Direct vs. Indirect Corrective Feedback
And
EFL Learners’ Spelling Ability

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Abstract:
The aim of the current study is to investigate the impact of indirect corrective feedback on promoting Iranian high school students’ spelling accuracy in English. It compared the effect of direct feedback with indirect feedback on students’ written work dictated by their teacher from Chicken Soup for the Mother and Daughter Soul. The study was conducted at the talented girls’ high school in Saveh, Iran. A sample of 56 high school sophomores were randomly assigned to two equal groups of 28. Group 1 (the direct feedback group) and Group 2 (the indirect feedback group) were treated differently regarding their spelling errors for five weeks. Statistical analysis based on Mean scores and Paired t-tests revealed that indirect feedback was more effective than direct feedback in rectifying students’ spelling errors.

Key terms: Spelling ability, corrective feedback and indirect feedback

1. Introduction
English is the main language for international communication in different fields including commerce, industry, politics and education. This is the major reason why millions of language learners all over the world are striving to improve their English language proficiency. An essential component of this proficiency is improving one’s ability to communicate via writing since it is crucial for effective communication and essential to employment in today’s world. As for writing competency, spelling is one of the important factors necessary to be taken into consideration. To emphasize the relationship between spelling and writing, Moats (2006) expresses that writing is a mental "juggling act", that is to say, while writing some basic skills like handwriting, spelling, grammar and punctuation are used automatically at the same time, so the writer has a chance to allot more time and attention on other concerns like topic, organization, word choice, and audience needs.

Poor spelling can have drastic effects on writing. It makes writing a labored activity with regular interruptions to the thought process by excessive attention to spelling (Moats, 2000, cited in El – Dakhs & Mitchell, 2011). Writers who must think too hard about how to spell use up valuable cognitive resources needed for higher level aspects of composition (Singer & Bashir, 2004, cited in Moats, 2006). Poor speller may restrict what they write to words they can spell which leads to loss of verbal power and sometimes incoherent pieces of writing (Moats, 2006).

English learners need to know the correct association of spoken sounds and written symbols in order to spell the English words correctly (Chomsky & Halle, 1998; Schane, 1970; Venezky, 1970, cited in Baleghizadeh & Dadashi, 2011). We as teachers are in charge of teaching this spelling system to our students and it is usually up to them to master this ability.

One of the commonest way to test learners’ spelling ability is dictating words and sentences from
students’ textbooks. Obviously dictation is not the only way for measuring spelling; there are some other ways such as multiple-choice and writing the missing letters (cited in Balezghizadeh & Dadashi, 2011). Bosman & Van Orden’s (1997) study concerns the use of multiple-choice tests to measure the spelling performance. In a multiple-choice test the correct spelling of a word is presented together with one or more incorrect spellings and students are required to mark the correct spelling.

The researcher's ten-year experience of teaching at high school revealed that learners frequently spelled the same corrected ill-formed words in the wrong way. It came to mind that students did not pay attention to the teacher's corrective feedback. In other words, it was concluded that this kind of corrective feedback would not work. So the current researcher attempted to see students’ contribution in correction because when everything was spoon-fed to them, students would take it for granted and did not ponder over them. Therefore, instead of providing the learners with correct forms, the researcher decided to push them to correct and produce. If learners are pushed to produce correct forms rather than provided with them, it will be more beneficial to them in the process of their interlanguage development (Allwright, 1975; Hendrickson, 1978; Virgil & Orell, 1978; cited in Amiri Dehnoo & YousefVand, 2013). So it is on the teacher’s shoulders to provide constructive corrective feedback.

Corrective feedback refers to any teacher's reaction which is aimed at improving learners' utterances (Chaudron, 1977, cited in Sivaji, 2012). Further, the definition by Ur (1996) explains that the recent and welcome shift of interest from language teaching to language learning affects the way feedback is perceived by both learners and teachers. However, over the last few years, the types and roles of corrective feedback have become controversial issues in the realm of language teaching and learning.

Error correction can be operationalized in terms of direct and indirect feedback. While indirect corrective feedback only consists of an indication of an error (i.e. by underlining the error or providing an error code), direct error correction identifies both the error and the target form (Bitchener et al., 2005).

Experts in the field of SLA have worked a lot on types and effectiveness of corrective feedback like Virgil and Orell (1975) and Brown (2001), just to name a few (cited in Balezghizadeh & Dadashi, 2011). Since there was a lack of similar studies on spelling, this paper attempts to take a step forward on the road of Spelling Research to make tracks in the literature on spelling instruction. Mentioning the studies carried out so far on giving feedback seems to be worthwhile at this stage.

2. Review Literature
Ur (1996) defines feedback as information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance. However, debate regarding the usefulness of feedback has been prominent in recent years. Moreover, it seems necessary to mention that a cursory reading of the literature on feedback will reveal that it is widely used as a substitute for error correction.

“Attitudes toward error correction have evolved from the strict avoidance of errors and thus quick and direct error correction before the 1960s, to the condemnation of error correction as something harmful in the late 1960s, and to a more critical view of the necessity and value of error correction in the 1970s and 1980s. The controversy over the topic of error correction, however, remains unresolved in the 1990s” (Lee, 1997, cited in Khatib & Bijani, 2012, p. 103).

Since spelling is one of the main components of writing, the current researcher decided to take into consideration the techniques applied in the field of EFL/ESL writing and attempted to focus especially on spelling ability, which is part of the writing skill. Therefore, the studies done in the area of giving feedback on written works of learners can be fruitful.

Research on teacher error feedback in EFL/ESL writing classes has predominantly centered on two topics. First, does error feedback help EFL writers in any significant way? Second, assuming that a decision to correct errors has been made, which type of intervention is preferable: direct or indirect correction? The above two mentioned topics, particularly the latter one which is the main concern of the present study, are the focus of literature in this paper.

Error feedback is one of the key issues in second language writing that both teachers and researchers are faced with. There has been controversy as to whether error feedback helps EFL/ESL students to improve accuracy and overall quality of their writing (Liu, 2008).

Semke (1984) compares the effects of error correction to the effects of content-focused comments and finds that error correction has no effect on students’ accuracy and a negative effect on their written fluency (cited in van Beuningen, de Jong & Kuiken, 2008). Truscott (1996), the main opponent of error correction, explains that corrective feedback on second language learners’ written output is not only unnecessary and ineffective but even counterproductive because it
distracts attention from much more important issues such as development of ideas (Chandler, 2003). As the last example of the group, Polio et al.’s (1998) study shows that both students who receive feedback and students who do not, are able to improve their accuracy over time (cited in van Beuningen, de Jong & Kuiken, 2008).

While some studies make claims about the ineffectiveness of error correction, a sheer number of them advocate the usefulness of it. Let us examine the results of some studies in this regard. Ashwell (2000), Cardelle & Corno (1981) and Ferris (2003) demonstrate a positive correlation between student writing accuracy and error feedback (cited in Pan, 2010). Chandler’s (2003) study reveals that teachers’ feedback on students’ grammatical and lexical errors results in a significant improvement in both accuracy and fluency in subsequent writing of the same type over the same semester. Bitchener (2008) indicates that corrective feedback improves learning skills of learners through error correction. He points out that teacher feedback is an integral part of students’ learning and improvement (cited in Ahmad, Saeed & Salam, 2013). Lee (2009) states that error feedback has a corrective function which improves the learner’s performance in the process of education (cited in Ahmad, Saeed & Salam, 2013).

Despite his call for the abandonment of error correction, Truscott (1999), in his response to Ferris acknowledges that many interesting questions remain open and that it would be premature to claim that research has proven error correction can never be beneficial under any circumstances (cited in Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005).

In most EFL/ESL settings the question has more to do with how to provide error correction rather than whether or not give feedback (Brown, 2001, cited in Baleghizadeh & Dadashi, 2011). Up to now an increasing number of studies have been investigating whether certain types of corrective feedback are more likely than others to help EFL/ESL students’ writing skill. A great number of them examined the relative effectiveness of varying feedback types, with the dichotomy between direct and indirect corrective feedback receiving the lion’s share of researchers’ attention. While direct feedback involves the teachers’ identifying the learners’ errors and applying direct corrections on them, indirect feedback, as the name reveals, entails teachers’ signaling the error spots and requiring the students to self-correct their errors. Further categorization of indirect feedback divides it to coded and uncoded classes. Through these two types of indirect feedback, learners are provided with ample time to correct their own errors (Lee, 2003).

There is research evidence suggesting that indirect error feedback is more helpful for students’ long-term writing development than direct error feedback (Ferris, 2003; Fratzen,1995, cited in Lee, 2003). Lalande (1982) shows that students who receive indirect feedback outperform students in a direct correction group. That is because it engages them in guided learning and problem solving leading them to reflection about linguistic form (cited in Chandler, 2003). Tribble (1994) suggests that it is important for teachers not to correct learners’ errors and provide the correct response immediately (cited in Khatib & Bijani, 2012). Ferris (1995) adds that students benefit more from indirect corrective feedback because they have to engage in a more profound form of language processing as they are self-editing their output (cited in van Beuningen, de Jong & Kuiken, 2008). It is noted in Ferris’s (2002) study that over the course of the semester students who receive indirect feedback reduce their error frequency ratios substantially more than those who receive direct feedback (cited in Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005). Baleghizadeh and Dadashi (2012) express that indirect feedback has more significant effect than direct feedback in correcting students’ spelling errors. Amiri Dehnoo & Yousef vand (2013) point out that direct feedback does not improve the students’ accuracy in English spelling as it is expected.

Contrary to surveys which reveal that both students and teachers have a preference for direct explicit feedback than indirect feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Komura,1999; Rennie, 2000; Roberts, 1999), a lot more studies report that the latter leads to either greater or similar levels of accuracy over time (Ferris et al., 2000 ; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Fratzen,1995; Lalande,1982; Lee, 1997; Robert et al.,1986) just to name a few (all cited in Bitchener et al., 2005).

The studies listed in this section represent only a small part of the vast body of research performed on varied aspects of corrective feedback and its application in pedagogical endeavors. Though a great deal has been revealed with regard to various applications of corrective feedback in educational settings, there still seems a paucity of research in the domain of corrective feedback and its effects on spelling errors, a major gap in the literature toward which the current study is targeted. To meet the aims, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- Indirect corrective feedback that is underlining the spelling errors and leaving the correction to students is more effective than the direct one in improving students’ spelling ability.
3. Methodology

2.1. Participants
This study was conducted at the talented girls’ high school in Saveh, Iran. A sample of 56 students aged 15 comprised the participants of this research. The subjects were randomly assigned to two equal groups of 28 as follows:
- Experimental group 1 who received “direct corrective feedback” i.e. underlining the errors and providing the correct forms,
- Experimental group 2 who received “indirect corrective feedback” i.e. underlining the errors and leaving the correction to the students.

2.2. Instruments
“Chicken Soup for the Mother and Daughter Soul” was the source of the dictated sentences. Since the participants had mastery of high school textbooks and their supplementary books—Cambridge English for Schools series, the researcher decided to choose the pre/postest paragraphs, each of about 70 words containing around 15 unseen vocabulary items, from the aforementioned source. Each session, one seventy-word paragraph was dictated.

The mean scores of the first two dictations were counted as pretest scores. The two-phase pretest was also considered as a selection test to select a homogenous sample of students whose performance was roughly similar. The sample selection was based on the student’s mark (mean score) obtained during the administration of the two-phase pretest. It was supposed to select those students who got between 13.5 – 15.5 marks, as participants, on the selection test. To meet the aim, a total of 56 high school sophomores sat the pretests. Since all 56 students’ marks were within the range they were all known as subjects.

On the third session, while returning the first dictation, the researcher provided the first experimental group with direct feedback and it meant that both error detection and correction were done by her. As for the second experimental group, the errors were only indicated and underlined, but the actual corrections were left to the students.

Concerning the indirect correction, the papers were returned to the students and they were asked to correct their errors based on the correct words in the source, and then hand the papers in to the researcher. In the case of the direct correction, students were reminded to see the papers and check the sentences and words they had found problematic in dictation sessions.

On the next session, the same was done with the second dictation.

Finally, without prior notice, the fifth session was held and allotted to the final dictation. It was made up of some parts of the previous dictations which students had received feedback on before. Furthermore, this last dictation was counted as the posttest.

The final papers were corrected, too. The scale on which the students’ dictations were scored was set at 20. For each single erroneous word 0.5 points were subtracted. The collected data were also analyzed through Mean scores and Paired t-tests.

3. Results and Discussion
In order to analyze the research hypothesis, first the effect of direct feedback on improving students’ spelling ability has been investigated. Since the group 1 has attended both the pre/posttests, so paired sample t-
test has been used for measuring the aforementioned effect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1, Paired samples statistics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pretest (direct feedback)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posttest (direct feedback)</td>
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</table>

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of students in direct feedback group

Paired Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>S.E.M</th>
<th>95%Confidence interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre &amp; post test (direct feedback)</td>
<td>-0.33036</td>
<td>1.23238</td>
<td>0.23290</td>
<td>-0.80823</td>
<td>14.751</td>
<td>-1.418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that mean score of students in pretest is 14.5357 and in posttest is 14.8661. Also, the standard deviations in pretest and posttest are .97827 and 1.76315, respectively. In table 2, mean score of students in pretest and posttest is -0.33036 and p value (Sig. (2-tailed)) is 0.167 which is more than 0.05. It means, direct feedback isn’t significantly effective in improving students’ spelling ability.

In the following part, the effect of indirect corrective feedback on improving students’ spelling ability has been measured. As indicated in table 3, paired sample t-test has been used for analyzing this effect. Mean score in pretest is 14.1161 and in posttest is 17.5714 and standard deviations are 1.32197 and 2.10363, in pre and posttests respectively. In table 4, the students’ mean score is -3.45536 and S.D is 1.48301 in pre and posttest. On the other hand p value (Sig. (2-tailed)) is 0.000 that is less than 0.05. It means, indirect feedback is significantly effective in improving students’ spelling ability.

| Table 2: Descriptive statistics of students in direct feedback group |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3, Paired sample statistics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pretest(indirect feedback)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posttest(indirect feedback)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Descriptive statistics of students in indirect feedback group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>S.E.M</th>
<th>95% Confidence interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.(2tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre &amp; post test</td>
<td>-3.45536</td>
<td>1.48301</td>
<td>0.28026</td>
<td>-0.403041, -1.418</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After analyzing students’ performance in pretest and posttest in both direct and indirect feedback, the effect of direct and indirect feedback in posttests has been measured by using paired sample t-test again. Table 5 displays that students’ mean score in posttest of direct feedback is 14.8661 and in indirect feedback is 17.5714.

Table 5: Paired sample Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posttest (indirect feedback)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posttest (direct feedback)</td>
<td>14.8661</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.76315</td>
<td>.33320</td>
<td>-.324</td>
<td>.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17.5714</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.10363</td>
<td>.39755</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of students in direct & indirect feedback groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>S.E.M</th>
<th>95% Confidence interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.(2tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posttest (direct &amp; indirect feedback)</td>
<td>-2.70536</td>
<td>3.15279</td>
<td>0.59582</td>
<td>-3.92788, -1.48283</td>
<td>-0.4541</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 indicates that mean scores of both direct and indirect feedback groups in posttest is -2.70536 and S.D is 3.15279 and p value (Sig. (2-tailed)) is 0.000 which is less than 0.05. So H0 is rejected and the research hypothesis is accepted. It means, indirect corrective feedback that is underlining the spelling errors and leaving the correction to the students is more effective than the direct one in improving students’ spelling ability.

The statistical figures for the indirect feedback group show a great change in posttest scores, which suggests they out performed in their final dictation. This significant difference observed on students’ final performance can be attributed to the indirect feedback with which their errors were dealt with. In fact the implicit feedback the second group received made them to experience a kind of meaningful exercise which ended in discovery learning (cited in Baleghizadeh & Dadashi, 2011). This result proves the idea of those scholars who believe that if learners are pushed to produce correct forms rather than provided with them, it will be more beneficial to them in the process of their inter-language development (cited in Amiri Dehnoo & Yousefvand, 2013).

5. Conclusion/Implication

Truscott’s review of studies by Kepner (1991), Semke (1984) and Sheppard (1992) states that error correction does not have a significant effect on improving L2 student writing (cited in Bitchener et al., 2005). Contrary to this limited range of studies, a sheer number of them like those of Bitchener (2005), Chandler (2003), Lalande (1982, cited in Chandler, 2003) and Lee (1997, cited in Bitchener et al., 2005), just to name a few, indicate that indirect error feedback is more effective in helping EFI students improve the accuracy of their writing.

This study shows an influential role of self-correction led by teachers in improving spelling ability of
high school students. It indicates that without the students' engagements in correction process, satisfactory results would not be achieved. The outcome of this study puts an emphasis on the role of indirect corrective feedback along with students' contribution. As cited in Sivaji (2012) indirect error correction induces the learner to become autonomous and responsible for their learning process, thereby supporting the theory of Learner Autonomy proposed by Holec (1980). Further, Ferris (2002) states that indirect error correction stimulates learners' responsibility in correction, and improves their writing accuracy in the longer term (cited in Sivaji, 2012). Therefore, it is fruitful to design additional classroom activities in which students engage themselves in the process of revision and self-correction.

Since the spelling errors was one of the main problems in the researchers' class, she decided to conduct the study in this area. Also, due to the fact that teachers of both English and Persian languages in this city (Saveh) most often use this kind of dictation and direct corrective feedback, the researcher advises them to carry out the same action research around this problem to see whether or not self-correction or indirect feedback really works in their classes.

References
Appendices

Appendix A
The first dictated paragraph
In the bottom drawer of my mother’s walnut veneer dresser lay a nylon and lace dress. It was blue and wrapped carefully in white a tissue with a tiny flowered lavender sachet tucked into its folds. I imagine that in 1939 she might have swirled in a filmy blue dress in front of a mirror, with her wide brown eyes. Years of betrayal, chemotherapy treatments, nausea and vomiting have dimmed the light of eyes.

New words:
1. walnut
2. veneer
3. nylon
4. lace
5. lavender
6. sachet
7. tucked
8. swirled
9. filmy
10. betrayal
11. chemotherapy
12. nausea
13. vomiting
14. dimmed
15. drawer

Appendix B
The second dictated paragraph
The doctor cuts the umbilical cord at birth, but an invisible connection remains throughout the life. After my mother’s death I feel bewildered—nothing to nurture and nourish me, and no emotional and spiritual sustenance. That day when the girls teased and taunted me, I started sobbing in her arm, and tried desperately to tell her how hurt I was. I saw her face which was streaked with tears. When will the load of grief and sorrow that suffocates me go?

New words:
1. umbilical cord
2. bewildered
3. nurture
4. nourish
5. emotional
6. spiritual
7. sustenance
8. teased
9. taunted
10. sobbing
11. desperately
12. streaked
13. grief
14. sorrow
15. suffocates

Appendix C
The third dictated paragraph
In the bottom drawer of my mother’s walnut veneer dresser lay a nylon and lace dress. It was wrapped carefully in white tissue with a tiny flowered lavender sachet tucked into its folds. That day I felt bewildered and when the girls teased and taunted me I started sobbing in my mother’s arm. I saw her face which was streaked with tears. When will the load of grief and sorrow that suffocates me go?