THE EFFECT OF FOCUSED CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON THE USE OF ARTICLES IN ESSAYS BY ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effect of focused direct written corrective feedback (WCF) on the use of two functions of articles in the written narratives of 43 lower-intermediate Malaysian ESL learners. Using a simplified adaptation of Sheen's 2007 study, this study used three intact ESL classes to form three groups: direct-only WCF (DCF, $n=16$), direct metalinguistic WCF (DME. $n=12$), and the control group ($n=15$). The study had a pretest-treatment-posttest-delayed posttest configuration with four CF treatment sessions and a short questionnaire survey with both experimental groups. This study found that receiving focused direct WCF does help improve students' written accuracy in the use of two functions of English articles. However, no difference was found between receiving direct-only WCF (DCF) and direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME). In terms of students' perceptions of its usefulness, both experimental groups indicated that receiving focused direct WCF made it easier for them to notice their errors and that it made them think about the errors they made. However, the participants who received direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME) significantly preferred receiving their form of WCF and that they also thought it was much easier to notice their errors when corrected that way.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menyiasat keberkesanan pembetulan bertulis (WCF) langsung berfokus atas penggunaan dua fungsi artikel dalam penulisan 43 pelajar ESL Malaysia berpenguasaan Bahasa Inggeris rendah. Kajian ini mengadaptasi kajian Sheen 2007, menggunakan tiga kelas ESL untuk membentuk tiga kumpulan: pembetulan langsung sahaja CF (DCF, n = 16), pembetulan langsung dengan komen meta-linguistik (DME n = 12) dan kumpulan kawalan (n = 15). Kajian ini mempunyai konfigurasi: pra-ujian – rawatan – pasca-ujian – ujian tertangguh dengan empat sesi rawatan WCF dan tinjauan menggunakan soal selidik pendek dengan kedua-dua kumpulan eksperimen. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa kumpulan yang menerima pembetulan bertulis (WCF) langsung berfokus dapat membantu meningkatkan ketepatan bertulis pelajar dalam penggunaan dua fungsi artikel Bahasa Inggeris. Walau bagaimanapun, tiada perbezaan ditemui antara menerima pembetulan langsung sahaja (DCF) atau pembetulan langsung dengan komen meta-linguistik (DME). Dari segi persepsi pelajar terhadap kegunaannya, kedua-dua kumpulan eksperimen berpendapat bahawa menerima pembetulan bertulis (WCF) langsung berfokus menyebabkan mereka lebih mudah menyedari kesilapan mereka dan ia menyebabkan mereka berfikir tentang kesilapan yang telah dibuat. Walau bagaimanapun, peserta yang menerima pembetulan bertulis langsung berfokus dengan komen metalinguistik (DME) didapati lebih suka menerima pembetulan bertulis jenis itu dan mereka juga fikir ia adalah lebih mudah untuk melihat kesilapan mereka apabila kesilapan mereka diperbetulkan dengan kaedah itu.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CF   :   Corrective feedback

WCF   :   Written corrective feedback

ESL   :   English as a second language

SLA   Second language acquisition

L1   First language

L2   :   Second language

DCF   :   Direct written corrective feedback

DME   :   Direct written corrective feedback with metalinguistic explanation

ECT   :   Error Correction Test

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

Corrective feedback (CF), oral or written, has always been considered as an essential aspect in the teaching and learning of any language, but especially in second language acquisition (SLA). Key SLA concepts such as Swain's 'comprehensible output hypothesis', 'negotiation of meaning' in Long's 'interaction hypothesis' and Schmidt's 'noticing hypothesis', all focus on learners repairing or modifying their initial output, after being given CF by their teachers. Most second language (L2) researchers posit that CF helps language learners focus their attention on the differences between the target language, and their interlanguage, that is, their knowledge of the target language.

The effects of written CF (WCF) in L2 classrooms is a topic that has greatly interested both researchers and teachers alike. In Malaysian ESL classrooms, teachers correct their L2 learners' writing with the intuitive belief that these corrections affect their students' language development although just how, still remains inconclusive. According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), "while feedback is a central aspect of L2 writing programs across the world, the research literature has not been unequivocally positive about its role in writing development, and teachers often have a sense that they are not making use of its full potential" (p.83). This may be because teachers find it challenging when trying to provide WCF as there are many aspects to writing that can be looked into like content, organization, and linguistic accuracy.

While oral CF studies suggest that CF focusing on one linguistic feature repeatedly can be helpful for interlanguage development (e.g., Long 1996; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Mackey & Philip, 1998; Han, 2002), WCF researches have typically looked into general improvement of a few different grammatical structures simultaneously. According to Guenette (as cited in Ellis, 2009), a reason for the mixed

results in WCF studies done thus far is because there has been a failure to systematically examine the different kinds of WCF and limit potential external variables that might influence its effectiveness.

The majority of earlier WCF researches that have compared different kinds of WCF on different grammatical structures within a study (e.g. Lalande, 1982; Robb et al., 1986) produced conflicting results in proving the usefulness of WCF. Furthermore, according to Ferris (2004), "the studies in the research base are fundamentally incomparable because of inconsistencies in design" (p. 52) which does not allow for reliable generalisations of their findings. This resulted in Truscott's (1996) criticism that WCF is unproductive and may even be harmful for learner language development. He further asserted that ESL learners only needed writing practice in order to improve. This judgement against the effectiveness of WCF has fuelled many researchers' attempts to refute Truscott's claims by advancing compelling empirical evidence on the advantages of providing WCF through the employment of better research designs with a more focused approach to the type of WCF and the grammatical structure investigated (e.g. Ferris, 2004; Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). These researches have proved that WCF is not only useful but also 'expected' of teachers.

On the other hand, Bitchener and Knoch (2009) noted that "little attention has been given to investigations of the extent to which written corrective feedback can facilitate accuracy improvement in the writing of new texts" (p. 205). This suggests that while there have been researches that have examined the effectiveness of WCF on revised texts, few researches have looked into the aspect of improved L2 writing skills through the production of more linguistically accurate new texts. In the ESL classroom, when providing WCF, one role of the ESL teacher is that of a grammarian (Nilaasini, 2015)

who facilitates learners' efforts in striving to continuously produce grammatical improvements when writing new texts.

> "As a grammarian, the teacher informs the students on their grammar errors and gives relative feedback that is useful to the students in order to help them overcome the grammar errors. This also includes giving explanations to the students on why certain grammar rules were followed the way it is." (p.3)

Correspondingly, earlier WCF researches that employed a 'correct-all-errors' approach found WCF to be ineffectual. However, SLA research designs that have looked into providing a more focused WCF approach (e.g. Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Sheen, Wright & Moldawa, 2009) have consistently shown significant positive effects in improving grammatical accuracy in the writing of new texts. According to Ferris (2010), "it only makes sense that students would utilize written CF more effectively for long-term acquisition and writing development when there are fewer, clearer error types on which to focus attention" (p. 192). Unfortunately, until recently, not many researches have looked into the effects of focused WCF (Sheen et al., 2009).

In addition, because ESL learners of lower proficiency might not be able to detect and amend errors even after the errors have been corrected for them (Ferris & Hedgcock 2005), Ferris (2010) also suggested that direct WCF may affect more consistent and effective results in learner language development. In studies by Sheen (2007), and Ellis and Shintani (2013), direct metalinguistic WCF was also found to be more successful in helping with long term acquisition of certain grammatical features in lower to intermediate level adult ESL learners.

Therefore, in order to address issues of linguistic accuracy in the written language over time, a focused direct WCF method would seem to be more effective in producing positive results.

1.2   Statement of the problem

According to Nunan's (2003) investigation on English language policies in the Asia Pacific region, Malaysia's decline in its standard of English due to changing educational language policies has led it to lose its competitive economic advantage. This steady deterioration in the level of English proficiency amongst Malaysian school students was again confirmed when Malaysia ranked 59th out of 65 countries that participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for English Literacy Skills in 2012.

With the implementation of the National Education Blueprint 2013-2025, and its new language policy to 'Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to Strengthen the Command of English' (MBMMBI), the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) realises the imperative need to strengthen the teaching and learning of the English language by improving on the existing curriculum, and by providing sufficient and quality teachers of ESL, and teaching materials. This focus on English proficiency among Malaysian school students calls for studies to be conducted to help in the improvement of their English literacy skills, which would also include their writing skills.

Good writing skills can be difficult to develop because it is a complex activity that requires not only organisation of content but grammatical accuracy as well. Writing can be especially challenging for ESL learners who may not be proficient enough to formulate and write in their L2. Furthermore, "real-world teachers struggle to help their students write more effectively, and, in some instances, students fail to meet practical goals because of their lack of progress in producing more linguistically accurate texts" (Ferris, 2010, p. 182). This may also be the case for a majority of Malaysian secondary school ESL teachers and their students. According to Mahmud (2016), "the biggest challenge of the teachers and learners at the upper secondary level is having to deal with numerous

tasks on composition, as students need to write long essays for [the] English language paper in [the] SPM examination" (p. 49).

According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), WCF by teachers "continues to play a central role in most L2 and foreign language (FL) writing classes" (p.84). Numerous SLA researches on WCF have provided evidentiary support that the development of English writing skills of ESL learners is dependent on receiving some type of WCF (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005; Bitchener, 2008). However, Malaysian ESL teachers may find it even more challenging when trying to decide which type of WCF to provide on their students' written work because not only are there many aspects to writing that can be looked into, they also have to contend with their students' low levels of proficiency, making the already time-consuming task of providing WCF even more exhausting (Mahmud, 2016).

In addition to overall low levels of English proficiency amongst Malaysian secondary school ESL learners, "articles constitute a problem for L2 learners, especially those learners whose L1 does not contain articles" (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 357). This is the case for most Malaysian ESL learners, whose first languages are [-ART(ICLE)] languages such as Malay, Cantonese or Mandarin (Wong & Quek, 2007). While the complex nature of English articles makes them difficult to grasp, their use is obligatory in most forms of English writing (like narratives). However, by focusing on only two features of its use, 'a' as first mention and 'the' as anaphoric reference, it might make it easier for learners to understand and acquire. Therefore, in order to improve grammatical accuracy in the writing skills of Malaysian ESL learners, research that looked into a focused direct WCF method would seem to be more valuable.

Besides that, the effectiveness of any type of WCF also seems to be dependent on the learners' preferences and opinions of it (Schulz, 2001; Najmaddin, 2010). That is to

say, learners' perceptions of particular types of WCF play a role in determining whether they use it in their learning or not. For instance, if a learner perceives that a particular kind of WCF is more beneficial, he or she might be predisposed to notice the correction and utilise it to learn than if he or she does not believe it is useful. So, it would also be beneficial to survey learners' views on the type of WCF provided in the study to examine whether there is any correlation between learners' perceptions in getting focused direct WCF and improvements in accuracy in the use of English articles in their written essays.

1.3   Purpose of the study

According to Ferris (2004), "*replicating research in different contexts* is a good thing" (p. 52) because it enables reliable generalisations of its findings. However, when replicating a study in a different setting, it is only prudent to decide on a study that is methodically rigorous. In the instance of this study, Sheen's 2007 investigation on the differential effectiveness between two kinds of focused WCF was selected because it was both methodically robust (Ferris, 2010) and it yielded positive results. However, while her research investigated the acquisition of English articles in an adult ESL learner setting in America, this study is adapted to the Malaysian secondary school ESL learning context.

Although there have been several studies conducted on the effectiveness of WCF in the Malaysian ESL language learning context (e.g. Farid & Samad, 2012; Ng & Kassim, 2014; Sudhakaran, 2015), the majority of them seem to have been at the tertiary-level. According to Mahmud (2016), "there are hardly any studies conducted in Malaysia, focusing on both WCF and the secondary level teachers and students" (p. 49). Since Malaysian secondary school level ESL teachers' practices when providing WCF can be so varied with differing results (e.g. Chieng, 2014; Nilaasini, 2015; Mahmud, 2016), this study that investigates the usefulness of providing only one type of WCF in the acquisition of one linguistic feature in the essays of Malaysian secondary school level

ESL learners could add to the pool of literature and perhaps help Malaysian secondary school level ESL teachers in deciding on a type of WCF that would be helpful in improving the linguistic accurateness in their students' writing.

This study has the general objective to examine the effectiveness of focused direct WCF on the use of English articles in essays by Malaysian ESL learners. The study also seeks to investigate learners' perceptions on the helpfulness of receiving focused WCF. As it is an adapted replication of Sheen's research, this study also applies Sheen's first two research questions as its first two research questions.

With this aim in mind, this study seeks to answer these three research questions:

1) Does focused written corrective feedback have an effect on lower-intermediate ESL learners' acquisition of English articles?
2) Is there any difference in the effect of direct correction with and without metalinguistic feedback on ESL learners' acquisition of English articles?
3) What are ESL learners' perceptions on the usefulness of focused written corrective feedback?

1.4   Significance of the study

Studies on WCF are important because they provide ESL teachers insight on which types of WCF to best utilise to help their learners improve on their writing skills. Since there have been few researches that have looked into teachers providing a more focused direct WCF approach in the Malaysian secondary school level language learning context, this study could help 'real-world' secondary school Malaysian ESL teachers when choosing to provide an effective WCF approach to help improve the grammatical accuracy of their students' written work. Also, while this study looks only at the linguistic accuracy of two functions of English articles, future researches on focused direct WCF in

the Malaysian secondary school ESL context can use this study as a starting point to investigate its effectiveness on other target structures.

In addition, Ferris (2004) recognized the need for researches that have comparable designs to be replicated in different contexts and across diverse student populations in order to "make some reliable generalizations" (p. 52) on the effectiveness of a type of WCF. Correspondingly, the results of this study that was carried out with lower-intermediate secondary school level Malaysian ESL learners will be able to add to the body of knowledge of previous research in helping to identify the effectiveness in delivering focused direct WCF among ESL learners of lower proficiency levels.

Ferris et al. (2013) also observed the scarcity in researches that consider how individual learners respond when receiving WCF. Moreover, as various WCF researches about learner perception on WCF approaches in the Malaysian ESL language learning have been conducted at the tertiary-level of education, this study that looks into the Malaysian secondary school level ESL students' perceptions of the usefulness of receiving focused direct WCF might reveal other factors that should be considered by Malaysian ESL teachers when providing this type of WCF.

1.5   Definition of key terms

Because this study is a simplified adaptation of Sheen's 2007 research on focused direct WCF, her operationalisation of key terms is employed.

a) Focused WCF

This refers to WCF that is directed at only one type of linguistic feature. In the case of this study, the target structure investigated is articles. More specifically, it looks at the two major functions: the indefinite article 'a' as first mention and the definite 'the' as second mention.

Eg.: I have **a** cat. **The** cat is very friendly.

b) *Direct-only WCF*

This WCF constitutes the teacher indicating the error on the learner's writing by deleting and/or replacing the error with the correct form.

Eg.: I have ~~*the*~~ **[a]** cat. The cat is very friendly.

c) *Direct metalinguistic WCF*

This WCF involves the teacher marking where the error is, and providing the correct form together with brief metalinguistic explanation that explains the correct form.

Eg.: I have ~~*the*~~ **['a' is needed for first mention of 'cat']** cat. The cat is very

friendly.

1.6   Conclusion

This chapter introduced the focus of this study by describing the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the research questions that this study hopes to answer, and the operational definition of key terms used.

This report has five chapters. Chapter 2 will review the literature relevant to this study, while Chapter 3 explains the methods used when conducting the research and how the data was analysed. Chapter 4 discusses this study's findings. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a summary of the research's findings, the study' limitations, and its pedagogical as well as research implications.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Introduction

While key second language acquisition (SLA) concepts like Long's 'negotiation of meaning' in his Interaction Hypothesis, and Krashen's Input Hypothesis do examine how learners repair or modify their initial output, after receiving input through corrective feedback, this study instead chooses to apply Swain's Output Hypothesis to explain how WCF helps L2 learners focus their attention on the differences between their interlanguage, and the target language.

Although Sheen, in her 2007 study, concentrated on Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis and how "written direct feedback increases noticing… [and] direct metalinguistic feedback increases not only noticing but also encourages *awareness-as-understanding*" (Sheen, 2007, p. 260), it is still the output that is produced by learners that is more significant. This is because "only production (that is, output) really forces L2 learners to undertake complete grammatical processing, and thus drives forward most effectively the development of L2 syntax and morphology" (Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2013, p. 175). Besides, without learner production and consequently learner errors in their production, there would not be any opportunity for any form of CF to be provided.

Therefore, in order to establish the efficacy of focused direct WCF on the language learning process, this chapter reviews Swain's Output Hypothesis alongside relevant empirical studies on WCF followed by an overview of the studies on WCF that have been conducted in the Malaysian school level ESL setting. This research draws on Swain's Output Hypothesis' three central claims to explain how receiving focused direct WCF can affect the functions of learner output in L2 learning. As such, this chapter is divided into four sections, with a general description of the theory itself as an introduction.

2.2   The Output Hypothesis

First postulated by Swain in 1985, the Output Hypothesis has gone through several reconsiderations to better describe the underlying complexities of SLA. Essentially, according to Swain, it is through learner production - through speaking or writing - that pushes L2 learners past their existing level of interlanguage. That is to say, learner output requires them to process the language more than they do input as "output may stimulate learners to move from the semantic, open-ended, strategic processing prevalent in comprehension to the complete grammatical processing needed for accurate production" (Swain, 2000, p. 99). However, it is important to note that Swain does not claim that comprehensible output is solely responsible for SLA, but that under some conditions it does help facilitate L2 learning because of the mental processes that are connected to language production.

The theory posits three main claims about the functions of learner output in L2 learning. Firstly, it is through their output that serves as the 'triggering function' that learners are able to 'notice' or become aware of the gaps in their interlanguage and their L2. The next function is that it is through their output that learners are allowed to be further involved in their learning process through hypothesis testing on linguistic forms in their L2. Finally, it is learner output that functions to provide learners with opportunities to reflect on their metalinguistic knowledge, through what Swain terms as 'languaging'.

2.2.1   The 'noticing function' in focused WCF

Closely related to Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis that focuses on learners noticing input, both theories agree that it is important for noticing of a particular language form to occur before it can be acquired by the learner (Swain, 2000). While CF that is provided by the teacher can be viewed as input, it is chiefly given because of gaps in learner

interlanguage that cause errors which occur in learner production, be it oral or written. Therefore, it can be said that without errors in learner output, CF would probably not be provided by the teacher. According to Donesch-Jezo (2011) "comprehensible output production is usually inseparably linked with feedback, which is a kind of interaction providing learners with error correction and with the metalinguistic information, facilitating improvement of the accuracy of L2 production" (p.14).

Although WCF is delayed and has less of a cognitive load on memory compared to oral CF, noticing can occur if the gap in learner interlanguage is made sufficiently salient, such as through the provision of focused CF on a single grammatical feature. "Processing corrections is likely to be more difficult in unfocused CF as the learner is required to attend to a variety of errors and thus unlikely to be able to reflect much on each error" (Ellis, 2009: p. 102). Similarly, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (2001) also suggests the importance of saliency for noticing to occur. Noticing is also considered an essential requirement for learning, both explicit and implicit knowledge (Schmidt, 2010).

In Sheen's study (2007) that looked into the differential effects of giving two different kinds of focused direct WCF among adult intermediate-level ESL learners, she found that both experimental groups performed better than the control group in the immediate posttests and again in the delayed posttests session. Her study was different from earlier WCF studies because "only one linguistic feature was targeted for the provision of CF" (Sheen, 2007, p.275). Because the WCF provided was so highly focused, only on two functions of a single linguistic feature, it made errors sufficiently noticeable on learner output. Her study also proved the effectiveness of providing focused WCF in helping learners to improve their linguistic accuracy in new pieces of writing. Other studies that have employed similar focused approaches to WCF (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Sheen et al., 2009; Shintani & Ellis,

2013) have also found that focused WCF does have a positive effect in improving linguistic correctness in learners by highlighting errors on specific linguistic features on learners' written work.

While Sheen's research (2007) that investigated the effects of providing highly focused WCF on only two functions of the English articles obtained positive results, it was carried out among adult ESL learners from various first language backgrounds. It has been supported by SLA research that ESL learners commonly find it difficult to acquire English articles particularly with ESL learners from [-ART(ICLE)] first languages such as Mandarin and Malay (Wong & Quek, 2007).

> "They do not have a functional equivalent of the English article system. Correspondingly, observational evidence has revealed that L1 Chinese and Malay ESL learners have difficulties with the article system in English, which consists of indefinite article *a* (*n*), the definite article *the*, and the *zero* article, *∅*." (p. 211)

Despite being introduced to them early on in ESL classes and their frequent use in writing, English articles being "unstressed function words and hence perceptually non-salient and semantically light-weight" (Lu, 2001, as cited in Wong & Quek, 2007, p. 217), make them difficult for these ESL learners to master.

According to Ellis (2009), "if learning is dependent on attention to form, then it is reasonable to assume that the more intensive the attention, the more likely the correction is to lead to learning" (p.102). Therefore, through focusing WCF on only two functions of English articles, it is hoped that errors in at least these two functions of English article use would be made salient enough for ESL learners to notice, especially in the Malaysian ESL context whereby most ESL learners have [-ART(ICLE)] first languages.

2.2.2 The 'hypothesis-testing function' in focused direct WCF

Interrelated with the noticing function is the hypothesis-testing function of learner output. While saliency in error correction through focused WCF improves noticing, it can also help improve future learner output by helping learners to "engage in hypothesis testing in a systematic way" (Sheen et al., 2009, p.567). When learners test their hypothesis on linguistic forms, it would be more effective not to overload their attentional capacity to facilitate better learner uptake. This is so that when they provide their modified output after receiving focused CF, their attempts to identify and use the targeted linguistic form in question would be greatly enhanced as their hypothesis testing would also be focused on only a few grammatical rules governing that linguistic feature. This may be especially applicable for ESL learners of lower levels of proficiency because of their "limited processing capacity model of L2 acquisition" (Van Beuningen, De Jong & Kuiken, 2012, p.4).

Apart from focusing WCF on fewer linguistic features, direct WCF, that is when the error is explicitly corrected and given the correct form, "enables learners to instantly internalize the correct form" (Van Beuningen et al., 2012, p.7). The immediacy in access to the correct target form might potentially help learners in their cognitive effort in forming or confirming their explicit knowledge. As cited by Shintani and Ellis (2013), "corrective feedback that results in explicit knowledge may indirectly contribute to the development of implicit knowledge by promoting 'noticing' and 'noticing-the-gap'" (p.288). Similarly, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) also state that providing direct WCF is more useful for learners because it "offers more explicit feedback on hypotheses that may have been made; and is more immediate" (p.210).

In Bitchener and Knoch's study (2010) that examined the differential effects between providing two forms of direct WCF (with written metalinguistic explanation

only or with oral form-focused review of the metalinguistic explanation) with indirect WCF in advanced L2 learners, although all three experimental groups outperformed the control group in the immediate posttest, they found that improvements in grammatical accuracy were maintained in the delayed posttest after a 10-week period only by the two groups that received direct WCF and not with the group that received indirect WCF. Other studies that have looked into the differences between the usefulness of providing direct or indirect WCF also corroborate these results, providing evidence that direct WCF does help improve L2 learners' grammatical accuracy (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Van Beuningen et al., 2012; Lee, 2014). "Chandler hypothesized that a teacher's direct correction helps ESL students internalize the correct form in a more productive way because indirect feedback, though it demands greater cognitive processing, delays confirmation of students' hypotheses" (Sheen, 2007, p.259).

According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), "even though explicit [direct] feedback can play an important role in second language acquisition, it needs time and repetition before it can help learners to notice correct forms, compare these with their own interlanguage and test their hypotheses about the target language" (p.85). This may be especially true with L2 learners of lower proficiency who may not have sufficient linguistic competence to self-correct when they check their hypotheses based on the internalized knowledge that they possess about the language. "For lower proficiency writers in language learning classes, indirect feedback tends to be less preferred because they have more limited linguistic repertoire to draw on" (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010, p.210). Consequently, while her participants did display positive results with only two WCF treatment sessions, Sheen (2007) recommended that future studies investigating the effectiveness of direct WCF to have more WCF treatments in order to produce "even stronger and more robust effects" (p.277).

2.2.3   Learner perception of WCF in the 'metalinguistic function'

The metalinguistic function of learner output, or the 'reflective' role in the Output Hypothesis, concentrates largely on the contribution of collaborative metalinguistic talk, which Swain calls 'languaging', in L2 development. "Languaging serves as a vehicle through which thinking is articulated and transformed into artifactual form" (Swain, 2006, p.97), or how the learner uses language to mediate his or her understanding and L2 learning. "Focused metalinguistic CF may be especially helpful in this respect as it promotes not just attention but also understanding of the nature of the error" (Ellis, 2009: p. 102). At the same time, written direct metalinguistic CF can be viewed as teacher mediated languaging that is written down because it elicits modified output by learners through metalinguistic comments in the CF received. Schmidt (2001) also differentiates between noticing and metalinguistic awareness. He maintains that metalinguistic awareness involves an inherent degree of learning. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that although focused direct WCF helps in noticing, focused direct metalinguistic WCF also assists in a deeper level of cognitive processing, which is, understanding (Sheen, 2007).

That being said, however, it has become quite a common assumption by L2 teachers and researchers alike that once any form of CF is noticed by the learner, it automatically gets "'taken in' to the learner's developing competence" (Swain, 2006, p.100) without taking into consideration the learner's sense of 'agency' in their learning of L2. Swain's more current description on languaging that adopts a more sociocultural perspective towards language learning, views the learner as "an individual who perceives, analyses, rejects or accepts solutions offered, makes decisions and so on" (Swain, 2006, p.101). She describes the example of Ken, a participant of Watanabe's study (2004), who "completely rejects the feedback he receives from the authoritative target language speaker" (Swain, 2006, p.99) only to accept it after he reconstructs his views through 'talking-it-through' or languaging, on his own. This indicates the significance of needing

to take into consideration learner perceptions when examining the usefulness or effectiveness of any type of WCF.

Studies that have investigated students' perceptions concerning the role of CF in L2 learning have indicated that the efficacy of the CF provided is dependent on individual learner characteristics, such as "age, aptitude, motivation, and learning style" (Schulz, 2001, p.245). In Sheen's study (2007), she also acknowledges that the "effectiveness of different types of CF will vary depending on the individual learner" (p. 259). She herself looked into the role of the learner's language aptitude in determining the usefulness of focused direct WCF. According to Schulz (2001), "language learning could be… hindered if students have specific beliefs regarding the role of grammar and corrective feedback and if their expectations are not met" (p.256). That is to say, disregarding students' expectations and their preferences about CF might demotivate them from learning the L2. This view on the importance of learner preferences on the effectiveness of a given type of WCF is supported by Storch and Wigglesworth (2010), as cited in Lee (2013):

"From the affective perspective, selective and focused WCF is also better for students, as their papers are no longer inundated with red ink, which is likely to hurt their ego and damage their confidence in writing, and may in turn affect the uptake of feedback." (p. 109)

There are also research findings that indicate that students tend to most successfully use the types of WCF that they prefer.

Najmaddin's study (2010) examined both teacher and student perceptions on four types of WCF, two forms of direct and two indirect WCF, at a university in Iraq. Overall, he found that the students generally preferred both direct forms of WCF compared to the indirect forms of WCF. His study suggests that it is useful for L2 teachers to not only pay attention to their learners' level of L2 proficiency but also to consider students'

preferences occasionally when providing WCF "because if feedback is not comprehensible for the learners, it might demotivate the students in writing" (Najmaddin, 2010, p.71). Correspondingly, the teachers' responses in the study also indicated "that some students might not learn from feedback because of their lack of motivation" (Najmaddin, 2010, p.72). Therefore, L2 teachers need to be discerning when choosing between the types of WCF, to balance between what their students prefer and what the teachers themselves think may be more effective, to utilise in the error correction of their students' writing.

Another study that looked into student and teacher WCF preferences and the reasons why is Amrhein and Nassaji's research (2010) among adult ESL students and teachers in two private English-language schools in Canada. They argued that "if a student prefers or believes that one type of WCF is more useful, then he or she may be more likely to pay more attention to the correction and use it for learning than if he or she does not believe in its effects" (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010, p.97). Their study found that students expect their errors to be corrected by teachers and that they preferred more explicit and explanatory types of WCF instead of self-correction because it allowed them "to remember their errors and understand how to fix them" (p.115). However, they also cautioned that although students' preferences are important when choosing which type of WCF to use, "it is important that teachers be aware of the possible consequences of the mismatch between their students' expectations and their own expectations" (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010, p.117). Therefore, while ignoring learners' expectations may discourage them, L2 teachers should not idealise their learners' WCF preferences as what they prefer may not be necessarily be more effective in promoting learner uptake.

2.3   Studies on WCF in the Malaysian setting

There have been numerous studies conducted on the effectiveness of different kinds of WCF, as well as student perceptions of the kinds of WCF received in the Malaysian ESL language learning context. Then again, a majority of them seem to have been carried out at the tertiary-level of education (e.g. Nordin et al., 2010; Farid & Samad, 2012; Ng & Kassim, 2014; Sudhakaran, 2015).

In a recent study that investigated the WCF practices of 54 ESL teachers in 14 high-performing national secondary schools in Malaysia, it was found that these ESL teachers "were unaware of the available WCF types to provide in the teaching of ESL writing" (Mahmud, 2016, p. 48) and that their feedback method was very much influenced by the marking codes and symbols provided by the Malaysian Examinations Board. It was also revealed that these Malaysian ESL secondary school teachers, most of whom (83%) have at least ten years ESL teaching experience, typically applied unfocused and indirect WCF when providing feedback on their students' writing. According to Mahmud (2016), "the fact that they were unaware of the available and important approaches of WCF really is a serious consideration" (p. 54). She adds that it is essential that Malaysian ESL teachers be made aware of the different types and approaches to WCF that can be included in their teaching of writing practices as it would consequently help improve their students' quality of writing.

Another study that looked into Malaysian ESL teacher WCF practices and beliefs was Nilaasini's case study (2015) of an ESL teacher in a Malaysian private primary school. Her qualitative study found that this ESL teacher most frequently employed direct, unfocused and metalinguistic WCF approaches to her students' writing. Similar to the findings of Mahmud's study (2016), it was discovered that although most of this teacher's practices were aligned with her beliefs about WCF, she was still "not fully aware

of her habits in giving WCF in the students' compositions" (Nisaalini, 2015, p. 38). In addition, while the teacher's beliefs about WCF were mostly aligned with her practices, the perceptions of her students on the kinds of WCF they received were not explored. As Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) suggested, it might be problematic if there was any "incongruity between students' and teachers' perceptions regarding WCF" (p. 98) because the effectiveness of a particular type of WCF is also dependent on the learner's perception of its usefulness. This implies that in order to improve on the effectiveness of any type of WCF, researchers also need to find out whether both the teacher and the students share similar perceptions on the usefulness of that particular type of WCF and if they do not, help improve their perceptions of it.

In terms of research that investigated the effectiveness of different types of WCF, Chieng's study (2014) examined the differential effects between providing direct and indirect WCF in improving the accuracy of tenses used at a secondary-level vernacular (Chinese Independent) school in Malaysia. Using a pretest-treatment-posttest design with 20 participants, this study found that the group that received direct WCF outperformed the group that received indirect WCF in the posttest stage in new pieces of writing, whereas the group that received indirect WCF only showed an improvement in revised texts. In follow-up interviews with selected participants, it was gleaned that factors that could influence the effectiveness of WCF are motivation of the student and the amount of scaffolding provided by the teacher. It was also the opinion of those participants that their teacher should "apply mix [*sic*] strategies of corrective feedback in their writings depending on the severity of the mistakes or errors" (Chieng, 2014, p. 59). This study also recommended that "when providing corrective feedback, it is suggested that teachers provide corrective feedback according to students' proficiency level" (Chieng, 2014, p. 65).

These recent studies in various Malaysian ESL school settings indicate that more research needs to be carried out on the effectiveness of WCF since Malaysian ESL teachers' practices when providing WCF seem to be so varied with differing results. These studies are important because they can provide Malaysian ESL teachers insight on which types of WCF to best utilize to help their learners improve on their writing skills. As there have been few researches that looked into ESL teachers providing a more focused direct WCF approach in the Malaysian secondary school level language learning context, studies that did so could help 'real-world' Malaysian ESL teachers when choosing to provide an effective CF approach which might help improve the grammatical accuracy of their students' written work.

2.4   Conclusion

In this chapter, relevant studies on WCF were reviewed using the three claims of Swain's Output Hypothesis to discuss how focused direct WCF on learner output can be significant in promoting L2 learning. A general overview of recent studies on WCF that have been conducted in the Malaysian school setting was also described in order to contextualise this study's objectives. In the following chapter, the methodology on how this study was carried out will be described.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1   Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology used during the data collection, data processing and data analysis of this study. It is divided into five sections in which each section describes: the design of the study, its participants, the instruments and procedures used, and how the data was analysed in order to answer the research questions of the study, which are:

1) Does focused written corrective feedback have an effect on lower-intermediate ESL learners' acquisition of English articles?

2) Is there any difference in the effect of direct correction with and without metalinguistic feedback on ESL learners' acquisition of English articles?

3) What are ESL learners' perceptions on the usefulness of focused written corrective feedback?

This study looked into the effectiveness of focused direct WCF on the use of the articles 'a' as first mention and 'the' as second mention in the written narratives of ESL learners. It utilized a pretest-treatment-posttest-delayed posttest configuration on three groups: two experimental groups that each received different types of focused direct WCF for a duration of four weeks, and a control group. In order to investigate whether the WCF treatments were effective, each group's mean score on an Error Correction Test (ECT), from the pretest to the delayed posttest, was compared. A short questionnaire was administered to survey participants' perceptions on receiving focused direct WCF.

3.2   Research design

In choosing to replicate Sheen's study (2007) that examined the effectiveness of receiving focused direct WCF on the acquisition of two functions of English articles in the written essays of ESL learners, this study similarly also employed a quasi-

experimental research design. As with many experimental situations in the education setting, researches tend to use intact groups as randomisation would disrupt regular classroom learning (Creswell, 2012). Accordingly, this study used three intact ESL classes to form the three groups: direct-only WCF (DCF), direct metalinguistic WCF (DME), and the control group. A pretest was conducted to check on the homogeneity in the participants' level of English proficiency at the start of the study.

This was followed by WCF treatment sessions with both experimental groups. While Sheen's study (2007) conducted two treatment sessions, this study incorporated four treatment sessions using similar narrative writing tasks. The treatment sessions were conducted once a week with each experimental group, and took a total of four weeks to be fully carried out. Each treatment session was completed in roughly one teaching period of forty minutes. In every treatment session, the participants were each asked to rewrite a short narrative based on an Aesop fable. These rewritten narratives would then be corrected with either DCF or DME, depending on the experimental group. The corrections for DCF would entail the indication of the error on the participant's text where the error is with the correct form provided. Corrections for the DME group would involve specifying the location of the error, and providing the correct form with metalinguistic comments as explanation for the correction.

Throughout the four weeks, while both experimental groups were receiving their respective treatment sessions, the control group continued with their regular English language lessons. This would comprise lessons based on either the Form 2 English language or English literature textbooks conducted by their own English language teachers involving any of the four English skills: listening, speaking reading or writing.

A posttest was conducted immediately afterward for all three groups, after which both experimental groups were asked to answer a short questionnaire. A delayed posttest

was carried out four weeks later. The control group only needed to complete the test sessions, and otherwise followed their normal English language classes. Figure 3.1 shows the design of this study.

| **Week 1** |
| **Pretest - Error Correction Test (ECT) 1** |
| *all groups |

| **Week 2 - 5** |
| **Treatment** for experimental groups |
| Once a week |
| Direct-only feedback (DCF) | Direct with metalinguistic explanation (DME) |
| *normal classes for control group |

| **Week 5** |
| **Immediate posttest - ECT 2** |
| *all groups |
| **Questionnaire survey** - Experimental groups only |

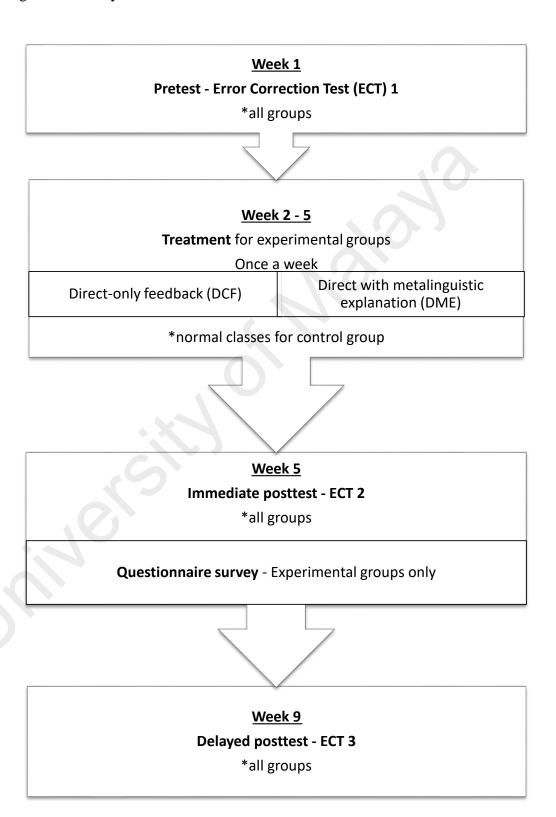| **Week 9** |
| **Delayed posttest - ECT 3** |
| *all groups |

Figure 3.1: Research design

3.3   Participants

All the participants, for this research and for its pilot study, were Form 2 students from two national-type secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur. Both schools share similar student demographics and are in the Bangsar-Pudu Zone. As all the participants for the main study and its pilot were from national-type secondary schools, permission from the Education Planning and Research Division (EPRD) of the Ministry of Education of Malaysia was obtained. Permission was also needed from the State Education Department (Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur) and each school's principal before the study, and its pilot, were carried out.

For this research, the participants were from the three lowest achieving classes out of 10 classes in Form 2 of the school with a total sample size of 78 participants at the start of the study. These participants were streamed into their Form 2 classes based on their Form 1 Year-End examination results, and also had a low proficiency level in English with the majority failing or just passing their English papers.

The second lowest achieving class in Form 2, 2 Luhur, which had a total of 25 students, formed the control group. The two experimental groups were from 2 Gamelan and 2 Makmur. 2 Gamelan, the third lowest achieving class with a total of 27 students received direct-only WCF (DCF) on their written narratives while the 26 students from 2 Makmur, the lowest achieving class in Form 2, received direct metalinguistic WCF (DME) on their written narrative tasks.

Although three intact ESL classes were chosen, participants with incomplete datasets at the end of the research were excluded from the sample. Also, participants whose ECT scores were not within the normal distribution range (outliers) were eliminated from the sample. Using G* Power, the minimum total sample size for repeated measures ANOVA is 36. At the end of the study, the mean test scores from a total of 43

participants were calculated from the three classes: the DCF group (*n*=16), the DME group (*n*=12), and the control group (*n*=15).

3.4   Instruments

This study used four narrative writing task instruments in the treatment sessions for both experimental groups. A 35-item error-correction test (ECT) was used to measure the acquisition of articles in all three groups. A short questionnaire was distributed after the immediate posttest to both experimental groups.

3.4.1   Narrative writing task instruments

There were four treatment sessions for both experimental groups, all involving a short narrative text stimulus, to prompt article usage by the participants. All four narrative stimuli, selected Aesop's fables, of similar lengths of not more than 100 words were adapted to the Malaysian Form 2 English level. Each narrative writing task instrument utilised words specified in the Malaysian English Form 2 Curriculum Specifications Word List that has a sample selection of the more common English words in everyday use. However, as "this suggested word list is only the minimum for the year... teachers are encouraged to widen this list according to the level, ability and maturity of their learners (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, during each narrative writing task session, the researcher would also discuss the meanings of words that the participants are not familiar with or that are not in the stipulated Form 2 Word List. This is done in order to help lessen the processing load on the participants when rewriting the narratives. Each narrative text would also have to contain the use of at least 10 articles of either 'a' as first mention or 'the' as anaphoric mention. The four narrative writing task instruments have been appended in Appendix A.

3.4.2   Corrective feedback treatment procedure and correction guidelines

The narrative writing task treatment sessions were carried out once a week for four weeks with both experimental groups following these six steps as shown in Figure 3.2 below.

Firstly, the researcher hands out the narrative writing task sheet to the participants, telling them that they will be reading the story and then rewriting it. The participants read the story silently. The researcher discusses the basic plot outline, key words, and other words that the participants are not familiar with in the story with the participants. The researcher collects the narrative portion of the task sheet; the participants keep the writing section. The researcher rereads the story out loud while she notes down key words on the whiteboard. The participants then rewrite the narratives as faithfully to the storyline as they can remember. The researcher collects the participants' written narratives for WCF.

Step 1

- R distributes narrative writing task sheet
- Ss read silently

Step 2

- R discusses basic plot outline and key words
- R collects narrative portion of task sheet

Step 3

- R rereads story
- R jots down key words on whiteboard

Step 4

- Ss rewrite narratives as faithfully to the plot as they can
- R collects scripts for WCF

Step 5

- R corrects scripts:
- **DCF** - indicate error, provide correct form
- **DME** - indicate error with number, numbered error indicated at bottom of script with ME and correct form

Step 6

- Tr returns corrected scripts to Ss
- Ss look over their errors and corrections (5 mins)

Tr = Teacher	Ss = Students	R = Researcher

Legend:

DCF = Direct corrective feedback

DME = Direct corrective feedback with metalinguistic explanation

Figure 3.2: Corrective feedback procedure

The researcher corrects the written narratives concentrating only on article errors.

For the direct-only WCF (DCF) group, the researcher indicates the article error and

provides the correct form above it (See Figure 3.3). A participant's narrative sample is appended as Appendix B.

Figure 3.3: Example of direct-only WCF (DCF). From Ellis et al. (2008)

For the direct metalinguistic WCF (DME) group, the researcher indicates the article error with a number. Each numbered error will be noted at the bottom of the script with metalinguistic information and provision of the correct form (See Figure 3.4). A participant's narrative sample is appended as Appendix C.

1 – 'a' needed for first mention of 'dog' and 'butcher'

2 – 'the' is needed for second mention of 'bone'

Figure 3.4: Example of direct metalinguistic WCF (DME). From Ellis et al. (2008)

During the following English class, the teacher returns the corrected narratives to the respective participant groups. The participants are given at least five minutes to look over their errors and corrections. The teacher does not comment further on the task and the participants are not required to revise their writing.

3.4.3 Error Correction Test (ECT) and scoring guidelines

While Sheen's study was methodically robust (Ferris, 2010), in that it employed three different testing instruments: a speeded dictation test, a writing test, and an error-correction test, her participants were adult intermediate ESL learners at a community college in America. In view of the lower levels of English language proficiency and the existing L1 issue concerning English articles amongst its participants, this study only utilises an error-correction test as a method to gauge learner improvements in accuracy in the use of the target structure.

In the pilot study, the Error Correction Test (ECT) was administered to a group of 30 students of similar lower-intermediate classes from a different school. An adequate level of test-retest reliability (.70 for all 30 items across two weeks) was established to ensure instrument reliability before the start of the study.

The ECT used in this study is an adaptation of Sheen's (2007) ECT, set to the level of Malaysian Form 2 students. With the five distractor items excluded, each discrete item was counted, making 30 marks the perfect test score.

The same ECT was used for all three test sessions to ensure equivalence of forms tested with the order of the items randomly rearranged between testing sessions. Although ECTs cannot be used to address the issue of whether error correction improves writing, "such a test can provide evidence of whether the correction helped to develop learners' explicit knowledge" (Shintani & Ellis, 2013: p. 291). The ECT is appended as Appendix C.

3.4.4   Questionnaire

Whereas Sheen's study chose to look into the role of language aptitude in article acquisition, this study instead explores learners' perceptions on receiving focused direct WCF in article acquisition.

A simplified adaptation of Najmaddin's (2010) questionnaire was distributed to both experimental groups after the immediate posttest to elicit learners' perceptions on the usefulness of receiving focused direct WCF. While Najmaddin's questionnaire contained 10 constructs with a 6-point Likert scale, his study was carried out among ESL learners at university level. In order to adapt his questionnaire to the level of this study's respondents, the questionnaire was simplified to have only 8 positive statements, based on 6 constructs, about the type of feedback the respondents received using a 3-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was calculated to have acceptable internal reliability (8 items; α =.724) in the pilot study.

Seeing as the questionnaire was administered just after the immediate posttest (Posttest 1) with both experimental groups, a total of 42 participants were surveyed: the DCF group (n=24), and the DME group (n=18). The questionnaire is appended as Appendix D.

3.5   Data Analysis

All ECT scores and questionnaire answers were entered into SPSS (Version 22) for descriptive and inferential statistics computation. The analyses were then used to answer this study's three research questions.

3.5.1   ECT

The descriptive statistics of group performances for all the test results were first calculated and compared in terms of means and standard deviations. For inferential

statistics, a one-way ANOVA was run, followed by a repeated measures ANCOVA. These analyses were used to answer research questions 1 and 2 of the study.

3.5.2 Questionnaire

To answer the third research question of this study, the median response and interquartile range (IQR) for each construct was calculated to find out the central tendencies of the participants towards the type of WCF they received. Then, the results of the two sets of questionnaires were compared with each other to find out whether there was any difference between them by running a Mann-Whitney U test.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter described the design of the study, its participants, the instruments and procedures used, and how the collected data was analysed. The findings of these analyses will be further discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1   Introduction

This study looked into the usefulness of providing two different types of focused WCF, direct-only WCF (DCF) or direct WCF with metalinguistic explanation (DME), in improving the linguistic accuracy of two functions of English articles in the narrative texts of Malaysian Form 2 ESL learners. An error correction test (ECT) was carried out with the control group and both experimental groups in three stages: pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest. Four treatment sessions were conducted with both experimental groups after the pretest stage with each group receiving either DCF or DME. This was followed by an immediate posttest for all three groups and a questionnaire survey for the experimental groups. Four weeks later, a delayed posttest was administered to all three groups.

All ECT scores and questionnaire answers were entered into SPSS (Version 22) for descriptive and inferential statistics computation. The analyses were then used to answer this study's three research questions:

1)   Does focused written corrective feedback have an effect on lower-intermediate ESL learners' acquisition of English articles?

2)   Is there any difference in the effect of direct correction with and without metalinguistic feedback on ESL learners' acquisition of English articles?

3)   What are ESL learners' perceptions on the usefulness of focused written corrective feedback?

The results based on the students' ECT scores were used to answer research questions 1 and 2, while the results obtained from the questionnaire survey were used to answer research question 3.

4.2   The effect of focused WCF on lower-intermediate ESL learners' acquisition of English articles.

The first research question sought to find out whether receiving focused WCF had any effect on the participants' acquisition of English articles. The results of the SPSS computation on the mean ECT scores from a total of 43 participants were used to answer this research question: the DCF group (n=16), the DME group (n=12), and the control group (n=15).
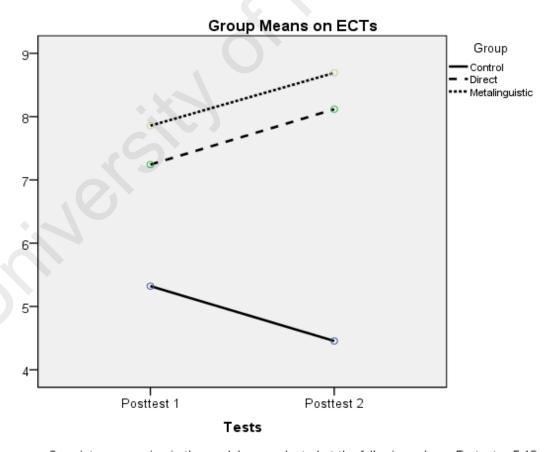
The distribution of test scores was first subjected to a normality test. A one-way ANOVA was used to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between the mean pretest ECT scores of the three groups. It was found there was a significant difference between the mean pretest ECT scores among the three groups, with $p<.05$, $F_{(2, 40)}$ =5.215, p=0.10.

Because the pretest scores did not indicate homogeneity of English proficiency levels in all three groups, it was considered as a covariate. Therefore, in order to evaluate the differences in the mean scores for both experimental groups (DCF and DME) and the control group across the two stages of immediate posttest (Posttest 1) and delayed posttest (Posttest 2), a two-way repeated measures ANCOVA was conducted to assess whether there were group and test differences in ECT test scores. To evaluate the sphericity of data assumption, the F-value was adjusted using the Greenhouse-Geisser correction, $F_{(2, 40)}$ =.044, $p<0.05$, η^2=0.01, with post hoc test (Bonferroni procedure) applied to compare the mean scores.

Table 4.1: Group Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for ECTs

Correction type	Posttest 1		Posttest 2	
	M	SD	M	SD
Control group ($n = 15$)	7.87	5.553	7.27	6.573
DCF group ($n = 16$)	7.25	7.532	8.13	6.712
DME group ($n = 12$)	4.67	5.263	5.17	4.086

Table 4.1 shows the group means and standard deviations across the immediate posttest (Posttest 1) and delayed posttest (Posttest 2). With the pretest mean score as covariate set at 5.12, both experimental groups' mean scores indicate an increment, while the mean scores for the control group showed a decline.

Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Pretest = 5.12

Figure 4.1: Group scores for Posttest 1 and Posttest 2

As shown in Figure 4.1, the mean group scores for both experimental groups that received DCF or DME increased from Posttest 1 to Posttest 2 while the mean group score for the control group decreased. The pattern in this graph shows that although the two experimental groups' gains over time were significant, the control group exhibited a decline. The gains for both experimental groups were also found to be statistically different from the control group at Posttest 2 with DCF (p=0.016) and DME (p=0.018).

Therefore, these results indicate that receiving focused direct WCF, whether direct-only WCF (DCF) or direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME), was effective in improving lower-intermediate ESL learners' acquisition of English articles. It also found that receiving focused WCF affected significant longitudinal gains in both experimental groups. This finding is similar to that of Sheen's 2007 research, of which this study is based on, that found both her experimental groups had outperformed the control group in the immediate posttests and again in the delayed posttests session. Despite the fact that the participants in this study were ESL learners from [-ART(ICLE)] first languages like Mandarin, Cantonese, and Malay, it can be argued that because the WCF provided was so highly focused, only on two functions of a single linguistic feature, that it made any error on their output sufficiently evident for the participants to notice and subsequent uptake into their interlanguage. From this finding, it can be said that focused direct WCF does have a positive effect in improving linguistic accuracy and can subsequently help in the acquisition of English articles among lower-intermediate ESL learners.

4.3   Differences in the effect of direct correction with and without metalinguistic feedback on ESL learners' acquisition of English articles

The second research question wanted to explore whether there were any differences between receiving direct-only WCF (DCF) and direct WCF with

metalinguistic feedback (DME) on the participants' acquisition of English articles. The results of the SPSS computation of the participants' mean ECT scores were also used to answer this question.

Table 4.2: Pairwise comparisons between groups for ECTs

Tests	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	SE	*p* value
Posttest 1	Control	DCF	-1.921	1.618	.727
		DME	-2.536	1.902	.571
	DCF	DME	-.615	1.739	1.000
Posttest 2	Control	DCF	-3.662[*]	1.239	.016
		DME	-4.236[*]	1.457	.018
	DCF	DME	-.575	1.332	1.000

Based on estimated marginal means
*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

As shown in Table 4.2, although there was a statistical difference in the mean posttests scores between the control group and both experimental groups, there was no significant difference in both experimental groups' mean scores of Posttest 1 or Posttest 2 (p>0.05).

Therefore, because there was no statistical difference found between both posttests results of these two experimental groups, the results show that there is no difference between receiving direct-only WCF (DCF) and direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME) on the participants' acquisition of English articles. This finding is dissimilar to Sheen's 2007 study as she found that while "both treatment groups in the immediate error correction test outperformed the control group, the direct

meta group [DME] performed better in all three delayed posttests" (Sheen, 2007, p. 274).

However, while her study did find a significant difference between both her experimental groups at the delayed posttests sessions with only two CF treatment sessions, Sheen used intermediate-level adult ESL learners as participants. Similarly, Bitchener and Knoch's (2010) research that found both types of direct WCF (with written metalinguistic explanation only or with oral form-focused review of the metalinguistic explanation) to be more effective also utilised advanced-level university ESL learners as participants. This study, in contrast, employed lower-intermediate Form 2 ESL students as participants. Also, although this study had four treatment sessions, each session was only carried out once a week over a single teaching period.

In another study by Bitchener (2008) that employed lower proficiency participants, it was also discovered that there was no statistical difference between the groups that received focused direct WCF only and focused direct WCF with written metalinguistic explanation. Bitchener contended that "it is possible that the limited detail and the single provision of written meta-linguistic explanation may not have been sufficient for it to have had a significant effect" (p. 114). Therefore, "it may be the case that what [type of WCF] is most effective is determined by… proficiency levels of the L2 writers" (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010, p. 210)

> "Even though explicit [direct] feedback can play an important role in second language acquisition, it needs time and repetition before it can help learners to notice correct forms, compare these with their own interlanguage and test their hypotheses about the target language" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p.85).

This can be particularly true among L2 learners of lower proficiency, like the participants of this study, who may not have sufficient linguistic competence to self-correct when they check their hypotheses based on the limited internalized knowledge

that they possess about the language, even when the corrections are given with metalinguistic explanations. So, it can be argued that while the 'hypothesis-testing function' may possibly be facilitated through focused direct WCF with metalinguistic explanation because it is more systematic and immediate for the learner, learner uptake of the WCF is also still highly dependent on their level of English language proficiency. That is to say, the lower the level of proficiency, the more time and repetition of focused direct WCF, even with metalinguistic explanation, may still be needed to help with learner uptake.

4.4 ESL learners' perceptions on the usefulness of focused written corrective feedback

The third research question aimed to survey the participants' opinions on the usefulness of receiving focused direct WCF, either with (DME) or without metalinguistic comments (DCF). The results of the SPSS computation on a total of 42 participants surveyed were used to answer this research question: the DCF group (n=24), and the DME group (n=18).

Firstly, the statements that were based on the same construct were summarised, and the median (Mdn) and interquartile range (IQR) for each was calculated to find out each experimental group's central tendencies between the two types of focused direct WCF provided, as shown in Table 4.3. A Mann-Whitney U test was then performed to see if there were any significant differences between both group's responses to each construct.

Table 4.3: Group Medians and Interquartile Range (IQRs) for questionnaire

Questions	Type of WCF			
	DCF		DME	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Q1 - I like this WCF	2.00	1	3.00	0
Q2 - With this WCF, it is easy to see my errors	3.00	1	3.00	0
Q3 - If I don't understand this WCF, I will ask my teacher	2.50	1	3.00	1
Q5 - This WCF makes me think about my error	3.00	1	3.00	1
Q4 & Q6 - With this WCF, I understand or know why I made the error	2.75	1	2.50	0.625
Q7 & Q8 - With this type of WCF, I write better or learn more	2.50	1	2.50	0.625

Note: Median 1.00 = Disagree   2.00 = Not sure   3.00 = Agree

For Question 1 that asked whether they liked receiving this form of WCF, while all respondents from the DME group indicated that they liked receiving this form of WCF (Mdn=3, IQR=0), most respondents from the DCF group were unsure (Mdn=2,

IQR=1). Although 58.3% from the DCF group revealed they were unsure about liking the WCF they received, 37.5% of them indicated that they liked receiving DCF.

In Question 2, both experimental groups expressed that the type of WCF they received made it easy for them to notice the errors that they made: DCF (Mdn=3, IQR=1) and DME (Mdn=3, IQR=0). Similarly, in Question 5, both groups also pointed out that they thought the type of WCF received made them think about the errors they made: DCF (Mdn=3, IQR=1) and DME (Mdn=3, IQR=1).

For Question 3, when asked whether they would ask their ESL teacher if they did not understand the WCF given, opinions seemed to be divided in the DCF group with half the respondents (n=24, 50%) indicating that they were either not sure or agreed that if they did not understand the correction given, they would ask their teacher for clarification (Mdn=2.5, IQR=1). The DME group however expressed their agreement with the statement that they would ask their teacher if they did not understand the correction (Mdn=3, IQR=1).

Questions 4 and 6 were based on the construct that the WCF received made the respondents understand or know why they made their error. While most respondents from both groups expressed that they were unsure of the construct, DCF (Mdn=2.75, IQR=1) and DME (Mdn=2.50, IQR=0.625), 50% from the DCF group and 33.3% from the DME group indicated that they agreed that the type of WCF they received helped them understand why they made their errors.

Similarly, Questions 7 and 8 were constructed on the respondents' perception on the usefulness of receiving that type of WCF. Again, most respondents from both groups indicated that they were unsure about these 2 statements; DCF (Mdn=2.50, IQR=1) and DME (Mdn=2.50, IQR=0.625). However, 50% of the respondents of both

groups revealed their agreement that receiving this type of feedback would help them write better essays or learn more.

In summary, both experimental groups agreed that receiving focused direct WCF (with or without metalinguistic comments) made it easier for them to notice any error in their output and that receiving focused direct WCF also made them think about the errors they made. This is similar to the findings in Najmaddin's study (2010) where his respondents agreed that both types of direct WCF (with or without metalinguistic comments) helped students to notice their errors (item 6 in his student questionnaire). The opinions of both experimental groups in this study also correspond with the findings of research question one in that the respondents also believe that receiving focused direct WCF highlighted their errors in output enough for them to 'notice the gap' and to know how to rectify them. Sheen et al. (2009) also argued that the nature of the narrative task, similar to the ones used in this study, "can be viewed as a kind of noticing task. Like a dictogloss task, it may have promoted pushed output and, as Swain (1995) has shown, such tasks can help learners to improve accuracy" (p. 566).

A Mann-Whitney U test indicated a statistical difference between both experimental groups' responses only in Questions 1 and 2. In Question 1, the DME group (Mdn=3) significantly preferred receiving their type of WCF than the DCF group (Mdn=2), U=81, $p<0.001$. In Question 2, the DME group (Mdn=3) also thought that it was much easier to notice their errors when their essays were corrected this way compared to the DCF group (Mdn=3), U=115, $p=.025$. There were no significant differences between both group's responses for the other constructs.

The results of the Mann-Whitney U test, that the respondents from the DME group preferred their type of WCF and that it was easier to notice their errors when corrected that way, are similar to the findings of Amrhein and Nassaji's study (2010)

that discovered their "students also showed approval of having their errors explicitly marked and corrected with WCF such as *error correction with a comment* and *overt correction by the teacher*" (p. 115). Likewise, in Najmaddin's study (2010), five out of the six participants interviewed, also preferred direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME) over the other types of feedback given. Among the reasons given why they preferred DME was because they found it more understandable compared to the other types of WCF studied. "In addition, the students need explanation for many of their mistakes" (Najmaddin, 2010, p. 44).

However, it is also important to note that while students tend to prefer more explicit types of WCF, teachers should not overemphasize learners' WCF preferences because what they prefer may not be necessarily be more effective in helping learner uptake.

"Thus, it is a good idea for teachers to communicate with students regarding corrective feedback practices as well as adapt their WCF practices to promote learner autonomy, and at the same time consider students' preferences so as to motivate and encourage students to be in command of their language learning" (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010, p. 116).

In the end, L2 teachers need to be judicious when choosing between the types of WCF to use, to strike a balance between their students' preferences, what the teachers themselves think may be more effective, and also their students' English proficiency levels, when providing WCF on their students' writing.

4.5   Conclusion

This chapter discussed the results of the data analysis and the study's main findings in relation to its three research questions. Firstly, it found that receiving focused direct WCF does help improve the participants' accuracy in the use of two functions of English articles and that receiving focused direct WCF affected significant longitudinal gains in both experimental groups. However, there were no differences

between receiving direct-only WCF (DCF) or direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME).

In terms of students' perceptions of its usefulness, both experimental groups indicated that receiving focused direct WCF made it easier for them to notice their errors and that it made them think about the errors they made. On the other hand, the participants who received direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME) significantly preferred receiving their form of WCF and they also thought it was much easier to notice their errors when corrected that way.

The next and final chapter will discuss this study's limitations, and also its research and pedagogical implications.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This study set out to investigate the effectiveness of providing focused direct WCF in increasing the linguistic accuracy of English articles in the written narratives of Malaysian secondary school ESL learners. It also looked into the students' perceptions on the usefulness of receiving focused direct WCF. This chapter comprises a summary of the findings, the limitations and implications of this study.

5.2 Summary of the findings

This study aimed to examine the efficacy in providing focused direct WCF in the acquisition of two functions of the English article in the Malaysian secondary school context of language learning by answering its three research questions.

Firstly, the findings of the study revealed that receiving focused direct WCF, whether direct-only WCF (DCF) or direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME), was effective in improving lower-intermediate ESL learners' accuracy in using the two functions of English articles investigated. It also found that receiving focused direct WCF affected significant longitudinal gains in both experimental groups. It can be argued that although the participants in this study were ESL learners from [-ART(ICLE)] first languages like Mandarin, Cantonese, and Malay, nevertheless the focused direct WCF provided made it easier for them to notice their errors. That is to say, it is because the WCF was so highly focused, only on two functions of a single linguistic feature, that it made any error on their output sufficiently evident for the participants to not only notice but also for the subsequent uptake into their interlanguage. From this finding, it can be said that focused direct WCF does have a positive effect in improving linguistic accuracy and can consequently help in the acquisition of English articles among lower-intermediate ESL learners.

However, this study did not find any statistical difference between receiving direct-only WCF (DCF) or direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME) even though four weekly treatment sessions were conducted. This finding is dissimilar to that of Sheen's (2007) finding. Her study found a statistical difference between both her experimental groups' mean test scores with only two WCF treatment sessions. This difference in results between these two studies could be because of the difference in the English language proficiency levels of their respective participants. While Sheen carried out her research with intermediate-level adult ESL learners, this study employed lower-intermediate Form 2 ESL students as participants.

It can be contended that while the 'hypothesis-testing function' may possibly be facilitated through focused direct WCF with metalinguistic comments because it is more systematic and immediate for the learner, learner uptake of the WCF is nonetheless also highly dependent on their level of English language proficiency. Bitchener's (2008) research that employed lower intermediate participants also discovered no differences between experimental groups that received focused direct WCF with or without written metalinguistic explanation. Therefore, it can be said that the effectiveness of a particular type of WCF is essentially still dependent on the language proficiency of the L2 learner (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). This would mean that L2 learners with lower levels of proficiency would still need more time and repetition when receiving focused direct WCF, even with metalinguistic explanation, in order to facilitate their uptake of the correction.

In terms of students' perceptions of its usefulness, results from the questionnaire survey revealed that both experimental groups indicated that receiving focused direct WCF made it easier for them to notice their errors and that it made them think about the errors they made. In addition, both experimental groups' responses in

this study corresponded with the findings of research question one as they also thought that receiving focused direct WCF made their errors salient enough for them to not only 'notice the gap' in their output but also how to correct them.

Additionally, it was also found that the participants who received focused direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME) significantly preferred receiving their form of WCF and that they also thought it was much easier to notice their errors when corrected that way. However, while the participants who received DME indicated a significant preference for receiving their type of focused direct WCF, there was no statistical difference between their mean test scores with those from the DCF group. This finding suggests that ESL teachers need to strike a balance when deciding on which type of WCF to use, between incorporating their learners' preferences with the teachers' own WCF beliefs and practices, while also taking into account their learners' English proficiency levels. This would not only help motivate their learners when learning the L2, but also encourage them to be more autonomous in their language learning.

5.3   Limitations of the study

While this study generated positive results in confirming the efficacy of focused direct WCF in improving the accuracy of two functions of English articles, it does have several limitations.

Firstly, because writing is such a complex skill to master with many aspects that can be looked into,

> "L2 writing researchers and practitioners might wonder if, in the interest of empirical rigor, some of the SLA research efforts on written CF have been so narrowly focused that it would be difficult to transfer their approach and findings to a real writing classroom or to a diverse group of students" (Ferris, 2010, p. 196).

Likewise, in the instance of this study, by choosing to investigate the effectiveness of a type WCF that only focuses on language accuracy questions its practical applicability by teachers in the Malaysian ESL classroom. Furthermore, in examining a highly-focused type of WCF, it does not attend to the necessity for individualised feedback based on each ESL learner's diverse strengths and weaknesses in writing. In addition, investigating the efficacy of WCF that only focuses on two simple functions of English articles makes this study's findings difficult to be generalised to other areas of linguistic accurateness, or even to the linguistic accuracy of the other features of English articles. However, these limitations highlight the importance for ESL teachers to be discerning when choosing which aspect of their students' writing to focus on, and not correct all aspects of writing at the same time. Also, as was found in this study, when choosing to examine language accuracy in their students' written work, Malaysian ESL teachers could employ a more focused direct WCF approach as this may be potentially more helpful with learner uptake.

Another major limitation of this study is in its research design. According to Ferris (2010), "studies should be designed in ways that address the L2 writing starting point (i.e., whether written CF helps students to develop more effective revision and self-editing processes" (p. 195). While this study did increase the number of WCF treatment sessions compared to that of Sheen's study (2007), it still only employed four treatment sessions. These narrative task sessions were conducted over a one-period (forty minutes) lesson, only once a week. Furthermore, only one testing instrument, the error correction test (ECT), was used to gauge improvements in the accuracy of the two functions of English articles among the participants. Additionally, the questionnaire survey to gauge the respondents' perceptions of the type of WCF received only used a 3-point Likert scale. This made the differences in responses of some constructs between respondents' preferences to some degree indistinguishable. These variations in this

study's methodology may limit its findings from potentially being generalizable to the Malaysian secondary school ESL learner population. Also, the fact that the delayed posttest was carried out only four weeks later potentially limits its results from being extrapolated as long term gains in accuracy of article use among the participants. Nevertheless, this study and its findings, still contribute to the pool of literature on researches conducted in the Malaysian secondary school ESL setting.

An additional limitation of this study is that it does not incorporate learner differences into the research. According to Ferris (2010), "research designs for written CF, whether from a SLA or L2 writing standpoint, must consider and control for contextual and individual differences" (p. 196). While this study does take into consideration the learner's sense of 'agency' in their learning of L2 when it surveyed learners' perceptions of the usefulness in receiving focused direct WCF, it does not consider that success in ESL learning may be mediated by other factors such as language analytic ability, learning style, metalinguistic background knowledge or motivation in the learner. This is limiting because this study does not acknowledge that ESL learners "have access to diverse linguistic resources and use them in unpredictable ways" (Larsen-Freeman, 2012: p. 302). Language learning is a dynamic and complex process that does not necessarily occur in distinct stages. Each individual ESL learner's language developmental path is diverse and unique. Therefore, while this study does incorporate Swain's more current description on languaging that adopts a more sociocultural perspective in language development, it still assumes that all ESL learners acquire explicit knowledge and language skills in a similar, linear manner.

5.4 Implications of the study

Based on the findings of this study, there are several pedagogical implications. Firstly, when choosing to focus on grammatical correctness, Malaysian ESL teachers

could employ a more focused direct WCF approach as this may be potentially more helpful with learner uptake. This is essential because without learner uptake, ESL teachers' efforts in providing their students with WCF are pointless. "L2 learners have limited processing capacity and asking them to attend to corrections that address a range of issues at the same time may tax their ability to process the feedback" (Sheen, 2007, p. 278). By choosing to utilise a more focused approach when applying WCF to correct grammatical errors, it makes it easier for learner uptake to occur because it is more manageable and motivating for the student. This may be especially true among Malaysian ESL learners of lower English language proficiency levels, as was found in this study.

Apart from that, when providing WCF, Malaysian ESL teachers should also consider the perceptions and preferences of their ESL students because "another factor that can influence uptake is the affective factor" (Lee, 2013, p. 113). For this reason, ESL teachers need to strike a balance between utilising the type of WCF their students prefer and what they, the ESL teachers themselves, think may be more effective, when correcting errors in their students' writing. By taking into consideration learner preferences in the type of WCF employed, teachers offer their learners an opportunity to possibly feel more motivated to learn English and to be more autonomous in their ESL learning journey. This incorporates a more socio-cultural theory approach towards ESL teaching as it provides learners with a sense of 'agency', "that it is the learner, … who has options and makes choices" (Swain, 2006, p. 100) in their own language learning development.

In terms of implications for future research, the methodological limitations in this study call for more researches on focused direct WCF with improved research designs to be conducted in the Malaysian secondary school ESL language learning

context. According to Ferris (2004), there is still a need for "longitudinal, carefully designed, replicable studies that compare the writing of students receiving error feedback with that of students who receive none, as well as comparing and controlling for other aspects of error treatment" (p. 60). This is so that the findings obtained can more conclusively be generalised to the Malaysian ESL secondary school population.

Firstly, future researches on the effects of focused direct WCF could incorporate more longitudinal methods, with possibly more WCF treatment sessions to add methodological robustness. Furthermore, this study chose to utilise only one testing instrument, the error-correction test (ECT) to gauge improvements in the use of English articles amongst its participants. Potential studies on the effectiveness of focused direct WCF could employ more varied testing instruments in order to increase the validity and reliability of their findings. In addition, while this study chose to examine only two functions of English articles, future studies could look into the other features of English articles, or at other target structures such as tenses or prepositions, when investigating the effectiveness of focused direct WCF in the Malaysian secondary school ESL setting.

Moreover, there have also been few studies on the effectiveness of WCF carried out in the Malaysian secondary school ESL learning context (Mahmud, 2016). The findings from these future studies would also be beneficial for Malaysian ESL teachers who may not be aware of the various types of WCF available, or the nature and advantages of each type of WCF, in order for them to be able to decide when best to use them.

5.5   Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of focused direct written corrective feedback (WCF) on the use of two functions of articles in the written narratives of 43 lower-

intermediate Malaysian ESL learners. It found that receiving focused direct WCF does help improve students' written accuracy in the use of two functions of English articles. However, no difference was found between receiving direct-only WCF (DCF) and direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME). In terms of students' perceptions of its usefulness, both experimental groups indicated that receiving focused direct WCF made it easier for them to notice their errors and that it made them think about the errors they made. However, the participants who received direct WCF with metalinguistic comments (DME) significantly preferred receiving their form of WCF and that they also thought it was much easier to notice their errors when corrected that way.

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