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The Effects of Direct Written Corrective Feedback and Metalinguistic Explanation on EFL Students' Acquisition of Articles across Proficiency Level

Supiani Supiani

Universitas Negeri Malang

Yoki Irawan

Universitas Negeri Malang

Rohfin Andria Gestanti

Universitas Negeri Malang

Bambang Yudi Cahyono

Universitas Negeri Malang

Introduction

Written corrective feedback (WCF) refers to teachers' responses to foreign and second-language students' language errors in their writing tasks. The contribution of WCF to second and foreign students' writing improvement has been the focus of current studies in second and foreign writing research for the past two decades. There has been a debate on the effectiveness of WCF practice since Truscott's (1996, 1999, 2007) articles, which argued that WCF was ineffective in promoting L2 development due to time consumption and lack of guarantee of success. However, recent studies have examined the effectiveness of different types of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy and acquisition (Alharbi, 2022; Ekanayaka & Ellis, 2020; Mujtaba et al., 2021; Nicolás et al., 2019; Zhang, 2021); most of these studies have found that the use of WCF types significantly improves students' writing accuracy and language acquisition. It means that WCF is fruitful and effective because it enhances students' explicit knowledge, which they can then use to eliminate language errors in their writing performance. As reported as well in a study conducted by Russell and Spada (2006), this method was beneficial in enhancing grammatical acquisition in writing works.

This present study examines the effect of direct WCF (DWCF) type and metalinguistic explanation (ME) on EFL students' acquisition of articles across proficiency levels. The role of one student-external factor, such as language proficiency level, affects students' performance in writing. Dörnyei (2005) points out that individual differences come from external factors influencing students' performance in learning, such as motivation, working memory, language ability, age, personality, learning style, language anxiety, and learners' attitudes and attitudes beliefs. One of these factors, the mastery of the language proficiency level, is essential for students in writing texts or essays because students are required to understand and analyze



every single sentence carefully while writing their drafts or essays. Students who had lower English proficiency could negatively influence their cognitive and behavioral engagement with WCF given by the teacher (Zheng & Yu, 2018). In the present study, we focus on examining one specifically important aspect of the grammatical form such as the use of English articles (referential indefinite “a, an” and referential definite “the”) are targeted in the feedback for linguistic accuracy in students’ writing drafts. Pedagogically, the adoption of the direct or explicit WCF and ME types can optimize the students to acquire a new language and enable the students to understand the use of articles so that their linguistic accuracy in writing texts or essays is much better. Sheen (2007) reported that DWCF with and without ME tended to promote awareness as noticing, while DWCF with ME promoted awareness with an understanding of grammatical accuracy.

Literature Review

In the EFL context, direct written corrective feedback (DWCF) is preferable because this type allows students to acquire L2 in a more focused way. As the correct version and corrected information are provided unambiguously and immediately, students can efficiently observe what is missing in their current understanding of performing the language (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris et al., 2013; Guo & Barrot, 2019). Concerning this debatable view, more empirical proof from current studies exploring and examining the effectiveness of corrective feedback indicates that the use of DWCF is more suggested, especially when other variables such as the target feature, the types of writing, the test type and external or internal factors of students are considered during the investigation (Bitchener, et al., 2005; Chandler, 2003; Stefanou & Revesz, 2015).

Research on corrective feedback discusses the integration of ME, a more regarded explicit form of corrective feedback and an alternative to DWCF, in addressing students’ linguistic errors in writing. Suzuki et al. (2019) examined whether direct and indirect WCF is significantly effective with English indefinite articles and past perfect tense as the target structure. The study involved new writing and revised drafts as analysed writing products. The findings revealed that both types of WCF (direct and indirect) affect students’ writing improvement in revising the draft instead of new writing. A significant effect of WCF explicitness (with or without ME) is partially found in revised writing. This research supports Sheen’s study, which revealed that ME integrated into WCF significantly affects the improvement of grammatical accuracy as a stronger, positive relationship between students’ aptitude and language acquisition was found in the direct metalinguistic instead of the direct-only group. Regarding previous studies, the generated findings explain that DWCF combined with ME improve students’ L2 writing and significantly affects students’ writing (Sheen, 2007; Suzuki et al., 2019). Empirical studies reported that the effectiveness of DWCF on particular features of linguistics has depicted the beneficial roles of DWCF. In terms of assessing students’ grammatical errors, which is also the focus of this study, the use of DWCF is considered to outperform indirect ones (Sarré et al., 2019; Van Beuningen et al., 2012). It provides necessary input that enables students to understand the correct linguistic concepts and obtain significant advantages in the accuracy of grammatical rules. Regarding students’ writing performance, providing focused feedback on a specific error is preferred and suggested. Compared to oral language, the written language system requires more specific rule-based items, especially English articles (Farrokhi & Sattapour, 2012; Reynolds & Kao, 2019). Errors in English articles is among various target structures in written corrective feedback studies that are have been found difficult for EFL students and require treatment for the errors (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ferris, 2006).

Method

Research Design and Participants

Using a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, treatment, post-test research structure, the study attempted to compare the effect of DWCF and ME on students' acquisition by using the indefinite article 'a, an' (for referring to first mention; something for the first time) and the definite article 'the' (for referring to subsequent mention; something already mentioned or known) across the students' language proficiency level. The study was conducted in the English language education department of a public university in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan province, Indonesia. A total of 60 students participated in the study. There were 19 male and 41 female students aged 19-20. These students were enrolled in the essay writing course as one of their compulsory bachelor's degree requirements in the second semester of the academic year 2021/2022. To take the essay writing course, the students were required to pass the paragraph writing course in the first semester before enrolling on the course. Two experimental groups (group A: receiving DWCF and group B: ME) and one control group (group C: no feedback) were involved, and each class was comprised of 20 students taught by the same instructor. It meant that the instructor gave DWCF for group A, ME for group B, and did not supply any feedback or no feedback for the control group or group C. The classes met once a week, each for a duration of one and a half hours.

Direct Written Corrective Feedback Group

The instructor provided the first experimental group (Group A) to cross out the targeted errors with the correct forms or insert missing articles on the students' writing drafts. Every error was corrected in red ink via the font colour of Microsoft Word. Two examples are shown below:

- 1) boy and girl were reading novel books at the library (original)
A boy and a girl were reading novel books at the library (original with DWCF)
- 2) I know all of students were from Jakarta (original)
 I know all of **the** students were from Jakarta (originally with DWCF)

The corrected sentences in the students' essays were then returned via e-mail, and the students were instructed to use the correct forms and re-submit them. The new sentences of their essays were corrected again, and the essays were re-sent to the students via e-mail. This recurring process was carried out the whole period of the treatment over the semester with the aim of re-constructing the students' language accuracy and clarity in writing drafts in terms of the use of definite and indefinite articles.

Metalinguistic Explanation Group

In this treatment, the students should work out the correction needed from the clue provided based on the type of metalinguistic feedback. This treatment was delivered in written form and sometimes by oral meta-linguistic explanation. It included a simple explanation of the two targeted functional uses of the definite and indefinite articles together with sentences. The explanation referred to (1) use 'an or a' when referring to something for the first time, (2) use 'the' when referring to something that has already been mentioned or known. Before giving the treatment, the instructor explained the metalinguistic information (rules and example) attached in the handout. Additional examples were illustrated on the whiteboard or on PowerPoint slides and discussed with the students in the class. Moreover, the instructor also instructed the students to read and understand the ME handout given so that they could revise the errors they made. The recurring process of providing this treatment was the same with DWCF during the period of the semester. The examples of this ME were as follows.

- 1) The use of smartphone can become alternative teaching tool for teachers (original)
The use of smartphone can become*ind alternative teaching tool for teachers. (Original with ME)
- 2) We see there are six books on table (original)
We see there are six books on*def table.

Notes: *ind = indefinite article, *def = definite article.

Data Collection

To collect the data about the students' progress in writing essays after providing them with both feedback types on the use of the English article system, we relied on the students' writings and the scores they got before and after the experimental treatment. We used a pre-test for the three groups before the experimental treatment, which lasted for four months and was followed by a post-test. After testing, comparisons between pre-tests and post-tests were made. The procedure of data collection is displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Procedure of Data Collection

Meeting	Groups		
	DWCF group	ME group	Control group
Time 1	Pre-Test		
Time 2	Topic 1	Topic 1	Topic 1
Time 3	DWCF	ME	No DWCF or ME
Time 4	Topic 1	Topic 1	Topic 1
	Revision	Revision	Revision
Time 5	DWCF	ME	No DWCF or ME
Time 6	Topic 2	Topic 2	Topic 2
Time 7	DWCF	ME	No DWCF or ME
Time 8	Topic 2	Topic 2	Topic 2
	Revision	Revision	Revision
Time 9	DWCF	ME	No DWCF or ME
Time 10	Topic 3	Topic 3	Topic 3
Time 11	DWCF	ME	No DWCF or ME
Time 12	Topic 3	Topic 3	Topic 3
	Revision	Revision	Revision
Time 13	DWCF	ME	No DWCF or ME
Time 14	Post-Test		

Results

The present study was designed to investigate the effects of DWCF and ME on students' acquisition using English articles. It determined the improvement as represented in the post-test. The results of the analysis are presented and discussed in this section. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the overall accuracy rates of the articles used on the pre-test and post-test for the two experimental groups and the control group.

TABLE 2
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations by Groups

Groups	n	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
		M	SD	M	SD
DWCF	20	71.25	8.383	89.40	10.200
ME	20	61.95	8.835	83.35	7.307
Control	20	57.05	2.273	65.20	8.508

As shown in Table 2, it can be seen that all three groups enjoyed improvement from the pre-test to the post-test, representing students' acquisition in using articles accurately. However, the average score indicated that both treatment groups showed a greater increase than the control group. The average score increase was 18.15, 21.04, and 8.15 for DWCF, ME, and the control group respectively. In this case, the ME group had the highest score increase.

To further examine whether DWCF and ME as the treatment groups outperformed the control group and had a significant effect on students' acquisition in using articles, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed with pre-test scores as the covariate. The analysis showed significant differences among the three groups, $F(2, 57) = 11.14$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = 0.6$. To examine the statistical differences among pairs, a post-hoc pairwise ANCOVA was then performed. The results revealed that there were significant differences between the treatment groups and the control groups: DWCF group and the control group, $F(1, 38) = 12.36$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = 0.3$ and ME and the control group, $F(1, 38) = 9.25$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = 0.2$. However, there was no significant difference between the two experimental groups, $F(1, 38) = 3.06$, $p = .082$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$. Thus, it can be implied that both DWCF and ME significantly affect students' acquisition as they were considered effective for treating the errors in definite and indefinite articles.

Discussion

The pre-test and post-test writing test results indicate that DWCF positively affected students' production of English articles. This type contributed significantly to learning the long-term effects of error correction on the accuracy and improvement of writing (Van Beuningen et al., 2008). Regarding this outcome, previous studies have confirmed that DWCF enhances students' learning when it is formed in a more focused way and focuses on single, less complex language errors. This finding supports previous studies that found DWCF provides necessary input for students to understand and construct correct linguistic concepts, leading to significant improvements in the accuracy of grammatical rules, particularly for English articles (Al Harrasi, 2019; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Farrokhi & Sattapour, 2012; Reynolds & Kao, 2019). Students receiving the DWCF treatments had higher proficiency levels than the control group students according to the intact class they were assigned. Informed by the results of the pre-test, there were significant differences among the groups. Boggs (2019) reported that students who received direct feedback made the most accurate revisions and increased their grammatical accuracy. This finding indicated that students' proficiency level could perform as an influential factor.

Similar to the DWCF treatment group, the post-test result indicated a significant effect of ME treatment on students' use of articles. There was evidence that ME enabled the students to develop students' explicit knowledge because they received more explanation of the grammatical errors from their teachers (Shintani & Ellis, 2013). Simply, the ME group outperformed the control group, indicating that the ME treatment proved to have an effect on students' acquisition even though the effect size was small. This is in line with earlier research showing that ME enhances the explicit feedback in which it assists students to improve particular linguistic categories (Guo & Barrot, 2019; Sheen, 2007), raises student awareness of grammatical and linguistic rules (Shintani & Ellis, 2013), and improves their ability to recognize and conceptualize their writing (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Sheen, 2010; Stefanou & Revesz, 2015). In addition, ME type had a positive effect on how students accurately use articles. It was because ME gave explicit attention to

grammatical choices which set out to develop students' linguistic understanding of writing and the rule for the use of the indefinite article, although their understanding was sometimes idiosyncratic (Myhill & Newman, 2016; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). Dörnyei (2005) pointed out that individual differences come from external factors influencing students' performance in learning a language. Students' proficiency level contributes to their writing production because they must understand and analyze every sentence carefully while writing their drafts or essays. There were no differential effects as no significant differences were found in the two treatment groups. It indicated that DWCF and ME are equally effective in treating students' errors regarding the use of articles, even though the statistical computation showed that DWCF significant value is slightly higher than ME. Guo and Barrot (2019) showed that direct correction feedback was more effective than ME in treating grammatical errors in the irregular past tense, but both types of feedback remain equal when dealing with regular verbs.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that DWCF and ME, in separate ways, proved to have significant effects on students' acquisition in using English articles in their writing. Both types significantly affect accuracy in new writing, and the students use their understanding of the rule to focus on the use of the definite and indefinite English articles system. Even though DWCF significant value is slightly higher than ME, the statistical computation showed that no significant differences were found between DWCF and ME. It indicated that the treatments are equally effective in treating students' errors regarding the use of articles. The students gain direct assistance from their teacher to correct the errors, which helps them to either revise or write new texts. Meanwhile, ME assisted the students in developing their explicit knowledge of the indefinite and definite article rule and making use of this knowledge when writing new writings. Regarding this outcome, previous studies have confirmed that DWCF enhances students' learning when formed in a more focused way. This result supports other studies that DWCF provides necessary input that enables students to understand and construct the correct linguistic concepts and obtain significant advantages in grammatical rules' accuracy, especially using the English article system. Compared with the ME, the use of ME provided the students with an opportunity to acquire explicit knowledge of the language regarding the English article system. Metalinguistic information facilitated the students to understand the rule of the use of articles and provided explanation and exemplification in which the use of articles became the object of this study. The study suggests that the goal is to develop explicit knowledge and encourage the students to improve their language accuracy. DWCF and ME constitute effective and practical feedback of doing so in a distinguishing way. The teacher should be consistent in giving both types of feedback to correct grammatical errors and teach grammar accurately.

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The Authors

Supiani is a teaching staff at the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Islam Kalimantan MAB Banjarmasin, Indonesia. He is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Letters in the ELT (English Language Teaching) program, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. His research areas include ESL/EFL writing, written corrective feedback, ELT methodology, and motivation in language learning.

Department of English Language Education
Faculty of Letters
Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia
Email: supiani.uniska@gmail.com /supiani.2202219@students.um.ac.id

Yoki Irawan is an English lecturer at the English Education Department of Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kerinci, Jambi, Indonesia. Currently, he is a doctoral student of English Language Education, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. His areas of interest lie in TEFL, Curriculum and Materials Development, and Global Englishes.

Department of English Language Education
Faculty of Letters
Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia
Email: yoki.irawan.2202219@students.um.ac.id

Rohfin Andria Gestanti is a faculty member at the Department of Communication Science, Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo. She is a doctoral student at the Department of English Language Education, Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. Her research interests are to work in the areas of ESP, applied linguistic and language assessment.

Department of English Language Education
Faculty of Letters
Universitas Negeri Malang
Malang, Indonesia
Email: rohfin.andria.2202219@students.um.ac.id

Bambang Yudi Cahyono is a professor in Applied Linguistics at Universitas Negeri Malang, East Java, Indonesia. He gained his Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics from Concordia University, Montreal, Canada (2000) and Ph.D. from the Department of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics of the University of Melbourne, Australia (2006). He participated in the summer school on “Writing in the Classroom” in the English Language Institute of the University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom (1995); “American Studies for Language Teachers” at the University of Chicago at Illinois, USA (2001); and online-course on “The Teaching of Critical”.

Department of English Language Education
Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia
Email: bambang.yudi.fs@um.ac.id

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