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INSIGHT TO HINDSIGHT: IRANIAN TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ABOUT GRAMMAR-BASED FEEDBACK ON L2 WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The term corrective feedback has lured a great deal of attention in foreign language teaching. In line with this trend, considerable attention has been given to varieties of written corrective feedback (WCF) in second language writing through decades. A great number of studies have investigated the effectiveness of WCF on students' writing accuracy (Ferris *et al.*, 2013; Bitchener *et al.*, 2005; Chandler, 2003). Most of these studies have attempted to find answer to the aforementioned issue through conducting experimental studies. The issue which has been left unnoticed is the teachers' perception concerning whether WCF should be provided, and if yes, what types of WCF lead to better learning outcomes. This issue has attracted considerable attention within the context of other countries except Iran. In order to fill the gap, this study aimed to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes toward providing written corrective feedback (WCF) on students' grammatical mistakes. To fulfil this end, a questionnaire constructed by Pavia (2011) was distributed among 110 EFL teachers in language institutes located in three cities of Iran: Shiraz, Jahrom and Yasuj. Both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed to identify the teachers' beliefs about WCF. The result showed that Iranian EFL teachers were of the opinion that provision of grammar correction must be a part of writing courses. Moreover, a large number of teachers preferred to provide error correction as directly as possible. The findings of this study can advise teacher trainers to consolidate the mentality within prospective language teachers regarding the effectiveness of corrective feedback and encourage novice teachers to provide students with correction of their grammatical mistakes.

Keywords: *Grammar, Corrective Feedback, Efl Teachers, Writing*

INTRODUCTION

Within the last two decades, research has changed from the perspective that students' achievement depends on teachers' behavior in classroom (Clark and Peterson, 1986; Fang, 1996; Shulman, 1986 and Jackson, 1990). Teachers are now considered as the one who is able to make decision in classroom and run it based on his/her judgment (Fang, 1996), not as the one who has to manage the class based on the prescribed rules and procedures inaugurated by experts (Basturkmen *et al.*, 2004). Inundating research has been done in the field of teachers' beliefs toward education (Clark & Peterson, 1986). This does not mean that there has been much progression and unanimity among scholars to have a trenchant decision regarding this convoluted issue. Advancement in the sphere of teachers' beliefs can help pave the way for institutes' teachers to overcome difficulties and learn how to deal with the same problem in the future. Differences in the teachers' views on how to correct the learners' writing errors have led to copious research concerning different facets of corrective feedback in general and teachers' conceptions of WCF in particular (Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Doughty and Varela, 1998; Mackey and Philip, 1998, Ammar, 2003). Answering the questions of whether corrective feedback should be implemented or not, and if yes, what sort of feedback it should be, has made a controversial issue among scholars. Scholars such as Bitchener (2008), Chandler (2003), Ellis *et al.*, (2006), and Ferris (1997) advocate the effectiveness of WCF. Nonetheless, scholars such as Kepner (1991), Truscott (1996, 2007) are against the use of corrective feedback.

Review of Literature

The rationale for expecting that error correction can be effective to language learning rests on different theoretical grounds. In this section, some of the theoretical foundations of the use of CF in L2 classrooms will be summarized.

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Research evidence on whether error correction contributes to improved accuracy

The concept and provision of corrective feedback varies among different methods. For instance, ‘negative assessment’ in audio-lingualism is abandoned as possible and it functions as punishment in which it may lead to the students’ disappointment and also discourage learning (negative view toward WCF). Meanwhile, in humanistic method the view toward WCF is considered as positive assessment to increase a positive self-image and self-esteem toward language learning (Ur, 1996). It has been postulated by EFL and ESL teachers and researchers, who work in the forum of CF, that WCF helps learners to gain mastery in linguistic form and structure. Therefore, they are trying to recognize the most efficient way to provide WCF for learners to improve the accuracy of their writing. According to Hillman, Willis, and Gunawaedena (1994), feedback can be reconstructed and applied in various types of interaction, such as peers (learner to learner), teacher (learner to instructor), and finally through content (learner to content). However, Truscott (1996) claims that all different types of feedback which are provided to the student’s writing should be abandoned in the light of its potentially harmful impact on learners. He proposed three arguments against WCF. First, he advocated the idea that learning process is so complex that it is not possible for learners to enhance it by providing corrective feedback. Next, it is difficult to provide CF to students when they are ready to learn a specific language structure, and he finally argued that those acquired knowledge which spring from correction will disappear after a period of time. Some scholars, such as Sheppard (1992) and Semke (1984) have conducted some studies which directly indicate that there is a significant difference between L2 students who receive written corrective feedback and those who do not in improving the accuracy of their writing. Also, Fathman and Whalley (1990) claimed that students who received error feedback made fewer grammatical errors. Therefore, there is a need to compare receiving feedback with no corrective feedback and its effect on students’ writing accuracy (Ferris, 2002). Haswell (1983) studied on three groups of freshman university students and compared the degree of their errors at the beginning and end of the semester. The study demonstrated that the accuracy of their writing improved and the number of their errors declined during the term. In the same vein, Bitchener and Knoch (2009) through a 10 month investigation studied the effects of WCF on the English article system. The result indicated that the experimental groups outperformed the control groups on all post-tests.

Research Evidence on the Effectiveness of Different Types of Feedback on Improved Accuracy of Students’ Writing

A plethora of studies have been done to investigate whether specific types of WCF help students improve the accuracy of their writing. As noted before, Truscott (1996) was against the use of corrective feedback in student’s writing. He was of the opinion that corrective feedback is not helpful, but also it is harmful to learning. He also accentuates that studies done by several researchers (Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Polio, Fleck and Leder, 1998) showed that there was no marked differences between the control and treatment groups. On the other hand, Ferris (1999), Chandler (2000) and Lalande (1982) were more radical supporters of the CF and believed that written corrective feedback is effective in helping ESL/EFL students in improving the accuracy of their writing. Cohen (1983) examined the effects of rewriting native writer of the target language on the original version of the student’s text completed with teacher correction. The result revealed that teacher-corrected composition’s group were more appreciated and also it led to students’ achievement in writing skills. On top of that, the students also found that correcting their errors with a native person was deemed as an advantage to them. However, the problem with the reformulation was that the students were not able to compare the two versions without the help of their teacher assistant.

Two Main Types of Written Corrective Feedback

Direct Feedback

As cited in Ellis (2008), teachers cater the correct forms of errors to the students in direct corrective feedback. It can be notified on various forms, such as crossing out an unnecessary word, phrase, or morpheme, inserting a missing word or morpheme and writing the correct form above or near the erroneous form (Ferris, 2001). In other words, it is defined as a type of feedback in which students’

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writing errors are underlined and the correct forms are supplied above them. In this case, the teacher provides the student with the correct forms.

Indirect Feedback

It deals with making students aware of their mistakes without correcting them. This is possible by underlining or highlighting the errors or using cursors to indicate omission in the student's writing or even by putting a cross in the margin next to the line containing the error. This involves deciding whether or not to show the exact location of the error (cited in Ellis, 2008). According to Lalande (1982), indirect corrective feedback is frequently used and recommended to other feedbacks, such as direct feedback in a way that it inspires the learners with problem solving and guided learning. It also helps them to become aware of linguistic forms.

Teachers' Perceptions on the Provision of Grammar-based Feedback to L2 Writers

The term corrective feedback (CF) has played the utmost challenging role within the process of acquiring a second language amongst both theorists and researchers (Beuningen, 2010). This issue is deemed as a problem that puzzles the researchers and instructors regarding the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of CF in the spheres of SLA. It is necessary to investigate the effectiveness of the role of corrective feedback (CF) on students' writing errors. Importantly, looking at teachers' perception of corrective feedback is of vitality accordingly in view of the fact that what they do in the classroom will be shaped by what they believe (Nation and Macalister, 2010). Teachers' beliefs play a significant role in pedagogical decision-making and interactional practices (Tillema, 2000; Wong, 2010). Equally important, Musumeci (1997) and Schulz (1996) maintained that teachers' perception of form-focused instruction has a great influence on whether they enjoy grammar teaching in their classrooms. Several studies (Edilian, 2009; Farrell and Lim, 2005; Yim, 1993) have investigated the teachers' beliefs in order to see whether their perception of grammar instruction had any effect on students' learning. Here, the project will bring studies concerning the perceptions of teachers and providing correction to the students' grammatical errors in order to see what light they shed on each other.

Kartava (2006) conducted a study to discover the relationship between novice EFL teachers' beliefs regarding corrective feedback and their pedagogical practices, showing that the teachers correct fewer errors in their classroom than they said they would.

It is also important to take the students' and teachers' perception of the usefulness of the corrective feedback into consideration because if there is no correspondence between the students' and teachers' perceptions on instructional effectiveness, it contributes to students' dissatisfaction; therefore, learning can be, to some extent, blocked (Brown, 2009).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodology

Participants

One-hundred eleven EFL teachers participated in this study. To gather the data, cluster sampling was employed. The researchers of the study came up with a list of institutes located in three cities of Shiraz, Jahrom, Yasuj. A questionnaire made by Pavia (2011) was administered to a total of 30 institutes within these cities.

Instruments

To gather the data of this study, a questionnaire constructed by Paiva (2011) was used. It has three main sections. Section one consists of general questions regarding the participants' experience, years of teaching and their academic status. Section two consists of 22 frequently-discussed items about grammar-based feedback on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly agree to strongly disagree), and the last one requested teachers to answer if they provide error correction to their students' writing, what sort of error correction they provide.

Procedure

To collect the data of this study, as mentioned before cluster sampling was used. In so doing, the researcher of the study came up with a list of institutes which were located in the three cities of Shiraz,

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Jahrom, Yasuj. The researcher could find 20 institutes in Jahrom, 50 in Shiraz, and 12 in the city of Yasuj. Subsequently, he randomly selected 10 institutes in each city (a total of 30 institutes). Then, a questionnaire originally constructed by Paiva (2011) was administered to all teachers (a total of 150 language teachers) working in these 30 institutes.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics for teachers’ responses to questionnaire items were utilized. In the second part of the questionnaire (open ended questions), the coding method was used. The percentage and means of the teachers’ agreement or disagreement with each of the items of the questionnaire were computed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first research question, some items of the questionnaire were described in terms of their means, percentage and frequency of people who agreed, disagreed or even were neutral to each of them and then the second research question was tried to be answered through qualitative research paradigm.

Belief 1: Grammar Correction must be a Part of Writing Courses

As indicated in Table 1 and Figure 1, the majority of English teachers who were working in different institutes of Shiraz, Jahrom, and Yasuj agreed with the importance of providing grammar correction as to the students’ mistakes in their writing classes. According to Table 1, the highest mean in this study belonged to the item “grammar correction must be a part of writing courses” (M=4.4636).

Table 1: The Role of Corrective Feedback in Writing Classes

Statement	N	M	SD
1	111	4.4636	.75026

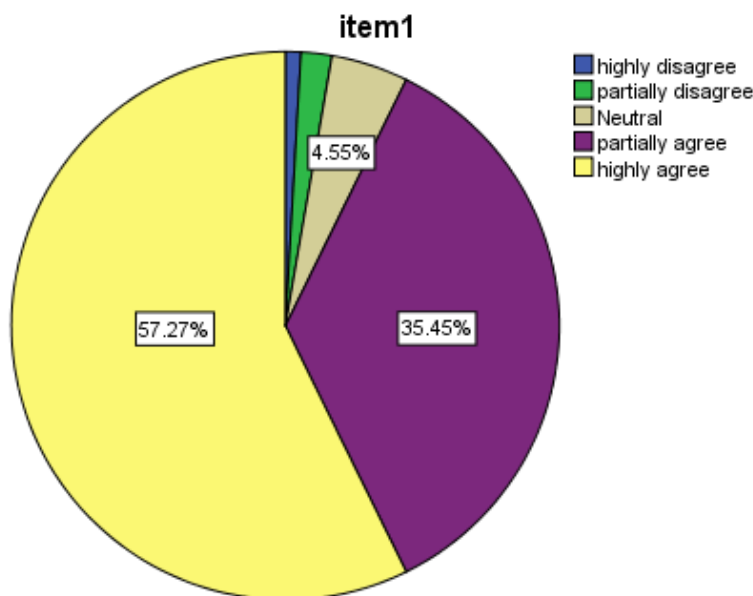


Figure1: The teachers’ views about grammar correction

The qualitative analyses also revealed that Iranian EFL teachers agreed with Ferris (1997) who maintained that grammar correction should be provided within the language classroom, and were against Truscott (1996) who believed that grammar correction should be abandoned in L2 writing courses. In response to the open-ended question 2A which asked the teachers to write their own reaction regarding their supervisors’ announcement that “from now on his/her teachers are not allowed to provide error correction on students’ L2 writing”. One of the teachers replied that “I can’t tolerate the new decision

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because it is really necessary for students to be corrected. Their grammar mistakes should be corrected. I'll talk to the supervisor and try to persuade him/her to let us do our job completely". This teacher maintained that he can't bear such a decision and is of the opinion that it is of importance for students to be corrected by their teachers. He also punctuates that he will talk to his supervisor to change his decision and let them correct the students' grammatical errors. Figure 1 shows the percentage of teachers' agreement and disagreement with the provision of grammar correction within the classroom.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of teachers' agreement and disagreement with the provision of grammar correction within the classroom. As observed, there are considerable differences in the proportion of teachers' response to the item "Grammar correction must be part of writing courses". For the ease of interpretation, five-point Likert scale was changed to a three-point one. "Strongly agree" and "agree" were combined with each other. The same happened to "strongly disagree" and "disagree" options in order to make a new scale. The highest rate was 92.8% which belonged to the "highly agree" option; that is, the majority of teachers agreed with the idea that grammar correction must be a part of writing courses. However, few teachers disagreed with the notion of the abandonment of corrective feedback. Referring to Figure 1, it can be noticed that 92.8% of Iranian EFL teachers preferred to use written corrective feedback within the classroom by providing different reasons to support the perks of grammar correction.

In contrast to item "Grammar correction must be a part of writing courses" (item 1), which enjoyed the highest mean (M= 4.4636), the item "Grammar correction in writing courses should be abandoned" (item 2) showed the lowest mean among the rest (M= 1.7000).

Belief 2: Grammar Correction in L2 writing Courses should be Abandoned

As already noted, the lowest mean belonged to item 2 which asked the teachers whether grammar correction should be prohibited within language classrooms (M=1.7000). According to Table 2, it is clear that the majority of teachers disagreed with this item; that is, they expressed exactly the opposite view of the first item and believed that grammar correction should be provided within language classrooms.

Table 2: The Role of Corrective Feedback in Writing Classes

Statement	N	M	SD
2	111	1.7000	.940384

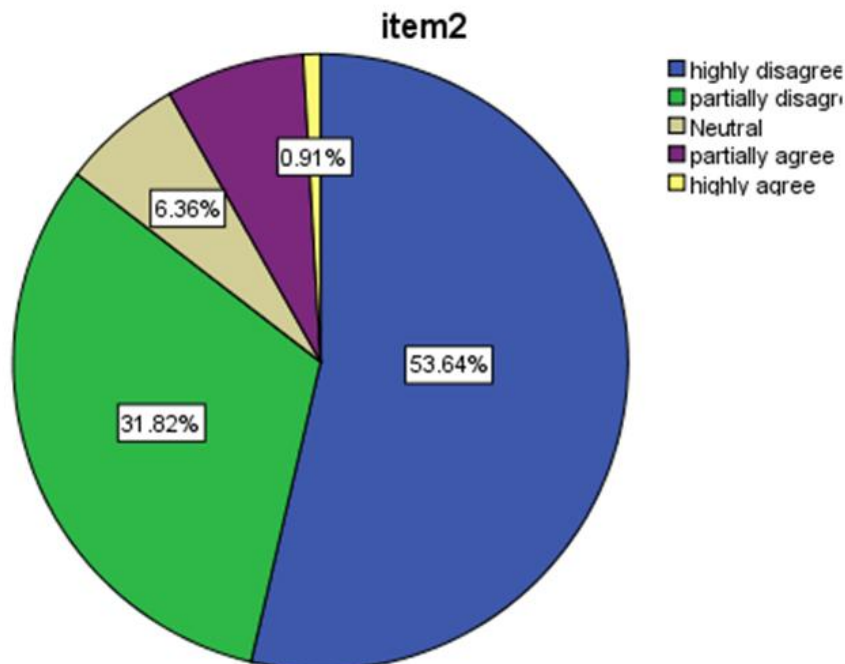


Figure 2: The Role of Corrective Feedback in Writing Classes

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Considering their view as to abandonment of grammar correction, it is obvious how strongly they felt regarding this issue. In response to this challenging issue, one of the teachers maintained that “*I highly disagree with abandonment of grammar correction because in my opinion if mistakes stick in their mind, they can never solve it.*” It can be seen from this response that this teacher highly disagrees with this point and believes that if teachers do not correct the students’ grammatical problems, errors will stick in their mind. Therefore, they will encounter problems in their subsequent writing.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of the teachers’ agreement and disagreement with the abandonment of grammar correction within the classroom. We turn now to consider the percentage of the teachers’ perspective about the abandonment of grammar correction. As shown, the lion’s share of Figure 2 belonged to the teacher’s disagreement with the percentage of 85.4%, whilst the proportion of agreement with this idea is inconsiderable.

Belief 3: Time spent on Grammar Correction Wastes the time that would be better spent on Organizational and Logical Development of Arguments

Table 3 indicates the mean of the institute teachers’ attitudes toward spending time on organizational and logical development rather than merely providing grammar correction on students’ writing. In Figure 3, the percentage of teacher’s agreement indicates that the highest proportion of teachers disagreed with this item (79.1%), maintaining that the mere provision of feedback to students’ grammatical errors would suffice. The mean (2.7000) and also percentage of the teachers’ agreement with the afore-mentioned idea indicated that teachers, to some extent, agree to spend time on students’ grammatical errors rather than on organizational and their logical development. However, some still agree to spend time on organizational and logical development of the students’ writing.

Table 3: Time Spent on Corrective Feedback

Statement	N	M	SD
4	111	2.7000	1.03649

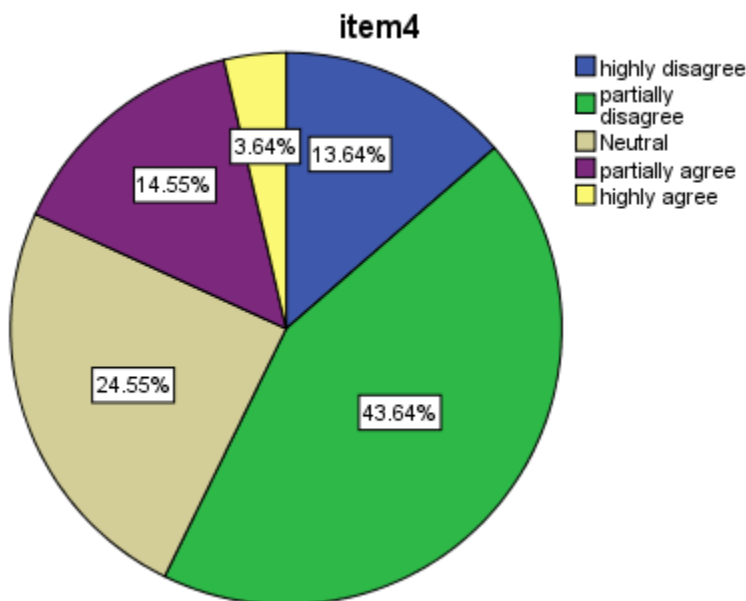


Figure 3: Time Spent on Corrective Feedback

Let’s consider a teacher’s comments related to this statement. Expressing agreement with the idea of spending more time on the organizational and logical development of arguments on students’ writing, one of the teachers said “*I think all the teachers’ arguments in English classes help students learn English through the use of grammar and vocabulary. So besides the fact that correction plays an important role,*

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the arguments to be developed are important as well.” Teacher 1 believed that grammar correction is insufficient by itself. In addition to grammar correction within L2 writing classrooms, teachers should consider other facets of teaching writing within the English classrooms in order to help students learn English.

Nearly 18% of the teachers expressed their agreement with the above belief. Judging from the percentage shown in Figure 3, we can conclude that the above belief has not found too many staunch supporters within Iranian EFL teachers.

The second research question asked: “How their beliefs are related to their perception of their classroom practice?” Based upon research question one, the majority of teachers agreed and highly supported the idea that “grammar correction should be provided within the classrooms”. Teachers’ perceptions of their classroom practice in regard to corrective feedback seem to indicate that they act on their beliefs. That is, they believe in written feedback about grammar, and their stated actions indicate that they use this approach in their classes. Question 3 in part 3 of the survey was designed to collect data for research question two. In response to the question “What is the most frequent method you use in order to correct the students’ grammatical mistakes”, one of the teachers said “*I read their writing carefully and when I face with a mistake, I underline it and write the correct form of that grammar. Most of the students have the same mistakes, so generally I explain them in class*”. In order to enhance the students’ accuracy, this teacher uses direct feedback to correct his/her students’ errors. He is of the opinion that generally most students have the same errors in their writing; therefore, he explains those general errors for all of the students within the classroom. On the other hand, some teachers agreed with the provision of indirect feedback on students’ writings errors. Their responses suggest that they perceive their classroom practice as providing indirect error feedback. Last but not the least, the type of error correction used by the participating teachers in this study is “peer correction”. These teachers are of the opinion that if students use peer error correction, they can guess and find the correct answers cooperatively and this contributes to better learning.

This study was done within the context of Iran in which many, if not most, institutions still use the traditional approaches to grammar teaching within the classrooms. The number of teachers participating in this study were one-hundred eleven EFL teachers, the majority of whom staunchly advocated the use of written corrective feedback on their students’ grammatical mistakes in their classrooms, even though they were somehow restricted by their institute’s managers to do whatever they want. As it has been mentioned, in spite of the fact that teachers were supposed not to provide error correction in one of the scenarios of the questionnaire, they disagreed and did their own job. It can be inferred that the majority of teachers valued providing error correction and showed a conflict between their beliefs and school policy. The results of this study is in contrast with those of Lee (2003), in which teachers reported that their choices of teaching approach were justified by institutional contexts, such as school policy.

The results showed that students wanted to be corrected by their teachers in the classroom. These findings corroborate Phipps and Borg’s (2009) discovery that teachers’ core beliefs that their students’ expectations can influence their learning process were more influential on their decision to use traditional methodology of grammar teaching in their classes. It is worth considering that the teachers’ agreement with the notion that grammar correction in L2 writing is beneficial because it helps them write accurately. Lastly, the results are, to some extent, in contrast with that of Pavia (2011) which indicated that language teachers’ perceptions about the usefulness of corrective feedback with respect to grammar in writing classes seem to reflect a conflict between holding that this practice cannot be abandoned and a corresponding doubt about whether grammar correction actually culminates in learners’ writing development. That is, the contrast between the results of the two studies is related to the context in which each of these studies has been done.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate 1) the perception of Iranian EFL teachers regarding the provision of grammar error correction, and 2) what types of error correction do they mostly provide on their students’ grammatical mistakes. The findings showed that the majority of Iranian EFL teachers

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participating in this study agreed with the idea of providing error correction on the students' writing grammatical errors. In addition, a large number of teachers preferred to provide error correction as directly as possible. In line with the teachers' previous opinions concerning the significance of the provision of grammatical error correction on the students' composition, the majority of language teachers attributed the significance of error correction to the students' expectations to be corrected by their teachers. Last but not the least, a large proportion of the teachers believed that correcting the students' grammatical errors would lead to enhancement of their accuracy. The findings of this study provide useful insights for novice teachers concerning whether written corrective feedback should be provided in language classrooms and if yes how. In other words, findings from this study will certainly contribute to future teacher educational programs in Iran, in that it brings to light theories, concepts, and principles that guide the teachers' instructional practices. The results also can advise teacher trainers to consolidate the mentality within prospective language teachers regarding the effectiveness of corrective feedback, and encourage novice teachers to provide students with the correction of their grammatical mistakes.

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