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ESL Teachers of Young Learners: What are their Perceptions and Practice of Written Corrective Feedback?

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Abstract

Written corrective feedback (WCF) has been used by teachers to help improve learners' writing competency (Veren et al., 2020). While past studies focused on the effectiveness of WCF on learners, research from the teachers' perspective is limited (Lee, 2020). This study fills in this gap by investigating the beliefs and practice of 11 primary school teachers' WCF on grammatical mistakes using questionnaires and analysis of learners' essays. The findings reveal congruence in the teachers' beliefs and practice in providing direct feedback. However, discrepancies are found in the amount of feedback, whereby learners' essays are marked comprehensively though most teachers view selective feedback as useful. The findings imply that there are underlying factors influencing teachers' WCF decisions and practice which may be different from their beliefs. This study hopes to prompt teachers to reflect on their feedback provision while stakeholders are hoped to provide teachers with more autonomy in their teaching.

Keywords: Grammar, Written Corrective Feedback, Primary, Teacher, Beliefs, Practice

Introduction

According to Handayani (2017), writing is the most difficult but essential skill in language learning. One of the reasons is that writing skill requires learners to accurately put forward ideas using the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and mechanics (Wulandari et al., 2019). Therefore, when it comes to young learners such as those in primary schools, they are bound to find writing a considerably challenging task (Imaniar, 2018) due to their low proficiency level (Gultekin & Nystrom, 2019).

Corrective feedback (CF) is commonly employed by language teachers to indicate the learners' mistakes and to further improve the learners' language competency (Sakanlai & Sukseemuang, 2021). CF can be given either orally or in the written form, but past research has found that the written form of CF, i.e., written corrective feedback (WCF) to be more useful particularly for low proficiency learners such as young learners, owing to the nature of the feedback being permanent and more noticeable (Aoyama, 2020).

WCF can be categorised according to its scopes (comprehensive and selective) and its type (direct and indirect). The scopes of feedback refer to the amount of feedback which is given to learners (Rahimi, 2019). Comprehensive WCF gives feedback for all the mistakes in learners' writing, while selective WCF provides feedback on only a few selected types of mistakes (generally one to five types) in learners' writing (Razali et al., 2021). On the other hand, in WCF types, teacher may provide direct feedback by giving the correct answers to the learners' writing, or indirect feedback by only indicating where the mistakes are without providing the correct linguistic forms (Wong, 2021).

Since past studies discovered that the majority of young Malaysian learners' mistakes were grammatical mistakes (Harun & Abdullah, 2020; Liong et al., 2019), and grammar structures are crucial to help organise ideas into comprehensible sentences in writing (Fareed et al., 2016), there is a need for teachers to improve young learners' grammatical competency, be it through the teaching and learning process or the WCF given to indicate their grammatical mistakes (hereby referred to as grammar-focused written corrective feedback).

In past related studies on grammar-focused written corrective feedback (GWCF) in the primary school setting, more emphasis was given to the perceptions of young learners and the effects of feedback on them (Ogawa, 2017; Tursina et al., 2019), as compared to the teachers' perceptions of feedback (Gultekin & Nystrom, 2019). Nevertheless, Lee (2020) argues that it is equally important to focus on the teachers as they are the ones making the GWCF decisions for their learners. Moreover, learners at this stage are still highly dependent on their teachers for their learning. Thus, it is imperative to understand primary school teachers' perceptions and practice of WCF because they determine the kind of feedback received by the learners which have important consequences. For example, teachers who do not believe in giving feedback may ignore or tolerate their learner's errors in writing, and this could give the impression that the language structures used are acceptable thereby causing fossilisation of errors at secondary and tertiary education levels (Plaza, 2020; Prayatni, 2019; Shoaei & Kafipour, 2016).

As such, to address the research gap mentioned, the researchers conducted this pilot study to investigate teacher beliefs and practice of GWCF in the Malaysian primary ESL context. The research objectives were to:

1. investigate Malaysian primary ESL teacher beliefs of GWCF;
2. examine Malaysian primary ESL teacher practice of GWCF;
3. compare Malaysian primary ESL teacher beliefs and their actual practice of GWCF.

Literature Review
According to Zohrabi and Ehsani (2014), GWCF is commonly used by language teachers to comment on the learners' grammatical errors. However, perhaps more important than just comments, the teachers' feedback can also be used as a mediating tool to assist the learners until they are capable of using accurate grammar structures independently (Sheen & Ellis, 2011).

While much attention is given to how the learners benefit from the feedback given, Storch (2018) argues that one should also focus on what shapes the feedback given by the teachers.