The Effects of Implicit Written Corrective Feedback on ESL Learners’ Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT

Background. Providing written corrective feedback (WCF) to learners for their writing tasks is pivotal in ESL learning process.

Purpose. This research aimed to examine the effects of a lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF on ESL learners’ writing skills as well as to identify the learners’ perceptions towards its utilisation in their essay writing tasks.

Methods. This is a mixed methods research which involved the gathering of data both quantitatively and qualitatively. By employing a purposive sampling method, 50 ESL learners from a private university in Selangor, Malaysia were selected for this study. They underwent a two-week treatment period whereby they were trained to self-correct their essays based on the indication of errors as implicit WCF by their lecturer, and a pre-test and a post-test were administered in between. Finally, 10 respondents were interviewed to generate their perceptions on the utilisation of this technique as implicit WCF in their writing tasks.

Results. The results showed that the students had achieved a slightly significant improvement in their essay writing skills after the treatment. They also perceived positively the utilisation of the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF in their essay writing tasks.

Conclusion and Implications: In sum, the lecturer’s error indication as implicit WCF is quite effective for enhancing writing skills, and the ESL learners perceived it positively. This present study contributes fundamental pedagogical implications and recommendations for future research. ESL instructors are encouraged to adopt and apply this technique in their composition writing lessons.

KEYWORDS
error indication, self-correction, implicit, corrective feedback, autonomous learners

INTRODUCTION

Giving and receiving corrective feedback is one essential aspect of teaching and learning process in an ESL classroom. It is one of the strategies used by educators to improve their students’ learning and academic performance. The corrective feedback administered can either be in the form of oral or written feedback. Past researchers classified the types of corrective feedback (CF) into different categories. Lyster and Ranta (1997) classified feedback into three main categories i.e., direct feedback (explicit correction), prompt (metalinguistic clue, elicitation, repetition, and clarification request) and implicit feedback (recast). On the other hand, Bitchener and Ferris (2012) categorised feedback into two main types: direct or explicit and indirect or implicit feedback. The main difference between this feedback rests on learners’ awareness of their understanding about something (Godfroid et al., 2015). In indirect or implicit feedback, teachers do not inform the students about their errors explicitly but use specific codes to indicate the type of errors so that the students are prompted to brainstorm, search, and fix the errors (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Teachers may offer feedback by underlining or circling the error, showing where the error has occurred using a code and what type of error it is, or stating in the margin the number of errors (Baleghizadeh & Dadashi, 2011; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). In direct or explicit feedback, actual corrections are given overtly by the teacher by crossing...
Written corrective feedback (WCF) is categorised as focused or implicit feedback with self-correction as an implicit WCF. It is a correction method used to indicate errors such as by underlining or circling the errors or using symbols or codes which will guide students to self-correct the errors they make (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Mohebbi, 2013; Hoesseini, 2014). This is a suitable technique for self-correction to take place because this type of feedback prompts learners to identify the errors that they make and correct them on their own. Self-correction is a form of indirect feedback where the teacher provides alternatives to learners but they themselves will have to discern the correct form (Bitcher et al., 2005). There is no description provided in the feedback as it is meant for students to discover their own errors. This type of corrective feedback will push learners to repair their own errors, induce them to think, and apply their existing schema knowledge in the learning process. This will eventually promote self-directed learners in an ESL classroom. Besides, this is a form of discovery learning, which implies that learning is more internally driven than externally driven (Maftoon, Shirazi, & Daftarifard, 2010). Learning through self-discovery paves way for the learners to produce language meaningfully and develop their linguistic competence.

Notably, very limited studies have been conducted on indirect or implicit WCF. Hyland (2010) contends in his review that there has been very little research conducted on “how students actually engage with feedback and how feedback shapes their writing processes, revising practices and their self-evaluation capacities” (p. 179). This is supported by Linh (2018) who asserts that there is very limited body of research giving focus on indirect written corrective feedback. Furthermore, Rouhi et al. (2018) claims that there is still inadequate evidence on which specific feedback strategies are effective for enhancing second language (L2) learners’ writing accuracy. Therefore, in response to this gap in literature, this present study aims to examine the effects of a lecturer’s indirect or implicit WCF (indication of errors by underlining or circling the errors) on ESL learner’s writing skills. It also pursues to test the research hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the students’ essay writing scores after the treatment using the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF. This present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

a) Does the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF effectuate a significant improvement in the learners’ writing skills?

b) What are the learners’ perceptions towards using the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF in their essay writing tasks?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Numerous research studies have been conducted on the effects of direct and implicit written corrective feedback (WCF)
on students’ speaking (Shamirim & Farvardin, 2016; Ramadhan, 2019; Lasmi, 2020) and writing skills (Alavi & Amini, 2016; Westmacott, 2017; Karim & Nassaji, 2018; Nemati et al., 2019; Sultana & Yoko, 2021). The findings of these past studies are varied and inconclusive. Besides, the findings on the comparison on which type of corrective feedback is effective for enhancing learners’ writing skills is also inconclusive. Several researchers claim that written corrective feedback is effective for improving students’ L2 writing (Ferris, 1999, 2006; Bruton, 2009, 2010; Chandler, 2009) against the arguments by Truscott (1996) that it is ineffective and harmful. Some other studies found that there is no significant difference in terms of effectiveness between direct and indirect WCF. Evidently, “a lot of researchers and practitioners have extensively investigated WCF role within the framework of second language acquisition and L2 writing” (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016), however, no conclusive results have been obtained (Yi, 2019).

Evidently, a review on 35 primary studies revealed that written corrective feedback can bring about improvement in L2 written accuracy (Lim & Renandy, 2020). Many recent research findings also approve the effectiveness of WCF on writing skills (e.g., Westmacott, 2017; Karim & Nassaji, 2018; Nemati et al., 2019; Sultana & Yoko, 2021). Alavi and Amini (2016) who investigated the effects of two different corrective feedback techniques, namely recasts and elicitation, found that elicitation was more effective than recasts. Many researchers approve that it is beneficial for long term learning improvements because it boosts students’ engagement and attention to forms and allows them to problem solve (Ferris, 2003; Lalande, 1982). This is supported by Kisnanto’s (2016) finding that direct WCF is effective for improving university students’ writing accuracy. She examined the effect of direct and indirect WCF on students’ L2 writing accuracy. The results of the writing tests revealed that participants who received the direct WCF experienced a statistically significant improvement in their writing accuracy than students who were given the indirect WCF treatment. Similarly, Hamid et al.’s (2018) findings also ascertain that corrective feedback is a useful editing tool. They explored the effect of colours as a form of corrective feedback on EFL learners’ writing and relationship of such feedback with learners’ performance in EFL acquisition. This study revealed that colour corrective feedback was found to be effective in increasing learners’ awareness which had improved learners’ performance in writing.

Pakbaz (2014) found an equally positive effect of giving both types of written corrective feedback on learners’ written work. There was no statistically significant difference between the implicit and explicit groups on their correct use of the specified structures. This is supported by Babanoğlu, Açıkmaz and Badem (2018) who also found in their study that there was no statistical superiority of explicit and implicit WCF over each other. Similarly, Wahyuni (2017) discovered that there was no significant difference in writing quality of students getting direct corrective feedback and those getting indirect corrective feedback. The findings also showed that the students’ cognitive styles did not have any influence on the effect of different feedback on writing quality of the students. This is an important finding, but it requires further examination as the results may not be generalisable to all ESL learners.

In contrast, Ariyandi (2018) who investigated the academic performance in writing skills between students who were taught using indirect written correction and those were not, found that indirect correction technique was more effective for teaching writing skills. On the other hand, Poorerebrahm (2017) who conducted a study to compare the effects of two types of indirect corrective feedback, namely indication and indication plus location involving two groups of learners revealed significant difference between the two groups in their reduction of errors from the original draft to the revision of each task. However, there was no significant difference in terms of accuracy of the new pieces of writing and it was found that the error reduction in the revision stage could not be considered as learning. The study implicated that “more explicit feedback is better for revising purposes while more implicit feedback is good for learning purposes” (p. 184). Evidently, some studies found that indirect corrective feedback seemed to be effective in helping the learners to improve their linguistic accuracy of grammatical errors (Jamalinesari et al., 2015). The findings of the above studies substantiate the inconclusive findings in past literature with regards to the effectiveness of direct and implicit WCF.

Notably, past studies show that students have different perceptions on the usefulness of the different types of corrective feedback and which feedback they prefer for their learning. However, the findings are also inconclusive and there are limited studies conducted in this field of research especially in Malaysia. Some past studies (e.g., Lee, 2009; Black & Nanni, 2016; Khalil Jahbel, et al., 2020) show that students prefer direct error correction. For instance, Mohammad and Rahman’s (2016) findings showed that majority of students wanted lecturers to provide correction or feedback for the mistakes on their writing and they preferred lecturers to mark their mistakes and give comments on their work. This finding is supported by Khalil Jahbel, et al. (2020) who found that students had high preferences towards written corrective feedback. Bozkurt and Acar (2017) support Mohammad and Rahman’s (2016) and Jahbel, et al.’s (2020) findings that students preferred getting explicit feedback to their written work, however, they were aware that implicit feedback led to more awareness, exploration, autonomy, and self-improvement. Chandler (2003) claims that students accept that they learn more from implicit feedback and benefit more from self-correction. This confirms Ferris and Roberts’ (2001) findings that students preferred implicit feedback for error rectification, and they valued the feedback specifically implicit correction from their teachers (Saito, 1994). In the contrary, Umer, Ahmad and Soomro (2018) found that students...
believed their teachers’ direct written feedback effective for improving writing skill and they perceived direct face to face interaction more productive than indirect feedback because of their failure to understand the comments or the symbols used by their teachers.

The contradictory findings in past studies may be due to several factors that can influence students’ preferences for corrective feedback. This includes important demographic factors such as age, educational background and linguistic proficiency which can influence how students like their errors to be corrected (Lee, 2009). Besides, students’ field of interest may also affect their preference for feedback. For example, some students prefer feedback on grammar and others need feedback on content and ideas (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Nevertheless, further examination on issues such as "the problems inherent in the provision of corrective feedback, the differential effects of various types of feedback, the conditions under which the effect of feedback can be maximised, and the issue of uptake" (El-Tatawy, 2002, p. 12) are pertinent. Storch (2010) reveals that research findings are still inconclusive although many of the inadequacies of earlier research have been largely addressed. She suggests that “future research on WCF needs to be conducted in authentic classrooms so that the feedback is given within the context of an instructional program” (p. 43). In providing WCF, she recommends future research to take into consideration learners’ writing goals and attitude to grammatical accuracy. Taking Storch’s (2010) suggestions into consideration, it is anticipated that the present study will offer some new insights and knowledge on these issues, especially relating to the effect of the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF on learners’ writing skills in an ESL classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This present study employed a mixed methods research design whereby two research methods were used for its data collection and analysis. For the quantitative data, a one group pre-test and post-test design was employed whereby the pre-test and post-test results were compared to measure the improvement in the writing skills after the treatment. “This design attempts to use the subjects as their own controls and to eliminate the need for a control group design. This design is sometimes referred to as a ‘repeated measures’ design because subjects are observed or measured twice on the dependent variable” (Seliger & Shohamy, 2008). The main advantage of using this design is it can control several extraneous variables which can affect the homogeneity of subjects when more than one group is employed (Seliger & Shohamy, 2008). Next, a qualitative research method using a structured interview was employed to obtain the participants’ perceptions regarding the treatment using the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit corrective feedback in the writing tasks. The combination of both methods can complement the flaws of each research method and thus, generate a richer data, and more reliable and concrete results. Also, this study was conducted in an authentic classroom environment whereby the participants remained in their lecture room during the experiment.

Participants

This study employed a purposive sampling method. The participants were a class of 50 final year Bachelor of Education in TESL (BTESL) students at a private university in Selangor, Malaysia. They were between the age range of 23 to 26 years old. Academically, majority of them had obtained a good cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 2.5 and above and generally, their English proficiency level was upper intermediate. All the fifty students participated in the treatment, the pre-test and post-test, but only ten of them were selected for the interview session with the researcher.

Instruments

Essay Writing Tests (Pre-Test and Post-Test)

Essay writing tests were the first instruments used in the data collection. These were employed to gather data which answered the first research question - Does the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF effectuate a significant improvement in the learners’ writing skills? A pre-test and a post-test were conducted to examine the differences in their total writing scores before and after the treatment using implicit WCF (the lecturer’s indication of errors and learners’ self-correction of essay writing tasks). During the Pre-Test, the students were asked to write a short essay of about 200 words entitled “The advantages of using Twitter for its users” in 30 minutes. Together with the essay question, four main points (access information, social interaction, share moments, create awareness) were given as guidelines for the students to use in their essay writing. They were also encouraged to use their own ideas to elaborate the essay. For the post-test, the students were also asked to write a short essay of about 200 words entitled “The advantages of using Facebook for its users” in 30 minutes. Four main points (access information, social interaction, share moments, create awareness) were also given like in the pre-test. Students were required to use them in their essay with the addition of their own ideas to expand the essay. Both written scripts obtained from the pre-test and the post-test were evaluated by two independent raters based on the scoring rubric for writing test adopted from Jacob et al. (1981). This rubric was employed in this study because it is one of the most frequently used and reliable profiles for ESL composition rating (Lee et al, 2008). Furthermore, it is a suitable scoring rubric that offers a clear undertaking of what and how to score the composition consistently based on each writing
element that is graded by the lecturer (Turgut & Kayaoğlu, 2015). The improvement was examined by comparing the essay writing scores that the students obtained in the pre-test and post-test.

**Independent Raters**

Two lecturers who have qualification in Master of Education in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) were elected as independent raters. Both raters have experience in teaching TESL subjects for more than five years. They were briefed about their roles as raters by the researcher and the rubric was explained to them. Importantly, a pilot study was conducted to test the inter-rater reliability of the two raters’ scores. The intraclass correlation coefficient analysis showed that the raters’ pre-test scores had a moderate inter-rater reliability of .67 while the post-test scores had a good reliability of .84.

**Interview**

For the qualitative data collection method, a structured interview was used to enable the selected participants to share their thoughts and opinions about the focused topic. There were eight structured interview questions (Appendix 1) in total which were related to their perceptions on the utilisation of the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF. This interview was mainly to answer Research Question 2 - What are the learners’ perceptions towards using the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF feedback in their essay writing tasks? The findings would support the data and findings obtained from the students’ essay writing tests. Using purposive sampling method, ten respondents were selected randomly for the interview session. The whole interview sessions involving the ten interviewees were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of the data analysis.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The systematic data collection procedures for this present study are illustrated in Figure 1.

A pilot study was conducted involving 30 students of the actual participants in the study a week before the treatment. After the pilot study, the pre-test was administered to a class of 50 final year BTESL students and they were given 30 minutes to complete the test. They were required to write a short essay of about 200 words, entitled “Advantages of using Twitter for its users”. The pre-test scripts were collected and photocopied in two sets to be given to each of the independent raters to evaluate. The original copies of the pre-test scripts were used for the first treatment. Figure 2 shows the framework of the treatment process. The first session of the treatment process began immediately after the pre-test. The remaining 20 students who were not involved in the pilot study were asked to write their essays based on the same essay topic, “Advantages of using Twitter for its users.” Therefore, all the 50 participants participated in this first treatment. Next, the lecturer administered the implicit WCF (Lecturer’s indication of errors by underlining or circling the errors) to all the 50 pre-test scripts during his free time after the lesson.
In the second session, the lecturer returned the pre-test scripts with indicated errors to the students, and they were given 30 minutes to do the correction and rewriting the whole essay. After completing the self-corrected essay, the students submitted it to the lecturer. Then, the second essay topic and its main points - “Ways of reducing stress” (have a hobby, watch television, exercise regularly, talk to a friend) were administered to all the students. The same process was conducted whereby students were required to write an essay of about 200 words in 30 minutes and submit the completed copy to the lecturer. Similarly, the implicit WCF was administered to the students’ writing scripts during the lecturer’s free time.

In the third session, the lecturer handed the second essay scripts with the errors indicated back to the students for them to do correction, rewrite the essays, and submit the corrected essays to the lecturer. After that, the lecturer gave a new essay topic and its main points - “Benefits of using social media” (make friends, social interaction, relieve stress, share posts) to the students. The same process was being conducted as in session 2 above for session 3 and session 4.

In the fourth session, the students were asked to write the final essay about “The importance of the internet” (obtain information, do research, watch videos, gain knowledge). The steps of the treatment are summarised in Table 1 as follows:

All the 50 participants participated and completed their essays in all the four sessions of the treatment. After the treatments had been conducted for four times in two weeks, the post-test was administered to examine the learners’ writing skills improvement. This time, the students also wrote a short essay of about 200 words in 30 minutes, but a new topic was given, entitled “Advantages of using Facebook for its users”. All the 50 students participated and completed their essays in this post-test. The same procedures were applied as in the pre-test whereby the essay scripts were collected, photocopied in two sets, and given to each of the independent raters to evaluate. The final scores in the pre-test and post-test were compared to examine if there was any significant difference in their essay writing scores after the implicit WCF had been administered.

A structured interview was conducted after the post-test. Ten students were chosen randomly for the interview session with the researcher. The structured interview instrument was also piloted with two participants from among the actual participants chosen. This pilot testing will enable the researcher to recognise vagueness and unclear interrogations to answer for required corrections (Kerlinger 1986). The reliability of the instrument was justified by the results of the pilot testing whereby the two participants did not face any difficulties in responding to all the interview questions. The questions were merely focusing on the students’ perceptions towards the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF in their essay writing tasks. One example of the interview questions (Appendix 1) includes “From your own experience, state two improvements that you have achieved after receiving the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF in your writing task.” The interview sessions were recorded and then transcribed to be analysed for the research findings.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Both the pre-test and post-test were rated by two independent raters based on the analytic scoring rubric for writing test adopted from Jacob et al. (1981). This rubric contains some constructs to guide the independent raters when giving marks for students’ pre-test and post-test scripts. The descriptions for every level of achievements were stated so that the raters could mark the students’ scripts efficiently. The average score was calculated to determine the final scores of both the pre-test and post-test. Finally, the final scores that the students obtained in the pre-test and post-test were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0, and the paired samples t-tests were run to examine the significant difference. Therefore, the results would finally reveal whether the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF is significantly effective for enhancing students’ essay writing skills.

Lastly, the interview sessions involving the ten students were recorded and later transcribed. The interview transcription was analysed using thematic analysis as employed by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). In the analysis process,
the views given by the interviewees were categorised into themes and codes. Besides that, an operationalisation table was constructed to identify the frequency of the same responses being repeated by the participants. This method was followed closely to analyse the qualitative data obtained from the interview.

**RESULTS**

**Does the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF effectuate a significant improvement in students’ writing skills?**

The essay writing test scores obtained by all the 50 students in the pre-test and post-test were computed for the data analysis. Then, the paired samples t-tests were run to examine whether there was any significant difference between the students’ essay writing final scores in the pre-test and post-test. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 2 below.

There were no outliers detected. The difference in scores for the pre-test and post-test were normally distributed, as assessed by the visual inspection of a Normal Q-Q Plot. Table 1 shows that students were able to increase their essay writing scores slightly in the post-test after the treatment using the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF ($M = 15.58, SD = 1.617$) than before the treatment in the pre-test ($M = 13.30, SD = 2.082$), a statistically significant mean increase of 2.28, 95% CI [1.828, 2.732], $t (49) = 10.13, p = .001, d = 1.43$. The mean difference was statistically and significantly different from zero and, therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The research hypothesis was accepted as there was a statistically significant difference between the students’ essay writing scores before and after the treatment. Besides, based on Plonsky & Oswald (2014), $d = 1.43$ shows a large effect size that denotes the difference has high practical significance. Hence, the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF had effectuated rather significant effects on students’ writing skills.

**What are the learners’ perceptions towards using the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF in their essay writing tasks?**

The interview sessions involving the 10 selected respondents were transcribed manually. After that, the transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis as employed by Maguire and Delahun (2017). Table 3 shows the students’ responses during the interview sessions which were classified into themes and codes to obtain a clear understanding on their perceptions and to ease the qualitative analysis. Based on these themes and codes, the frequency was determined to ease the analysis of the research findings.

Table 3 shows that the students perceived positively the use of lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF in their essay writing tasks. All the 10 participants believed that lecturers are the most qualified individuals to give feedback. Besides, they concurred that errors should be corrected immediately after receiving the indication of errors from their lecturer. According to 7 participants, this would enable them to identify the nature of the errors. For example, participant 1 expressed this by saying, “Yes, the errors made should be corrected. From there, we are able to notice the mistakes that are commonly made by us and at the same time, we could improve our writing skills.” All the 10 students also indicated that they could improve their writing skills after receiving the treatment in their writing tasks. Majority (9) of them also believed that the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF helped them to reduce and avoid common

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>The Comparison of Students’ Pre-Test and Post-Test Essay Writing Scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paired Samples Statistics</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>13.30</td>
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</table>

<p>| <strong>Paired Samples Test</strong> |  |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>Post-test-Pre-test</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1.591</td>
<td>.225</td>
<td>1.828</td>
<td>2.732</td>
<td>10.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
errors. This was perceived by participant 5 positively, “Firstly, I would say I am improving a lot with my grammar. Secondly, I believe, it would be the sentence structure as I can now construct longer sentences.” It also enables good understanding of a language component learned as majority (7) of the interviewees perceived they were able to understand the classification of the errors.

Notably, the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF helps students to assess their own progress in writing. All the 10 interviewees clarified that it enabled them to become more aware of their own errors and monitor their writing development. As participant 8 expressed it, “Yes, I become more careful of the possible errors that I may make in writing specifically on grammatical items.” All of them also claimed that the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF enhanced learning as it could lead to meaningful learning and 7 of them believed that it could increase their knowledge. This was perceived confidently by participant 3, “It helps me to enhance my learning because basically the concept of this feedback actually drives students to learn and explore learning by their own. This kind of learning definitely helps me to discover more and learn better...” As suggestions, 6 interviewees commented on the need to discuss feedback orally during the correction phase to get clarification from their lecturer. Majority (7) of the interviewees suggested the implementation of this technique in their writing tasks to be conducted more often, as expressed by participant 5, “Yes. From my point of view, lecturers should start implementing this technique more often so that the learners would appreciate the need of self-learning.”

DISCUSSION

The present study has achieved its aim. The findings ascertained that the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF had rather significant effects on ESL learner’s writing skills. There was a slight improvement in the ESL learners’ essay writing skills after the treatment. The students were able to obtain a slight mean increase in their post-test essay writing scores. Therefore, the research hypothesis was accepted as there was a statistically significant difference between the learners’ pre-test and post-test essay writing scores, and the difference had a high practical significance. This finding is supported by Ariyandi (2018) who found that indirect correction technique was more effective for teaching writing skills. This is because it boosts students’ engagement and attention to forms and enables them to problem solve which is essential for long term learning improvements (Ferris, 2003; Lalande, 1982). Baghzou (2014) as cited in Farrokhi and Sattarpour (2012) states that some researchers think that error feedback is useful for students’ improvement in their writing skills. However, contradictory findings were also found

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**Table 3**

*Thematic Analysis of the Interview Transcriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualified feedback provider</td>
<td>Lecturers, Peers</td>
<td>////////////// (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for immediate correction</td>
<td>To identify the error type</td>
<td>////////// (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid repeating errors</td>
<td>/// (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvements in writing</td>
<td>Improve writing skills</td>
<td>///////////// (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identify and correct errors</td>
<td>/// (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduce/avoid common errors</td>
<td>////////// (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use wider vocabulary</td>
<td>/// (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good understanding of language components</td>
<td>Classification of errors</td>
<td>////////// (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discovery learning</td>
<td>/// (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to assess own progress</td>
<td>More aware of errors</td>
<td>///////////// (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monitor writing development</td>
<td>///////////// (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It enhances learning</td>
<td>Meaningful learning</td>
<td>///////////// (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase knowledge</td>
<td>////////// (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for feedback discussion</td>
<td>Get clarification</td>
<td>////////// (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>better understanding of error type</td>
<td>/// (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of elicitation</td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>///////////// (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not too often</td>
<td>/// (2)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
by several past studies (e.g., Poorebrahim, 2017; Wahyuni, 2017) on the effects of indirect WCF in improving writing quality. Lim and Renandya (2020) found that WCF can boost L2 writing accuracy and both direct and indirect feedback can benefit learners. This is supported by Kim et al. (2020) who also found that both feedback types were effective for promoting learning of new linguistic features through collaborative writing. With the limited available studies on the effects of implicit WCF on writing skills, this present study has contributed new finding to the body of knowledge. The lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF is proven quite effective in improving ESL learner’s writing skills.

The findings from the qualitative analysis revealed that most of the interviewees perceived positively the utilisation of the lecturer’s indication of errors in their essay writing tasks. They convinced that the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF had contributed to the improvement of their writing skills. The lecturer’s indication of errors during the treatment had enhanced the learners with important knowledge and writing skills as they self-corrected their own work. This is consistent with Cahyono and Rosyida’s (2016) claim that teacher feedback helps to improve the quality of the students’ writing. Recent studies (e.g., Babanoğlu, Ağçam & Badem, 2018; Lim & Renandya, 2020) also indicate that written corrective feedback (WCF) is effective in improving learners’ grammar. A study by Babanoğlu, Ağçam, and Badem (2018) revealed that learners who were given treatment of WCF made more progress in learning English prepositions than the control group. This is further supported by Lim’s and Renandya’s (2020) finding that written corrective feedback had the potential to improve L2 grammatical accuracy. During the interview, the students also clarified that their ability to identify and correct the errors were getting better after the lecturer’s indication of errors in their essays. Majority of them acknowledged that they were also able to reduce and avoid common errors in their writing. This finding supports Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis theory (2001) which says, “for something to be learned, it has to be noticed first” (p.13). However, Schmidt argues that noticing by itself does not lead to acquisition. Therefore, he postulates that input can become intake for L2 learning when learners pay conscious attention to or notice the input” (p. 13). This is because such corrective feedback encourages learners to notice the gaps between target norms and their own inter-language (IL), thus facilitating grammatical restructuring (Schmidt 2001, p. 13). Schmidt rationalises that the errors made by second language learners are part of the learning process, and that drawing attention to them is a key part of their language development.

Notably, written corrective feedback is very beneficial in the learning process. After the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF is administered, the students commented that error correction must be done instantly. This is because they believed that error correction would help them in identifying the nature or types of errors that they had committed. Furthermore, some of them claimed that the same errors would not be repeated. Through their lecturer’s feedback, students will know their mistakes and they will be able to self-correct themselves. Self-correction requires students to identify the erroneous sentences and this active engagement of students will result in a better performance in their writing task and learning in general. In the long run, this helps to develop self-confidence and enhance their learning. They claimed that it led to meaningful learning and increased their knowledge. They also approved that it helped them to monitor their own writing development. This is supported by studies which showed that language learners were able to improve the accuracy of a particular piece of writing based on the feedback provided and then, gradually they could construct long and complex sentences (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1997; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Learners learn from mistakes. Hence, without feedback, students will never get to know their own mistakes in the very first place. They will be left puzzled and eventually as time passed by, they will not be bothered by the errors anymore, and this can lead to the fossilisation of those errors. As they self-assessed their own progress in the writing task, they managed to notice important aspects in their writing. Besides, the interviewees also believed that the lecturer’s indication of errors enabled them to become more aware of the common errors that they used to make in their writing. This is consistent with Kubota’s (2001) finding that the number of errors of different categories in students’ writing diminished when they do self-correction through self-helped resources.

The lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF also functions as a self-assessed learning strategy that helps students to discover their own errors that they made in their essay writing tasks. As they managed to successfully grasp the type or nature of errors in their writing scripts, the writing process is made easier since error correction can be done more accurately. As mentioned by the students in the interview, they activated their prior knowledge the most whenever they saw the errors in their writing. With the efforts that they are making to self-correct their errors, “it allows the students to be the ‘architects’ of their own learning” (Makino, 1993) and enhances their learning autonomy (Westmacott, 2017) by allowing them to take charge of their own learning, and this will mould them into autonomous learners.

Majority of the participants claimed that lecturers are the most qualified individuals to provide them with feedback for their writing tasks. Many past literatures support this finding, for example Fatemeh and Hossein (2017). Even though the use of implicit WCF in the present study does not emphasise on giving any specific comments on the errors that the students have made in their writing, merely an indication to show that there is an error in the writing task is sufficient as lecturers are always the reliable persons to highlight the error. Fatemeh and Hossein (2017) state that the feedback given by the teacher is considered more ‘qualified’, ‘experi-
enced’, ‘accurate’, ‘valid’, ‘reliable’ and ‘trustworthy’. They argue that with the teachers’ expertise mainly in linguistic field, they know exactly the weakness of the students and with that, feedback is given to ensure that students are aware of it and through the lecturer’s indication of errors, students will build the curiosity to learn and explore more independently especially in identifying their own mistakes. This will drive them to self-correct their errors without assistance from the lecturer.

Finally, majority of the interviewees proposed that the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF should be conducted more often in an ESL classroom. However, despite the participants’ positive perception towards this form of WCF, they felt that there is a need to discuss the feedback orally with the lecturer during the correction phase. They reasoned that oral feedback is beneficial for getting clarification from their lecturer after the indication of errors is administered. As all the interviewees claimed, lecturers are the most qualified individuals to administer the feedback to enlighten the issue and guide them in the learning process. They also believed that if they consulted with the lecturers, they would get better explanation and definite insight of their own weaknesses. Moreover, they asserted that if the oral feedback was given by the lecturer, they would be able to obtain better understanding of the types of errors. Past studies’ findings supported the interviewees’ positive idea of providing oral feedback. For example, Agricola et al. (2020) found that students had positive perceptions towards teachers’ verbal feedback. Besides, Merry and Orsmond (2008) and Van der Schaaf et al. (2011) asserted that students respond more positively to verbal feedback than written feedback. Therefore, the combination of oral feedback and implicit WCF can be explored in future studies.

**IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

It can be implicated from this present finding that the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF is beneficial in an ESL classroom for enhancing learners’ writing skills. It is applicable as a form of scaffolding particularly for composition writing tasks. With a teacher’s or lecturer’s indication of errors, students are assured the confidence to identify their own errors and do self-correction. Hence, this learning method enables learners to solve a writing task and achieve a learning goal by exploring into the learning process on their own and thus, develop their own learning experiences. In other words, it grooms learners to be autonomous in their learning. Fatemeh and Hossein (2015) state that minimising the number of errors and self-correction are in favour of high achievers. Therefore, ESL teachers and lecturers are recommended to adopt and apply this technique in their composition writing lessons.

Nevertheless, this present study has its own limitation. First, the participants of this study were only the final Year BTESL students who mostly had an English proficiency level of upper-intermediate. Besides that, only a small sample size of 50 participants participated in this study. Therefore, the results might not be generalisable to other contexts and population of learners. Future research is recommended to conduct a study involving bigger sample and learners with pre-intermediate or intermediate English proficiency level to generate better contrasting effects of the treatment. Third, the single group pre-post design employed for the quantitative data analysis has its own weaknesses. One of the primary disadvantages of using this design is that other external variables such as incidental exposure to the second language outside classroom may affect performance (Seliger & Shohamy, 2008). However, this unexpected extraneous effect is beyond the control of the researcher. A fully experimental research can be conducted in future by employing a control group design. This will enable the performances of two homogenous groups - the experimental and control groups, can be compared to examine their improvements and obtain more impactful findings. Finally, the treatment for the present study was only conducted for four sessions within a period of two weeks. Future longitudinal studies need to allocate longer time for the treatment to allow for more sustained treatment occasion (Storch, 2010) and this may dodge the influence of extraneous variables on the performance.

In sum, the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF is quite an effective method for enhancing ESL learners’ writing skills in the present study. The participants also embrace positive perceptions towards its usage in their essay writing tasks in the classroom. With the lecturer’s indication of errors, which serves as a prompt for doing the correction, students can identify the type of errors that they have committed in their essays, and this can improve their writing skills. Besides, it enables students to reduce and avoid common errors and thus, they can monitor their own progress in writing. Furthermore, it can promote meaningful learning as it can enhance the learning process and increase their knowledge. Hence, educators should consider adopting this technique as one beneficial method for administering implicit WCF to boost learners’ writing skills in a second language classroom.

**CONCLUSION**

The present study has revealed quite a positive effect of the lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF on ESL undergraduates’ writing skills. A slight improvement in their essay writing scores was evident in the post-test after the treatment period. The lecturer’s indication of errors, which serves as a self-correction learning strategy and a scaffolding for writing tasks, is also perceived positively by the ESL learners. These findings are quite significant contributions to the body of knowledge in a second language acquisition. Thus, lecturers and teachers are encouraged to exploit this
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technique for administering implicit WCF for their students’ writing tasks in the current L2 classroom. Students should be given wider opportunities to practise self-awareness, self-learning, self-correction, and self-evaluation to shape and develop them into autonomous learners. As the current education system is gearing towards producing quality future graduates and generation who are creative critical thinkers, students and undergraduates should be given more opportunities and exposures to shape and develop their own learning experiences. Therefore, lecturers and teachers should slowly lessen the use of direct WCF in the classroom as the traditional spoon-feeding approach is no longer relevant. The lecturer’s indication of errors technique and other forms of indirect WCF will enable educators to actively implement a student-centred teaching and learning approach in a contemporary L2 classroom environment.

For future execution, future research may conduct similar research with a different sample of participants, especially involving the pre-intermediate or intermediate proficiency students. A better impact of the treatment using the lecturer’s indication of errors technique can be obtained if students with lower English proficiency level are employed as participants in the study. Since the present study is focusing only on implicit WCF, future research can also be conducted to investigate the effects of incorporating both oral and written corrective feedback on students’ writing skills. To obtain more impactful results, future studies may need to conduct a fully experimental study that employs a control and experimental group design. This may also require a more rigorous preparation and data collection procedures. The lecturer’s indication of errors as implicit WCF is yet to be perceived wholly by learners, hence, conducting more future research in this field of study is highly beneficial and imperative.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Frankie Subon: Conceptualization, data analysis and interpretation of results, writing, reviewing & editing the final version of the manuscript.


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