Written Corrective Feedback on the Use of Conjunctions among Malaysian ESL Learners

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Abstract: This mixed-methods study explored the influence of metalinguistic corrective feedback on thirty Malaysian ESL learners' appropriate and inappropriate use of conjunctions in their writing practice. Data were derived from three sources: students' essays, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The categories of conjunctions explored in this study were additive conjunctions, causal conjunctions, temporal conjunctions, and adversative conjunctions. The percentages of appropriate and inappropriate use of conjunctions were tabulated based on three writing assignments (expository essay, cause and effect essay, and problem-solution essay). The results showed a positive influence of metalinguistic corrective feedback on the ESL learners' use of conjunctions. The findings from the survey questionnaire revealed positive perceptions in three main aspects: the helpfulness and preferences of coded metalinguistic corrective feedback and their feelings receiving the feedback. Additionally, the efficacy of metalinguistic corrective feedback was explored in the questionnaire and interviews with the feedback perceived as a mediator tool, a trigger for noticing, a correction aid for conjunctions use in writing and as a tool to promote independent learning.

Keywords: Written corrective feedback, metalinguistic feedback, conjunctions, ESL writing, college writing.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to write well is essential to achieving success in any educational setting. At the tertiary level, written assignments and examinations are common forms of assessments. One of the important aspects of the writing skill is the ability to write coherently. In this regard,

students are guided to use connectives in their writing. "In EAP [English for Academic Purpose], cohesion and coherence are often discussed in conjunction. Cohesive devices can contribute to text coherence as they can guide the reader" (Basturkmen & von Randow, 2014, p. 15). According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), conjunction is classified under cohesion, which is further categorized into grammatical classification and semantic classification. Semantic classification (which is the focus of this study) consists of 'additive' (for example 'and', 'also'), 'causal' (for example 'so', 'therefore'), 'temporal' (for example 'firstly', 'then') and 'adversative' (for example 'yet'). Conjunctions are elements commonly and extensively used in writing composition when cohesion is concerned. Studies focusing on the use of conjunctions among ESL or EFL learners due to the popular application of conjunctions as cohesion in writing continue to grow gradually over the years. Muftah Hamed's (2014) study on Libyan students' application of conjunctions in argumentative writing diagnosed that the EFL learners faced difficulty in the use conjunctions in their essay. Additionally, Nuruladilah Mohamed's (2016) study on the use of conjunctions in argumentative essay by Malaysian ESL undergraduates revealed that appropriate and inappropriate use of 39 conjunctions occurred due to limited exposure and comprehensibility on the variety of conjunctions.

Metalinguistic corrective feedback

Schmidt (1990) and Sheen (2007) define metalinguistic feedback as a method that involves "the careful and systematic location of an error by the teacher and providing the correct form by explaining the correct term or metalinguistic code" (cited in Eyengho & Fawole, 2013, p. 1614). Metalinguistic feedback involves providing some mode of explicit comment to the learners on the errors they have made using error codes (i.e. abbreviated codes for various types of errors indicated in the text or margin) or metalinguistic explanations of their errors (i.e. providing metalinguistic remarks or numbering errors at the end of the text).

Considering that most studies on metalinguistic corrective feedback (CF) "have been carried out in laboratory context with a focus on learners' end products, there is further work to be done in terms of more longitudinal qualitative studies tracing individual learners' developmental process during their engagement with CF in naturalistic settings" (Chen, Lin, & Lin, 2016, p. 90). In response to this, a study in a natural classroom setting with no experimental 'treatments' given to students was conceived. Additionally, according to Ellis (2012), there are two dimensions of corrective feedback: "strategies for providing CF" and "how students respond to the feedback". Following his ideas, this study aims to explore the influence of metalinguistic corrective feedback on the ESL learners' appropriate and inappropriate use of conjunctions and to investigate the learners' perceptions of the use of metalinguistic corrective feedback in their essay writing practices in order to better understand the use of metalinguistic feedback in a naturalistic setting.

METHOLODOGY

The mixed-methods approach adopted for this study employed the pragmatic worldview with both quantitative and qualitative data drawn from three sources: students' essays, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Participants for this study consisted of 30 (18 female and 12 male) Malaysian ESL students from a private university in Selangor. They were studying the compulsory English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses offered by their respective degree studies (Accounting and Finance, Mass Communication and Hospitality

and Tourism).

Research Instruments

Three writing tasks, based on the syllabus provided by the university, were assigned to the students: one expository essay, one cause and effect essay, and one problem-solution essay. The number of words for each writing task was between 300 and 350 words. A total of 90 essays were collected from three separate writing sessions. Since these essays were part of the course requirements, they were all graded with the university's course essay marking rubric consisting of 5 scale-score for four main components: (1) content, (2) organization, (3) mechanics and (4) sentence structure, diction and usage. While regular grading techniques such as underlining and circling were used to mark the essays, the conjunctions which is the focus of this study, were graded with metalinguistic corrective feedback using abbreviated codes: *Ad* (Additive), *Caus* (Causal), *Temp* (Temporal) and *Adv* (Adversative). The second instrument, a 17-item questionnaire, was given to obtain the students' perception on the use of metalinguistic corrective feedback. The questions were adapted from Anderson (2010) and Balanga et al. (2016). Six of the questions were on demographic and education background information while eleven questions were related to their perceptions on metalinguistic corrective feedback. Each question uses the 5-point Likert scale format ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). In order to elicit more in-depth data, an interview which consisted of eight semi-structured questions was also conducted.

Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study were gathered in the course of one semester (17 weeks). Data collection started in week 4 for the first set of essays (an expository essay). The second and third sets of essay, a cause and effect and a problem-solution essay, were collected in weeks 8 and 12 respectively. The questionnaires were collected in week 14 after the students had completed and received all three of their graded writing tasks. The interviews with six students (two students representing each category of proficiency level - high, intermediate, and low) were conducted in week 17, two weeks after the students completed their final exam. These six students consented to be interviewed individually.

Data Analysis

To explore the influence of metalinguistic corrective feedback on ESL learners' use of conjunctions in essay writing, this study referred to Muftah Hamed's (2014) study. It focuses on the identification, classification, and the appropriate and inappropriate use of conjunctions. For the idenfication and classification of conjunctions, Halliday and Hassan's (1976) cohesion framework for connectives is employed. The percentage for each category of conjunction distributed according to types was then calculated for each writing task. Similarly, percentage calculations were made for the data obtained from the questionnaires while thematic analysis was employed for the interviews.

Limitations of the Study

Even though the findings of the study portray that metalinguistic corrective feedback played a role in improving appropriate use of conjunctions in writing, there are a few limitations to the present exploratory study that should be recognized and considered for future research. The sample size for this study is relatively small (n=30), therefore the results and findings are not able to represent the general population of Malaysian students and the sample was limited to

the context of private university where the setting may differ from other learning institutions. Besides that, the different essay types which were used as part of the data for this study may create issues on reliability. Some crucial variables for this study were not taken into consideration, such as the teacher, learners' goals and motivation of learning English should be involved within the socio- cultural framework to ensure an ideal learning setting. For future research, it is important to increase the number of participants in order for the data to be generalizable. Besides, more themes for discussion can be identified to yield a richer set of finding and response. On top of that, other aspects of treatable errors can be investigated in a qualitative approach besides conjunctions use as cohesion in writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses of Conjunctions

To observe the trend of appropriate and inappropriate uses of conjunctions for all three writing tasks, the distribution of total occurrences is presented first (Table 1), bearing in mind that E1, the expository writing task was written prior to receiving any form of metalinguistic corrective feedback.

Table 1: Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses of Conjunctions

Writing Tasks	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Total (N)	Percentage (%)	
				Appropriate	Inappropriate
E1: Expository	591	80	671	88	12
E2: Cause & Effect	901	72	973	93	7
E3: Problem-Solution	889	53	942	94	6
Total	**2381**	**205**	**2586**		

It can be observed that the total occurrence of conjunctions fluctuates across three writing tasks, E1 (671), E2 (973), and E3 (942) due to the nature of the essay types. However, the appropriate use of conjunctions gradually increased from 88% for E1, to 93% for E2 and finally 94% for E3 after the students received corrective feedback for every writing task. Conversely, the occurrence of inappropriate use of conjunctions reduced consistently for each subsequent writing task: 80 (12%) for E1, 72 (7%) for E2 and 53 (6%) for E3.

Overall, the additive conjunction was the most frequently used conjunction while the adversative conjunction was the least used by the ESL learners in this study. This is found to be similar to Nuruladilah Mohamed's (2016) and Do and Vo's (2014) studies which were conducted on Malaysian ESL learners and EFL learners respectively.

Table 2: Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses of Each Category of Conjunctions

Writing Task	E1: Expository			E2: Cause & Effect			E3: Problem-Solution		
	Approp.	Inapprop.	N	Approp.	Inapprop.	N	Approp.	Inapprop.	N
Additive	384 (91%)	36 (9%)	420	530 (94%)	31 (6%)	561	524 (95%)	25 (5%)	549
Causal	129 (87%)	19 (13%)	148	222 (93%)	18 (7%)	240	206 (95%)	11 (5%)	217
Temporal	71 (90%)	8 (10%)	79	94 (91%)	9 (9%)	103	105 (95%)	6 (5%)	111
Adversative	43 (72%)	17 (28%)	60	55 (80%)	14 (20%)	69	54 (83%)	11 (17%)	65

Total	627	80	707	901	72	973	889	53	942

For the influence of metalinguistic corrective feedback, the results of this study show an encouraging trend. The percentage of appropriate use increased, from 89% for E1 to 94% in E3 and the percentage of inappropriate use gradually decreased for all four categories of conjunctions for each subsequent writing task, from 11% for E1, 7% for E2 and to 5% in E3. The progress shown by learners in this study echoes the findings in Ebadi's study (2014) where the EFL learners' writing ability improved after receiving metalinguistic corrective feedback.

Perceptions of Metalinguistic Corrective Feedback

From the questionnaire and interview data, three themes emerged: the helpfulness and preferences of coded metalinguistic corrective feedback and the respondents' feelings receiving the feedback. Each theme will be discussed by incorporating data from the questionnaire and interview.

On the question of helpfulness, 25 out of 30 students (83%) strongly agreed that '*Metalinguistic corrective feedback (codes provided to indicate error) helped improve my use of conjunctions in writing'*. This strong support concurs with Hyland's (2013) study where "most students believed that feedback can help them in their studies" (p. 182).

On the aspect of preferences on corrective feedback ('*I would like my teacher to provide more metalinguistic corrective feedback in my writing assignments'*), similarly the majority of the students (25 out of 30 students) would like teachers to provide more such feedback. Conversely, on the question of '*I would like my teacher to provide less metalinguistic feedback in my writing assignments'*, 29 students (97%) overwhelmingly disagreed. Again, when presented with the statement, '*I prefer to receive no corrective feedback'*, all 30 students (100%) strongly disagreed. These responses confirm that the Malaysian learners appreciate and want to receive some form of corrective feedback including metalinguistic feedback. Some of the participants (A and D) in the interviews preferred the codes to be explained verbally as well. "If the lecturer explain what the codes mean will be easier to understand. I think overall the flow of my essay improved because I remember to connect my sentences or ideas better now" (Participant A). However, when asked if he would approach the lecturer to clarify if he did not understand the codes, he replied that he would not but would instead ask his friends. This is similar to Carless's (2006) study which found that students do not take the initiative to approach lecturers for verbal feedback (p. 226).

Two participants (E and F) were able to grasp the function of metalinguistic corrective feedback and benefited from it and preferred to have the coding feedback on other errors as well. Participant E, "… But after the second and third time it's easy and clear for me to spot my mistakes or where I can improve better. I believe it'll be better to get feedback on other mistakes as well." This affirmed Goldstein's (2006) claim that learners with higher degree of motivation have more interest in engaging in a higher level of analysis of corrective feedback.

In terms of the perceptions on their feelings towards metalinguistic corrective feedback, the majority of the participants (25 students, 83%) claimed that the feedback does not make them feel bad ('*Metalinguistic corrective feedback makes me feel bad about my writing'*). There are studies that suggest that corrective feedback may impede their confidence and feelings, making them feel discouraged (Truscott, 1996). This is not the case for this study.

To gain further insight into their feelings towards metalinguistic corrective feedback, a question was posed during the interview, *"How do you feel when you receive written feedback from your teacher?"* The six interviewees from various proficiency levels felt that

more details and attention were paid to their essay writing and liked it. Participant C said, "I will think that the teacher mark my essay very detailed. I will read the comments and I will find out where and what is the problem." Additionally, the feedback was a form of motivation for another participant, "I feel the teacher paid attention to my essay and is encouraging me to do better." Interestingly, two participants highlighted that this form of feedback is better than the usual marking that they had received, which is underlining or circling their errors. Based on the interview question, *"What are your thoughts or opinions on these methods in which feedback is given for conjunctions?"* three participants expressed positive viewpoints because according to them, this form of feedback is clearer and better than receiving circles and underlines to indicate errors. Additionally, Participant B stated that, "It's good because can see what is wrong and I can try to connect my paragraphs. For example, for new paragraphs I start with 'besides that' or 'next', last time I just write the sentences only."

In other words, a majority of the learners in this study perceived metalinguistic corrective feedback favourably and that they feel their use of conjunctions in writing has generally improved. Also, their preferences and feelings towards metalinguistic corrective feedback are positive as this form of feedback seems to them to be notably clearer and helpful than circling or underlining their errors in writing. It can also be claimed that these ESL learners prefer both written and verbal feedback which corroborates with Carless (2006) findings where students express it will be better to have verbal explanation by lecturers (p. 226).

On the flip side, there were some aspects of metalinguistic feedback that needed attention. The main concern was that the metalinguistic corrective feedback using codes can be confusing at first. Many of the participants initially faced challenges in interpreting and understanding the corrective feedback codes. Although all participants were given the list of codes and explanations at the beginning of the class, this was evidently insufficient. The intermediate and high proficiency learners (participants C, D, E and F), stated that they were able to understand the codes better from the second writing task onwards. Chandler (2003, cited in Park et al, 2015) found that indirect feedback may create confusion as learners make their own corrections.

Another potential drawback of metalinguistic feedback was the issue of correcting their errors accurately on their own. This is because the codes appeared to be unclear due to the complexity of the errors, for example at the sentence level. It would be important for teacher guidance to continue. As highlighted by Ferris and Roberts (2001), learners are unable to correct their errors if they cannot identify the correct form and although learners may proceed to correct their errors they cannot be sure that they are correct. Moreover, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) and Ferris (2010), indicated that, "Learners with low L2 proficiency are less likely to benefit from indirect feedback as learners need a certain level of linguistic competence to be able to self-correct their errors" (p. 4, cited in Park et al. 2015).

In terms of their feelings, one participant in particular, participant A (with low proficiency) expressed somewhat feeling bad if she did not do well but would check the mistakes later and try not make the same errors again. This is not uncommon as Carless (2006) found that some of his interviewees felt dejected or pressurised when receiving poor feedbacks or marks, but would look into how to do it better next time (p. 229). Thus, "for the weaker students, feedback carries more risk of being discouraging and/or misunderstood" (p. 230).

The negative perceptions towards metalinguistic corrective feedback discussed above mainly revolved around learners' confusion in interpreting the metalinguistic feedback codes and the lack of confidence and ability in correcting their own errors. Furthermore, although learners expressed their dejected feelings they would persevere in correcting their inappropriate use of conjunctions in their writing. These issues are real but fortunately easily

minimised with the teacher's willingness to provide more guidance.

Efficacy of Metalinguistic Corrective Feedback in Conjunctions Use for Writing

Numerous studies (Ferris, 2006; Anderson, 2010; Herrera, 2011; Ferdouse, 2013; Gholaminia, I., Gholaminia, A., & Marzban, A., 2014; Ebadi, 2014) have reported on the efficacy and effectiveness of corrective feedback. The efficacy of metalinguistic corrective feedback in this study was explored in the questionnaire and interviews as a mediator tool, a trigger for noticing, a favourable correction aid for conjunctions use in writing and as a tool to promote independent learning.

On the role of metalinguistic corrective feedback as a mediator tool, Participant D felt that the "teacher pays attention to my mistakes and with the codes I can try to understand what mistakes I make. Sometimes I can see what type of mistakes I make the most also". Echoing this response all six participants interviewed felt their writing was guided because the error codes exhibited the teacher's detailed attention and concerns on their writing. Moreover, corrective feedback appeared to be a form of encouragement for students to pay more attention to their writing progress.

On the role of metalinguistic corrective feedback as a trigger for noticing, almost all the respondents (97% or 29 students out of 30 students) in the questionnaire agreed to: *'I always pay attention to the metalinguistic corrective feedback in my writing assignments.'* Only one student (3%) remained neutral and none of the learners disagreed. This factor of noticing helping to improve the use of conjunctions was further supported by 80% (24 students out of 30) of the respondents when they strongly agree or agree to the question: *'Paying attention to the feedback helps to improve my use of conjunctions in writing'*. Schmidt's (2001) noticing hypothesis has consistently been foregrounded as the theoretical underpinning for the use of corrective feedback. It is hypothesized to be "a necessary condition for L2 learning; what is noticed becomes intake". Thus, metalinguistic corrective feedback could be a beneficial way of encouraging learners to consciously recognise the "gap" or disparity between their interlanguage and the language features, and at the same time motivate students to develop their writing. This result supports the positive role of noticing in L2 learning.

In an attempt to gather learners' perceptions of metalinguistic corrective feedback as a correction aid to prompt them to improve their use of conjunctions: *'I fix the mistakes after my teacher gives me metalinguistic corrective feedback on my conjunctions use errors'*, 83% (25 out of 30 students) of the learners strongly agreed or agreed that they would fix the errors after receiving metalinguistic corrective feedback in their writing assignments. None of the learners disagreed. This is in line with the results from Ferdouse (2013) where she found that correction codes helped in enhancing self-correction.

The theme of metalinguistic corrective feedback as a correction aid was also probed in the interview. Each interviewee's three writing tasks was first analysed to identify the most frequently used conjunction and then their willingness to try new forms of conjunctions was revealed when each was asked, *"Besides the conjunctions (X) you use regularly in your writing, are there new ones you have attempted to include or use in your writing after receiving the corrective feedbacks?"* Four out of six participants claimed that they would try to use new conjunctions in their writing upon receiving corrective feedbacks. An interesting comment came from Participant C when it was revealed that, "I will try to change because when I see I use the conjunctions correctly for one essay, I will use a different one because after the teacher mark I can see if I am correct or not."

On the final role of metalinguistic corrective feedback as a tool to promote independent learning, *'It is better for my learning to discover answers on my own through metalinguistic corrective feedback codes'*, the findings can be perceived to be mixed. 17 students (57%)

strongly agreed or agreed that it is better for their learning to discover answers on their own through metalinguistic corrective feedback codes. However, eight students (27%) remained neutral and five students (16%) disagreed. According to Bitchener and Knoch (2008), learners will gain more advantage from indirect approach because "it requires pupils to engage in guided learning and problem solving and, as a result, promotes the type of reflection that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition" (p. 415). A possible reason for the mixed results is the level of competency. Learners with lower proficiency need more directed guidance. As reported by Anderson (2010), students with lower proficiency tend to prefer direct feedback as it provides clearer feedback which helps them with corrections.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From this study, it can be inferred that metalinguistic corrective feedback certainly influenced the frequency of conjunctions used in writing. It positively influenced the gradual increase of appropriate use and at the same time decreased inappropriate use for all conjunctions category for each subsequent writing task. On the whole, the learners perceived metalinguistic corrective feedback to be helpful and from their response through the questionnaire and interview, almost all agreed that the feedback helped improve their use of conjunctions in writing. The Malaysian ESL learners in this study also perceived metalinguistic corrective feedback as a mediator tool, a noticing factor, and a promising correction aid which encourages them to self-correct and with more structured guidance, it can potentially promote independent learning. Therefore, the findings of this study refute Truscott's (1996) notion that error correction is non-beneficial and non-productive for students' L2 writing development.

A few strategies may be put in place for the learners to benefit fully from this corrective feedback. Besides, giving the codes and explanation, teachers need to closely guide them on self-correction for the first two writing tasks to help student familiarize themselves with the coded marking. By understanding the function and meaning of the corrective codes, students will potentially be able to identify and at the same time make necessary corrections for their subsequent writing tasks.

For teachers who have low proficiency learners, the coded feedback should be supplemented with verbal feedback to help the students understand and correct their errors. When the feedback codes are explained clearly, confusions can be eliminated and thus help learners to be more confident in correcting their errors. In Hyland and Hyland (2006), it is stated that students are keen to receive written corrective feedback along with other sources, including sessions of discussions.

To promote independent learning, feedbacks should be consistently provided for a progressive learning experience. The more familiar the learners are with the coded feedback, the better they will become in identifying and correcting their errors in future writing tasks. As reported in Ebadi's study (2014), "Employing focused meta-linguistic CF improves Iranian EFL learners writing ability. In other words, employing focused meta-linguistic feedback led to a significantly fewer errors in writing and helped learners to become aware of their own errors and monitor themselves. The student become more independent learners and develops autonomy." (p. 882).

By utilizing metalinguistic corrective feedback as a teaching and learning tool, learners can potentially be able to achieve progress and be accountable for their own learning. As stressed by Gholaminia, I., Gholaminia, A., and Marzban (2013), "Corrective feedback can be a means of assessing students' accuracy and helping them to be aware of the errors and more importantly, to make fewer errors in writing. Metalinguistic error feedback helped

learners to become aware of their own errors and monitor themselves. The students learned to be responsible for their own errors and become more independent learners." (p. 320). Based on the positive perceptions on metalinguistic corrective feedback, it is hoped that the dependent learning culture among Malaysian ESL learners can transcend to a more independent learning curve.

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