Corrective Feedback During Communicate Tasks: Do Recasts, Clarification Requests and Explicit Correction Affect EFL Learners' Second Language Acquisition Equally?

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Abstract

The quasi-experimental was conducted to investigate the beneficial effects of three different types of corrective feedback (CF), namely recast, prompt (i.e., clarification request), and explicit correction with metalinguistic information, on Iranian EFL learners' learning of definite and indefinite articles. For the purpose of the study, 75 male elementary EFL learners, aged 18 to 24, comprising 4 intact classes in a public language institute in Iran participated in the study. The four classes were randomly assigned into three treatment groups and one control group. During the intervention, each experimental group engaged in doing communicative tasks (i.e., narrative type) for 3 sessions and the learners in each group were provided with one specific type of CF in response to their errors, while the control group only engaged in communicative tasks. The participants' knowledge of articles was measured in pre-tests one week prior to the outset of intervention and in post-tests which were administered two weeks after the last treatment using an untimed grammaticality judgement task and a timed written picture description task. Results of repeated-measured ANOVA with subsequent ANOVA and post-hoc test on the untimed grammaticality judgement task and ANCOVA on timed picture description task with post hoc comparisons indicated that the treatment groups performed significantly better than the control group. Additionally, explicit correction with metalinguistic information group outperformed the other treatment groups and the control group in both measures of the study. The researcher concludes that CF contributes to improvement in the knowledge of usage and the ability to use the language and explicit CF with metalinguistic information which results in deep level of understanding and entails longer time-outs from interaction works better than recasts and clarification requests for elementary learners in the EFL context of Iran.

Key words: TBLT, corrective feedback, recast, EFL

Introduction

Research in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts has revealed that the exclusive use of traditional teaching methods such as grammar translation is problematic and the learners who are taught through these methods perform successfully on discrete-point grammar tests, but they fail to communicate fluently and accurately in communicative contexts (Hu, 2003). Most of the teachers in Iranian schools and universities and other EFL contexts still adhere to the traditional form-focused instruction that denotes the teaching of linguistic forms in isolation. This type of teaching entails extraction of linguistic features from context or communicative activity (Doughty & Williams, 1998), and presenting them based on one of the synthetic syllabuses. The problem with this type of approach is that students with some years of studying English behind them fail to communicate fluently in L2. In fact, research suggests that the traditional teaching of isolated grammatical forms is not sufficient to promote their acquisition (Long & Robinson, 1998). Therefore, there is a need for

introduction of tasks into EFL educational system in Iran in order to bring about a dramatic change into the quality of language teaching. However, what needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that without attention to form, the new approach will fail to lead to both fluency and accuracy at the same time, and as the research findings suggest, interlanguage is likely to stabilize, and fossilization may set in.

The overall effectiveness of and necessity for focus on form are accepted facts among SLA researchers. Among the proposals that have been set forth in an attempt to incorporate form into TBLT in order to distinguish it from the traditional grammar teaching and avoid compromising the values of tasks as realistic communicative motivators and opportunities to trigger acquisition has been Long's *Focus on Form* (Long & Crooks, 1992). In a seminal work, Long (1991) distinguished *Focus on Forms*, which is the main characteristic of synthetic approaches to language teaching from what he called *focus on form*, which consisted of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the teacher (Doughty & Williams, 1998). This kind of attention to form in the context of doing a task is what R. Ellis (2003) generally refers to as "methodological focus on form". Corrective feedback (CF) is regarded as one type of methodological focus on form.

Researchers have attempted to identify and classify CF techniques into discrete types. For second language classroom, the most influential taxonomy was developed by Lyster and Ranta (1997). Among those CF identified by Lyster and Ranta, three types of CF techniques have figured strongly in CF studies. They include prompts, explicit correction and recasts. Although not all researchers have addressed their research questions using these terms, these techniques can be described in a number of ways that makes them different. In fact, each of these types can differ greatly in implementation and degree of explicitness or implicitness based on the teacher's behavior and context (Ortega, 2011). Recasts can be partial or full. They can also be implicit or explicit. Explicit correction can be accompanied with metalinguistic feedback or is used alone. Prompts also vary on whether they elicit a correct form from the learner after some metalinguistic information is provided or by teacher's repetition of the incorrect form, requesting the student to produce the correct form using phrases such as "Pardon me", or elicitation which entails direct questions such as "How do we say this in English?". Therefore, it seems logical to pursue studies focusing on different CF techniques with precise definition of each for the sake of clarity in our claims for supporting a theory or a pedagogical practice.

Previous studies on CF have addressed a number of these aspects. Although recasts were proposed by Long (1996, 2006) to work for acquisition because of their reactive and implicit nature, their effectiveness was not as much as the other types of corrective moves in some studies (e.g., R. Ellis, 2006; Lyster, 1998a). Ellis et al. (2006) argued in favor of explicit prompts in the form of metalinguistic information and Sheen (2007) argues in favor of explicit correction which was a combination of provision of correct form and metalinguistic information in her study. These studies suggest that explicit techniques of focus on form are superior to implicit forms. This had been previously supported by the results of Norris and Ortega's (2000) meta-analysis which were in favor of explicit instruction. Since different CF operationalizations have been used in these studies, a question that needs to be addressed is what type of explicit correction works best.

This kind of orientation towards researching CF can push research on CF forward by building on what we already know about the CF studies. Sheen (2007) refers to the need for studies comparing explicit recast and metalinguistic correction and expresses doubts regarding the superiority of explicit input-providing techniques (i.e., explicit correction with metalinguistic information) over output-pushing techniques. Also, Ellis (2012) argues that the studies that have compared recasts and prompts are not without their problems because recasts are considered a single CF strategy, while

prompts include a number of different strategies such as clarification requests, repetition of errors, elicitation and metalinguistic clues. Additionally, Ellis states that the beneficial effect of prompts in comparison with recasts might be due to the fact that prompts include several strategies that vary with different degrees of implicitness and explicitness and thus the salient nature of certain strategies in the prompt group might be the reason for the effectiveness of prompts rather than their output-pushing nature. These recent arguments make us think twice before we claim that in the context of communicative focus on form, one CF technique is superior to the other ones because of a certain characteristic it has. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap and to add another piece to the puzzle of CF strategies.

Research Questions

This study was an attempt to answer the following questions in an Iranian EFL context:

1- Does CF on English article errors during the performance of communicative tasks contribute to Iranian EFL learners' second language acquisition?

2- Do different types of CF, that is, recast, prompt, and explicit correction with metalinguistic information have differential effects on Iranian EFL learners' second language acquisition?

Methodology

Research Setting

The research was conducted in elementary classes at Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Iran, which is a public sector and affiliated to the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children & Young Adults. The institute offers Foreign language courses, mainly English, for different age groups. Each term in this language institute lasts for eleven weeks and classes meet twice a week on Saturday-Wednesday, Sunday-Tuesday or Monday-Thursday. Each class lasts for 105 minutes. The students are assigned randomly to different elementary classes by the institute registration office. The pedagogical approach adopted by the institute is a combination of focus-on-forms and communicative language instruction aiming to develop students' linguistic accuracy and communicative language ability.

Participants

Four intact EFL classes and a total of 82 male students participated in the study. The number of students per class ranged from 18 to 24, but the data of 75 students were analyzed in the study because some of the students were absent from classes on the day of the pre-test or post-test or missed the treatment sessions or were excluded from the study based on their extreme scores on the proficiency test.

Information obtained from a background questionnaire showed that the mean ages of all participants was 23 and all the students were Iranian and their native language was Persian. They had received between 6 months and 9 months of English instruction either at the same language institute or in high school. Two of the students reported that they had the experience of learning a third language. Except for two students who had been abroad once or twice and were excluded from the study, the rest of the participants had never visited an English speaking country.

Sampling

Since the study was quasi-experimental in nature, 4 intact classes at a public language institute in Iran were included the study. This type of sampling which is referred to as convenience or opportunity sampling is the most common type of sampling in L2 research and is usually used when the participants possess certain key characteristics that are related to the purpose of the investigation (Dörnyei, 2007). It should be noted that since a true experimental design requires three important basic conditions: a) getting a sample from a well-defined population, b) random assignment of indi-

vidual learners to different groups, and c) using a control group, most of the form-focused studies adopt a quasi-experimental design because the first and second conditions cannot be easily met in form-focused instruction (Ellis, 2008).

Design

The study used a pre-test-post-test design with 4 Iranian elementary classes which were randomly assigned to one of the 3 experimental groups and a control or a comparison group. The control group only engaged in doing communicative tasks without provision of CF and participated in the pre-tests and post-tests. The experimental groups participated in the CF treatment sessions which lasted one month and a half. The independent variables in this study were the types of CF and time. The learners' linguistic development (i.e., development of knowledge of usage and the ability to use the target feature) form pre-test to post-test was the dependent variables. In each treatment session, one communicative task (narrative tasks) was utilized. The testing instruments included (1) an untimed grammaticality judgment task(UGJT), and   (2) a timed written picture description task (TWPDT).

Instruments

For the purpose of this study, the following instruments were used:

A Background Questionnaire: The demographic survey or background questionnaire was designed to identify the participants' gender, age, English learning background, and years of living abroad.

Treatment Materials: For the purpose of engaging learners in communicative use of language, three narrative tasks were used as treatment instruments in this study.. In each session one narrative task which required the learners to retell a story after they had read it was used. Prior to treatment sessions, all the narrative tasks had been piloted on one intact class of elementary students in the same institute and the stories and based on the results of piloting, the vocabulary and grammar in each story was adapted to the level of the students. There were almost equal number of definite and indefinite articles in each story. The rational for using narrative tasks as treatment tasks in this study were twofold. First, a narrative task has the main characteristics of a communicative task: (a) the primary focus of the learner is on conveying the meaning and narrating the events (i.e., telling what happened in the story),(b) it involves real world processes of language use (i.e., retelling a story that one has read in a book to a friend or a colleague), (c) It requires the use of any of the four language skills (i.e., reading and speaking in this study), it engages cognitive process (i.e., remembering the details of what one has read). Second, while narrative tasks stimulate communicative language use, they can also easily elicit the use of definite and indefinite articles which were the target features of this study. It should be noted that each narrative task was accompanied by a series of pictures with word prompts next to each frame to reduce task complexity.

General English Proficiency Test: Prior to the intervention, a Nelson English Language Test (150 D was administered to the classes to ensure that the participants in each group were homogenous. The test comprised a cloze test and 50 multiple choice question.

Untimed Grammaticality Judgment Task (UGJT): The untimed grammaticality judgment task was intended to provide a measure of explicit knowledge while the timed written picture description task was employed to asses implicit knowledge. Choosing these tasks to assess the treatment effects was R. Elli's (2004) argument that tests of implicit knowledge should elicit use of language where the learners perform by feel and are under pressure to perform in real time with the focus on meaning and little dependence on metalinguistic knowledge. According to R. Ellis, tests of explicit knowledge should elicit a performance in which the learners are encouraged to use rules. When the

learners has no time limitations to answer and consciously focus on form, they use their metalinguistic or explicit knowledge.

Timed Written Picture Description Task (TWPDT): The timed written picture description task was adapted from Muranoi's (2000) and Sheen's (2011). The students were expected to write a short story based on a 6 sequential pictures. The word prompts were put next to each picture so that the students would use enough details in their writing. Based on the pilot study, the students were allowed 8 minutes to write the story and they were asked not to go back and revise their stories because the researcher was interested in the spontaneous use of English in writing under time constraints. In order to give students more details about the study and elicit more data on the use of the articles, the story was given to the students to read for 5 minutes, then the stories were collected and the pictures were distributed between the class and the learners were asked to write a story in the past based on the pictures.

Procedure

One week before the treatment, the Nelson Proficiency Test which was used for the purpose of homogenizing learners in terms of linguistic proficiency was administered to the four intact classes which were selected for the purpose of this study. A number of outliers in each class whose proficiency scores were too high or too low were identified and their subsequent pre-test and post-test scores on two measuring instruments for articles were removed from the study. One week after the learners took the proficiency test, the pre-tests which included the untimed grammaticality judgment task and the timed written picture description task were administered in the four classes. This was followed by three treatment sessions. In each treatment session, communicative narrative tasks which encouraged the use of articles in obligatory contexts and constituted focused tasks were used and the researcher provided one type of intensive CF (i.e., recast, prompt, explicit correction with metalinguistic information) for the learners in each class. Each treatment session lasted 30 minutes. A post-test was given two sessions after the last treatment. The whole process of CF treatment along with pre-tests and post-tests lasted for one and a half months. The procedures for CF treatments were as follows.

1-The researcher coordinated with each teacher prior to the start of the class for treatment sessions and entered each teacher's class 30 minutes before the end of the session. On researcher's arrival, the teacher left the class.

2- The students were handed out stories and were asked to read the stories. They were told that they were expected to read and just retell the story to the whole class. They were assured that they were not going to be scored or evaluated.

3- The class was divided into groups of five and each student retold part of the story and the other member of the group was requested to continue the story.

4- Immediately following a student's error, the researcher corrected him with one of the CF techniques under study.

Results

In order to answer question one, and two, the mean scores of different groups in pre-tests and posttests for Untimed Grammaticality Judgement Task (UGJT) and Timed Written Production Task(WPDT) were calculated, tabulated and inferential statistics including Repeated Measures ANOVA, one-way ANOVA and ANCOVA were conducted on the results to see if the findings are statistically significant. The descriptive statistics are displayed in the tables below.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for pre-test and post-test (UGJT)

Group	Pre-test		Post-test		N
	Mean	SD Deviation	Mean	SD	
Prompt	8.21	1.81	10.47	1.64	19
Recast	9.61	2.30	10.67	2.61	18
Explicit Correction	9.17	2.64	13.72	2.27	18
Control	8.55	1.669	9.25	1.251	20
Total	8.87	2.152	10.97	2.55	75

Tables 2. Repeated measures ANOVA for UGJT across two testing times and across the four groups

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
TIME	171.978	1	171.978	107.452	.000
TIME *GROUP	83.937	3	27.979	17.481	.000
Group	139.693	3	46.564	6.756	.000

Table 3. The results of ANOVA and the Post hoc Scheffe test

$F(3, 71) = 17.48, P < .005$			
Corrective Feedback	N	Subset for alpha = .05	
		1	2
Control	20	.7000	
Recast	18	1.0556	
Prompt	19	2.2632	
Explicit Correction	18		4.5556

Table 4. ANCOVA for post-test mean scores on written picture description task across four groups

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	19287.93	4	4821.98	28.80	.000
Intercept	11458.55	1	11458.55	68.441	.000
Pre-test	4638.87	1	4638.87	27.71	.000
Corrective Feedback	12828.97	3	4276.32	25.54	.000
Error	11719.61	70	167.42		
Total	216314.00	75			
Corrected Total	31007.54	74			

Table 5. Post hoc pair-wise comparison of post-test mean scores of WPDT

Group	Pre-test		Post-test		
	M	Std.	M	Std.	Contrast
Prompt	40.37	17.072	44.11	14.640	a) *P* < .001
Recast	45.28	15.079	54.56	19.570	b) *P* < .001 c) *P* < .005
Explicit Correction	34.39	19.722	70.17	13.254	d) *P* < 001
Control	27.90	11.867	32.25	12.573	
F (3, 71) = 25.54, *P* < .005 Note: Contrast = post hoc contrasts a) prompt ≠ explicit b) recast ≠ explicit correction c) recast ≠ control d) explicit correction ≠ control					

Discussion and Conclusions

This study was conducted to investigate whether CF on English article errors during the performance of communicative tasks contribute to Iranian EFL learners' second language acquisition . Analysis of data revealed that the explicit correction group that received CF in form of explicit correction with metalinguistic information improved considerably from pre-tests to post-tests. Therefore, the answer to Research Question 1 is affirmative and based on the findings it can be concluded that CF contributes to Iranian elementary learners' second language acquisition in terms of both knowledge of usage and the ability to use the language. These findings support the previous claims for the efficacy of focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Long & Robinson, 1998). The findings also lend support to the previous studies which have demonstrated the benefits of CF for second language acquisition (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Doughty & Valera, 1998). Carroll and Swain (1993) found that using different types of feedback was more effective than no treatment. The results of the present study suggest that providing elementary EFL learners with CF in the context of conducting communicative tasks (narrative tasks in this study) results in better performance in post-tests. These results are a clear rebuttal of the claims that CF is not necessary and should be abandoned (Krashen, 1981; Schwartz, 1993; Truscott, 2007).

The fact that control groups' interlanguage did not undergo any significant change from pre-tests to post-tests, despite performing the focused communicative tasks that entailed frequent use of articles, is important in showing that a meaning-oriented interaction which is not mingled with some kind of focus of form cannot be the best option. This finding is in line with the arguments that tasks which are accompanied with some kind of focus on form can help second language development more effectively than those tasks which exclude such a focus (Loschky & Beley Vroman, 1993; Muranoi, 2000; Skehan,1996).

On a theoretical level, Schmidt (1990) first argued that when items are taught and later heard in the input, learning takes place. Schmidt (2001) states that along with teaching items and exposing learners to them in the input, linguistic items should be noticed to be learned. Therefore, CF in this study led to the noticing of target linguistic feature and in some cases understanding it, leading the researcher to conclude that embedding CF within communicative tasks is more beneficial that mere performance of such tasks. It can be argued that the treatment period was very short (almost one month) and acquisition of articles could have automatically taken place without intervention in the long run. Nonetheless, assuming that the acquisition of linguistic knowledge can occur in the ab-

sence of any focus on form in the context, our interest, as Doughty and Williams (1998) also mentioned, is sometimes to determine what compromises the most effective educational plan with reference to constraints of learning a second language in the classroom and hence the results of this study are revealing in this regard.

However, there are two caveats in order. The first point that needs to be taken into consideration is that CF in this study was intensive. Previous studies have shown that CF is beneficial to L2 learning when it is intensive and focuses on particular linguistic forms (e.g., Doughty & Valera, 1998). Extensive feedback which focuses on any specific form is reported to be less effective (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Based on the findings relevant to the first research question, CF can affect L2 learning when it targets a specific linguistic feature.

The second point is that the target feature in this study was articles and although in line with Muranoi's (2000) and Sheen's (2011) studies which indicated that CF was successful for rules of English articles, R. Ellis et al. (2007) found that beneficial effects of CF depends on the linguistic feature, too. Accordingly, we cannot extrapolate from this study and claim that CF on other types of linguistic errors can have similar results. It would be reasonable to argue that the extent to which these findings can be generalized depends on the type of the linguistic feature, too.

Do different types of CF, that is, recast, prompt (i.e., clarification requests), and explicit correction with metalinguistic information, have differential effects on Iranian EFL learners' second language acquisition?

When considering the second research question concerning the effectiveness of different CF techniques, the results of both grammaticality judgment task and written picture description task indicated that explicit correction with metalinguistic information led to a higher rate of accuracy than recasts and prompts in post-tests. On the other hand, there was no significant difference between the recast, prompt and control group. The students in the control group also improved a little from pretest to post-test, which can be attributed to the test practice effect. Therefore, in light of the findings of this study, the second hypothesis is rejected and the findings support superiority of explicit correction with metalinguistic information over other CF techniques under investigation.

The results lend support to Carroll and Swain's (1993) study in which the learners who received CF in form of showing the learners the location of the error plus metalinguistic information acquired dative alternation. The results are also consistent with Carroll's (2001) study which showed explicit correction with metalinguistic information was superior to recasts. The findings also provide support for R. Ellis et al.'s (2006) study in which metalinguistic information showed its superior effect over recasts in delayed post-tests. The findings of this study are also congruent with Sheen's (2007, 2011) studies which reported the beneficial effects of metalinguistic correction in comparison with recasts. Unlike Sheen's and R. Ellis et al.'s (2006) studies, the recasts in this study were explicit, but similar to their findings recast group did not perform as well as the explicit correction with metalinguistic information in the post-tests, suggesting that explicit and implicit nature of a CF technique cannot be the only determining factor in efficacy of CF.

Although all types of the CF techniques were explicit in this study, considering the researcher's intention to control for the explicitness of the corrective moves as well as the foreign language context which usually highlights the corrective nature of teacher's feedback, these techniques differed in terms of the type of input they provided. While explicit correction with metalinguistic information and recast provided both positive and negative evidence, the prompt group served only the function of giving learners negative evidence. Although provision of both negative evidence and positive evidence has been offered as an explanation for the efficacy of certain types of feedback (e.g., Rassaei & Moeinzadeh, 2011; Sheen, 2011), the fact that both explicit correction with meta-

linguistic information group and the recast group received positive and negative evidence and yet only the explicit group with metalinguistic information excelled the other CF groups in post-tests, suggests that something more than simultaneous provision of negative and positive evidence might have led to these results. In fact, superiority of the effect of explicit CF with metalinguistic information over recasts in this study cannot merely be explained with reference to the importance of simultaneous provision of negative and positive evidence.

As far as prompts are concerned, interestingly enough, although the prompts in this study were explicit in the sense that they showed there was something wrong in the production and provided learners with negative evidence, they did not seem to work for acquisition as much as explicit correction. Nobuyoshi and R. Ellis, (1993) and Takashima and R. Ellis (1999) investigated the beneficial effects of clarification requests on learners' past tense verb errors during the performance of communicative tasks and found that clarification requests were useful in reducing learners' errors. In another study less than half of the learners who had received clarification requests improved in immediate post-test and only one learner maintained the improvement over time. However, while the findings of this study do not reject the findings of R. Ellis and his colleagues, they suggest that prompts in form of clarification requests are not as effective as explicit correction with metalinguistic information for article errors. The results of scores on grammaticality judgment task are partially in line with McDonough's (2007) study that showed no advantage for clarification requests over recasts.

Considering the fact that the CF techniques in this study were all explicit in the sense that they showed there was an error in production, and also considering the corrective nature of explicit correction with metalinguistic information and recasts that provided both positive and negative evidence, learners' benefit from CF in the form of explicit correction with metalinguistic information in both knowledge of usage and the ability to use the articles in comparison with other CF groups in this study can be explained with reference to two main factors (1) deep level of attention, (2) proficiency. These factors are discussed below.

Schmidt (1995) makes a distinction between low and high levels of awareness and argues that while noticing is necessary for acquisition, understating results in deeper learning. Therefore, the logical explanation for the efficacy of explicit correction with metalinguistic information over the other CF types concerns the deeper understanding of the rule. It can be argued that since explicit correction with metalinguistic information helps learners develop awareness at both levels of noticing and understanding, it is a better candidate for the promotion of second language learning. Reviewing the studies that have focused on the effect of form-focused instruction, R. Ellis (2001), Norris and Ortega (1999), and Spada (1997) have concluded that the explicit techniques work for second language acquisition more than the implicit techniques. Based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that the explicit CF techniques which result in deeper understanding are more effective than other ones and this superiority can be observed in both tests of knowledge of usage and the ability to use the language.

The explicit CF group received feedback through provision of the correct form that was accompanied by linguistic information on the error whenever an article error occurred. This type of correction helped learners to locate the exact problem and thus the learner was made to think about his production. As soon as the learner became aware of the existence of problem in his production, its nature and its locus, the primary condition for the effectiveness of CF, which was "noticing", was fulfilled. Provision of metalinguistic information following the explicit correction made learners aware of the rule at a deep level which is referred to as "understanding". Frequent exposure to explicit correction with metalinguistic information, intensified by the nature of CF which was intensive,

served as kind of practice for learners to learn the usage and develop the ability to use definite and indefinite articles correctly.

As far as recasts are concerned, although the context of study (i.e., EFL) as well as teachers' partial reformulation of learners' errors made them explicit, it's not clear if all the learners noticed the corrective nature of the recasts. Besides, even those who might have noticed the location of the error did not benefit from the deep level of awareness and understanding that resulted through explicit correction with metalinguistic information. Partial reformulation of learners' errors did not lead to long time-outs from interaction to afford learners the opportunity to think about the rule and reanalyze their hypotheses as much as it occurred in explicit correction with metalinguistic information group.

As for the prompt in this study, they have been reported to be beneficial to language acquisition and it has been suggested that they are more useful than recasts (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Lyster, 2004). The Beneficial effects of prompts in these studies were attributed to the uptake or self-repair following the CF and thus their prompts were different from those used in the present study because clarification requests may result in learners' successful self-repair where he/she produces the correct form, or peer and teacher repair. In fact, prompts in this study which were operatinalized as clarification requests did not give the learners the opportunity to find out that what the exact error in their production was. They were explicit in showing that an error had occurred, but they were implicit in the sense that the location of the error was not indicated. Furthermore, clarification requests did not add to learners' declarative knowledge which was incomplete at the time of pre-test for all the groups while it can be argued that explicit correction with metalinguistic information and recast did so. Explicit correction with metalinguistic information and recasts both provided positive and negative evidence with the difference that the former, explicit correction with metalinguistic information, entailed two extra elements of deep understanding and brief time-outs from interaction. Therefore, superiority of recast group in timed picture description task over control group, in comparison to clarification request, can be attributed to simultaneous provision of positive and negative evidence. In other words, in comparison to explicit correction with metalinguistic information, the clarification requests did not provide the prompt group with positive evidence and metalinguistic information to allow them process the CF deeply and reevaluate their hypotheses and, unlike recasts, it did not provide the learners with positive evidence. Therefore, it can be argued that not all output- pushing techniques seem to work in a foreign language context and only those techniques which have some metalinguistic ingredient such as Lyster's (2004) prompts and R. Ellis et al. 's (2006) metalinguistic feedback seem to be effective. This can be explained with reference to skill building theories. In skill building theories, declarative knowledge (knowledge of definite and indefinite articles) is a prerequisite for procedural knowledge.

Lightbown and Spada's (2006) recommend that when students have difficulty with forms that do not have a great effect on clarity or accuracy of their production, perhaps it's better to sustain form-focused instruction. Therefore, recasts and clarification requests in this study could have contributed to learners' second language acquisition if they had been provided over a considerably longer period of time. The provision of CF in the present study was limited to three treatment sessions for each group which lasted 30 minutes and were spread over a period of one month. It can be argued that explicit correction group outperformed the other CF groups in a short period of time because from the very beginning, that is, the first treatment session, the necessary declarative knowledge for subsequent proceduralization and automatization was established and understood deeply and correct use of this declarative knowledge was reinforced in the second and third treatment sessions, whereas the recast group and clarification group might have been gradually figuring out the

rule in the treatment sessions and if the treatments had continued a few more sessions, they could have also grasped the declarative knowledge and proceduralized it. Again, it can be argued that since positive evidence was not provided for the clarification request group, the group might have needed more treatment sessions to catch up with the recasts and explicit correction with metalinguistic information group

Another central factor which can be offered as a possible explanation for the superior effect of explicit correction with metalinguistic information is proficiency . A number of studies that have focused on the usefulness of different types of CF have reported that the variable of proficiency can affect the beneficial effects of CF techniques (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Van den Branden, 1997). Although the students' proficiency as a possible intervening variable was controlled through administration of a General Proficiency Test for elementary learners at the beginning, and learners in all groups were homogenous in terms of general linguistic proficiency prior to the treatment, it can be argued that EFL learners at low levels of proficiency in language schools (elementary levels vs. intermediate and advanced levels) benefit from explicit correction with metalinguistic information more than recasts or clarification requests. Previous research on recasts has shown that low-proficiency learners do not benefit from recasts (Mackay & Philp, 1998; Netten,1991). In fact, it can be argued that recasts may prove effective for those learners who are cognitively ready to process the information (Nicolas, Lightbown & Spada, 2001). A caveat is in order. One can claim that the arguments concerning the intervening role of proficiency in effectiveness of CF in the literature pertain to implicit recasts while the recasts in this study were explicit. This claim can be partially true. However, as it was previously mentioned, the recasts in this study were explicit in the sense that they were partial reformulation of learners' erroneous utterances and also based on the assumption that learners' orientation to form in EFL contexts such as Iran makes recasts didactic and explicit, no matter the learners are engaged in performing a communicative task or some accuracy work. Therefore, the provision of recast in this study was not as explicit as explicit correction.

Although a number of studies have also shown that prompts benefit low proficiency learners (Ammar, 2003), the fact is that the prompt in this study was just limited to clarification requests and did not include other types of prompts such as elicitation which have been reported to benefit low-proficiency learners more than recasts. Learners at low proficiency levels can only notice there is something wrong in their production, but the clarification requests do not usually lead to successful repair on the part of learners because of their inability to reanalyze their production, especially in studies such as the present research that excludes any instruction on the target form at the outset of the study.

Limitations and future research
Although the researcher endeavored to the best of his ability to control for the intervening and moderating variables in study and the survey, there are still some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, one intact class was chosen for each treatment group and this raises the possibility that individual differences such as anxiety (e.g., Sheen, 2008), aptitude (e.g., Sheen, 2007), attitude (e.g., Sheen, 2011) might have had a possible effect beyond CF type. These studies have shown that those learners who have low levels of anxiety, high levels of aptitude and positive attitudes toward error correction benefit from CF more. Using more crowded classes with comparable participants in terms of individual differences would yield more robust and reliable results in future studies.

Another limitation of this study is that the communicative tasks used in this study were all narrative types. Although all tasks were focused communicative tasks in R. Ellis's (2003) categorization of tasks based on whether the task designer has the intention of eliciting a certain linguistic feature or not, other design variables of tasks might vary in terms of complexity (Skehan, 2001) and the kind of gap they contained, i.e., information, opinion, reasoning gap (Prabhu, 1987). It can be argued that if the CF techniques in this study had been used with more complex tasks and different gap tasks, the results might have been different.

Another limitation of this study is that there is no measure of spontaneous spoken English production in pre-test and post-test which could have been done through a similar picture description task. The production instruments in this study consisted of a timed written picture description task (i.e., picture narrative task) which was used for the purpose of getting a clinically elicited focused sample. This kind of instrument can induce learners to use certain linguistic features (articles in this study) while they are "oriented primarily to message-conveyance" (R. Ellis, 2008, p. 919), which is the main feature of communicative tasks. Considering the fact that writing and speaking are two different processes, including a spoken production test could have contributed to the robustness of the study.

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