level attached more importance to feedback on the errors related to these three categories than those at a low level of writing ability. No significant difference was found between the students at the high and mid levels.

A likely explanation for the difference between the views of the more skilled learners and those of the students at a lower level can be that these three grammatical elements moderately affect communication of ideas or clarity of the message expressed through writing, whereas the errors related to sentence structure or connectors would create more ambiguity or, at times, block communication totally; as a result, the teacher does not attend to the former as often as the latter while giving feedback. Consequently, more skilled learners, who are more concerned with their writing accuracy and communication of ideas, have shown stronger desire to receive error feedback on these elements.

The think-aloud data confirm this speculation, to some extent. In order to show the effect of writing ability on the views of the students, the comments of more skilled and less skilled students were compared. Interestingly, rather distinct differences can be observed between their views. The following comments belong to the more skilled student writers (those with a high writing score):

I think verb tenses are really important. Sometimes, a wrong tense would create ambiguity and would change the whole message of the writing.

Lack of consistency in tense would create ambiguity and I think my writing does not look sophisticated enough.

We are told that an adverb usually just adds to the meaning of the verb, but I think it is very important. For example, compare “obviously” and “apparently.” These two adverbs, put at the beginning of a sentence would change the meaning of the sentence and, sometimes, the meaning of the whole paragraph.

Sometimes, as our teacher maintains, replacing a full stop with a comma would cause ambiguity and make the reader confused and block communication with the reader.

As these comments indicate, the students with a high writing ability consider feedback on these grammatical aspects important since they affect clarity of the text, particularly when communication of the message is concerned.

Now see the comments of the less skilled student writers:

I think the tense of the verb I use is not very important. Whether I use the past tense or past perfect my teacher understands what I mean. When it comes to the conditionals, the tense is very complicated. I get confused because it is different from Persian. Anyway, my teacher understands what I mean.

An adverb is not very important. The sentence renders its original meaning even without an adverb. My teacher replaces “some” problematic adverbs with more appropriate ones and crosses out some others without replacing them with new ones. Thus, I think, an adverb is not as important as a transitional word.

Sometimes, as our teacher maintains, replacing a full stop with a comma would cause ambiguity and make the reader confused. However, it is not always the case.

Not using a question mark at the end of an interrogative sentence does not affect comprehension of the sentence. Or, using or not using a comma does not make much difference.

To be honest, rules related to punctuation are very confusing and, more importantly, my teacher does not give a lot of feedback on my

punctuation errors, although I know I have a lot of mistakes in punctuation.

A comparison of the views of the students of the two groups shows that the students with a higher writing ability, when dealing with such grammatical units as punctuation or verb tenses, pay more attention to communication of ideas and the overall message; on the other hand, those with a lower writing ability just look at the immediate sentence in which the error occurs and, particularly, how often their teacher corrects such errors. It appears that, at least for these moderately important categories (as the students' views indicate), the opinion of the students at a lower level is more influenced by their teachers' practices and instructions than that of the students with a higher writing ability.

Research question three: What are Iranian EFL students' beliefs regarding the effectiveness of error correction practice and strategies?

In order to answer the second research questions, the students' responses to the second part of the questionnaire were analyzed. Table 6 illustrates the percentages of the students' responses to the second part of the questionnaire.

Table 6: Percentages of the students' beliefs about error correction

| Questions | Negative | Positive |
|---|----------|----------|
| 1. Is it necessary that teachers correct your written errors? | 4% | 96% |
| 2. Do you always pay close attention to your teacher's written feedback on your writing? | 42% | 58% |
| 3. Dose teacher's correction help you learn and improve your writing? | 46% | 54% |
| 4. Is it important that teachers correct all of your errors? | 62% | 38% |
| 5. Do you make the same error once the teacher corrects it? | 52% | 48% |
| 6. Do you believe that self correction is more useful than teacher correction? | 84% | 16% |
| 7. Do you believe that indirect correction like giving error codes, or underlining the errors can be more useful? | 82% | 18% |

The data presented in Table 6 reveal that the majority of the students (96%) found teacher correction necessary. In their think-aloud protocols, the students provided the following reasons for the importance of teacher feedback:

We will learn the correct forms of our errors.

I like that because my teacher's correction is the easiest way for me to recognize my errors.

I like it because my teacher writes down the correct forms and, therefore, it takes less time to look for the errors and correct them.

This last remark confirms Zacharias' (2007) finding that the main reason why L2 learners consider teacher feedback necessary is that it facilitates revising their drafts. Results also corroborate the findings of Radecki & Swales (1988), Leki (1991), Lee (2004), and Gram (2005).

In response to question two, 58% of the students said that they paid close attention to their teacher's comments, whereas 42% indicated that did not. The students' response to this question seems to be in contradiction with their response to the first question; that is, on the one hand, they considered teacher feedback necessary, but, on the other hand, about half of them said that they did not attend to their teacher's comments. Nonetheless, the think-aloud data revealed that, to students, an important reason why they do not attend to teacher feedback is that they are not usually required to write the second draft of their papers. Some of the students' comments are in order:

I do not pay much attention to the comments my teacher gives on my drafts because she does not check my papers to see if I have applied the comments or not.

I just have a quick look at my paper and usually just pay attention to the teacher's comments on big errors like sentence structure and similar comments that catch my eyes at first sight; in fact, I think these errors would make the writing incomprehensible; there is no need to pay attention to every single problem, because we are not supposed to revise our writing.

I read my teacher's comments quite carefully because I am so much

interested in writing and I believe this would help me write better subsequent essays.

In response to the third question, which asks whether teacher feedback would help them improve their writing, 54% of the students reported that teacher's correction of errors would help them learn and improve their writing, whereas 46% had a different idea. Their comments while they were thinking aloud revealed that they found it quite natural that learning about their errors and how to correct them would result in the improvement of their writing. However, they also mentioned that the problem is that they are not required to rewrite their essays so teacher feedback cannot be so effective. In addition, they mentioned that their teachers are so busy that they can hardly find some time to talk with them about their errors. The results partially confirm those of Lee (2004). In his study, the majority of the students indicated that teacher feedback does not help them improve their writing.

The participants' response to question four confirms the results obtained from the first section of the questionnaire. As the results show, only 38% of the students acknowledged that all the errors must be corrected, while 62% did not think so. The analysis of their protocols showed that the majority of the students consider macro level errors (those pertinent to cohesive devices, or the overall structure of the sentences) more important than micro level ones (prepositions, for example) because the former would lead to incomprehensibility of their writing. For example, one of the students said:

I will never learn the correct use of all the prepositions. Whether I use "satisfied with" or "satisfied by" or "satisfied at," the reader will understand what I am saying but an erroneous sentence structure would make my sentence incomprehensible.

They further stated that it was what their teachers always emphasize and ask them to pay attention to. This, once again, shows that the students' beliefs and opinions are, to a great extent, a reflection of the teachers' ideas, rather than their own views. Results are different from those of Leki (1991) and Radecki & Swales (1988) in that their

participants believed that all the surface-level errors must be corrected.

As for question five, a significant percentage of the respondents (48%) stated that they make the same errors in their subsequent essays. The reasons they provided for the problem were similar to those they mentioned for their response to question three. In other words, here again, they attributed the problem to not being required to revise their essays and, thus, not practicing the correct forms of the errors indicated by their teachers. They also remarked that in writing their subsequent essays, sometimes, they do not need to use the same structures or words; consequently, they do not have the chance to practice the correct forms of their mistakes and, as a result, they would repeat the same errors in their following essays. The results confirm those obtained by Lee (2004).

In response to question six, asking for the students' beliefs regarding self-correction, 84% thought that it was mainly their teachers' job to locate and correct errors for the students and only 16% believed that it was the students' job to do so. Literature on error feedback indicates that the majority of the studies surveying students' views have come to the same conclusion (See Lee, 2004). Reviewing the students' remarks made in their think aloud protocols indicated that most of the students found self-correction almost impossible. Below come some of the students' comments:

It is absolutely impossible for a student to find and correct his own errors.

It is illogical because the students cannot correct their errors.

If the students were able to correct their errors, they would not make them in the first draft.

On the other hand, a few students had relatively different ideas:

Students can correct some of the errors they make in the first draft but it is helpful only if the teacher corrects the papers after that.

Self-correction makes me more confident and careful in writing.

The attempt to find and correct the errors will improve my writing. Although our teacher never asks us to do so, before submitting my essay, I review it a couple of times and actually self-correct it.

As mentioned above, it seems that the students' perceptions about error feedback are formed by their teachers' practices in class. Indeed, since editing and revising do not have any significant roles in teachers' instructions and practices in the writing classes surveyed in this study and, thus, the students are not required to review and self correct their papers, the majority of the students did not consider self-correction and self-editing an important step in the writing process.

The last question (question 7) asked about the students' belief regarding their preference for direct or indirect correction. The results, as presented in Table 5, show that 82% of them do not consider indirect correction helpful because (as they stated in the think-aloud phase of the study) they did not usually understand what their teacher meant by coding or underlining the errors. Some of the students' comments are in order:

Knowing the codes is one thing, but correcting an error is quite a different thing.

They just help me recognize that there is a problem but even when I correct the error, I am not sure if my sentence is correct or not. I should always refer to my teacher and ask him what exactly she means.

Sometimes my teacher underlines an error but I do not understand what my error exactly is.

It seems that although teachers sometimes use codes, they do it quite haphazardly, without introducing them to the students in advance and talking about the purpose and the advantages of coding or the other indirect methods of giving error feedback. That is why the students do not regard indirect feedback as logical and helpful. As Lee (2004) recommends,

Teachers have to handle correction codes with a great deal of care. To make the codes easier to interpret for students, teachers may consider reducing the number of codes they use in correcting errors, concentrating on specific error patterns. It would also be beneficial if teachers link error correction directly with grammar instruction. If teachers adopt these strategies, error codes could be less problematic for students, and students may also benefit more

from the use of codes. (302)

5. Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate the Iranian EFL learners' preferences for receiving feedback on different surface-level errors as well as their beliefs about receiving different types of feedback. The study, furthermore, examined the effect of the learners' writing ability on their preferences about receiving feedback on their grammatical errors. A significant finding that emerged from the study is that, on the whole, Iranian EFL students prefer to receive feedback on more global and meaning carrying grammatical items such as transitional words and sentence structure than the micro-aspects such as spelling and prepositions, which do not have much impact on the meaning and communication of ideas. Another major finding that emerged from the analysis of the students' think-aloud comments is that their preferences and perceptions reflect what their teachers usually emphasize in the writing class.

The results of the study also showed that the students' writing ability, as indicated by their writing scores, influences their views about three grammatical units--verb tenses, adverbs, and punctuation--which they considered moderately important. The think-aloud data revealed that more skilled student writers attach more importance to these grammatical units because they are more concerned with their writing accuracy and, more importantly, with the clarity of the message expressed through their writing as well as communication of ideas. On the other hand, the less skilled writers just look at the effect of the errors at the sentence level and their views are strongly influenced by the frequency with which their teacher attends to an error.

Moreover, the results indicate that although the students consider direct teacher feedback necessary, they do not find it very helpful since they are not required to revise their essays. The results also showed that the students regard self-editing illogical and indirect teacher feedback not very helpful due to the fact that their teachers have not explained the

procedure of self-editing and the logic behind indirect feedback to the students. In fact as Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) state, “learners’ expectations and preferences may derive from previous instructional experiences, experiences that may not necessarily be beneficial for the development of writing” (p. 173).

An important implication of the results of the present study is that, as Ferris (2002) maintains, teachers’ beliefs and practices must change and it is only then that can we expect that students will change their expectations, which are shaped by teacher practice. Thus, teachers must instruct and practice self-editing, indirect feedback, and peer feedback in class and elucidate their logic and purposes for the students. As a result, the students would appreciate and value such practices.

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