Written corrective feedback on students' thesis writing: an analysis of student-supervisory interactions

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Abstract

This study examines written corrective feedback (WCF) provided by the lecturers on their supervisee-students' thesis drafts at the English Education Program, Faculty of Education, Jambi University. Following Kumar and Stracke (2007), the analysis focuses on the types and distribution of WCF by Holmes' (2008) three main categories of speech acts: (a) Referential (editorial, organization, content); (b) Directive (suggestion, question, instruction); and (c) Expressive (praise, criticism, opinion). The use of non-linguistic features such as question mark, interjection, circle, and underline was also identified to see the supervisors' emotional expressions during the interactions. The findings show that Referential was the most frequent types of WCF identified (131 out of 271 or 48.3 %), followed by Directive (107 or 39.5 %). Expressive, on the other hand, was not very common with only 33 instances (12.2%) found in the data. Overall, the majority of the lecturers' WCF were dominated by the use of Editorial (102 = 37.6 %) but with a very limited number of Opinion (4 = 1.5%)) and Content (6 = 2.2%). A total number of 394 non-linguistic symbols were identified along with the lecturers' WCF to show their personal and psychological expressions. Apart from its frequent absence in many students' writing assignments, the provision of WCF on the students' writing does not only play a key role in improving the students' writing but also accelerates their self-directed learning.

Keywords: Written Corrective Feedback (WCF); self-regulated learning; thesis supervision

Studies on written corrective feedback (WCF) on students' writing tasks are limited, especially in higher education EFL teaching and learning contexts. The use of WCF has long been overlooked and are frequently inattentive in many lecturer-student supervisory written interactions - they are not common in academic circumstances. Students rarely receive enough and meaningful feedback from the lecturers on their writing tasks, and thus they cannot learn considerably from the feedback. Not only do the students fail to understand their errors and inaccuracies in their writing, but they also show a deficient communication with the lecturers or supervisors. This phenomenon has resulted in both the students' insufficient skills in writing and ineffective interpersonal communication with the lecturers – the two factors which were significantly influential in the process of student thesis writing (Mullins and Kiley, 1998, cited by Kumar and Stracke, 2007: 461). Mullins and Kiley (1998) argued that communication and collaborative skills are necessary for the process of university student supervisory practices as they have been regarded as essential and workable generic skills that play an imperative role in the students' educational development process. Philips and Pugh (2005) further consider this skill as a professional dexterity in Higher Education outcomes.

WCF reflects the lecturers' guidance and instructions over the students work. Through WCF, the students are reinvigorated to respond to the points of the inaccuracies and clarify any queries and comments provided by the supervisors on their writing. Students need to take serious care and attention to make necessary adjustments to the WCF addressed by the lecturers. Both WCF and students' responses formed an interpersonal communication between the students and the lecturers and stimulated self-regulated learning (Stracke and Kumar, 2010). WCF is believed to increase students' critical thinking, analysis, and discovery – all of which are essential in their academic development in higher education. Nevertheless, such a process is not evident in many local settings of the English Education Program, especially in Indonesian Tertiary Education.

In practice, the inadequacy of WCF in most Indonesian higher education may be triggered by at least a few critical factors. The lecturer's overload work and responsibilities, as well as the large number of students taking the course, maybe two of the prime reasons which account for the absence of lecturer's WCF on any students' writing tasks and theses. This even gets worse when the students' works are not corrected and returned to the students. Such a bad practice results in severe academic bias both in teaching and in assessment, causing students' pessimistic and mistrust over this ineffective supervisory environment.

WCF shows lecturer-student communication as if the lecturer is expressing their thoughts and ideas over the student's writing tasks in a face to face setting. It also indicates the lecturer's emotions and feeling, which are

reflected from the student's writing content and quality. Unlike in real face to face interaction, in which mimics and other non-verbal expressions are used, WCF is often represented through specific written symbols such as interjection (!), question mark (?) and many other symbols such as underlines, circles, ticks, and various kinds of emoticons. Quite often, the intensity of the emotion is displayed through the repeating number of the symbols used. The higher the number of the symbols used in the WCF, the more concern and attention that are addressed by the supervisors towards the students' writing. In short, the use of WCF shows the tutor's or lecturer's personal and psychological state over the student's writing.

A few studies have confirmed that WCF plays a crucial role in accelerating students' self-regulated learning (Kumar and Stracke, 2007; Stracke and Kumar, 2010). Students benefit themselves in many ways through the lecturers' comments, corrections, and suggestions on their writing tasks. First, lecturers' WCF provides cues for students to learn more effectively as it is represented in written form in various types and models. These models may be absent in formal learning practices in which the contents are carefully structured and formatted. As claimed by Vygotsky (1978) in Stracke and Kumar (2010: 19) WCF, especially in higher education contexts, serves an essential personal interaction between students and their supervisors, enhancing the students' competence from "the current state" to an optimal state called "proximal".

According to Stracke and Kumar (2010), WCF caused not only the students' encouragement to be independent but also the students' self-regulated learning (SRL). The lecturers on the other hand, according to Stracke and Kumar (2010), may also benefit from WCF, since such a kind of academic practice demonstrates an interactional journey (*travel a journey of discovery* (page 19). "In this process, lecturers or supervisors learn and reflect on their supervision practice as academics so that they can improve and develop the ways they train the students so that they become a member of an academic scholarly community". Hence, the SRL mechanism should work well through the provision of effective WCF by supervisors or lecturers. Hyland and Hyland (2006) add that WCF offers suggestions and comments to facilitate learning as the supervisee students are encouraged to provide responses which need extra efforts to recheck and go back to references for confirmation as prompted in the lecturer's WCF. The supervisees, in this process, are also exercised not only in academic writing but also in other aspects such as time and personal supervision.

SRL has been viewed as academic learning which is emerged in education since the mid-1980s (Stracke and Kumar, 2010). This kind of learning stresses on the individual student experience, which nurtures a master of their own learning process (Zimmermann, 2001). According to Zimmermann (Ibid.), in SRL, students develop active metacognitive, motivation, and behavior in the learning process so that they self-generate thoughts, feelings, and actions to accomplish

their learning goals. This active involvement is said to be an important characteristic of SRL (Zimmermann, 2001 in Stracke and Kumar 2010: 20). SRL is seen as an important factor in effective learning and in academic achievement as students have to decide themselves what to do and learn without any external forces from other persons. It focuses on process, progress, and transferability in which the students keep moving and never stand static. In a thesis supervisory context, the student needs to actively seek information and perform necessary tasks to address all WCF from the supervisors, and this certainly requires extra efforts and time (Boekaerts, 1999). Here, SRL can be viewed as self-directed learning (SDL) for which WCF is an inherent catalyst (Butler and Winne, 1995: 246) and it seems true, in this context, that WCF lies at the heart of the SRL experience of university students (Stracke and Kumar, 2010:22).

Studies on WCF and its relation to SRL have been conducted widely by many scholars, a few of those include Butler and Winne (1995); Hyland (1998); and Hyland & Hyland (2006). Investigations of WCF and its speech acts classification, in particular, have been studied extensively by a few experts. These include those from Kumar and Stracke (2007) and Stracke and Kumar (2010). They categorize WCF into three main speech acts categories (Referential; Directive; and Expressive).

METHOD

This is a descriptive study which bases its data from students' academic writing tasks at the English Study Program, the Faculty of Education, Jambi University. Following Kumar and Stracke (2007) and Stracke and Kumar (2010), this study analyses types, and classifications of lecturers' WCFs based on Holmes' (2001) speech acts classification models (Referential, Directive, and Expressive). Three sub-categories for each of the above classification are also provided (see Table 2). Three undergraduate students (S1 level) who were undertaking Research Proposal and or Thesis Writing were involved either in data collection or in data analysis. These students were encouraged to take WCF as their main topics for their research with various different focuses so that they would get an empirical experience prior to their thesis process and completion.

This study addresses the issues of types, pragmatic classification, proportions, and qualities of WCF provided by lecturers on the students' writing tasks as parts of their academic responsibilities to maximize the students' skills and competence in academic writing. It offers an evaluation of teaching-learning practices which attempts to discuss an effective and workable model of lecturer-student interaction in supervisory practices in a context of Higher Education in Indonesia. The study aims to look at WCF provided by lecturers on the students' thesis writing at the English Study Program, Faculty of Education, Jambi University. It focuses on the types, proportions, and quality of WCF provided

and see how the students learn from the feedback. It looks primarily at the classification of the lecturers' WCFs based on Holmes (2001) pragmatic categorizations.

A descriptive-qualitative method of data collection employed, aiming at categorizing all WCF on the students' thesis drafts based on Kumar and Stracke's (2007) and Stracke's and Kumar's (2010) models. The analysis focuses on types, and classification of the WCF based on Holmes' (2001) speech acts classification models (Referential, Directive, and Expressive) along with their sub-categories for each of the above classifications as seen in Table 2 (p. 7)

The data were collected through 6 samples of students' thesis drafts in which WCF from lecturers or supervisors were attached. All WCF was documented and coded to put them into three main and nine sub-categories. These include **referential**: message/feedback which shows the lecturers' information; **directive**: feedback which signals the lecturers' direction for the students to do something; and **expressive**: feedback which reflects the lecturers' feeling. Further step lies in the analysis of the frequency of each classification to find the percentage and most preferred type of WCF. Finally, the students (respondents) will be asked in a short-term interview, investigating how they learn from WCFs.

FINDINGS

A total number of 271 WCF were found in the data and Referential appeared to be the highest frequency (131=48.3 %). The directive was the second highest with the total number of 107 (39.5), and Expressive turned to be the lowest with only 33 instances (12.2 %) found in the data. The majority of the lecturers' WCF falls into Editorial category with the total number of 102 (37.6 %). Content and Opinion were the least frequent types of WCF in the study, embodying less than 10 % of the total number the lecturers' feedback. This signals that the lecturers did not pay much attention to these two categories in the thesis supervisions and interactions. Table 1 below shows the distribution of WCF in the three main categories of speech act functions.

Table 1. WCF Distribution

Main Function	Sub-Category	Number (N)	(%)
Referential	Editorial	102	37.6
	Organization	23	8.5
	Content	6	2.2
		131	**48.3**
Directive	Suggestion	16	5.9
	Question	58	21.4
	Instruction	33	12.8
		107	**39.5**
Expressive	Praise	9	3.3

Criticism	20	1.4
Opinion	4	7.5
	33	**12.2**
Total	**271**	**100**

Apart from the variations in the use of WCF, the distribution of non-linguistic features used by the lecturers in their WCF also reveals a remarkable disparity, especially in terms of types and functions. Table 2 below shows how the variation occurs.

Table 2. The Use of Non-Linguistic Features

Main Function	Sub-Category	Number (N)	(%)
Non-linguistic Features	Question Mark	96	37.6
	Interjection	47	8.5
	Others (Circle, Arrow, Underline, Cross, Tick, etc.)	251	63.7
		349	**100**

It is obvious that the use of non-linguistic features such as: circle, arrow, underline, cross, and tick dominated the proportion in the data, with the total number of 251 (63.7 %) identified. There is nothing much that can be implied with this trend, but such these features are usually common and remarkably evident in the lecturers' feedback in the students' writing as they reflect a practical and a technical direction and correction that may be assumed to effectively encourage the students' awareness and attention towards their writing errors, inaccuracies, and inappropriacy. The use of question mark was frequently and notably apparent in the table, comprising a total number of 96 (37.6 %). This feature may be generally associated with the lecturers' queries over particular points that show uncertainty, vague, or unclear statements, meanings, ideas, and directions in the students' writing. With this feature, supervisee students need an extra effort to grasp what the lecturers actually try to ask, clarify, or know under the question marks.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study disclosed a few interesting phenomena. The types of WCF provided by the lecturers on the supervisee students' writing tasks, for example, should be critically perceived as either a personal or psychological facet – they should not merely be perceived only as an academic matter. To some

extent, WCF reflects the emotional condition of the lecturers as the effect of the students' errors in the students' writing. The distribution of WCF types in Table 1 demonstrates the lecturers' attitude and style in responding to the students' academic writing, especially thesis writing. The trend of WCF from the lecturers could represent an interpersonal communication between the lecturers and the supervisee students, through which the corrections and suggestions in written forms are provided, expecting that they would significantly accelerate the students' learning. Through WCF, students need to respond and address the issues appropriately pointed out by the lecturers and revise the draft accordingly. With this sort of interaction, students should actively engage themselves in participating by optimizing their critical thinking, analysis, and interpretation. That is why Stracke and Kumar (2010) claim that WCF accelerates the students self-regulated learning as it forms an effective journey of their academic performance.

Data in Table 1 (p.5) describes the proportion of WCF types provided by the lecturers on the students' writing with Editorial (Referential) being the highest in frequency followed by Question and Instruction (Directive). Opinion (Expressive), on the other hand, was the least frequent, signalling the ignorance of the lecturers in expressing themselves elaboratively in their feedback. This finding, however, contradicts to what Yu, Jiang and Zhou (2020) recently found in their research that the expressive feedback turned out to be the most frequently used type of feedback on the students' writing. It was also evident in their study that Expressive was claimed to effectively enhance the students' encouragement and motivation. The discrepancy in this finding may occur due to the differences in the styles of preferences of the lecturers in providing feedback on their students' writing in the two academic atmospheres. However, the limitation in the lecturers' understanding of the content of the students' writing may also be one of the potential causes.

The WCF distribution in Table 1 indicates a few reasons for this phenomenon. First, the problems of the students' writing were tremendous especially the problems of editing, irrelevant ideas, and sequencing; thus the lecturers may not have sufficient understanding to address the content so that they decided to put more emphasis on language and editing matters. This may result in the absence of comments and opinions in the students' writing. Furthermore, a few lecturers may consider expressing opinions or ideas on a particular area, requires a scholarly thorough understanding and analysis which may not work appropriately well at this particular moment, while at the same time, their attention has been heavily preoccupied with editorial problems in the students' writing. Understanding the content and expressing opinions or ideas over the students' academic writing usually take an extra time to do and are

frequently lacking in the students' supervisory interactions, most notably in many Indonesian HEIs contexts.

The overwhelming number of Editorial matters in the lecturer WCF reveals an interesting phenomenon. Most of the problems seem to be recurring in the students' academic writing, showing either their carelessness or their incomplete mastery and understanding over the grammar, spelling, and punctuation systems of the English language. Some of the problems are quite simple but are so surprising or annoying as such errors should have never come up because the students have undertaken enough supporting subjects such as Grammar, Writing, and even Linguistics in their previous semesters. Normally, the students will not be allowed to proceed with the subject of Thesis Writing before they reach semester six or seven. The following examples show the lecturer's WCF addressing Editorial category.

Figure 1. Editorial WCF

In the above example, the lecturer provides cues (circles and arrows) for the student to learn from the inaccuracy of the questions she or he tries to write. With this WCF, it is clear enough that the student that copula "is" should be placed at the end of the sentence. In this example, the student might not have understood the rule (grammar) of Relative Clause in English. This kind of error should never happen as the students have been taught a few Grammar or Structure subjects in their previous semesters. Now, see another Editorial example below:
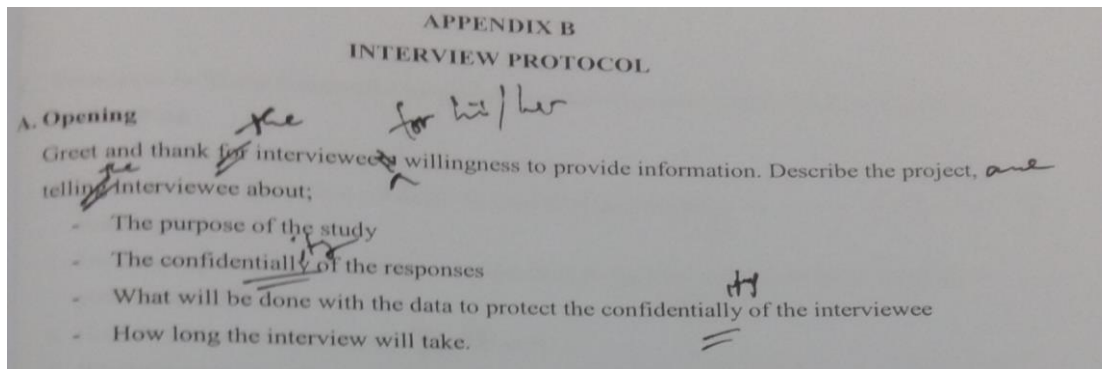
Figure 2. Editorial WCF

Figure 2 reveals that WCF is provided directly with corrections. This kind of correction also reveals the student's incomplete understanding of the rules of grammar of the English language, especially in the use of the article (definite) and Noun formation. Again, this is annoying, and such a kind of error should never take place because it is written by the seventh-semester student.

The worst can be seen in the following example below.
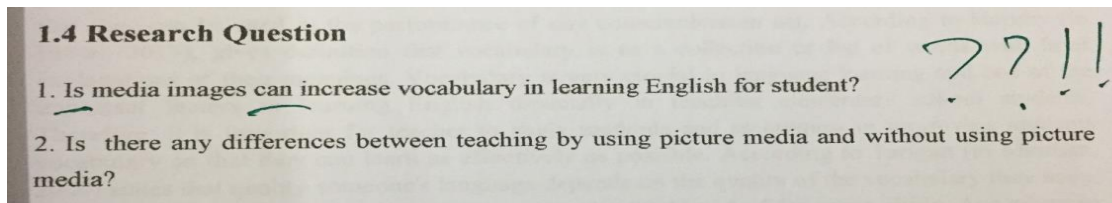

Figure 3. Editorial WCF

The example shows an interesting fact. WCF is addressed only with a few non-linguistic features (underlines, question and interjection marks). At a glance, this is likely careless writing, but too many non-linguistic features may result in the lecturers' annoyance and disappointment since such a kind of careless error should have never occurred. The use of double interjection may display the lecturer's anger over the unexpected careless errors as it is seen in figure 3.

CONCLUSION

The description of findings and discussion reveals that the supervisors' WCF plays a very critical role in making the supervisee students learn and improve their writing skills. The variety of the WCF provided by the supervisors was not as varied as those found by Kumar and Stracke (2007) - it seemed to be

monotonous and simple. They did not cover the whole aspects of writing skills and components that students need. In addition, in a few cases, the complete absence of the supervisors' WCF was evident on some aspects of the students' theses - there was no WCF found at all, and the students could not make any changes and improvements on their thesis drafts.

The majority of the lecturers' WCF fell into Editorial function, with very little attention addressed to substantial content or topic coverage of the students' research. Other WCF regarding the methodology of the study, such as sampling and research procedures, and data analysis, were not significantly frequent. Such comments were extensively required and needed by the students. This was seen through short-term interviews with the supervisee students, showing that they really expected comprehensive lecturers' WCF which should have been addressed more towards substantial aspects of the thesis rather than merely to the editing facet. Opinion, Suggestion, and Criticism are types of WCF that they like most. With these types of WCF, they felt that they received significantly effective inputs, insights, and corrections over their academic writing tasks.

Overall, it is recommended that the students writing tasks or assignments should be treated effectively through comprehensive and meaningful WCF from the lecturers. This is essential as the students need to learn much from feedback or comments written by the lecturers or supervisors on their thesis drafts. The provision of WCF plays a critical role in increasing the students' writing skills and competence, and thus, the corrections and feedback should be comprehensive, motivating, and need to be focused on the students' needs and problems as much evidence shows they are enhancing the students' self-regulated learning (see Boekaerts, 1999; Butler and Winne, 1995; Hyland, 1998; and Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

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Authors' Brief CV

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