

# **The impact of metalinguistic corrective feedback on Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of the hypothetical conditional**

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**Abstract:** Several recent works have shown the efficacy of written corrective feedback (WCF) as a method in improving ESL/EFL learners' grammatical accuracy. Using a quasi-experimental design, this study aims at investigating the effect of metalinguistic explanation (ME) corrective feedback as a form focused instruction on Iranian high school students' use of the hypothetical conditional in their writing. Fifty high school students were given the Oxford placement test. Based on the results, 34 of them were chosen to be homogenous in terms of language proficiency. The students were then randomly assigned to two groups, one experimental and one control group. The experimental group received the treatment (ME) after each guided writing practice but the control group did not. The results of independent samples t-test showed that students in the experimental group significantly outperformed students in the other group in the accurate use of the grammatical feature. The findings have some implications for EFL teachers, teacher educators, and learners.

**Keywords:** grammar accuracy, L2 writing, meta-linguistic, written corrective feedback

## **INTRODUCTION**

Writing is basically considered as a difficult skill and a complex task for L2 learners. (Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). In fact, writing is a demanding skill for native and non- native speakers since they need to pay attention to multiple issues including focus, elaboration, organization, conventions, and vocabulary. Grammar is one of the important writing conventions. According to Hashemian and Farhang (2018), in order to produce readable texts L2 learners need to be able to create ideas and put them together which in turn requires linguistic accuracy. Doughty (2008) also points out L2 writing education should entail attention

to linguistic forms. Additionally, grammatical accuracy is regarded as a crucial dimension about language learning because it creates confidence in L2 learners to communicate through their foreign language (Nickel, 2002). It is pretty common among Iranian EFL learners to make grammatical mistakes which might be due to different sentence structures in Persian and English (SOV in Persian vs. SVO in English). More specifically, the hypothetical conditional was used as the targeted structure in this study because most students have had difficulty in mastering this structure based on the first researchers' observations as a high school teacher in Iran.

On the other hand, corrective feedback is considered as an important part of L2 writing instruction, a substantial amount of studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) in second language acquisition (SLA) and second language writing over the past decades since Truscott (1996) claimed that providing WCF should be abandoned because it is ineffective and harmful. However, corrective feedback, as it is seen in the literature, is believed to be not only beneficial but also crucial in order to promote learners' linguistic accuracy and L2 development using scaffolding provided by teachers (Tayebipour, 2019). Also, as Esfandiari, Yaqubi, and Marzban (2014) pointed out, several scholars who believe in the efficacy of corrective feedback have proceeded to discover the effectiveness of various types of written corrective feedback (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Sheen, 2007; Rummel & Bitchener, 2015).

Additionally, as Shintani, Ellis, and Suzuki (2014) stated, there is growing empirical evidence that it might lead to increased grammatical accuracy in new pieces of writing while the efficacy of form-focused written feedback remains debatable. Therefore, to this point, the consequences of different forms of WCF have been examined by many researchers. The process of providing written CF may be a time consuming process as it requires ESL/EFL teachers and practitioners to provide corrections on individual learners' written texts. In comparison, linguistic explanation allows teachers to save more time in the classroom as it enables the teachers to provide explicit instruction to the entire class on observed errors. Additionally, Bitchener and Ferris (2012) reported a case within the literature where more complex and idiosyncratic forms and structures are proof against the effect of written CF. Shintani, Ellis, and Suzuki (2014) further added that the focus of most of the recent studies has been on the definite and indefinite English articles or verb forms; however, it is of importance to examine if written CF is helpful in treating errors arising from complex linguistic forms and structures.

Based on past literature, further investigations are needed on the use of various kinds of grammatical features particularly complex syntactic structures so as to ensure the findings are more reliable. Thus, the present study used the hypothetical conditional as a complex structure that has not received its due attention by written CF researchers. It aimed at investigating whether providing feedback significantly affects Iranian EFL learners' accurate use of the hypothetical conditional in their writing. Accordingly, the following research question was formulated.

Does metalinguistic explanation corrective feedback significantly affect Iranian EFL writers' accurate use of the hypothetical conditional sentences?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Supporting Theories of the Written Corrective Feedback

From a theoretical point of view, Rummel and Bitchener (2015) believe that there are still unanswered questions regarding written CF. One such question is whether teachers should anticipate for written CF to be effective on second language acquisition in spite of the fact that a great deal of time and effort have been devoted to written CF. They also referred to several cognitive perspectives as possibly anticipating its effectiveness (Polio, 2012). DeyKeser (1994), for instance, described implicit knowledge as the knowledge that can be used automatically and unconsciously by learners whereas explicit knowledge is only accessible through conscious and controlled processing. Due to the processing pace, implicit knowledge is mostly drawn upon in oral contexts; however, explicit knowledge is more often used in written contexts. In DeKeyser's (1995) view, a learner uses explicit knowledge whenever his attention is directed to a specific grammatical form which is why the information provided as CF to the learners is considered as explicit knowledge. However, according to Polio (2012), some scholars (e.g., Truscott, 1996; Krashen, 1982) argued that written CF only promotes explicit knowledge. They also stated that explicit knowledge cannot ultimately lead to L2 acquisition.

However, there are several researchers (e.g., Schmidt, 2001; Long, 1981) who believe that attention to form plays a significant role in second language learning. For instance, Schmidt (2001) claimed conscious *noticing* of the formal aspects of L2 in the input helps learners to be aware of the target forms and this in turn assists them to monitor their L2 production accuracy. It is believed that form-focused instruction also promotes such noticing. As noted in Rummel and Bitchener (2015), the interaction hypothesis also supports the role that corrective feedback plays in language acquisition process and L2 development by pushing learners to modify their output. Although the origins of interaction hypothesis are established in oral interaction, it has also been recently proved to be useful in written corrective feedback studies since it concentrates on the role of input and output during L2 interactions. Ellis (2011) also argued that even though explicit knowledge does not have a direct effect, the act of retrieving and utilizing explicit knowledge might ease L2 development.

### Empirical Works on the Impact of WCF on Grammatical Accuracy

According to Shintani, Ellis, and Suzuki (2014), most recent studies on WCF have focused on addressing Truscott's (1996, 2007, and 2010) claim that there was a lack of empirical and theoretical justification for correcting students' errors. In response, Ferris (1999, 2006) provided theoretical arguments in support of WCF delivering a firm rebuttal of Truscott's claim. The positive effect of WCF on grammatical accuracy in new pieces of writing has also been forthcoming through empirical evidence (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). However, to date, much of the recent research has focused intensively on a narrow set of grammatical features such as English articles or simple past tense (Bitchener, 2008). Therefore, there is insufficient evidence that WCF leads to more accurate use of syntactic features. Some investigations were conducted on unfocused written CF by some other researchers (Van Beuningen et al., 2012) and they have demonstrated that it leads to a more overall accuracy in new pieces of writing although no direct connection has been shown between correcting errors

in specific grammatical structures and improved accuracy in those structures. Thus, there is scarcity of research exploring the impact of asking students to rewrite after correction on accuracy in writing new texts (e.g., Chandler, 2003).

As noted in Bitchener and Ferris (2012), the effectiveness of written CF has been investigated by an increasing range of recent studies through *focused* written CF in which only one or a few linguistic errors were targeted. From the theoretical point of view, Schmidt (1994) and Ellis (2005) have stated the important roles of “attention” and “understanding” in cognitive theories of SLA. So it appears if learners are given intensive written CF on only certain limited number of linguistic features, they would be more likely to “attend”, “understand”, and finally correct the targeted errors. On the other hand, there is another type of written CF called *unfocused* WCF in which a range of error categories are addressed. Beuningen et al., (2012) contended that unfocused or comprehensive corrective feedback corresponds to actual teaching practice which indicates a high ecological validity of these types of CF. This study, however, investigated only focused type of feedback rather than unfocused feedback.

Most of the early studies have already investigated English indefinite and definite articles as error types so far; and the results of these works have demonstrated that written CF facilitated the use of English articles by L2 learners. For instance, Rummel (2014), conducted a study on 72 advanced learners at Kuwait and Laos universities for 7 weeks. The results showed that the Laotian EFL learners who obtained WCF performed better than students who did not receive WCF over time while Kuwaiti EFL learners who obtained only direct WCF outperformed learners who were not provided with CF (control group) over time. Guo (2015) also carried out another study with 157 Chinese EFL students at a university setting for 7 weeks. The results indicated that students who received WCF within 4 months outperformed those who did not receive any CF in the control group in the immediate posttest. In an Iranian EFL context, Khanlarzadeh and Nemati (2016) conducted a study to explore the effect of direct unfocused CF on the grammatical accuracy of elementary students. They reported that although experimental group outperformed the control group in revision writing tasks, no significant difference was seen in new pieces of writing after a one month interval.

As can be seen from previous studies, although obtained results support the effectiveness of WCF when targeting some linguistic features such as prepositions, simple past, and articles, the investigations, according to Bitchener and Ferris (2012), have been too limited and sometimes inconclusive to see if WCF improves grammatical accuracy of learners, specifically when it comes to complex linguistic forms and structures. It is obvious from reviewing the literature that to date, only few studies have investigated the effectiveness of complex grammatical structures (e.g., Roshan, 2017; Shintani, Ellis, & Suzuki, 2014). Thus due to the scarcity of research on complex linguistic structures this area needs to be further explored and this study endeavors to fill this void and contribute to the literature by investigating the effectiveness of the most explicit type of written CF i.e. metalinguistic feedback on Iranian EFL learners' writing in using the hypothetical conditional sentences as a complex structure.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

This research was carried out in an Iranian high school among Elementary EFL learners. Students were only males, selected through convenience sampling, with the age range of 16 to 18 years old. They had already studied English in junior high school for three years and later in high school for two years. All the students were studying in grade two and were taught by the first researcher of this study. Oxford Placement Test was given to 50 students. Based on OPT results, 34 students who scored between 8 and 20 were selected as elementary learners. Then, the learners were randomly assigned to one control and one experimental group each with 17 students.

### **Instruments**

To answer the research questions, two tests were utilized: the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and the writing test. OPT was administered to choose students who were homogeneous in terms of language proficiency. The test includes 60 items which the students had to answer in 30 minutes. Two writing tests were administered to students as a pretest and posttest. Students were given 20 minutes to write on general topics which were of interest to them.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

To begin the data collection procedure, permission was obtained from the participants. After the consent was obtained and the students agreed to take part in the study voluntarily, the researchers carried out the investigation. Thirty four students were selected out of 50 students based on the results of Oxford Placement Test. Then they were randomly assigned into the control and experimental groups. Both classes were taught by the first researcher of the present study. General topics which were familiar to students were selected from students' textbook and were used both in the pre and posttests to ensure the obtained results are the outcomes of the treatment and not the difference in the difficulty levels of the writing tasks. In week 1, all the participants carried out the first writing task (pre-test). As for the treatment, metalinguistic explanation was provided to those in the experimental group and they were asked to make revisions in their writings; however, the control group was asked to write pieces of writing while no treatment was given to them. After 3 weeks of treatment students in both groups were given the post-test.

### **Data analysis and scoring**

The hypothetical conditional is the target structure in this research. In English the second conditional is used to convey unreal situations in the present or future; often utilized to convey a wish. Conditional clauses consist of two sentences. One is known as the "if clause" and the other is known as the 'main clause'. Each sentence consists of a verb. Since tenses play an important role in determining the meaning of the sentence, it is important to know the tenses to

be used in these clauses. The tense in the dependent clause is generally simple past tense while that in the main clause is generally the present conditional as shown in the following example:

*Example: If I had money (dependent clause), I would give you (main clause)*

The scoring procedure by Izumi et al., (1999) was used in the present study. In doing so, one point was awarded for each of the component features of the conditional sentence including the tenses in both 'if clause' and 'main clause'. In other words, if they used every single component feature accurately, they received a score. In addition to the accurately used component features as noted in Shintani, Ellis, and Suzuki's (2014), one point was also scored when a learner made the attempt to write a sentence containing a dependent clause corresponding to one of the conditional sentences regardless of whether the sentence was correct. Since a conditional sentence is composed of two components, students might learn and apply only one of its components rather than two parts as a result of feedback provision; therefore, this type of scoring method might provide more accurate data analysis.

## **Research Design**

This study adopted the quasi-experimental pre-test post-test design. Metalinguistic feedback was the independent variable and the accurate use of the hypothetical conditional was the dependent variable.

## **RESULTS**

As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of the current study was to explore the effect of metalinguistic corrective feedback on Iranian high school students' accurate use of hypothetical conditional in their writing. For this purpose, a research question was examined in the light of a classroom research. Having collected the required data, the participants' scores on the pre and post-tests were compared utilizing SPSS version 23 and the following formulated hypothesis for this study was tested:

**H0:** Metalinguistic explanation CF does not statistically affect Iranian EFL writers' accurate use of the hypothetical conditional sentences.

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for different aims. Means and standard deviations were calculated using descriptive statistics to check the underlying assumptions of the statistical procedure used in the study. Also an inferential statistical procedure was used to test the posed hypothesis for the study. To analyze the data, the independent samples t-test was run using SPSS version 23.

### **Normality Test Data**

First, Shapiro Wilk's test was run to check the normality of the data. As shown in table 1, the distribution of data was normal as the p-values (.10 & .28) are greater than .05. Since the data was normal, a parametric statistical procedure, independent samples t-test, was used to compare the performance of the two groups.

*Table 1: Result of Shapiro Wilk's test of normality*

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
pretest	Experimental	.141	17	.200*	.911	17	.105
	Control	.174	17	.179	.937	17	.287

## **Independent Samples t-test**

The independent samples T-test was used at the outset of the study in order to compare the participants' performance on the writing pre-test for the experimental and the control group.

### **Pre-test results**

The following table 2 illustrates the descriptive statistics of learners' performance in the pre-test of experimental and control groups. As it is clear from this table, the mean score of the learners in pre-test for the control group is 59.36, and for the experimental group, the mean score in the pre-test is 57.78. In order to see whether the difference between the mean score of the experimental group and control group pre-tests of writing is statistically significant, an independent samples t-test was run.

*Table 2: Pre-test data*

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest	experimental	17	57.7882	33.90764	8.22381
	control	17	59.3624	23.19747	5.62621

As illustrated in the following table 3, the result of Levene's test for equality of variances reveals that it does not violate the assumption of equal variance as the sig value in levene's test is greater than .05 ( $F=2.997, p>.05$ ). However, it can be seen that the sig value (2-tailed) of t value is .875, which is bigger than the required cut-off of .05. Therefore, it can be said that the means for the two groups are similar and there is not any statistically significant difference between the performances of the participants in the two groups.

*Table 3: Independent samples t- test result for pre-test*

<i>Independent Samples Test</i>										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
pretest	Equal variances assumed	2.997	.093	-.158	32	.875	-1.57412	9.96420	-21.87053	18.72230
	Equal variances not assumed			-.158	28.286	.876	-1.57412	9.96420	-21.97557	18.82733

Post-test results

Table 4 below presents the descriptive statistics of learners' writing scores in the post-test of writing for experimental and control groups. As displayed in table 4, the mean scores for the control group and experimental group in the posttest were 67.64 and 90.12 respectively. An independent samples t-test was conducted to see whether the difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the post-test of writing was statistically significant or not.

*Table 4: Post-test results*

<i>Descriptive Statistics of writing Post-test for Experimental and Control Groups</i>					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post test	Experimental	17	90.1288	11.92149	2.89139
	Control	17	67.6488	22.56510	5.47284

As indicated in Table 5 below, the result of Levene's test for equality of variances reveals that the assumption of equal variance was not violated as the sig value in Levene's test is greater than .05 ( $F=.258, p>.05$ ). Also, again as shown in Table 5, the results of the Independent Samples T-test indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on the post test, with a p-value of .001 which is much lower than .05. This indicates that the difference between the means is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis was not accepted. In other words, the students in the experimental group scored higher overall in terms of achievement, i.e. accurate use of the hypothetical conditional, as opposed to those in the control group as a result of the treatment.

Table 5: Independent samples t-test results of post-test

<i>Independent Samples T-test for Post-test of writing for Experimental and Control Groups</i>										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
posttest	Equal variances assumed	1.325	.258	3.632	32	.001	22.48000	6.18968	9.87204	35.08796
	Equal variances not assumed			3.632	24.286	.001	22.48000	6.18968	9.71310	35.24690

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of the current study was to investigate the impact of metalinguistic feedback on Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in using the hypothetical conditional in their writing. The findings revealed that metalinguistic corrective feedback positively affected students' accurate use of the hypothetical conditional. The students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group in their use of the hypothetical conditional. In other words, the findings illustrated a remarkable advantage for Iranian EFL learners as they received one of the most explicit types of WCF (ME) which made them notice and eventually reduce their grammatical errors. In line with Shintani, Ellis and Suzuki's (2014) suggestion, the focused feedback given to the participants in the experimental group might have better enabled them to restructure their interlanguage system as they obtained repeated evidence of how to correct the same error.

The results are consistent with earlier findings in the literature that have found significant effects of different types of WCF in promoting L2 writers' grammatical accuracy (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Karim & Nassaji, 2018; Shintani, Ellis, & Suzuki, 2014). Few studies have examined the effects of different kinds of corrective feedback on complex linguistic structures so far. Hence, the results of the present study demonstrated that metalinguistic corrective feedback significantly affected EFL learners' accurate use of this grammatical structure in the short run. In fact, the result of this study is in line with Shintani, Ellis, and Suzuki's (2014) study. They explored the effectiveness of direct corrective feedback and metalinguistic explanation among Japanese university students' writing in using indefinite articles and the hypothetical conditional; and found that providing the students with metalinguistic CF leads to increased accuracy for the hypothetical conditional. However, they stated that provision of direct CF had longer lasting efficacy than metalinguistic feedback. As Gass and Selinker (2008) suggested, interaction can be achieved through input, output, and

feedback; provision of metalinguistic corrective feedback on students' erroneous grammatical structures involves some kind of interaction between the teacher and the students. Also, consistent with Schmidt's (2001) noticing hypothesis, metalinguistic CF most probably assisted students to attend to form which is required to understand virtually all aspects of L2 acquisition.

Overall, the positive contribution of providing different types of feedback to improve EFL learners' linguistic accuracy has been shown by some earlier studies (e.g., Roshan, 2017; Karim & Nassaji, 2018; Tayebipour, 2019). In addition, it might be suggested that metalinguistic corrective feedback can be intellectually motivating for students to test the linguistic hypotheses in their interlanguage system (Montazeri, & Salimi, 2019). The findings of this study showed that providing EFL students with metalinguistic corrective feedback on their writing tasks can be beneficial in improving their linguistic accuracy in using the hypothetical conditional. Additionally, from the theoretical perspective, the findings also imply that L2 grammar development can be affected by the level of explicitness as used in this study. Thus, based on the results of the present study Iranian EFL teachers can be recommended to use more explicit types of corrective feedback in Iranian high schools. Overall, regarding specific implications of the findings of this study, it can also be claimed that while regular direct or indirect corrective feedback may or may not help students improve their grammatical accuracy in their writings, metalinguistic corrective feedback seems to have grasped the likely advantages that regular corrective feedback generates in improving EFL learners' grammatical knowledge. Metalinguistic feedback is highly recommended to be used by L2 writing teachers to correct students' grammatical mistakes. It is a lot less time-consuming compared with other types of WCF so that teachers can spend more time on other aspects of writing such as vocabulary, organization, etc.

This study has limitations that should be noted. The first one relates to sample size. Further research could use larger sample sizes at different, preferably, higher proficiency groups due to the complexity of the targeted structure. The participants of this study were male elementary EFL learners of English. They were chosen simply because the targeted structure was part of their English subject at high school taught by one of the researchers. Moreover, survey studies can be carried out examining the students' perceptions about the impact of metalinguistic corrective feedback. Additionally, it might be very helpful to examine the efficacy of instruction on complex grammatical forms and structures over a longer period of time in order to see whether or not corrective feedback leads to retention of the structure. By conducting longitudinal studies, it can be examined whether or not explicit knowledge of the students turns into implicit knowledge.

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