



Iranian EFL Learners' Reaction to Teacher's Written Corrective Feedback

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Abstract

Providing different types of corrective feedback on learners' writing is a common practice in writing classes. Applied linguists have also invested huge attempt in investigating the impact that coorrective feedback might have on developing different language skills among EFL/ESL writers. Despite the breadth of empirical research on the issue, literature has witnessed very few studies addressing the writer thought processes in dealing with the corrective feedback they receive from their instructors. Therefore, the present qualitative study, which explores the way Iranian EFL learners respond to teacher corrective feedback, is an answer to this research need. The study included a sample of ten female high school students who were purposively selected and investigated for the cognitive process they assumed in responding to teacher written corrective feedback and their preferences for CF in writing tasks. Findings of the study have revealed that EFL learners go through a long and sophisticated thought process, reviewing, evaluating and finally accepting or 'submitting to' teacher corrective feedback.

Keywords: Corrective feedback; EFL Learner; Writing

1. Introduction

Ellis (2006) defines Corrective feedback (CF) simply as 'responses to learner utterances containing an error' (Ellis, 2006, p. 28). Providing CF is an essential part of any formal language learning context, and it has, therefore, been widely researched by applied linguists. As Lyster, Saito, and Sato (2013) observe, the meta-analysis studies of CF published in the past few years indicate that interest in research on CF has gained remarkable momentum in SLA. Such a mounting interest in CF is due to the fact that CF is highly researchable (Ellis, 2010). In addition, there exist a lot of conceptual controversies surrounding the concept of CF and it is also ubiquitously practiced in English language teaching (Kang & Han, 2015). According to Ferris (2010), even Truscott's essay, which suggested the abandonment of the use of CF, has created more research enthusiasm in the topic.

With the communicative approach to language teaching dominating the field of second language instruction in the early 1970's, enabling language learners to use the second language in meaningful communication came to the fore. As a result, language learners were provided with opportunities to receive sufficient comprehensible input and engage in meaningful language use (Krashen, 1984). By implication, if acquiring a native-like accuracy in the target language is considered as an ultimate goal of learners, then they should develop an appropriate level of well-formedness (Ellis, 2005). To achieve this importance, language instruction should, besides focusing on the meaning of the message, attend to the linguistic form as well. However, while learners typically appear to gain native-like perceptive skills and fluency, they often fail to reach a target-like level of accuracy (Lyster, 2007). Therefore, providing corrective feedback seems to be an essential element in any language instruction program.

The rationale for the practice of error correction in classroom is of course backed up by some theoretical stances. The interactionist theory, for instance, considers "the provision of feedback as an essential instructional practice" as it, through provision of negative evidence, makes learners aware of the learning gaps and encourages them to reorganize their linguistic mental processes. In a similar way, sociocultural theory sees feedback as an important element in building communication; it is, however, argued that for feedback to be effective, it should be adjusted to the learner's existing level of proficiency. For instance, Nassaji and Swain (2000) found that when feedback is adjusted to learner's zone of proximal development, the learner is ready to understand and benefit from the feedback more efficiently.

2. Literature

There exists a considerable body of literature dealing with the topic of CF in first and second language acquisition. Some studies have dealt with the impact of feedback on learners' language accuracy (Sheen et al., 2009; Ferris, 2004; Russell & Spada, 2006; Sato & Lyster, 2012); some others have centered on factors such as age (Lyster & Saito, 2010), learning contexts (Li, 2010), and treatment lengths (Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010) that tend to affect the effectiveness of feedback; and still others have focused on the impact of different types of feedback on learners'

language improvement (Bitchener, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al. 2009). It is, however, interesting to mention that there is some amount of inconsistency among these studies as to the effectiveness of CF.

Although a huge number of researchers argue strongly for the efficiency of CF in language learning and linguistic accuracy (Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Bitchener, 2008), a few others have contended that providing feedback has nothing to do with the improvement of linguistic accuracy (Belanger & Allingham, 2004). There even existed some extremist views holding, "the best estimate is that correction has a small harmful effect on students' ability to write accurately" (Truscott, 2007, p. 270).

As it was already pointed out, most of the studies on CF seem to argue for the positive effects of this teaching strategy on language accuracy. To begin with, Bitchener (2008), comparing the effectiveness of three different types of direct CF, found that students who received feedback outperformed the control group in the accurate use of the referential articles 'a' and 'the' in writing. To follow, in an experimental study with adult ESL intermediate learners, Sheen et al. (2009) investigated the effect of the focused and unfocused CF on the accuracy of the use of a range of grammatical structures. The findings revealed that the focused CF group gained the highest scores for accurate use of all the grammatical structures under study. They were, therefore, able to conclude that focused CF could enhance grammatical accuracy in writing. Similarly, Li's (2010) meta-analysis of 33 experimental studies dealing with the effectiveness of CF on second language acquisition revealed that implicit feedback was more effective than explicit feedback. In addition, CF in foreign language contexts proved to be more conducive to language learning than CF provided for learners in second language contexts. Likewise, Lyster and Saito (2010), performing a meta-analysis of 15 classroom-based studies, found that CF had a significant and long-lasting effect on language development. They also reported that younger learners could benefit more than the adult learners from CF. In addition, in a quasi-experimental study, Saito and Lyster (2012) investigated the impact of peer interaction and CF on second language development in a Japanese EFL context. Learners in CF group appeared to have gained higher levels of accuracy and fluency in comparison with peer-interaction-only and control groups. Although peer interaction provided learners with more opportunities for production practice, CF sharpened learners' awareness of their errors which was beneficial for language development. Finally, Ghandi and Maghsoudi (2014) investigated the effect of direct and indirect corrective feedback on enhancing Iranian EFL high school students' spelling accuracy during a five-week period. Statistical analysis showed that indirect feedback promoted students' spelling errors more effectively than direct feedback. The study also revealed that receiving direct feedback in the absence of the students' active engagement with the revision and the correction process failed to improve the spelling accuracy of the subjects. In another recent study, Shitani and Aubery (2016) investigated the effect of timing of CF, i.e. synchronous and asynchronous CF, on grammar acquisition among 68 intermediate-level university students of English in Japan. The synchronous group received feedback on grammatical errors during writing tasks while the asynchronous learners received feedback after the tasks, and the control group completed the writing tasks without getting any feedback from the instructor. The results showed only a significant improvement in the performance of the two experimental groups.

On the other hand, some research findings refute claims that corrective feedback is useful in language learning, especially in writing process. Findings of a study on 141 first-year students taking German over a period of ten weeks by Semke (1984) revealed that error correction failed to improve students' writing competence. Furthermore, Belanger and Allingham (2004) investigated the issue of how secondary school students would respond to teachers' written comments on their writing. They managed to collect data through observations, questionnaires, interviews and think-aloud tasks. The study revealed that the students were not much interested in and affected by their teachers' comments on their writing. They rather appeared to be more interested in and influenced by the grades they were given for their writings.

Despite its being widely researched in SLA, the bulk of research on CF has mostly dealt with either the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of different types of CF in developing language accuracy. It has, nonetheless, been less explored from the perspective of the thought processes of the student writer attending to it (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996). In other words, very little attempt has been made to investigate the cognitive processes of the learners when they respond to teacher feedback. It would, therefore, be of much interest and importance to gain insights into learners' cognitive processes and writing behaviors they experience in responding to the CF they receive from their teachers. To this end, the current study aimed at exploring the cognitive process that Iranian EFL learners go through in reacting to instructor feedback and their preferences for written CF in carrying out writing tasks. More specifically, the present study was carried out to answer the following research questions:

1. What cognitive processes do Iranian EFL learners engage in when they attend and react to teacher CF in writing classes?
2. How do Iranian EFL learners attend to teacher written CF?

3. Methodology

This qualitative study involved data in the form of written texts, concurrent think-aloud protocols, observation and interviews. The participants were ten Iranian female EFL students doing their fourth grade in high school at the Iranian school of Imam Khomeini in Malaysia. Their age ranged from 18 to 19. The participants already studied English as a foreign language for six to seven years at school (three students had failed a grade in highschool). Every academic year in Iran includes 32 weeks, and each week students attend two ninety-minute sessions for the English subject matter.

These students were included in this study since they newly arrived in Malaysia, and they had not already attended any English language classes outside their schools neither in Iran nor in Malaysia. As such, the participants were considered typical of the phenomenon to be studied, and the research sampling in this qualitative study was a typical case sampling (Ary et al. 2006, p 473). Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the subjects. It should be pointed out that for the sake of confidentiality, the researcher assigned a pseudonym to each of the students.

Table 1. the demographic information of the subjects

No	Name	Age	Gender
1	Laleh	18	Female
2	Fatima	18	Female
3	Sanaz	18	Female
4	Nilufar	18	Female
5	Malika	19	Female
6	Samira	18	Female
7	Parisa	18	Female
8	Sogoli	19	Female
9	Shiva	19	Female
10	Shirin	18	Female

3.1 Procedure of the Study

This study was carried out in several stages and a teacher from the school assisted the researcher in the process of data collection. The teacher, a native speaker of Farsi, held a bachelor degree in TFL and had already been teaching English as a foreign language for 17 years in Iran. She gave the writing tasks to the participants, provided feedback on their written tasks, and collected the think-aloud protocols from them. The researcher, however, managed to carry out the task of interviewing the participants and translating their written think-aloud into English.

In order to familiarize the participants with the think-aloud tasks, the researcher managed to conduct one think-aloud training session with them before the start of the research. The training session aimed at enabling the student participants to feel at ease with the idea of thinking aloud and also providing an opportunity for them to practice on sample tasks. The researcher, in the training session, modeled thinking aloud while performing a similar task to what the students were expected to do. This was practiced in the hope of mitigating any fears that the participants were likely to feel about the idea of thinking aloud and reducing the troubles they might have experienced in reporting their reactions to the written corrective feedback supplied by their teacher in writing classes.

After giving informed consent to the research, the participants of the study were introduced to think-aloud procedure. The teacher then wanted the participants to write a 100-word paragraph on topics of interest at their convenience and submit the drafts to the teacher. The teacher read through the drafts and provided indirect corrective feedback on their writings by just underlining the words or phrases that were grammatically incorrect.

Then came the proper think-aloud protocol during which the learner writers were required to carefully read the first draft and verbally state their thoughts as they attended to the feedback provided by the teacher while revising the draft. Each participant was observed reacting to at least five pieces of feedback. With every step in reading the teacher's comments, the participants verbally stated what they were thinking about and what type of information they drew on to respond to the teacher's corrective comments. More specifically, they verbalized what they were thinking about the feedback, what was wrong about their own use of the language, how the same idea could be stated in their mother tongue, and how they would give in to the teacher's comments. It is interesting to point out that as the learners' limited knowledge of English did not allow them to talk aloud their thoughts in the target language, the learner writers were allowed to speak them out in their native language, Farsi. They were also required to record their own verbal statements in reactions to the feedbacks on their cellphones. The revised drafts were then handed out to the teacher and the recorded thinking-alouds were sent over to her through WhatsApp software in the same session. Next the researcher, who was present in the revision session for class observation, collected all the data from the teacher. Next, the researcher transcribed the verbal reactions for further analysis. Finally, the researcher interviewed the participants about their perceptions of written CF to gain an in-depth knowledge of how they reacted to teacher feedback. It should be mentioned that for reporting purpose, the translation of the think-aloud statements was carried out by the researcher.

Following Simon Phipps and Simon Borg (2009), data analysis was carried out in three phases: pre-coding (transcription of the data and initial development of categories), coding (reduction of data, organizing categories into a hierarchy, and checking and refining categories), and theorizing (a cyclical process of interpreting data, drawing

conclusions, and developing theoretical frameworks). Thus, the students' response to and their cognitive processes of interpretation of their teacher's feedback were categorized in terms of patterns figured out from the data.

4. Findings and Discussions

This case study aimed at investigating the Iranian EFL learners' reaction to teacher written CF. When the participant writers attended to the written feedback on their writing, they always stopped at each feedback and recursively went back and forth from teacher feedback to their written text and then to their knowledge reservoir of the target or first language. During this process, they went through many different thought processes to evaluate and finally accept or 'submit to' the teacher's feedback. They were able to identify and correct their errors in some of the cases. In some others, however, they just came to terms with feedback and admitted that there was an occurrence of error in their writing due to the authority they attached to their teacher; otherwise, they could not identify the problem and thus failed to make the appropriate corrections. They drew on their knowledge of either the target language or first language to evaluate and react to the feedback and achieve their writing goal.

The participants' reaction to the teacher's feedback turned out to be influenced by the type of errors they made. One error type comprised of the errors they committed due to inattention. They corrected this type of non-target forms in no time at all. For instance, Shirin missed the third person -s ending with the verb "*teach*" in her original draft. When she read her paper and came across the verb underlined by the teacher, she thought aloud,

Oh, my God, how come did I make such a silly mistake? I must have failed to pay enough attention to it; otherwise, it is as easy as ABC for me. The teacher shouldn't have underlined this as a mistake because she herself knows that it is just a slip I've made.

Then Shirin corrected it while shaking her head and regretting her mistake. As another example, Nilufar used the past form 'was' to describe one of her teachers in the sentence "She was very kind and helpful". Despite the present time situation, she used the past form 'was'; as a result, the teacher underlined the verb. Coming across the underlined verb 'was', Nilufar began to feel unhappy and **blamed** herself for the mistake, asking herself why she had made such a very big mistake. She thought aloud,

"I'm always careless. However, the student should not be penalized for such mistakes that occur simply because of the lack of enough attention. These types of mistakes show that the student is carefree not that she lacks the related grammatical knowledge, I think. I do hope I never make such embarrassing mistakes on the exam session".

On the whole, the participants, in reacting to this type of errors, appeared to get involved in no or very limited cognitive processes simply because they attributed such mistakes to their being inattentive rather than their lack of knowledge of the language.

The second error type caused the participant writers to engage into some degree of cognitive processes. They attended to, analyzed and evaluated these errors against their knowledge of the second language and succeeded in correcting the mistakes they had made. For instance, Malika made a mistake in using the appropriate verb form with the preposition '*since*'. In the first place, she showed acceptance of feedback by planning to correct the non-target as the teacher indicated. She began with reading the sentence and attending to the verb underlined and then read through the sentence. As she came to the end of the sentence, she underlined the time adverbial and began to come to terms with the feedback. Then Malika started to reason aloud, "Yes, although the time adverb '*last year*' is past, it is preceded by the preposition '*since*'; so the main verb should be expressed in present perfect tense rather than simple past." She, finally, changed the verb '*visited*' to '*has visited*'. In a similar way, Sanaz had a sentence containing the phrase '*one of my friend*' which was indicated as an error by the teacher. Reading the phrase, she stopped at '*one*', circled it and began to think aloud, "Yes, my teacher is right. After '*one of*' the noun should be in plural form". Then she changed the phrase to '*one of my friends*'.

The thought processes reported by the participants in this study reveal that though indirect feedback can, at times, be confusing or even misleading, it challenges learners' cognitive abilities and skills, enabling them to overcome some of their learning problems on their own. The evidence from the cases mentioned so far forced the present researcher to agree with the observations made in the previous research on the effect of feedback on L2 writing improvement that indirect feedback can "engage student writers in guided-problem-solving" (Ferris, 2010, p. 190). In other words, it encourages learners to assume more responsibility for their own learning (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013).

The third error category consisted of those which the participants could not handle due to their limited knowledge. They made the participants contemplate upon the error and seriously triggered their active cognitive processes. Facing with such cases, they lingered and went on a long cognitive discovery trip. They, as nonnative speakers, tended to recursively travel from the target language to their mother tongue to respond to teacher feedback (See Figure 1). They, nevertheless, failed to identify the problem most of the times. Therefore, they came to terms with the teacher's indication of errors just because they knew their teacher was more knowledgeable in the target language than them. They accepted their teacher's authority, and with resort to their knowledge of mother tongue and second language, they went through some boring and unrevealing cognitive processes. As an illustration, Sogoli had a sentence which read, "The teacher that I love her most is Mrs. Y". (Y is the researcher's substitute for the teacher's name for the purpose of

anonymity). The teacher drew a line under the phrase *'that I loved her'* with two arrows at the ends of the line pointing at *'that'* and *'her'*, expecting the student to omit *'her'* from the sentence due to the presence of the relative pronoun *'that'*. Sogoli read the sentence carefully with due attention to the underlined words, perhaps looking for clues from the context. This is what she processed cognitively to make the expected correction. She thought aloud,

First, the verb *'love'* is correctly used both in terms of subject–verb agreement and tense. So whatever mistake is with the phrase must be related to the pronoun *'that'* or *'her'*. As far as *'her'* is concerned, it is the object of the verb *'talk'* and should follow the verb. Since it refers to a female person, it should be in the object form *'her'*.

Then Sogoli reread the sentence and translated it into her mother tongue, Farsi, and insisted on justifying her choice of the object pronoun *'her'* and began to go through some more cognitive processes.

I think the problem must be with the relative pronoun *'that'*. I know that the relative pronoun *'that'* can be used as a substitute for other relative pronouns like which, who, and whom, but I can well remember the teacher explaining some restrictions of the use of *'that'*. This is perhaps one of the cases where *'that'* can't be used in place of another relative pronoun. Now, since the head noun refers to human being and is in object position, *'whom'* should be used in this sentence. So she changed the original sentence to "The teacher **whom** I love her most is Mrs. Y".

Despite the long cognitive processes she went through, her limited knowledge of the second language did not help her to make the expected correction. What is more, her knowledge of relative pronouns, as they occur in her first language, misguided her because in Farsi the occurrence of object pronoun after the verb following a relative pronoun seems to be inevitable. Thus, instead of removing the object pronoun *'her'* from the sentence, Sogoli managed to substitute the relative pronoun *'that'* with *'whom'*.

Likewise, Fatima's writing draft contained the sentence: "He always wants the students to do a lot of homework and take a quiz from us on Mondays." The teacher underlined the phrase *'take a quiz from'* in this sentence. Having attended to the feedback, Fatima stopped, read the whole sentence, underlined the verb *'wants'* and then came to reason aloud,

Yes, you are right my dear teacher. Because *'wants'* is used with –s ending, the second verb connected to it with the conjunction *'and'* should be in the same mood and thus have an –s ending. But why is the whole phrase underlined? Maybe there is more to it than just the _s ending.

Fatima read the phrase once more and showed a frown of concentration but remained confused. Then she came to the teacher and asked her if there was something wrong with the whole phrase which the teacher conceded and asked her to read it more carefully and correct the whole phrase. She reread the phrase and even translated it into Farsi loud to herself but showed a disapproval, or better to say, puzzled frown on her face. Then she continued to talk aloud her thoughts,

Everything appears OK to me, but the teacher says it isn't. I don't really know why. I'm sure the teacher knows better than me. Perhaps it is better to change the whole structure of the phrase. Maybe this verb is not used in this way. I'm not sure. Anyway, all that I can think of is to change the phrase structure.

Then Fatima changed the whole phrase to *'takes us a quiz on Mondays'*. Here again the error committed is due to the participant's limited knowledge of the target language and partly due to interference from the first language into second language because in Farsi it is 'the teacher who takes the exam and the students who give the exam', which is, exactly the opposite of what English speakers say. Unfortunately enough, she justified her limited knowledge of the second language by recourse to her mother tongue. As it can be noticed from the thought processes of the participants, although indirect feedback is believed to engage learners in problem-solving and reflection on their current knowledge of the language, which in turn encourages long-term learning and greater levels of accuracy (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010), care should be taken that this technique should be practiced with learners who are knowledgeable enough to self-correct (Chandler, 2003).

Having collected the participants' revision of their original drafts and think-aloud protocols, the researcher interviewed the participants to investigate their attitudes towards receiving written CF and the type of feedback they favored most. They appeared willing enough to receive CF on their writing; they, however, came to be in favor of direct feedback and described indirect feedback as perplexing. Two of the participants, for instance, stated that when a verb was underlined, they were not sure whether the problem was with subject-verb agreement or with the tense or even with missing a preposition the verb would take. This indicates that despite the useful impact of indirect feedback, it appears to be less favorable to writer with lower-proficiency as these learners have a limited access to linguistic knowledge of the target language to benefit from (Elola & Oskoz, 2016).

Only Samira, who also scored highest in the writing course, appeared to be inclined to receive indirect feedback. She argued that indirect feedback would challenge the mind seriously, causing great higher thinking skills to grow. She even went on to suggest that negative feedback could impede the flow of information and restrain her from writing more and freely. Therefore, use of feedback in writing tasks should be individualized and adjusted to the needs and preferences of the learners.

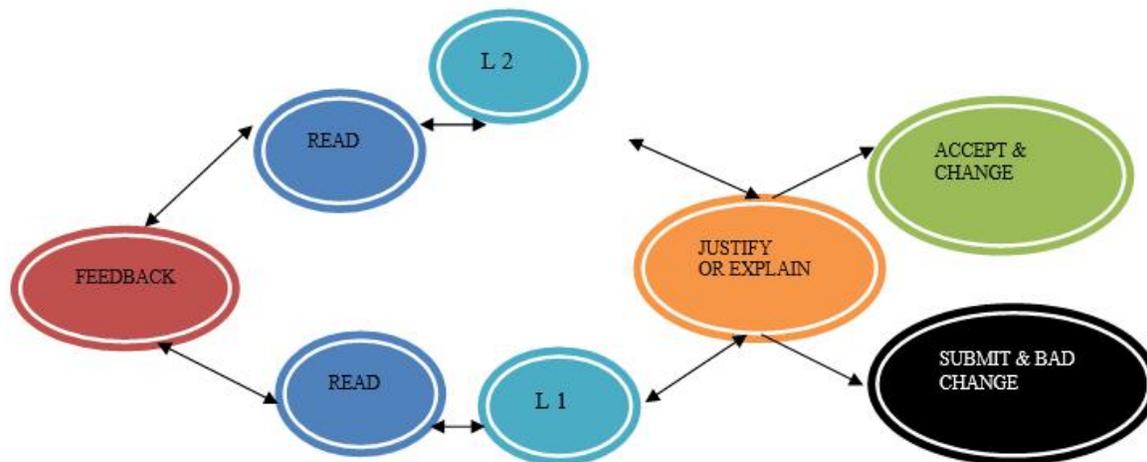


Figure 1. Model of EFL Learners' Thinking Processes in Responding to Feedback

5. Conclusions

The current study was an attempt to bring to light the thought processes that EFL writers tend to go through as they attend to teacher feedback and think aloud simultaneously. It showed that responding to CF among the EFL learners is a sophisticated cognitive process (Figure above). Observational evidence from the current study revealed that the process is highly recursive, that think-aloud leads to noticing, and that EFL writers draw on two main sources of knowledge in attending to teacher feedback, that is, knowledge of first and second language. In other words, the participants in this study did more than just attending to the feedback and revising their original writing. They focused on teacher feedback, read the whole sentence for once or more, and accessed their knowledge of the target and first language for corrections to be made. Findings in the present study are in line with Hayes (1996) who indicated that ESL writers go through a recursive process in the different stages of writing. This recursive process, however, appears to be of more duration and of more magnitude in the EFL writers due to, perhaps, their limited knowledge of the target language.

Another major contribution of the present study might be the attempt to reveal the cognitive processes of writing and the idea that thinking aloud leads to noticing. As a cognitive activity, talking aloud their thoughts helped the participants to notice and ponder over the errors on which the teacher had provided feedback. Feedback can help writers in their writing if it is noticed and focused on (Wigglesworth 2005). As the participants moved back and forth between teacher feedback and their writing, they, most of the time, noticed the mismatch that existed between their drafts and standard target forms. For example, Sanaz looking at the teacher feedback said, "Yes, my teacher is right. After '*one of*' the noun should be in plural form". So verbalizing their thoughts could be revealing as to how the EFL writers' thought processes were formed while attending to CF. Thinking aloud, therefore, led to noticing in the participants.

Findings of this study imply that, in some situations, EFL learners tend to remain almost passive in dealing with teacher feedback. While participants in the study showed interest in actively interacting with teacher feedback and went through many different cognitive processes to gain accuracy in their writing as suggested by the feedback, they tended to confess their insufficient language ability and finally show submissiveness to their teacher authority. Even when they failed to come to terms with the feedback, they admitted "*There must be something wrong with my use of the grammatical form, but I can't identify what the problem is*".

While findings with ESL writers are in favor of indirect feedback (Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Chandler, 2003), the EFL participants in this study showed tendency and preference for direct feedback. The participants also preferred to have only some of their errors indicated and commented on. They resented teacher indication of those errors which resulted from their carelessness or inattention. For instance, Shirin did not expect the teacher to underline her "mistake because she herself knows that it is just a slip I've made". Or Nilufar was of the opinion that "the students should not be penalized for such mistakes" since these mistakes tend to "occur due to the lack of enough attention" on the part of the student not her lack of "the related grammatical knowledge". Accordingly, individual students' linguistic abilities, needs, and preferences have to be taken into account in providing the type of feedback that would help them in improving their writing skill and ability.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

This study suffered from some limitations, however. First, findings and the interpretations are based on data gathered from only ten female participants. Second, all the participants shared the same mother tongue and were of the same level of proficiency. Third, the findings suffer from the limitation that simultaneous thinking aloud and attending to feedback might have resulted in incomplete, inaccurate, or exaggerated reports, as some researchers have indicated (Jourdenais, 2001). Despite all this, the study can be more or less insightful as to the cognitive processes that EFL writers go through in identifying and reacting to teacher written CF. It is hoped that further discovery research exploring the thought processes of EFL writers of different proficiency levels, genders and nationalities would contribute more to this line of research.

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