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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFFECTS OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON VIETNAMESE EFL NINTH GRADERS: A CASE OF PAST CONTINUOUS TENSE LESSONS

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Abstract

The comparison of the effectiveness of direct and indirect written feedback (WCF) is a continuously debated topic in second language learning (SLA). Previous studies have largely focused on second language learners at universities or those majoring in English. Therefore, this study was designed to investigate the experimental gap regarding the effectiveness of WCF on complex, rule-following structures such as the past continuous tense in young Vietnamese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The present study was a quasi-experimental, mixed-method investigation of short-term acquisition and long-term retention of grammatical accuracy and learners' emotional awareness. The participants were 39 ninth-grade students who were learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Vietnam. The participants were divided into two separate experimental groups (direct feedback and indirect feedback). Data were collected over a six-week period using three parallel written assignments (a pretest, an immediate posttest, and a delayed posttest) and a 10-item questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale. Quantitative data were analyzed using Mixed ANOVA, which showed a statistically significant main effect with time. Results also showed that both groups improved their accuracy almost immediately. The data also demonstrated a significant parallel decline in long-term performance on the test after a period of time. Crucially, no significant difference emerged between the Direct and Indirect CF cohorts. Furthermore, descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests demonstrated that students held overwhelmingly positive, pragmatic attitudes toward both methods, reporting high academic confidence and low anxiety.

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Findings suggest that for morphologically salient, rule-bound structures, feedback clarity supersedes the degree of explicitness. While WCF is an emotionally safe and highly valued pedagogical tool, it must be integrated into a sustained cycle of instructional reinforcement to prevent long-term grammatical decay.

Introduction:-

In the area of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Vietnam, the pedagogical paradigm has been shifting gradually to communicative language teaching frameworks. Nevertheless, this communicative shift notwithstanding, the national curriculum still places emphasis on the mastery of core grammatical structures as a pre-requisite for the development of productive language skills such as academic writing. The English tense system is taught to middle school students to help them to write coherent narrative, to describe previous events and to establish complicated temporal linkages. In particular, grade 9 is a critical transition period in the Vietnamese general education system. Students will be expected to continue developing their foundational language abilities in readiness for high school.

The current national curriculum textbook provides comprehensive information regarding the structure, usage, and distinguishing features. English 9 - Global Success. This material is addressed in Lesson 4 ("Remembering the Past"). Students are required to synthesise affirmative, negative and interrogative formulations to describe background actions in progress or events interrupted by a shorter past action. But accurate tense usage remains a persistent challenge despite this structured framework. Diagnostic analyses reveal that young learners struggle with morphological subject-auxiliary agreement (was/were) and display systematic syntactic errors in clause integration, especially with subordinating conjunctions like when and while.

Language teachers make extensive use of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) to correct such persistent errors and to promote interlanguage development. In the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), WCF is defined as the evaluative linguistic input an instructor provides in response to an error in a learner's written text. Today, the cognitive perspective on WCF is seen as a sophisticated, dialogic intervention delivered in different instructional contexts. The pedagogical aim is to help learners to dynamically modify their transitional interlanguage systems by systematically focusing their limited attentional resources on specific grammatical features during meaningful production of texts.

The categorisation of WCF typologies functions primarily on a continuum of explicitness, best illustrated by the dichotomy of Direct WCF and Indirect WCF. Direct WCF is a very explicit, teacher-driven approach in which the teacher identifies the linguistic error and immediately provides the correct target form above or next to the error. This approach minimises ambiguity of interpretation, offering immediate cognitive relief that is very helpful for lower-proficiency learners. In contrast, Indirect WCF is about indicating the presence and location of an error (e.g. by underlining or highlighting) without offering the actual correction, thus allowing for the student's self-correction. Indirect interventions are theoretically more propitious to deeper cognitive processing and to learner autonomy in the long term, but their effectiveness is still highly conditioned by baseline structural knowledge of the learner. Language correction does not occur in a psychological vacuum, but is heavily mediated by the learner's affective filter and subjective expectations. Early naturalistic SLA paradigms suggested that intensive error correction could result in debilitating writing anxiety. But recent empirical investigations show that the EFL learners have positive, pragmatic views on teacher correction, and even ask for explicit feedback as an indispensable tool for language development. In many Asian educational settings, such as Vietnam, this valuation of feedback is further amplified by cultural expectations and the high stakes of standardised testing. Targeted corrective interactions are active mechanisms of grade optimisation and skill validation, which students accept as non-threatening.

The role of WCF is well established, but there is a significant empirical gap in the domestic literature. Recent research on WCF in Vietnam has focused heavily on tertiary education settings, specifically on undergraduate expectations and correction practices by university instructors. The findings are not easily transferable to secondary classrooms, because of the fundamental differences in cognitive maturity, the basic proficiency levels (usually CEFR A2-B1), and the washback pressures from high school entrance examinations. This study employs a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods approach to investigate the short-term acquisition and long-term retention effects of Direct versus Indirect Written Corrective Feedback on the accurate usage of the Past Continuous tense among Grade 9 students. Also, it explores the interior psychological experiences of these young learners to analyse the correlation between feedback mechanisms and emotions in response to feedback received from their teachers.

This study addresses two principal research questions:

1. How do direct and indirect written corrective feedback differ in their short-term and long-term effects on Grade 9 Vietnamese EFL students' accurate use of the past continuous tense in writing?
2. How do Grade 9 students perceive the usefulness of the written corrective feedback they receive?

Materials and Methods:-

Setting and Participants:-

The study was carried out in a private secondary school in Binh Duong Ward, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. English is a compulsory foreign language in this institution. It is taught according to the national curriculum and the textbook *Tiếng Anh 9 - Global Success*. The participants were 39 Grade 9 EFL students selected from two intact classes by convenience sampling. Their English language level was estimated to be at the A2-B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This level of proficiency is a very important stage of development when the learner has sufficient vocabulary, but has difficulty in learning complex, multi-clause structures such as Past Continuous tense. Participants were randomly assigned to two treatment conditions: Direct WCF (n=20) was provided to Group 1 and Indirect WCF (n=19) to Group 2.

Data Collection:-

This study employed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design, with data collected systematically over a six-week period. The quantitative instruments consisted of three parallel writing prompts designed to elicit the Past Continuous tense. These included a pretest (Week 1) to establish baseline grammatical accuracy, an immediate posttest (Week 2) administered shortly after the feedback intervention to measure short-term uptake, and a delayed posttest (Week 5) to assess long-term retention. Students were instructed to write a paragraph consisting of five to seven sentences on a specified topic using the Past Continuous tense.

Following the delayed posttest, students engaged in a survey to gather qualitative data evaluating their learning results. The researcher distributed a 10-item questionnaire to students in both groups, utilizing a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). This questionnaire was divided into two sections: Perceived usefulness of feedback (Items 1-5) and Emotional response to corrections (Items 6-10).

Data Analysis:-

Data were collected systematically over a six-week period using a quasi-experimental mixed methods design. The quantitative instruments to elicit the Past Continuous tense were three parallel writing tasks. These included a pretest (Week 1) to establish baseline grammatical accuracy, an immediate posttest (Week 2) administered immediately after the feedback intervention to measure short-term uptake, and a delayed posttest (Week 5) to assess long-term retention. Students were asked to write 5-7 sentences about past ongoing actions in different thematic contexts for each prompt in order to minimise the testing effects. Learners' perceptions were evaluated through qualitative data collection after the delayed posttest. All subjects performed a 10-item questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument had two constructs, namely, Perceived Usefulness of the feedback (Items 1-5) and Emotional Responses to the corrections (Items 6-10).

Results:-

The Short-term and Long-term Effects of WCF on Grammatical Accuracy :-

The researcher applied mixed ANOVA to compare the effect of Direct and Indirect WCF on the short-term acquisition and long-term retention of the Past Continuous tense. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the three testing intervals.

Table 1.Descriptive Statistics for Accuracy Scores

Group	Time	N	M	SD
Direct CF	Pretest	20	82.43%	17.17
	Immediate Posttest	20	90.95%	10.12
	Delayed Posttest	20	79.29%	17.77
Indirect CF	Pretest	19	78.57%	27.07
	Immediate Posttest	19	86.46%	23.57
	Delayed Posttest	19	80.72%	20.41

Descriptive data showed an immediate higher trend in accuracy for both cohorts after the intervention: the Direct CF group from 82.43% to 90.95% and the Indirect CF group from 78.57% to 86.46%. However, a further regression was noted in the Delayed Posttest as the means dropped to 79.29% and 80.72% respectively. Mauchly's Test of

Sphericity was violated ($p < .05$), and hence the Greenhouse-Geisser adjustment was used. The inference results are summarised in table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Mixed ANOVA Results

Source	df	F	p	Partial Eta Squared (η^2)
Within-Subjects				
Time (Greenhouse-Geisser)	1.72, 63.50	4.29	.023	.104
Time * Group	1.72, 63.50	0.48	.595	.013
Between-Subjects				
Group	1, 37	0.20	.654	.005

Table 2 shows that the main effect on Time is statistically significant with respect to the $F(1.72,63.50) = 4.29$, $p = .023$, $\eta^2_p = .104$ indices. The data also show that the test interval explains a significant amount of variance in accuracy. On the other hand, the results show that the main effect on the Treatment Group is not statistically significant with respect to the $F(1,37) = 0.20$, $p = .654$, $\eta^2_p = .005$ indices. This indicates that allocation to either WCF environment does not produce any systematic variation in performance. The Time \times Group interaction is not statistically significant with respect to $p = .595$, further reinforcing that both techniques lead to nearly identical development pathways.

Students' Perceptions of WCF:-

The second research question was to examine learners' subjective evaluations via a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire on their perceptions of both forms of feedback. The item-level proportions are laid out as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

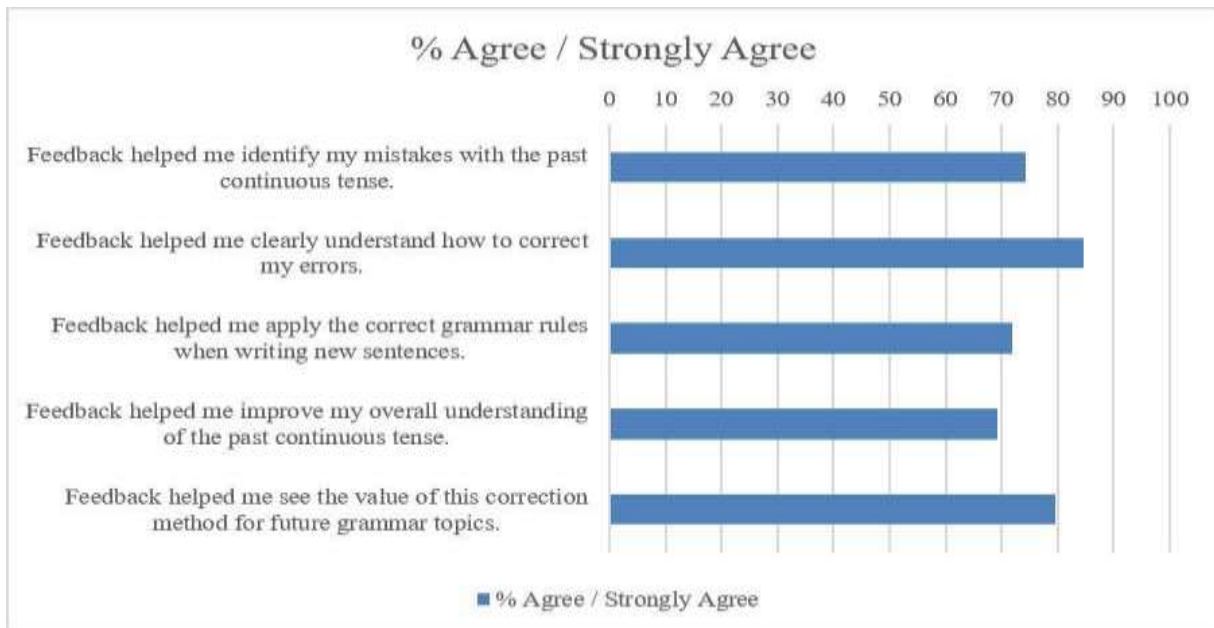


Figure1. Descriptive Frequencies for Student Perceptions for Feedback

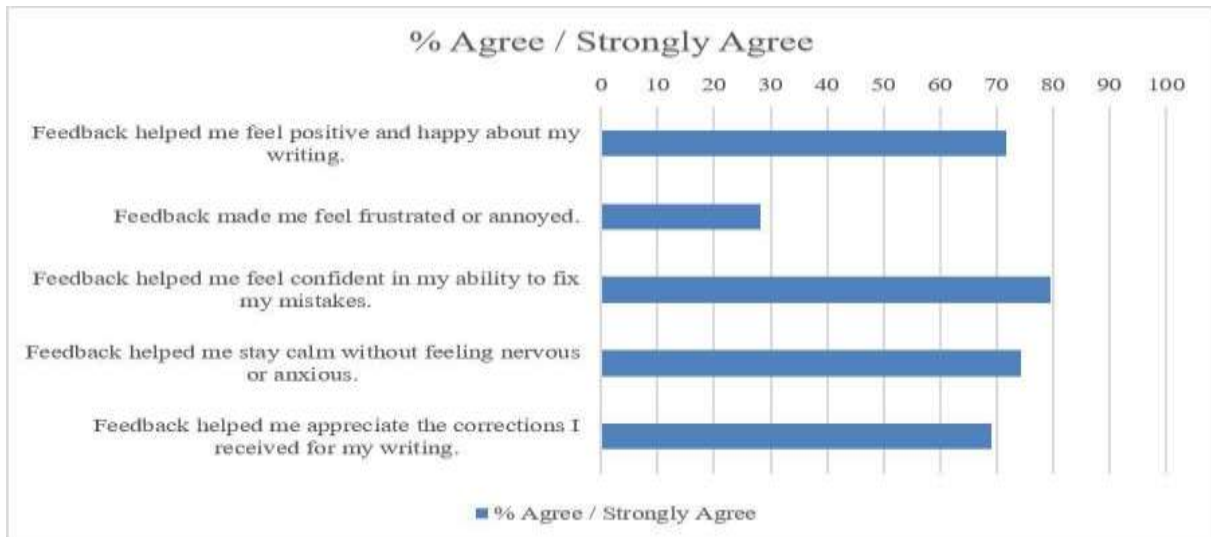


Figure2. Student Perceptions about the Usefulness of Feedback

According to the survey data, participants in both groups had a positive attitude towards the usefulness of feedback in identifying errors ($M = 4.21$) and the clarity of feedback ($M = 4.18$). It can be inferred that participants appreciated the interventions implemented by the teacher. These interventions were clear enough to meet the learners' needs. Receiving feedback was generally associated with increased confidence ($M = 4.31$) and did not increase disappointment ($M = 2.38$) after receiving teacher feedback, which led to an increased confidence in the participants' ability to use the material in their writing. Although some students were disappointed that the results were not as expected, the majority agreed that the teacher's feedback was appropriate. The researchers performed independent t-tests to determine the effect of the specific feedback mechanism on these perceptions. Detailed descriptive statistics for the groups are presented in Table 3 and the inference results are presented in Table 4.

Table 3.Group Statistics for Student Perceptions

Construct	Group	N	M	SD
Usefulness	Direct CF	20	4.21	0.57
	Indirect CF	19	4.00	0.75
Emotion	Direct CF	20	4.20	0.72
	Indirect CF	19	3.93	0.73

Table 4.Independent Samples T-test Results

Construct	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Usefulness	0.99	37	.331	0.32
Emotion	1.18	37	.244	0.38

The t-test results presented in Table 4 demonstrate the high level of similarity of psychological experiences. There were no significant differences between the Direct CF group and the Indirect CF group in terms of Usefulness ($p = .331$) and Emotion ($p = .244$). This outcome indicates that both direct and indirect forms were evaluated with similar cognitive and emotional safety ratings.

Discussion:-

The statistically significant result for the Time factor ($p = .023$) provides strong empirical evidence supporting Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis. The annotations added by the teacher served as significant cognitive signals.

These signals forced learners to shift their attention from meaning to the morphological structure of the word. Through this process, participants “noticed the gap” in their intermediate language. For instance, Student 5 used a subordinating conjunction (when or while) to construct a complex sentence combining the Past Simple and Past Continuous tenses and wrote, “While my sister cooked dinner, the telephone suddenly rang.” (Score: 0 points; the student incorrectly used the Simple Past “cooked” instead of the Past Continuous after the conjunction ‘while’ to show a background action in progress). In the Direct WCF group, the teacher crossed out “cooked” and wrote “was cooking” above the verb; in the Indirect WCF group, the teacher underlined “cooked”, signalling the need to review the structural constraint of the conjunction. In the posttest, Student 5 wrote, “While my sister was doing her homework, my friends knocked on the door.” (Score: 1 point; the student accurately used the auxiliary and present participle following the subordinator). This error represents a type of syntactic error related to clause integration with conjunctions like when or while, which is very common in the Past Continuous tense. The fact that it was resolved successfully in both feedback modes further supports the view that the rule’s transparency neutralises the supposed advantage of indirect feedback.

The dramatic decline in accuracy in the final test ($p = .007$) is a noteworthy pedagogical fact. This finding supports Truscott’s (1996) long-standing sceptical perspective. This reduction indicates that only a limited period of time is sufficient to activate explicit knowledge in short-term memory through a correction cycle. This is inherently insufficient for implanting information into long-term tacit memory if teachers do not keep the teaching momentum with repeated review and recall activities. This is consistent with recent long-term follow-up studies by Michaud et al. (2025).

Direct and indirect feedback were not significantly different ($p = .654$), contrary to Ferris’s (2004) hypothesis that indirect feedback is inherently better for promoting deep cognitive processing. This theory is not appropriate for the learners of A2-B1 level in this study when they learn the Past Continuous tense. The morphological rules of this tense are transparent (was/were + -ing). So teachers just have to underline or circle the error to trigger the cognitive retrieval process, same as with direct correction. In other words, both methods lead to the same cognitive load and avoid cognitive overload.

The most significant theoretical foundation of this study is the congruence between objective results and students’ perceptions. Students’ attitudes towards both types of feedback were very positive. This is reflected in the high pragmatism in learning which is a characteristic of Vietnamese secondary education. The entrance exam for the tenth grade is a huge pressure for ninth graders, and grammatical errors mean a big loss of points, so they do not perceive red ink as personal criticism but rather as a vital strategic tool for high scores.

Moreover, the very high scores on the affective measures ($M \approx 4.0$) are evidence that the intervention was successful in lowering the “Affective Filter” described by Krashen. The pedagogical environment reduced anxiety and frustration systematically and thus allowed the corrective linguistic input to enter the cognitive systems of the learners without emotional conflict. Since both Direct and Indirect CF cohorts reported their feedback to be equally clear, valuable and non-threatening ($p = .244$), they allocated an identical quantity of cognitive resources to processing the corrections, which perfectly explains why their developmental trajectories remained statistically parallel.

Conclusion:-

The findings of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications for the ongoing discussion of written corrective feedback (WCF) in second language acquisition, particularly in the setting of Vietnamese secondary education. The study calls into question the conventional wisdom that the best way to improve cognitive processing is through indirect feedback. In fact, it shows that for structures with diverse morphological characteristics, the explicitness of feedback is less important than its clarity. It allows teachers to employ flexible grading practices that save time while maintaining the quality of instruction. Moreover, the 9th grade participants of this study had a very positive and practical attitude toward WCF which alleviated the long-standing concerns that correction might lead to anxiety and stress in students. This shows that students see constructive feedback, given in an encouraging environment, as a good way to improve learning and not as a punishment.

The study has revealed an important educational fact: the isolated correction of errors is not enough for the long-term reconstruction of implicit memory. WCF is to be conceived as a constant pedagogic discourse and not as a final evaluative task. Only then can teachers begin to bridge the gap between fleeting cognitive “perception” and lasting language ability. Educators need to build in cycles of reinforcement, including making students revise work, and

actively watch for mistakes. Teachers need to use both techniques of correcting errors skilfully to optimise the development of linguistic competences of students.

Further experiments and contexts are needed to acquire deeper fundamental insights. Future studies should include larger cohorts, from different regions and socioeconomic strata and in full randomisation to improve generalisability of the findings. Future research should explore other grammatical features and whether the effect of response clarity varies for complex or ambiguous syntactic errors compared to simple morphological errors. Finally, the application of a longitudinal design during an academic year, along with qualitative methods such as think aloud interviews, will contribute to a better understanding of the cognitive processes learners use to interpret and process teacher feedback.

Ethical Compliance:-

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for human participants. Formal administrative clearance was obtained from the board of management of the participating institution before data collection. All participants were informed and consented to the study, with explicit statements that participation was completely voluntary and would not influence their official academic status. Anonymity and confidentiality were protected by stripping all identifying information and assigning student scripts and survey responses unique numerical codes.

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