

# Is Indirect Written Feedback Valuable? A Study Targeting ESL University Students in Pakistan

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## Abstract

The aim of this small-scale study is to investigate the effect of indirect written feedback (coded and un-coded correction along with revisions) among ESL learners in Pakistani University and learners' written accuracy in three types of errors (i.e., articles, past simple tense, and prepositions). In this quasi-experimental study, 50 students are randomly assigned into two groups. At initial level, teachers provide indirect written feedback (e.g., underlining, circling or error codes are provided for three types of errors) to the first group, and no feedback is provided to the second group. The participants' written work is assessed in three phases: pre-test writing, an immediate post-test writing and delayed post-test piece of writing. Findings from an independent sample t-test demonstrate that the students receiving indirect written feedback followed by revisions perform better on new writing as compared to those who receiving no feedback at all. Findings conclude that Indirect written feedback is significant in minimizing the errors of one out of three linguistic forms in subsequent writing. Further, results suggest that indirect written feedback can help learners become more aware of their errors, reduce some of them, and so become more self-reliant.

**Keywords:** written indirect feedback, English writing, writing accuracy, language learning, English teaching

## 1. Introduction

A variety of studies have been undertaken in order to explore the efficacy of various forms of writing feedback on the tasks of writing, mainly comparing indirect and direct feedback. Direct feedback takes the form of providing correct form of a linguistic feature, while indirect feedback consists of hints about how to correct errors (but does not provide the correct form) to help students correct their errors themselves (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). This strategy engages the students cognitively to work out for themselves why they have made errors. The idea is that they can then store this information and apply the same procedures in future to avoid making similar errors again or correct other errors identified by their teachers (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Guénette, 2007).

Lee (2004) distinguishes indirect written feedback strategies using a code system from those without a code. Coded indirect feedback is when the teacher indicates the location and type of errors, (e.g., 'Art' means incorrect usage of the article). Un-coded feedback is when a teacher circles or underlines errors without indicating their type to help learners diagnose and correct their errors themselves. Thus, coded indirect written feedback provides some meta-linguistic information about the type of error from a linguistic point of view, while the un-coded type does not.

In comparing direct and indirect types of written feedback, some of the research (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Ferris, 2006; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Lalande, 1982) suggests that indirect feedback leads to increased learner's accuracy over time while others have concluded that direct feedback is a more helpful way for learners to produce written output with greater levels of accuracy (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010b; Van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2008). However, Robb, Ross, and Shortreed's (1986) study found no significant differences between these two types of written feedback, finding indirect written feedback a '*less time-consuming methods of directing student attention to surface errors*' (p. 91). Hence, in practical terms, L2 instructors may find indirect feedback strategies less arduous and more time-efficient. This study thus investigated the potential significance of indirect feedback (which would be less time consuming for teachers to use) in the classroom

environment to discover whether learners were able to benefit from it on their written texts and so improve the accuracy of their writing by being able to self-correct from the hints provided and have fewer errors in later written tasks.

### *1.1 Effectiveness of Indirect Written Feedback*

There is a plethora of empirical evidence supporting the notion that indirect written feedback can bring about long-term improvement in students' writing (Ferris, 1995, 1997; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Lalande, 1982). However, only a few researchers have included a control group receiving no correction. Robb, Ross, and Shortreed's (1986) study, with a no-correction control group, also investigated the long-term effects of indirect written feedback, but their findings were based on the students' revised texts rather than new pieces of writing. Lee's (1997) work had a control group like that of Ferris and Roberts' (2001) study. In Ferris and Roberts' study, the aim was to investigate the efficacy of different indirect feedback types (coded and un-coded) on five error categories (i.e., verb, noun ending, articles, wrong word and sentence structure). The results exhibited that the indirect feedback-receiving group showed better performance than the control group receiving no feedback for the targeted errors. However, Ferris and Roberts focused solely on the revisions or short-term changes made soon after receiving feedback on their writing. But successful revisions immediately or soon after receiving feedback do not indicate whether the same forms would be accurately produced in the long run and in new pieces of writing. Lee's (1997) study also showed a similar trend and reported the results on revised pieces of writing rather than on new pieces of writing.

To extend the previous findings, some studies worked on design and methodological issues and included a pretest-post-test-delayed post-test design to discover whether there was any long-term or longitudinal effect of indirect feedback on written accuracy. These include van Beuningen, de Jong, and Kuiken's (2008 and 2012) study and the study by Bitchener and Knoch (2010b), comprised of learners at a secondary level in school that had a multilingual classrooms context and advanced ESL learners respectively. These studies revealed that there were short-term or immediate positive effects following indirect feedback but they were unable to show any long-term effects.

In the same period, Truscott and Hsu (2008) who worked with 47 EFL students in Taiwan, and were also unable to find any difference between the feedback group and the group receiving no feedback over time. By contrast, Rahimi (2009) and Frear and Chiu (2015) found that indirect written feedback had a long-term effect when compared to the written performance of the no-correction control group. Due to these varied results, further research is still required to discover whether there is a long-term effect of indirect written feedback on written accuracy.

### *1.2 Effectiveness of Feedback with Respect to Error Categories*

A distinction was made by Ferris (1999) between two types of error: one was treatable (being rule-governed like English articles) and the other was untreatable errors (like choice of vocabulary). Teachers were supposed to give more indirect feedback for errors that belong to rule governed category and direct feedback for errors related to idiosyncratic forms, which can affect both the students' short term and long-term progress (Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000). Only a few studies have examined these differences (Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). Most of the research has been concerned with treatable errors (Ferris, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), as these are easier to define and teach. Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, and McKee's (2000) work, for instance, presents positive results concerning the treatable errors of verb form and tense, but less improvement was noticed in noun ending treatable errors and untreatable lexical errors. Ferris and Roberts (2001) too, found a considerable reduction in the number of treatable errors relating to verb and noun endings in revisions when indirect written feedback had been used. While Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, and McKee (2000) discovered no progress in the accuracy of article (treatable) errors, the study by Ferris and Roberts (2001) did observe a little progress in the accurate production of articles. The study undertaken by Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) did find an increase in the accuracy of articles and past tense forms but no increase in the accurate use of prepositions after providing direct written feedback. These different findings concerning articles is not altogether surprising when one considers the complex rule structure associated with the correct usage of definite and indefinite articles in different linguistic environments (Master, 1995).

A series of studies (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010b; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009) focused on English articles to know its accuracy change through the usage of direct written feedback. In those studies, all the experimental groups showed positive longitudinal improvements in their usage of articles compared to the no-correction group.

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework of Study

Theoretically, the present work adopted the output hypothesis (Swain, 1995) and Schmidt's (2001) hypothesis of noticing. By receiving indirect written feedback (in the current study) it was hypothesized that learners might get the chance to test their current production (interlanguage) by comparing it with the feedback provided and thus push themselves to reformulate or modify the rules they had used in their written interlanguage production (Izumi, 2003). According to Ferris (2010), this type of feedback gives them a greater potential to notice their errors, which then pushes the learners to engage themselves in hypothesis testing—a process which may induce deeper internal processing and enhance the internalization of correct forms or structures. This feedback might make writers aware of their errors without providing the correct forms which sets the learners a problem to solve.

According to some researchers (Bialystok, 1994; DeKeyser, 1998), having competency in second language is the evidence of employing implicit or acquired knowledge which is procedural and unconscious; while explicit knowledge is verbalized, that is, declarative (or conscious) knowledge of grammar rules. If such explicit knowledge in the form of (indirect) feedback leads learners to produce accurate linguistic forms, it can ultimately convert explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge taken as a strong (DeKeyser, 2003) or weak interface between implicit and explicit knowledge (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998). On the other hand, if feedback does not indicate any development towards implicit knowledge has been made, a non-interface position would take place and knowledge is believed to be a '*transient form of knowledge*' (Truscott, 1996, p.345) or '*pseudolearning*'. In the case of a strong interface position, implicit knowledge evolves from explicit or declarative knowledge when the latter becomes procedural knowledge through output practice (DeKeyser, 2003). It means, when learners practice language (in the form of producing new piece of writing in the current study), their linguistic knowledge is automatized (Manchon, 2010) and feedback is assumed to help the proceduralization of explicit L2 knowledge that is also declarative knowledge (Ellis, 2010). Hence, practice can turn learned (declarative, explicit) knowledge (in the form of feedback) into acquired (implicit, automatic) knowledge (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998). According to the weak interface position, explicit knowledge (in the form of feedback) of a linguistic form can only be transferred into procedural (implicit) knowledge through practice when the linguistic forms are acquired by a learner who is developmentally ready for this acquisition (Pienemann, 1998). Feedback in this respect could be expected to trigger interlanguage development as this facilitates the process of noticing (the gap in knowledge).

It is also significant to take note that the type of knowledge used by learners is mostly dependent on the type of task they perform (Ellis, 2005). In the current study, students were required to produce free writing or freely constructed responses (Norris & Ortega, 2000) where, unlike constrained constructed responses, the learners were asked to describe a story which is based on sequences of pictures, only under time pressure. Hence their written production in response to the pictures could have tapped into their intuitive awareness of implicit grammatical rules (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Ellis, 2005).

Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, and Takashima (2008) point out the theoretical rationale presumes the focused approach benefits accuracy enhancement more than that of unfocused feedback. They claim that learners are supposed to notice and comprehend the corrections mostly when they focus on a targeted error type and this idea of noticing and comprehending errors is significant for the acquisition of the correct forms in use (e.g., Ellis, 2005). Keeping this theoretical view in mind, the current study thus used a focused approach by targeting three error types.

### 1.4 ESL Language Learning Context in Pakistan

In the Pakistani ESL language-learning context, indirect feedback could be useful regardless of the selected pedagogy (product, process or a mixed approach) when teachers allocate a lot of their time and energy responding to and editing learners' compositions (Haider, 2012). This could be possibly because of the low acceptance of teacher and students towards errors in the final product (Haider, 2012). On the basis of this, it could be inferred that the Pakistani system is hostile to errors as these are considered a sign of failure. Students may fail to acquire the required competency in writing skills despite studying the English language as a compulsory subject from grade 1 to grade 14 (Warsi, 2004). This could be due to a general perception that learners do not see acquiring writing skills as a step-by-step process, with errors being part of the learning process.

In Pakistan, the grammar translation method (GTM) is the dominant way of teaching English and focuses on correcting grammar errors, believing that students will make effective progress only if their mistakes or errors are identified (Haider, 2012), therefore learners hardly get any opportunity to practice their language skills or knowledge in the classrooms (Nawab, 2012) by producing output. However, this over-dependence on the teacher does not motivate students to attempt any self-corrections during the process of writing as direct feedback from

their teachers means no effort on their part was expected. Hence teachers' efforts are taken for granted (Haider, 2012). As corrections from their teachers on written texts are not well incorporated into new work, consequently, they neither notice nor reflect upon their mistakes.

### *1.5 Rationale and Objective of Study*

Keeping in view the previous empirical discussion, the practices of English language learning in the local context and to maximize the involvement of learners, this study thus employed indirect written feedback which allowed the learners to self-edit or revise their texts in order to notice and correct their errors themselves before producing a new piece of writing. The purpose was to evaluate if learners revise their work through using the indirect feedback provided on their writing, this would help them to improve their writing accuracy on the immediate and delayed post-test scores (Ferris, 2010). Although the design and methodological issues of previously conducted studies seem robust, the context here is different and their findings not unanimous, thus further research is still required to investigate the views described.

In the above empirical research, direct written feedback was mostly used to investigate its long-term effect on different error categories; however, there is a need to study the long-term effects of other feedback types (i.e., indirect written feedback) too, on both treatable (or rule governed) and untreatable (or idiosyncratic) error categories, especially in the Pakistani ESL context. Another important aspect worth mentioning is that most of the above studies provided no details about the targeted linguistic forms, so it is not known which were the most problematic, error-prone forms for the participants concerned. Considering these gaps in the previous research, the current study thus focused only on those linguistic forms that the learners had more problems with.

### *1.6 Research Questions*

This study has the following research questions:

- 1) What effect did indirect written feedback have on Pakistani ESL learners' overall accuracy in new scripts written one week and five weeks after feedback treatment was provided?
- 2) What effect did indirect written feedback have on Pakistani ESL learners' accurate use of the focused linguistic forms in new texts?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Research Design*

The present study aimed at exploring the effect of indirect written feedback by comparing two independent groups (experimental and control group). In this quasi-experimental research, the participants were assessed at pre-, immediate and delayed post-test to know their effect on three focused linguistic forms.

### *2.2 Participants and Sampling*

In the current study, 50 undergraduate learners enrolled in the University of Lahore, Pakistan, were recruited. The selected students were regular students in four different departments; Psychology ( $n = 11$ ), Economics ( $n = 14$ ), History ( $n = 12$ ) and Islamic studies ( $n = 13$ ) to make sure all the available social science disciplines were represented. The participants were randomly assigned to groups. The age of participants ranges from 17 to 22 years ( $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) with 17% male and 79% female. The same language teacher was appointed to all classes. To match all the groups on all conditions and avoid unforeseen variables, certain inclusion and exclusion criteria were also generated, which also reduced the possibility of having a larger sample size.

#### *2.2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

- 1) All the selected students were bilingual: with Urdu as their first and English as their second language, as practiced at most academic institutes in Pakistan.
- 2) In order to control for the effect of any extraneous variables, participants who were bilingual speaker of languages other than English were excluded.
- 3) Participants with English as their first language were also excluded.
- 4) In addition to this, participants identified or diagnosed with any significant psychological impairment, speech or language difficulties, deficiency or disability, and/or other neurological conditions were also excluded.
- 5) It was also made sure that none of the study participants had attempted any other language related activity or assessment before the administration of any of the assigned conditions (i.e., provision of indirect written feedback at pretest, post-test times) during the study.
- 6) Those participants were included who had attended and completed successfully an EAP (English for

Academic Purposes) language course of 3 credit hours with minimum of a 50% pass mark were included. The main objective of EAP course was to make learners improve their academic writing which is the basic requirement of the university.

### *2.3 Tools of Measurement*

The present study used sets of picture prompts to produce narrative writing; these were taken from Fletcher and Birt's (1983) standardized prompts. Though, all the prompts were generated from the same source, all three sets of picture prompts had different topics in order to avoid any practice effect. The accuracy of focused forms which includes articles, prepositions, and verb tense was measured at three points in time; week one (a pre-test written exercise first), week four (an immediate post-test written exercise), and after two months (a delayed post-test exercise). There was a fixed time limit of twenty minutes for all the learners to create a piece of writing under time pressure to allow learners to use their implicit knowledge of grammatical forms (Ellis, 2005).

### *2.4 Control and Experimental Groups*

In the present study, the two groups were exposed to two treatment conditions: no feedback at all (as control group) and teachers' indirect written feedback (as experimental group including error codes, underlining and circling of errors), at three testing conditions (pre-test, immediate and delayed post-test). The coded and un-coded feedback was provided to the students' writing texts present in the experimental group. In the case of the un-coded feedback, students' errors were underlined and circled while codes related to the errors were given in the case of the coded feedback, for instance, error code 'A' is written above the word to indicate an error of English article use. The participants in the experimental group were provided with a list of error codes and symbols linked to each error type. Before they were allocated to groups, the participants were well briefed and the procedures were discussed appropriately to make sure they understood the symbols of error.

### *2.5 Procedure*

The initial step was when all the Heads of department were informed about the aims, importance and significance of the current study. Fifty students were recruited from four departments representing all the disciplines within the social sciences on campus. They were briefed about the schedule for the administration of the interventions (i.e., Feedback) to make sure that the participants did not skip their classes to be the part of this study. The participants were informed about the confidentiality of their results and assured that they would only be used for research purposes.

Before administering the pre-test writing, the necessary research information (i.e., filling a form to show willingness to be the part of the study, and a written explanation of the entire procedure along with a description of error codes) was given to all the students and teachers. In the first week, pretest written texts were produced by the students which, afterwards, were photocopied twice before providing the correction on them: one set was given to the language teacher who participated in the research to mark the errors while the other set was marked by the researcher to produce a reliability check. Throughout the whole procedure, the same teacher and researcher marked all three sets of writing to maintain consistency. By the second week of the experiment, the marking of all the written errors had been completed. The frequency of each error category was counted and the most frequent errors types were taken as the main focus of this study.

In the third week, the pre-test writing was returned to the students of both groups however in Group 1 with indirect written feedback for the three frequent error categories and the students were asked to self-correct these errors. Group 2 was asked to correct their errors by themselves without receiving any feedback on their written text. The second piece of writing of both groups, based on the second set of picture prompts took place in the following week (week 4) to see if there was any improvement in the accuracy of the three types of targeted errors which might be linked to the type of feedback provided. After a week, the second piece of writing with indirect feedback was given back to Group 1 to self-correct, while group 2 got no feedback. To explore whether the feedback had an effect over time, a delayed post-intervention test was administered five weeks later. During the interim period, normal instruction continued.

### *2.6 Data Analysis*

The data were produced at three different times (i.e., the pre-test in week 1, immediate test in week 4, and delayed post-test in week 12). There was a between-participant factor, that is, indirect written feedback in the form of coded and un-coded feedback, and no feedback. In either case, the students were focused on accuracy as the dependent variable that was measured as an error ratio or an error rate per type for the three pieces of writing. Since the students' compositions could vary as far as the number or frequency of words is concerned, so the error rate was calculated as the total number of errors/total number of words  $\times 100$ .

The mean and standard deviations for the three targeted forms in each of the three pieces of writing (pre, immediate, and delayed post-test) were calculated for both Groups (1 & 2). An Independent sample t-test was performed to compare the error means of the two groups on the pre-, post-, and delayed post-tests to indicate the short- and the long-term retention of feedback. For this purpose, SPSS software was used.

A reliability level of .85 was gained for the categorization and identification of errors found in the writing test written before the provision of feedback. Using the three targeted error types, correlation coefficients of .81 and .78 respectively, were obtained for error counts in the samples written soon after the pre-test and those written after two months, and the correlation coefficients were 0.92 and 0.91, respectively, for error assignment/markings in the second and third writing samples.

**3. Results**

The first research question concerned the effect of indirect written feedback on the learning of three linguistic forms in the writing of ESL Pakistani learners. For this purpose, an independent-samples t-test was performed on pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test in order to compare the accuracy means in experimental (Group 1) and control group (Group 2), as shown in Table 1. It was only at the immediate post-test where there was a significant difference in the scores for Group 1 (M = 4.72, SD = .94) and Group 2 (M = 5.84, SD = 1.03);  $t(49) = -4.03, p = .000$ . Further, Cohen’s effect size value ( $d = -1.14$ ), which is used to determine the strength of the difference of the two groups, suggested a high significance. This means that the two groups performed differently only for the test written soon after receiving the feedback treatment as shown in Figure 1.

Table 1. Independent sample t-test of two treatment groups on pre-, immediate post-test and delayed post-test

Testing times	Groups	Mean	SD	t	p	d
Pre-test	Group 1	5.40	.91	.320	.750	.091
	Group 2	5.32	.85			
Immediate post-test	Group 1	4.72	.94	-4.03	.000*	-1.14
	Group 2	5.84	1.03			
Delayed post-test	Group 1	5.08	1.04	-1.87	.07	-.528
	Group 2	5.64	1.08			

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ .

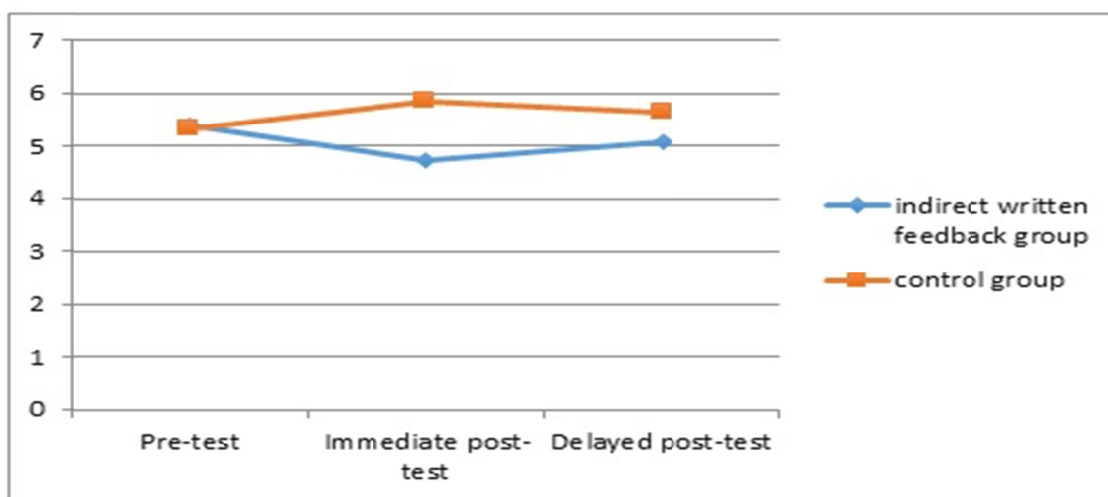


Figure 1. Group means of three errors across three testing occasions

In order to get the answer of second research question, each error category was analyzed separately as shown in Table 2. In case of article, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the accuracy means in experimental (Group 1) and control group (Group 2) on pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test as

shown in Table 2. It was only at the immediate post-test where there was a significant difference in the scores for Group 1 ( $M = 1.76$ ,  $SD = .78$ ) and Group 2 ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = .58$ );  $t(49) = -2.27$ ,  $p = .03$ . Further, Cohen's effect size value ( $d = -.64$ ), suggested a moderate practical significance. This means that article errors performed differently between the two groups only at the test written soon after receiving the feedback treatment. In case of preposition errors, it was neither the pre-test and immediate post-test, nor the delayed post-test which exhibited the difference which is significant between the two treatment groups. In case of past simple tense, it was only at the delayed post-test where there was a significant difference in the scores for Group 1 ( $M = .80$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) and Group 2 ( $M = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ );  $t(49) = -3.65$ ,  $p = .001$ . Further, Cohen's effect size value ( $d = -1.03$ ), suggested a moderate to large practical significance. This means that past simple tense errors performed better after receiving the two feedback treatments.

Table 2. Independent sample t-test of two treatments group concerning three errors overtime

Target forms	Testing times	Groups	Mean	SD	t	P	d
Articles	Pre-test	Group 1	1.92	.70	-46	.65	-.13
		Group 2	2.00	.50			
	Immediate post-test	Group 1	1.76	.78	-2.27	.03*	-.64
		Group 2	2.20	.58			
	Delayed post-test	Group 1	1.96	.73	2.15	.83	.06
		Group 2	1.92	.57			
Prepositions	Pre-test	Group 1	1.88	.67	-.42	.68	-.12
		Group 2	1.96	.68			
	Immediate post-test	Group 1	1.92	.86	-.89	.38	-.25
		Group 2	2.12	.73			
	Delayed post-test	Group 1	2.24	.78	.42	.68	.12
		Group 2	2.16	.55			
Past simple tense	Pre-test	Group 1	1.56	.77	1.05	.30	.30
		Group 2	1.36	.57			
	Immediate post-test	Group 1	1.00	.71	-1.63	.11	-.46
		Group 2	1.40	1.0			
	Delayed post-test	Group 1	.80	.50	-3.65	.001*	-1.03
		Group 2	1.64	1.04			

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ .

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The evaluation of the data revealed that the learners who received indirect written feedback and then made revisions of their writing themselves, performed better on subsequent writing tests than those who were not provided with feedback. However, a significant difference between the two groups only appeared in the immediate test (soon after getting the feedback treatment), not in the delayed post-test (to discover any longer-term effect). In other words, the feedback group had higher overall accuracy scores soon after receiving indirect written feedback and then revised the pretest writing scripts. However, the feedback group was not able to retain the accuracy they had achieved in the immediate posttest, three months later. The delayed test p value was equal to .067, that is, slightly above .05. It can thus be assumed that if the sample size had increased, then the difference could have been significant, suggesting learners in the feedback group might be able to retain the same level of accuracy over a 3-month period. That is, continued, recycled practice, and revisions are necessary for students to retain grammar forms in their internal grammars—i.e. implicitly.

These results advocate those found in Bitchener and Knoch (2010b); Van Beuningen, de Jong, and Kuiken (2008); Truscott and Hsu (2008), reporting that indirect written feedback on errors helps learners to improve their accuracy only in the short term (i.e., in an immediate post-test). These results, however, are not the same from those of other set of studies which concluded that indirect written feedback provided on errors helped learners improve their accuracy over a longer term in their writing in the delayed post-test (Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2006; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Frear & Chiu, 2015; Lalande, 1982; Rahimi, 2009). However, except for Rahimi (2009) and Frear and Chiu (2015), the other research referred to did not have a control group, making their studies non-comparable.

The accuracy in the three focused linguistic features was calculated and a comparison was made across the two groups: the feedback group and the no-correction group. The results show that the provision of coded and

un-coded indirect feedback, which was provided simultaneously, resulted insignificantly greater accuracy in past simple tense use in new writings of students. However, this was not prominent with the performance of prepositions. These findings are in line with the study of Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, and McKee (2000), Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) and Ferris and Roberts (2001). In the case of articles, the feedback group in the current study only improved in the immediate posttest. This finding supports the studies of Ferris and Roberts (ibid) and Bitchener and Knoch (2010b) which found a short-term effect for indirect feedback on article accuracy. The former study found improvement in revisions while the latter did so in the new pieces of writing. The current study included both stages-revisions and then new texts-hence suggesting that as far as accuracy of article is concerned, whether only revisions or only new texts or both are the part of the study. These findings differ from the work done by Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005), the study by Bitchener (2008), and Bitchener and Knoch (2008), which found long-term accuracy in new writing. This can be probable that the learners in those studies improved longer term as they focused only on article correction. The current study considered not only just articles needed attention but two other grammatical features as well (i.e., preposition and past tense). Nevertheless, Urdu is the national language in Pakistan that has no definite articles to be used. Therefore, students in this study mostly omitted the article or used few definite articles in their new pieces of writing.

These findings also support the idea demonstrated through previous studies (i.e., Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000; Ferris & Helt, 2000) that different linguistic structures should not be treated in the same way as they represent a separate domain of knowledge acquired at different language acquisition stages (Ferris, 2002). The students displayed different levels of progress across three error types. These findings can also be considered from Ferris' (1999) perspective of treatable and untreatable categories. The past tense forms that were amenable to indirect feedback in this study, are considered treatable as they are rule-governed and thus easy to instruct and comprehend, while most prepositions are considered untreatable, more idiosyncratic and thus need to tap into a wider range of students' acquired or implicit knowledge to correct their errors, which requires a longer period of time (Ellis, 2004). Because of this time factor, Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, and McKee (2000) highlight this point that untreatable error categories require more explicit feedback. In this study, keeping in view their previous English language learning experience in the Pakistani academic context, the students' knowledge of prepositions was not highly developed. Moreover, they were at the initial stages of their English language course, so they had not practiced much about the prepositional use in English, hence they may not have been developmentally ready to acquire forms which need a lot of time to acquire (Pienemann, 1998).

Theoretically, the findings in the case of articles and simple past tense could be described by Schmidt's narrative of the role of comprehension in second language acquisition. Schmidt (2001) distinguished comprehension at the noticing level and at the level of understanding. *Noticing* involves simply attending to exemplars of specific forms in the input (e.g., English has 'a' and 'the' in sentences); *understanding* entails knowing a rule or principle that governs that aspect of a language (e.g., English uses 'a' before the first mention of a noun and 'the' before the second mention; use of 'the' shows the specificity or uniqueness in a particular context). Thus, it could be argued that the group who received indirect written feedback while being aware in terms of noticing, were not aware in terms of understanding. Indirect written feedback alone was perhaps insufficient to bridge this gap for the learners. However, additional written feedback might increase learners' awareness (of both sorts) by providing a clearer indication of the gap between their interlanguage (current production of language) and the target language. Schmidt further contends that such conscious rule awareness arising from understanding can strongly trigger later L2 learning. However, written feedback of such type would mean learners could not exhibit the development of their implicit knowledge by showing the evidence for the non-interface position (Truscott, 1996); the written feedback provided was not explicit (because of lacking an explanation of errors) to allow the learners to develop their implicit knowledge of linguistic forms. Hence the level of explicitness can make a difference to students' understanding of teacher correction and their applying it in new writing.

Contextually, the implementation of such feedback is found not to help the Pakistani learners who have problems with their teachers' method of teaching English (Nawab, 2012), or their method of teaching and correcting students' written English (Haider, 2012; Warsi, 2004). Although using such a type of feedback might reduce the stress levels on teachers, the students especially those at the beginning of an EAP language course, might not have enough knowledge of language to correct their errors themselves, so this feedback type was found to be insufficient for the purpose of improving their written accuracy (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998).

In pedagogical terms, the conclusion could be helpful for instructors to use indirect written feedback along with a direct feedback type that is less time consuming. They should realize that providing this kind of feedback to low proficiency learners might not be the most effective since their linguistic knowledge may be too limited for



them to self-correct their errors (Ferris, 2002), so they need to include a more explicit type of feedback or focused practice. Therefore, teachers need to find adequate methods to enhance low-proficiency second language learners' knowledge of errors. The students need a clear awareness of what should be done to correct errors if these are underlined or given codes by the instructor and needs to be corrected by themselves, so pair work error correction might help. Teachers who need to find less stressful or time-consuming ways of correction like indirect feedback first need to establish whether their students are capable of correcting their texts by themselves, and if they could not correct them successfully, then a more explicit form of oral meta-linguistic feedback or practice can be provided. Moreover, it is essential to spend some of the time towards training teachers about the provision of appropriate feedback and error correction practice. Some students do not pay attention to the feedback they are given and show no interest in self-correcting their errors. They need to be taught how to benefit from the given feedback on both treatable and untreatable errors and what coded or un-coded feedback refers to so they can be motivated to improve their performance.

To conclude, indirect written feedback was effective over a period of time only when learners receive it on the treatable errors. To make indirect written feedback more effective for untreatable errors, learners can be asked to work in groups or pairs to deal with indirect written feedback which would ultimately make them independent and self-reliant.

### 5. Limitations

The present study has some limitations. It was undertaken with university students without knowing their current level of language proficiency. Therefore, there is a need to study the efficacy of other forms of written feedback with university learners at different proficiency levels and to explore whether their proficiency level affects their capability in order to get advantage from different types of written feedback. Moreover, the present study could not work on the learners' personality factors like differences between gender or attitude because of practical limitations. It has been recommended that different personality parameters may have differential effects on the success of feedback (Sheen, 2007). It would be significant if coded and un-coded forms of indirect feedback were studied separately to discover their effect on the improvement of treatable and untreatable errors.

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