

**DIRECT CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK AND STUDENTS' NOTICING
ABILITY OF BE-VERB FORMS IN ESL WRITING**

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A project report submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Education (TESL)

Faculty of Education
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

DECEMBER 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In preparing this thesis, I was in contact with many people, researchers, academicians, and practitioners. They have contributed towards my understanding and thoughts. In particular, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my thesis supervisor, Assoc. Professor Dr. Ummul Khair Ahmad. Without her continued support and interest, this thesis would not have been the same as presented here.

My fellow postgraduate students should also be recognised for their support. My sincere appreciation also extends to all my colleagues and others who have provided assistance at various occasions. Their views and tips are useful indeed. Unfortunately, it is not possible to list all of them in this limited space. I am grateful to all my family members.

ABSTRACT

The study examined the role of corrective feedback in helping Malaysian students learn difficult grammatical items through essay writing. Studies have suggested that corrective feedback is beneficial for students and is effective in teaching writing in Second Language Acquisition environment. However, a number of studies have also doubted the efficacy of teachers' corrective feedback on students' acquisition of difficult grammatical items. Scholars have argued that corrective feedback does not help the students to notice the difficult grammatical items corrected by teacher. Thus, the current study was set to investigate how direct corrective feedback given by teachers could help students notice difficult grammatical item in particular the 'be' verb forms in their essay writing. This case study involved four form four students from native Malay L1 background from a rural school. The students wrote three different drafts of five types of essay for a period of 10 weeks and underwent two sessions of Stimulated Recall Interview. Analysis of errors made in students' drafts revealed that corrective feedback does help the students to notice 'be' verb forms. Analysis of Errors across different genre suggests that errors involving 'be' verb forms persist in students albeit in a smaller number. During the stimulated recall interview, students did notice specifically 'be' verb forms being corrected by teacher. 'Be' verb forms were found to be difficult for the students because they mainly rely on translation method for essay writing. The essays from different types of genres were found to be particularly challenging for the students. However, given more practice and opportunities to learn, students will have higher chances to acquire 'be' verb forms. Considering students' positive response towards corrective feedback, teachers could use corrective feedback as a way to help students to notice and learn difficult grammatical items through essay writings. The pedagogical implication of this study is that improvement is needed in teaching of writing in Malaysia with more emphasis given on a variety of practice on writing as well as providing of corrective feedback. The findings also suggest that teachers need to be creative in providing corrective feedback considering the limitations that they work under.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji peranan pembetulan dalam membantu pelajar Malaysia belajar hukum-hukum tatabahasa yang sukar melalui penulisan esei. Kajian-kajian sebelum ini menunjukkan bahawa pembetulan oleh guru memberi manfaat kepada pelajar dan pembetulan tersebut berkesan dalam pengajaran penulisan esei dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat beberapa kajian yang meragui keberkesanan pembetulan oleh guru dalam pengajaran hukum-hukum tatabahasa sukar. Kajian terkini telah menyiasat peranan pembetulan oleh guru dalam membantu pelajar mempelajari kata kerja 'be' menerusi penulisan karangan. Kajian kes ini melibatkan empat orang pelajar tingkatan empat yang belajar di sekolah menengah luar bandar serta Bahasa Melayu merupakan bahasa ibunda mereka. Semua pelajar telah menulis tiga draf esei yang berbeza bagi lima jenis esei dalam masa 10 minggu dan menjalani dua sesi Temuduga 'Stimulated Recall'. Kesilapan yang dilakukan oleh pelajar dalam 54 esei yang dikumpulkan telah dianalisa dan keputusannya menunjukkan bahawa pembetulan oleh guru berkesan dalam pembelajaran kata kerja 'be'. Analisis juga menunjukkan bahawa pelajar tetap melakukan kesilapan berkaitan kata kerja 'be' dalam semua esei walaupun jumlah kesilapan pelajar berkurang. Ketika pelajar ditemuduga oleh penyelidik, mereka menyatakan bahawa mereka dapat memahami pembetulan yang dilakukan oleh guru pada hasil kerja mereka. Namun didapati, pelajar berasa sukar untuk menggunakan kata kerja 'be' kerana mereka bergantung kepada kaedah penterjemahan semasa penulisan esei. Selain itu, pelajar juga menghadapi cabaran disebabkan 'jenis' esei yang dipilih. Walau bagaimanapun, pelajar-pelajar ini akan dapat memahami penggunaan kata kerja 'be' jika mereka diberi latihan yang banyak secara berterusan. Para guru perlu menyambut baik respons positif pelajar terhadap pembetulan oleh mereka untuk membantu pelajar memahami hukum-hukum tatabahasa yang susah dalam Bahasa Inggeris menerusi penulisan esei. Guru-guru juga boleh menggunakan kaedah pembetulan untuk membantu pelajar memahami dan mempelajari hukum tatabahasa yang sukar semasa penulisan esei. Hasil kajian menunjukkan pengajaran penulisan esei Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia perlu memberi lebih penekanan kepada kaedah pembetulan. Kajian ini turut menunjukkan bahawa guru-guru perlu kreatif ketika membetulkan hasil kerja pelajar sambil mengambil kira batasan yang dihadapi oleh mereka.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Malaysian English as Second Language (ESL) learners have been taught that language form is an important part of their writing since in primary school. Teachers emphasize on correcting language form or grammar for students. Teachers also encourage and sometimes demand that the students produce error free essays as part of teaching writing. This is because grammatical accuracy is deemed to be very important in Malaysian Education system. Even in national examinations like *Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia (SPM)* and *Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR)*, students are marked for their grammatical mistakes in their essay writing. The marking schemes by Malaysian Examination Syndicate which is given to SPM and PMR examination markers show that grammatical accuracy has great influence in the awarding of grades. Thus, teachers want their learners to be able to master English grammar the best they can. The teaching method employed by teachers emphasizes the importance of English grammar to students.

Teachers employ different methods to ensure that learners are able to master the English grammar in writing. Some of the methods are found to be effective in helping learners to learn English grammar. One of the methods employed by Malaysian teachers is corrective feedback. Teachers work hard to provide corrective feedback to learners' writing so that learners are able to see their mistakes and learn from their mistakes. Thus, Malaysian students are accustomed to receiving corrective feedback from teachers that they feel uncomfortable when they do not receive corrective feedback for their writing in English. Some students even feel they are not learning when they do not receive corrective feedback. However, there

are instances where students miss corrective feedback and thus fail to correct their mistakes in their writing. The present study plans to look into this matter and find out why such occurrences happen.

1.2 Background of study

According to Silva and Brice (2004) teacher response or feedback is considered as the “most important and time consuming” aspects of teaching writing. Many people from the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) circle have echoed similar thoughts about feedback or teacher response (Lee, 2004; Zacharias, 2007; Ashwell, 2000). This clearly means that teachers’ feedbacks or responses are essential part of teaching writing. Acknowledging the influence of corrective feedback, a number of studies have been done in the recent years by SLA researchers. Ellis (2009) confirms that many SLA researchers are interested in effects of different types of corrective feedback on students and they have attempted to identify the most effective corrective feedback. However, research to this date has provided mixed results about the most effective corrective feedback.

In fact, there are different types of feedback provided to students by teachers. These feedbacks provide a platform for students to improve their writing skill. This is very true for students in Asian classrooms who depend a lot on feedback from teachers. Research done by Lee (2004) and Zacharias (2007) have shown that Asian L2 students prefer to have feedback from teachers to help them with their writing. Moreover, L2 students showed appreciation when teachers focus on the form or grammar while giving corrective feedback on students’ writing task. This is different from students from western countries because students were encouraged to do self correction if they are able to do it (Ellis, 2009).

However, some L2 students do not seem to benefit from corrective feedback given by teachers (Kartchava, 2012). It seems that the students fail to “notice” the corrective feedback given by teachers. Schmidt’s (1995) has identified noticing as one of the conditions that lead to second language acquisition. He stated that

learners cannot learn the grammatical features of a language unless they notice them. Gass (1997) and Robinson (2002) also agree that awareness and noticing are important as they mediate input and L2 development among L2 learners. Corrective feedbacks are meant to help the students to notice the language mistakes they make during language learning especially with English grammar. By helping the L2 learners to notice their language mistakes, corrective feedback can help the students to improve their writing.

Moreover, research done in the past have highlighted that corrective feedback by the teachers involves more of grammar than any other aspects. It is because it is easier for teachers to notice grammatical mistakes. Teachers also find it easy to correct grammar mistakes as compared to other types of mistake. Some of the grammar mistakes are more common than others. For example, mistakes involving 'be' forms are rather common in English for second language learners. This is because both auxiliary and copula 'be', which are part of 'be' forms, are difficult structures for second language learners.

In fact, omission of copula in writing is one of the prominent grammatical mistakes committed by students (Maros, Salehuddin and Tan 2007). The studies by Maros *et al.* (2007) and Wong (2012) have collectively acknowledged that copula 'be' is indeed a difficult thing for L2 learners. Meanwhile, Samad and Hawanum (2011) have suggested that auxiliary 'be' has a complex structure than it seems proving it to be a difficult for students. Thus, 'be' forms are definitely challenging for second language learners like in Malaysia. The current study aims to look into the use of corrective feedback to help second language learners to notice their mistakes with difficult grammatical items such as 'be' forms.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Teachers have tried a number of ways to make sure that learners are able to understand difficult grammar items. Corrective feedback by teachers is one of the ways used by teachers to teach students about difficult grammar items. However, Park (2011) states that sometimes students miss the corrective feedback given by

teachers. He claims that some students do not notice the corrective feedback given by teachers and consequently do not overcome their problems with English grammar. It is a great loss as learners will definitely correct their mistakes if they notice their mistakes. Izumi (2012) agrees with this and results from his study shows that learners who notice corrective feedback are capable of incorporating solutions to overcome their problems. Thus it is a lost opportunity for learners to improve their language when they failed to notice the corrective feedback given by the teachers.

As such, students' failure to notice corrective feedback given on grammar items is an interesting point to study. Interestingly, not many studies have been conducted to identify why learners fail to notice corrective feedback given by teachers. Park (2011) conducted a research which explored the self generated noticing of L2 by learners. In the study, Park (2011) roughly divided the participants into two groups; learner-external factors and learner-internal factors. Park discussed the role played by L1 in helping learners with noticing items in L2. He points out that learners' L1 might influence them to process L2 in a certain way. He suggests that L1 interference might be a reason why some L2 learners are unable to notice corrective feedback given by teachers.

Meanwhile, study done by Kartchava (2012) looked into notice-ability and effectiveness of three corrective feedback methods namely recasts, prompts and a mix of both. The study discovers interesting relationship shared between noticing, feedback, L2 development and learner beliefs. Kartchava (2012) reveals that lack of belief on corrective feedbacks given by teachers could be a reason why learners fail to notice corrective feedback. Learners' belief in corrective feedback can positively influence learners to notice the correction given by teacher. The studies by both Park (2011) and Kartchava (2012) have highlighted that there is a need for new research to find out more about learners' failure in noticing corrective feedback given by teachers and the reason behind this lost opportunity.

The current study will look into the connection between the corrective feedback from teachers and students' ability to notice corrective feedback on difficult grammatical items such as 'be' forms. This would provide new additional information to what we already know regarding corrective feedback and learners' ability to correct their mistakes by noticing corrective feedback by teachers.

1.4 The purpose of the study

The purpose of the research project is to identify the role played by direct corrective feedback from teachers in helping students to notice difficult grammatical items such as 'be' forms. Other than that, this study is looking at the role played by direct corrective feedback by teachers in improving students' subsequent writing. This is because corrective feedbacks by teachers play a significant role in improving language learning among L2 learners. Ellis (2009) confirms that corrective feedback contributes to language learning and pedagogy. Hyland (2003) also agrees that corrective feedback is a crucial point for writing development and it is generally expected and welcomed by L2 students.

This research also plans to ascertain the responses of the second language learners in Malaysia towards the direct corrective feedback given by teachers in improving their writing performance. Thus it is possible that the data gathered from the research is used to find a better, effective and meaningful way to bring learners' attention to difficult grammatical items such as 'be' verb forms. Other than that, teachers also would be able to improve their teaching practices that make use of corrective feedback in teaching difficult grammatical items from the data gathered from this research.

1.5 Objective of the study

This study aims to investigate

- i) how direct corrective feedback given by teachers can help L2 learners to notice difficult grammatical items
- ii) how direct corrective feedback given by teachers can help ESL students with difficult grammatical items in writing different essays.

- iii) how do L2 learners respond to the direct corrective feedback given by teachers in essay writing.

1.6 Research questions

Therefore, the following research questions will be addressed:

- i) How can direct corrective feedback given by teachers help ESL learners to notice difficult grammatical items in their writing?
- ii) How does direct corrective feedback given by teachers help ESL learners in writing different essays?
- iii) How do L2 learners respond to direct corrective feedback given by teachers in essay writing?

1.7 Significance of the study

This section will discuss the significance of this study in the educational field in the future. This study will be very beneficial for Malaysian teachers. This is because this study would allow the teachers to understand the role of corrective feedback in helping Malay L2 learners to notice the difficult grammar items. In this research, the focus will be on 'be' forms as an example of difficult grammatical item. The findings from this research will help the teachers to use corrective feedback effectively in addressing problems faced by SLA learners with difficult grammatical items such as 'be' forms. Consequently, this would lead to a better and more effective teaching and learning process among Malaysian English Language teachers and L2 learners.

1.8 Scope of the study

This research is conducted to study the effects of promoting noticing through direct and written corrective feedback on a selected group of L2 learners' production of difficult grammatical items in essay writing. This study focuses on only selected number of secondary school students from selected L1 background. This is because the study would be able to obtain detailed results which could be used to address the problems faced by Malay L2 learners in noticing corrective feedback in English. The grammatical item in focus for the purpose of study is 'be' form (auxiliary 'be' and copula 'be'). The aspects which will be looked into for the purpose of research will be corrective feedback given by teachers, noticing of corrective feedback by students and students' responses towards corrective feedback by teachers.

1.9 Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of this study would be the selection of the participants. The selected group of native Malay students from the rural area is a limitation of this study. This is because the findings from this research could not be generalized for other L2 learners in Malaysia coming from different L1 background. It is because these L2 learners are from different L1 backgrounds which might have substantial linguistic difference in language system.

Another limitation of this case study would be the method employed in this study. This is because the students in this research were asked to complete one sample per essay in multiple drafts. This is a limitation because the students were not given the opportunity to practice with different samples of essay. For example, the students wrote a speech once. They were not asked to write a second speech during this case study. Thus the students did not have the chance to practice what they have noticed in their essay writing and this could have intensified the students' learning. As such this is a limitation identified in this case study.

Other than that, the focus of this research is on noticing behavior and teachers' corrective feedback. It is important to note that students make different types of mistakes in their writing. The errors include both grammatical mistakes as well as text cohesion and coherence mistakes. Teachers would have to give corrective feedback all the different types of mistakes made by students. Thus, there would be a wide range of mistakes that the teacher has to give corrective feedback on within the limited duration allocated for this research. However, studies on corrective feedback have mostly focused on one grammatical item (Sheen and Ellis, 2011). As such, the researcher also focused on one specific grammar item, 'be' verb forms. This is a limitation because the researcher will cover only errors involving 'be' verb forms in this research.

1.10 Definitions

For the purpose of this research, there are several terms which are used very often that there is a need to define them first. The words and their meanings are listed as below;

- i) Noticing Hypothesis = Noticing Hypothesis claims that input does not become intake for the language learning unless it is consciously registered (Schmidt, 2001). This theory actually looks at how conscious and continuous attention has an effect on L2 developing system. This theory suggests that students need to notice the relevant material in the linguistic data provided to learn L2 (Schmidt, 1994).

ii) Corrective feedback (CF) = Ellis (2009) defines corrective feedback as forms of response made for learners' writing with error.

iii) 'Be' verb Form = Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) explains that 'be' verb functions as copula 'be' as well as an auxiliary 'be'. These two are completely different functions. Copula 'be' functions as linking verb, while auxiliary 'be' functions as verb helper.

a) Copula 'be' : According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) copula is known as linking verb and it has eight different forms (am, is are, was, were been, being and be). Copula links nonverbal predicates for example noun or adjective, with their subjects and it serves as a carrier for tense and subject verb agreement (present tense).

b) Auxiliary 'be' : According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) auxiliary 'be' occurs in progressive aspect, in passive voice as well as in a number of phrasal modals. Samad and Hawanum (2011) explain that auxiliary 'be' does not carry much semantic meaning because it combines with another verb to denote action in a sentence.

This case study looks at 'be' verb form because it is difficult grammar item. It has 2 different forms which were copula 'be' and auxiliary 'be'. Both forms do not have equivalents in Bahasa Melayu, thus making it difficult to be understood and acquired by the students of Malay background. This research observes all the errors involving 'be' verb forms made by the students in their essay writing. Thus it is important to clearly define the 'be' verb forms so that the grammar item in focus is understood in this case study.

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