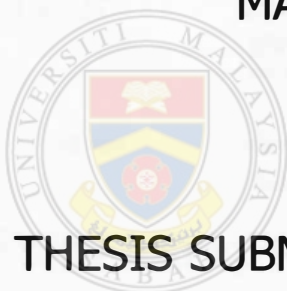


**THE EFFECTS OF UNFOCUSED AND FOCUSED
WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON
GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY AMONG
SELECTED FORM 2 STUDENTS**

MASLIZA BINTI YUNUS



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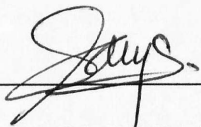
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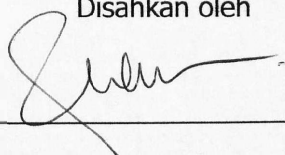
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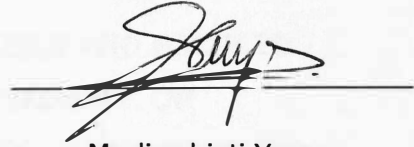
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I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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I thank Allah SWT for giving me the strength to persevere and to finish what I had started. May He bestow His blessings on both my parents, all members of my family and in-laws, and all Muslims, Amin.

As Edith Wharton once said, "Learning Never Ends".

ABSTRACT

THE EFFECTS OF UNFOCUSED AND FOCUSED WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY AMONG SELECTED FORM 2 STUDENTS

The issue of teacher feedback has been the subject of heated debate during the last few decades. Theorists, researchers and classroom practitioners alike have varying degrees of doubt over the efficacy of this widely practiced endeavour. Although various studies had been carried out, there are still uncertainties over the effects of feedback on improving learner's grammatical accuracy especially in producing new texts. The main objective of this study is to determine whether unfocused and focused written corrective feedback (CF) is effective in improving grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns as subject and object in a sentence and possessive pronouns. A quasi-experimental study with a one-group pretest-posttest design involving 30 Form 2 students was carried out. The study was divided into unfocused written CF treatment for the first three weeks and focused written CF treatment for the subsequent three weeks. Data were collected based on four guided writing compositions, two for each type of CF treatment. For the unfocused CF treatment, all the errors were corrected while only errors on the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives were corrected for the focused feedback. Instances of error were analysed and scored using obligatory occasion analysis. The first composition was used as pretest, the revised text was used posttest1 and a new piece of writing carried out a week later was used as posttest2. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used to analyse the data. Findings from the study show that both unfocused and focused written CF were equally effective in increasing grammatical accuracy in writing revised texts. However, it was found that unfocused written CF was more effective than focused written CF in increasing grammatical accuracy in writing new texts, which is in contrast to Ellis *et al.*'s (2008) findings on these two types of feedback.

ABSTRAK

Isu maklum balas guru telah menjadi subjek perdebatan hangat dalam beberapa dekad yang lalu. Ahli-ahli teori, penyelidik dan guru mempunyai pelbagai darjah keraguan atas keberkesanan usaha ini diamalkan secara meluas. Walaupun pelbagai kajian telah dijalankan, masih terdapat ketidakpastian terhadap kesan maklum balas untuk memperbaiki ketepatan tatabahasa pelajar terutama dalam menghasilkan teks baru. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk menentukan sama ada maklumbalas tidak berfokus dan berfokus adalah berkesan dalam meningkatkan ketepatan tatabahasa dalam penggunaan ganti nama diri sebagai subjek dan objek dalam ayat dan kata ganti nama posesif. Satu kajian kuasi-eksperimental dengan reka bentuk kajian satu kumpulan pretest-posttest yang melibatkan 30 orang pelajar Tingkatan 2 pelajar telah dijalankan. Kajian ini telah dibahagikan kepada rawatan maklum balas tidak berfokus selama tiga minggu pertama dan rawatan maklum balas berfokus untuk tiga minggu berikutnya. Data dikumpul berdasarkan empat penulisan karangan berpandu, dua untuk setiap jenis rawatan maklum balas. Bagi rawatan maklum balas tidak berfokus, semua kesilapan telah diperbetulkan manakala kesilapan hanya pada penggunaan kata ganti nama peribadi dan adjektif posesif telah diperbetulkan untuk maklum balas berfokus. Kesilapan dianalisis dan pengskoran adalah menggunakan analisis penggunaan wajib (obligatory occasion). Hasil penulisan yang pertama digunakan sebagai data pretest, teks yang disemak telah digunakan sebagai data posttest1 dan sebuah karangan berpandu baru yang dijalankan seminggu kemudian telah digunakan sebagai data posttest2. Ujian Wilcoxon Signed Rank telah digunakan untuk menganalisis data. Penemuan daripada kajian menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua bentuk maklum balas, tidak berfokus dan berfokus unfocused adalah sama berkesan dalam meningkatkan ketepatan tatabahasa dalam penulisan teks yang telah disemak. Walau bagaimanapun, ianya telah mendapati bahawa maklum balas tidak berfokus adalah lebih berkesan daripada maklum balas berfokus dalam meningkatkan ketepatan tatabahasa dalam penulisan teks baru, satu hasil dapatan yang berbeza dengan dapatan Ellis et al. (2008) tentang keberkesanan kedua-dua jenis maklum balas ini.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL	English as a second language
CF	corrective feedback
L2	second language
WCF	written corrective feedback



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Effective writing skills among secondary school students are very important as these are vital skills that could very much affect students' success at tertiary level educational pursuits as well as their success in any future vocation. It is not only a significant skill to attain for personal enrichment but more importantly, it is an essential tool for professional development. In some cases, even when a learner is able to converse fairly competently in English, the same learner may not be able to express his or her ideas as fluently in writing. Browne (1993) said that writing is not merely speech written down on paper as there are so many more factors to be considered in the process of writing. Unlike in speech, everything that is put in writing is permanent, so achieving accuracy in writing can be considered as an important and worthwhile endeavour. Furthermore, in the written text, unlike in oral communication, writers do not have the luxury to clarify their ideas and intentions through negotiation of meaning, instead, they have that one chance to get it right the first time.

From my personal experience as a classroom practitioner, I have seen even the best of students struggle with their writing. Even those who have arrived at the final year of formal secondary education still see writing as a daunting task which is understandable as writing is arguably the most difficult productive language skill to acquire as compared to speaking and other receptive skills of reading and listening. While many learners may have the necessary knowledge and ideas to produce a potentially high quality piece of writing, the task of actually writing a smooth flowing and at the same time grammatically accurate piece of writing can seem to be an almost impossible task to perfect. Brilliant ideas and plotlines in learners' minds may not transmit as smoothly as expected into the written form, much to the frustration of both learners and teachers.

1.2 Background of the problem

The process of writing, even in one's own mother tongue is a hard enough task, let alone in another language that one is still struggling to learn. In producing a piece of writing, second language (L2) learners need to combine various aspects of linguistic knowledge such as grammatical rules, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation that learners may not have yet mastered and at the same time, they also need to ensure that their ideas flow smoothly by editing and revising their piece of writing. As such, the complexity of the writing process is something that never escapes the attention of both learners and teachers alike.

Even before the L2 learners start to worry about the cohesiveness of any piece of writing, getting to grips with the numerous grammatical aspects of English is already complicated enough. What tense do I use? Is the subject singular or plural? Is the subject male or female? Where does the verb go in this sentence? These are only some of the conflicts that learners are likely to wrestle with each time the teacher says that 'We are going to do writing today!'

Indeed, for a large number of L2 learners, writing certainly is not an easy task even for those who are at the end of their secondary school education. Delving into the question of why that is so is a very complex matter and trying to look at all aspects of written accuracy, fluency and cohesion is also very complicated. My interest in this matter is focused on learners' ability to produce grammatically accurate piece of writing. My initial interest in this was sparked a few years ago based on an observation that I made in the classroom.

In an examination, one of the continuous writing questions in Section B, paper 1 for Form 5 asked students to write a story ending with "... and that was the last time I ever saw him." When I went through the students' answer scripts, I found that not just one but several students had written a story based on the central character of a woman, having missed the cue that it should have been a male character. In my opinion, when learners at Form 5 level are still unable to differentiate between 'him' and 'her', they are bound to make serious errors in semantics which is very likely to affect their ability to communicate their ideas fluently. Even among more advanced students who are able to produce

considerably cohesive and interesting piece of writing, they still tend to make various grammatical errors in their writing that would likely reduce its merit and ability to communicate intended meaning effectively.

For the purpose of this study I have chosen to focus on the use of personal pronouns as the subject and object of a sentence as well as possessive adjectives as many English language learners in Malaysia have particular difficulty in using these items accurately. In the attempt to make sense of the various grammatical rules in English, L2 learners who have already acquired their mother tongue may use what they already know about grammar rules in the mother tongue and applied it to the target language which may be a benefit or otherwise.

In the case of the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives, the rules in English and in Malay are distinctly different. The English third person pronouns 'he' and 'she' are expressed in Malay as 'dia' which does not differentiate whether the subject or object is male or female (Yong, 2001: 284) which makes it is very confusing for Malay speaking English language learners to determine which is the correct pronoun to use in English as it is not a factor that they need to consider either in their daily oral communication or in writing in Malay. Furthermore, the English pronouns may also change in form depending on whether it is the subject or object in the sentence.

In the teaching and learning processes of writing, there are countless issues that one could delve into but also one issue that I wish to explore is feedback. It is widely regarded that learning and giving feedback go hand in hand. However, many second language teachers feel that despite the laborious efforts put into marking and correcting students' written errors, the students did not seem to learn much from it, if at all. Perhaps that is one of the possible reasons why after years of instruction, my Form 5 students were still unable to differentiate 'him' from 'her'. If that is the case, why give feedback at all? Like other language teachers the world over, I certainly have had my fair share of feedback giving and spent countless hours be it during the school hours or at home, on this endeavour. I certainly hope that it was not a futile attempt.

Looking at the literature, while various studies have been carried out on the efficacy of various forms of feedback on different areas of writing accuracy and fluency, no definitive answers have been arrived at as past research often provides ambiguous evidence of the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (CF). However, Fanselow (1987:267) states that 'to teach is to provide feedback' which indicate that the process of giving written CF is essential in the English language classroom. This study has been designed with the assumption that giving corrective feedback is a desirable part of the writing process and is indeed beneficial in improving grammatical accuracy among ESL learners in the Malaysian classroom context.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Teachers give corrective feedback because they believe that doing so will help learners to improve their writing. This belief is supported by empirical studies on written corrective feedback (CF) by researchers such as Ellis, et al (2008), Evans et al (2010) and Sheen (2007) who indicate that giving written corrective feedback (CF) does help learners to improve grammatical accuracy in their writing. However, other researchers have also found that certain practices in giving feedback would have adverse effects on students' motivation. For example, Zacharias (2007) found that learners felt de-motivated and overwhelmed if too much feedback were given on their writing.

In my own experience, I definitely can sense learners' disappointment at seeing the compositions that they have worked hard on returned to them riddled with red ink. Based on Zacharias' findings and my own experience, I would expect that practicing restraint in giving a more focused feedback by choosing one or two types of error to correct at one time might actually be more effective than giving feedback that is very extensive and unfocused by marking most if not all errors in a student's piece of writing (Ellis, 2008: 98). Furthermore, it would simply make much more sense as it would be less time consuming for teachers who already have so much on their plate to deal with.

It is also assumed that errors that remain uncorrected would become a habit and in time, fossilize. In order to avoid fossilization, this study is conducted on

lower secondary school students before these grammatical errors become harder to rectify. Form 2 students are chosen as they have had more instructions in this grammatical form since entering secondary level schooling in Form 1 and throughout their primary level schooling. Students at this level should also be more familiar with the format of directed writing compositions which they would be required to produce as the main element of the study. In contrast to Zacharias' (2010) findings, Ellis et al (2008) found that both unfocused CF and focused CF were effective in improving learners' accuracy in the use of English articles. Thus, this study attempts to explore the effectiveness of unfocused CF compared to focused CF on learners' pieces of written work to improve their accuracy in the targeted grammatical forms, the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives, among Form 2 English language learners in Malaysia.

1.4 Aim of the study

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of unfocused and focused written corrective feedback to improve students' grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives among Form 2 English language learners in Malaysia generally and in Sabah specifically.

1.5 Objectives of the study

The study has been designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the effects of unfocused written CF on grammatical accuracy in writing revised texts and new texts among Form 2 English language learners.
2. To investigate the effects of focused written CF on grammatical accuracy in writing revised texts and new texts among Form 2 English language learners.
3. To determine which type of written CF is more effective in helping to increase grammatical accuracy in writing revised texts and new texts among Form 2 English language learners.
4. To investigate the students' perception towards unfocused and focused written corrective feedback.

1.6 Research questions

The study is designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Does unfocused written CF help to increase grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in writing revised texts and new texts?
2. Does focused written CF help to increase grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in writing revised texts and new texts?
3. Is there a difference in the effect of unfocused and focused written CF on grammatical accuracy in writing revised texts and new texts?
4. How do Form 2 English language learners perceive the effectiveness of unfocused and focused written CF in helping to increase their grammatical accuracy in writing revised texts and new texts?

1.7 Research hypotheses

- Ho1: There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest1 results in increasing grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives with unfocused CF.
- Ho2: There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest2 results in increasing grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives with unfocused CF.
- Ho3: There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest1 results in increasing grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives with focused CF.
- Ho4: There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest2 results in increasing grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives with focused CF.
- Ho5: There is no significant difference between unfocused and focused written CF in increasing grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in writing revised texts (posttest1).
- Ho6: There is no significant difference between unfocused and focused written CF in increasing grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in writing new texts (posttest2).

1.8 Significance of the study

English is an extremely important language to master not merely for examination purposes but also as a tool to further careers as well as a recreational tool to enrich lives. A good command of English would enhance a school leaver's success in pursuing further education and increase a graduate's chances at obtaining desired professional posts. However, grammatical accuracy among secondary school students in Malaysia is still far from being at its optimum level. The significance of this study is to determine whether or not giving students unfocused or focused written CF could indeed serve to increase grammatical accuracy in the use of the target grammatical item, the use of personal pronouns as subject and object in a sentence and possessive adjectives. The study would also shed some light on whether unfocused and focused written CF would show any difference in effect in increasing grammatical accuracy in the use of the target grammatical item. Findings from the study would allow the researcher to make recommendations on the practice of feedback giving in English language classrooms in the Malaysian context.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

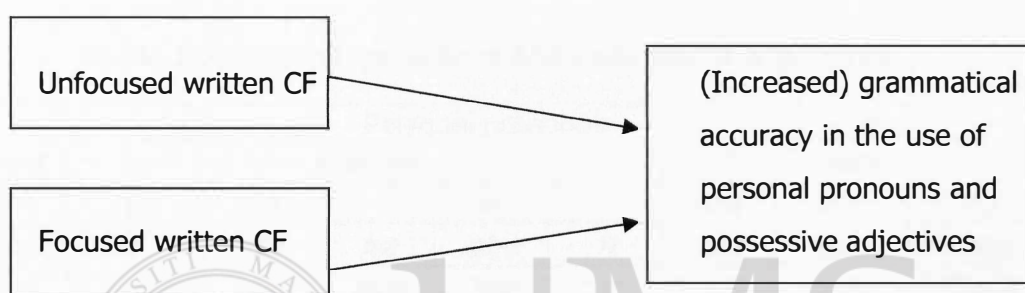
The main limitation for this research is that it was only conducted for a short period of time (6 weeks) as the data collection process had to be done at the end of the school year. Busy school schedules at this time of the year such as examinations had to be taken into consideration in planning and carrying out the classroom based treatment process. The study was also designed with a small number of participants which would reduce the generalizability of the research. The sole experimental group is one intact class with 36 registered students. There was no control group included in the study that was not given any kind of feedback as I believe that denying any group of student feedback that is given to another group is unethical. I had originally designed the study to involve two experimental groups, one given the unfocused CF treatment while other focused CF treatment but had decided to adopt the one-group design instead to reduce threats to internal validity as the two classes are taught by different English teachers and I would not have any means of controlling the input given by both teachers that might compromise the findings of study when I was not present in the classroom. The study also looked at the effectiveness of direct written CF in relation to the use of only

personal pronouns and possessive adjectives, not looking at the accuracy and fluency of the written text as a whole.

1.10 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is shown below. The framework relates the relationship between the two variables, unfocused and focused written CF and their hypothesized effects in either increasing or decreasing grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives.

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework of the study



1.11 Definition of terms

1.11.1 Direct written CF

Direct written CF involves the teacher identifying the error on students' piece of writing by way of underlining the error and providing the correct form above the erroneous one. In the case of the desired grammatical item being missing, it is marked using this sign (Λ) and the correct form provided above it. Both forms of the written CF used in the study, unfocused and focused written CF, are both direct written CF as errors are clearly marked and the correct form given.

1.11.2 Unfocused CF

In unfocused CF, **all errors** in the piece of writing are identified and corrected including on the use of the target grammatical items, personal pronouns and possessive adjectives.

1.11.3 Focused CF

Focused CF is operationalized as indicating the location of errors and providing the correct form as mentioned above but **only on the erroneous use** of the target grammatical items, personal pronouns as subject and object in a sentence and possessive adjectives.

1.11.4 Grammatical accuracy

Grammatical accuracy in this study will only refer to grammatical accuracy in the use the target grammatical items, personal pronouns as subject and object in a sentence and possessive adjectives as shown below:

Table 1.1 Personal pronouns and possessive adjectives

Personal pronouns								
Number	Singular					Plural		
Person	1st	2nd	3rd			1st	2nd	3rd
Subject	<i>I</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>he</i>	<i>she</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>they</i>
Object	<i>me</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>him</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>Them</i>
Possessive adjectives								
-	<i>my</i>	<i>your</i>	<i>his</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>its</i>	<i>our</i>	<i>your</i>	<i>their</i>

(Adapted from Azar, 2003: 171, 176)

1.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have talked about the reason why I have decided to study the effects of unfocused and focused written corrective feedback in helping to increase grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives among Form 2 English language learners in Sabah. As I have mentioned earlier, writing is a task that can be daunting even in one's own mother tongue, let alone is a language that one has yet to master. As such, it is very important that various aspects in the teaching and learning process of writing in the L2 classroom be given particular attention including the process of giving feedback. In the following chapter, the importance of writing and feedback in the L2 classroom is elaborated on. Various studies that have been conducted on the effectiveness of various types of feedback, on various different aspects of writing and the salient findings of these studies are also presented.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, the aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of unfocused and focused written corrective feedback (CF) to improve students' grammatical accuracy in the use of personal pronouns as subject and object in a sentence and possessive adjectives. In order to understand the significance of feedback in the writing process, it is necessary to understand the process of writing itself especially in the second language (L2) setting. In addition, it is also important to look at the different types of written CF and to have a better understanding of what has already been done to study their effectiveness on various aspects of grammatical accuracy and what are their findings of the studies conducted.

2.2 The importance of writing and feedback in the L2 classroom

The importance of writing in the L2 classroom is undeniable not merely for the pursuit of further education, commerce but also for personal enrichment, a sentiment that is reflected by Weigle (2002). Harmer (2008) states that one of the reasons why writing is very important in learners' language development is because writing gives learners more 'thinking time' that gives them more time to actively process the language compared to more spontaneous oral production of language. Raimes (1983) added that writing is essential in helping students learn as it helps to reinforce among others the grammatical structures and vocabulary that they have been taught in the classroom.

When children grow up, they will learn to speak their mother tongue through the unconscious process of acquisition but in attempting to learn a second language once you have acquired your mother tongue, various aspects of the target language have to be processed consciously. In this process, L2 learners may produce what is termed as interlanguage (Selinker, 1972 in Bates et al, 1993). Bates et al (1993) describes this stage as the learners' attempts to make sense of the 'chaos of linguistic forms' by trying to 'impose order' and produce language that