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Providing Corrective Feedback on Esl Students' Writing During Open and Distance Learning (Odl)

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has altered the landscape of education, including language acquisition, where teaching and learning now takes place virtually. Therefore, educators are required to adapt to the sudden changes in teaching scenario. Language instructors face challenges in teaching language skills especially writing in open and distance learning. One of the most crucial building blocks in improving language learners' writing skill is the feedback they receive on their writing. This has proven to be the main challenge as giving feedback to students can no longer be given through face-to-face interaction. Thus, this study aimed to explore the practices applied by English language lecturers in providing corrective feedback on ESL students' essay writing during ODL and the underlying reasons for their choices of practices. Focusing on qualitative research method, 10 respondents were interviewed to collect data on the practices they applied in providing corrective feedback on their learners' essay writing during ODL and reasons for the practices they chose. The thematic analysis revealed various practices were adopted mainly to suit and support the needs of the students as well as the preference of the lecturers themselves. The respondents also shared some suggestions to improve the practices in providing corrective feedback on students' writing during ODL. Keywords: Corrective Feedback, Writing, ESL, Online and Distance Learning.

Introduction

Over the years, many second language learners have been describing writing as one of the most difficult skills to master in language acquisition (Wicaksono, 2017; Wihastyanang et al., 2020). This viewpoint inevitably makes them struggle in gaining mastery of said skill with some going as far as to show reluctance or avoidance to engage in any writing activities. Nevertheless, writing remains a critical language skill to be developed in second language learning (Nematzadeh & Siahpoosh, 2017) and one that language instructors have to focus their attention on in developing their learners' language proficiency. Meanwhile, numerous studies have explored the significance of corrective feedback on the development of learners' writing skill, with most indicating its constructive role in providing guidance in revising writing

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work and learning from errors. Westmacott (2017), for instance, explained that corrective feedback helps reinforce grammatical knowledge and encourage active and autonomous behaviour in writing classes. In short, the importance of both writing skill in second language acquisition as well as the provision of corrective feedback as its building block are indeed undeniable.

However, the landscape of education, including second language acquisition, has drastically changed since the spread of Covid-19. Physical classrooms and direct interactions have to be transformed into virtual teaching and learning, also known as open and distance learning (ODL). It is now imperative for language instructors to integrate technology into their teaching (Wihastyanang et. al., 2020). This includes the shift in teaching writing and providing corrective feedback that were previously done in physical and immediate setting, to online platforms. In writing skill development, the shift in the mediums or platforms of instruction should not, in any way, disregard the significant role of corrective feedback provision to learners. Thus, this unprecedented situation requires an exploration of the choices of practices or strategies with regards to writing activities, particularly the provision of corrective feedback, among second or foreign language instructors (Wei & Cao, 2020). As corrective feedback remains a crucial part of writing skill development, it is worth exploring the strategies and practices that language instructors can apply during ODL in supporting learners' language acquisition. The findings can shed some light on the available and feasible practices that can be implemented in providing corrective feedback to language learners' writing during ODL.

Hence, this study aimed to explore the strategies applied by English language lecturers in providing corrective feedback on ESL students' essay writing during ODL and the underlying reasons for their choices of practices. The study intended to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the platforms used by the lecturers in teaching writing during ODL?

2. How do the lecturers give corrective feedback on students' essay writing during ODL?

Literature Review

Corrective Feedback on Writing

Feedback, which can be described as feedback from a reader to a writer by providing information to the writer for revision, is a critical component of a process approach to writing (Keh, 1990). Written feedback is used to help learners develop their writing skills and serves as a compass that directs them in the right direction (Tee, 2014). In general, there are two forms of corrective feedback: direct and indirect corrective feedback. Direct feedback is a form of feedback given by language instructor to students by correcting the mistake done by the students in their essay writings and indirect feedback is also a form of corrective feedback, however, the language instructor just indicates the errors done by the students but not providing the correct form directly (Sabarun, Sugianto & Elhawwa, 2020). Besides, a study carried out by Westmacott (2017) highlighted that students in a Chilean university assented indirect feedback was more practical because it stimulates greater cognitive learning. This is supported by a study done by Eslami (2014) on 60 low-intermediate students in Iran where it was revealed that the indirect feedback group surpassed the direct feedback group in terms of post-test and delayed post-test. Nevertheless, Sabarun, Sugianto and Elhawwa (2020) disclosed that whether the students received direct or indirect feedback, their writing performance was on par. Therefore, it is crucial to note that there were several studies (Eslami, 2014; Westmacott, 2017) where indirect feedback was beneficial to the students.

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Previous studies revealed that providing feedback on students' essay could improve their writing (Farrah, Zahida & Zaru, 2014; Omar, Safa, Al-Talib, Abeer, Shaibob, & Lasheen, 2020; Sabarun, Sugianto & Elhawwa, 2020; Saidon, Said, Soh, & Husnin, 2018; Tee, 2014; Xhama, 2018). They must improve writing skills because they are vital for them especially in their academic writing and professional life (Omar, Safa, Al-Talib, Abeer, Shaibob, & Lasheen, 2020). Furthermore, providing feedback to the students could enhance their grammatical skills (Westmacott, 2017) and boost their motivation to write better (Hamidun, Hizwari, & Othman, 2013; Zarei, Ahour, & Seifoori, 2020). In terms of psychological implication, it could increase the students' morale because it showed that the teacher checked their essay thoroughly (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014; Walker, 2017). This could improve their writing skills when the teacher drew attention to inaccuracies in their writing and asked follow-up questions regarding their points (Saidon, Said, Soh, & Husnin, 2018). In addition, it is necessary to provide feedback to second language learners in order to reduce their errors and to provide a solution to the students' writing. Hence, this can increase positive attitude towards writing and reduce frustration in essay writing.

Online Learning or Open and Distance Learning

According to Saima et al (2012), open and distance learning (ODL) refers to a situation in which the teaching process is conducted away from the learner. The aim is to allow more openness and flexibility in the teaching and learning process. In addition, ODL can also be defined as a flexible learning method for students who are not able to be physically present at a specific location nor attend the traditional classroom setting (Towobola and Raimi, 2011). At first, the concept of ODL is to cater to busy students or learners who are not able to fit in the typical classroom schedule. This is because the lectures, notes and assignments are posted online therefore giving students the liberty to study at their own pace without having to adhere to conventional classroom settings. The arrival of COVID-19 in Malaysia on 25th January 2020 has changed the meaning of ODL in this country. Instead of catering for only busy students, ODL has since been used fully for the teaching and learning process in Malaysia. This is due to the enforced Movement Control Order (MCO) by the federal government in its effort to curb the pandemic.

For UiTM, with the exception of a few courses, all classes have been moved to open and distance learning (ODL) mode effectively since April 13 last year until today. UiTM blends asynchronous and synchronous online learning which means the learning process can happen without real-time interaction and/or real-life interaction. The advantage of practicing ODL is that the learning process can happen any time and at any place. However, ODL also comes with its own disadvantages. One of them is the inability for teachers to provide face to face feedback to the students. As face-to-face interaction is no longer possible, educators are forced to find new ways to administer their lesson. Google Classroom (GC) is one of the most famous applications chosen by educators to conduct their class. GC offers a teaching environment that is interactive and learner-centred whilst the students find GC to be a useful platform to study language learning activities (Nanthinii, 2020).

Practices Applied in Providing Corrective Feedback on Writing during ODL

The development of technology and the recent education transformation to ODL have enhanced the role of technology in both delivery and providing feedback in the process of teaching and learning languages as well as research. Various modalities (text, audio, or video) that are available and accessible to educators creates opportunities for future studies in

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studies in terms of giving effective online feedback (Elola & Oskoz, 2016). Previous studies on students' perceptions towards e-feedback and the traditional written feedback, exposed their preference towards the prior than the latter (Chang et al., 2013; Saliem & Ahmed, 2009). This can be due to the nature of computer-mediated corrective feedback which differs from the conventional face-to-face corrective feedback.

Technology-based corrective feedback could be provided in both synchronous (immediate feedback) and asynchronous (delayed feedback) communication. Thus, this presents an advantage when applied since the constraints of time and geographical location can be overcome and suits the needs of specific instructional settings and goals of distance education. It further enables all forms of feedback to be permanently available for students at any time and encourages students' participation (Warschaver & Ware, 2006) and less demanding on the working memory due to their untimed nature (Shintani, 2016). Nevertheless, in a study by Chang et al. (2013), participants indicated that handwritten corrective feedback is more preferred as it was perceived to be more detailed and personally connected with the instructor. Despite that, studies have mentioned that online media and applications available provides help and support for language teaching and learning as various functions are made to cater to the needs of teachers and students (Iksan & Halim, 2018; Parkin, Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, & Thorpe, 2012). Instructors could highlight, add notes and comments, even use the available editing features, which could show grammatical errors and check spellings in students' writing easily (Widyaningsih, 2018).

Moreover, a study by Rassaei (2019) on the effects of text-based and audio-based corrective feedback on learner's style and accuracy revealed that both types promote learners' knowledge on the target forms. However, audio-based corrective feedback is more effective than text-based for the development of the target forms. This result might be due to the difference between modality where written work (text-based) and corrective feedback (audio-based) could trigger more attention to the target form and could enhance motivation by creating a social aspect of computer-mediated interaction between learners and instructors. The mixture of methods which accommodates students' learning style and preference could help influence students' quality of writing in the long run (Rassaei, 2019; Tuzi, 2001).

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative analysis research design in investigating lecturers' corrective feedback on students' essay writing in ODL setting. The aim of the research is to gauge in-depth understanding of the situation and those involved in the process. Purposive sample technique was adopted in identifying suitable participants in achieving the research objectives. The participants were 10 English lecturers, 6 females and 4 males, from Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka, with more than 5-year teaching experience. Lecturers teaching the English course, Integrated Language Skills III-Writing (ELC231) were selected as the nature of the course is on teaching writing skills to the third semester diploma students after they have completed their prerequisite courses that focus on receptive skills, listening and reading. English courses are compulsory for tertiary diploma students of all public universities in Malaysia. One of the course objectives is at the end of the course, students should have necessary skills to help them improve their written English, especially in writing expository essays and evaluative commentary essays. Hence, to accomplish this learning objective, necessary corrective feedback should be administered. However, corrective feedback

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provided to the students will differ should the context undergo transformation, in this case, the setting of ODL.

As a constructive method for qualitative data collection, a semi-structured interview was conducted thoroughly with the participants. In data collection, open-ended data was chosen in examining thoughts, feelings and beliefs of the participants. The questions formed by researches were constructed based on interview questions gathered from earlier researches. The data were later collected and reviewed following the interview in establishing true and accurate data. The researchers' mutual consensus was corroborated in transcribing and labelling the data. Should more elaboration be required to explain the responses, participants were contacted and further questions were asked to clarify and prevent misinterpretations and presumptions. Accumulated data then were analysed descriptively based on inductive thematic analysis.

Results

Research Question 1 aimed to explore the platforms used by the lecturers in teaching writing during ODL. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: Google services, social messaging applications, video conferencing applications, and Learning Management Systems. Majority of the participants used Google services that include Google Classroom, Google Meet, email, as well as YouTube. They added that Google services provide suitable platforms for their needs in teaching writing such as in sharing materials, assigning tasks, collecting assignments, sharing feedback, and communicating with students. Google Classroom, according to P1, P6, and P7 for instance, was utilised primarily to assign and collect writing tasks, along with email for a few of them (P4, P6, P9). In addition, Google Meet was used to provide further explanations in a synchronous manner while YouTube was utilised by P1 and P8 to share materials and extra educational videos.

With regard to social messaging applications, many participants used WhatsApp. Participants (P5, P6, P7) relied on this platform to communicate and give comments or feedback to students as they teach writing during ODL. One participant, P4, also used Telegram to communicate with his or her students in addition to WhatsApp. As for the video conferencing applications, one participant mentioned Zoom in teaching writing during ODL. P4 stated that Zoom was the main platform used in his or her writing classes. No other video conferencing application was mentioned by the participants apart from Zoom and Google Meet. Meanwhile, when it comes to the Learning Management Systems, one participant (P3) stated that he or she used uFuture, a Learning Management System specifically developed by UiTM. Another participant (P10) cited Edmodo as one of the platforms he or she used in teaching writing during ODL.

Research Question 2, meanwhile, intended to explore on the ways the lecturers give corrective feedback on students' essay writing during ODL and their reasonings behind their choices. The analysis revealed four main themes which are written, verbal, direct and indirect corrective feedback. All participants, with the exception of P6, applied written form of corrective feedback in teaching writing. They preferred to write down and share their corrective feedback with the students. One participant (P9) claimed that this strategy is convenient for students, especially when they are in large groups, and is able to make them feel much more comfortable and confident in their writing. Many participants, on the other hand, chose written corrective feedback as it is convenient for lecturers. For instance, P3

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indicated that it is a faster and clearer strategy, while P8 stated that it is more practical. P5 further explained that it is not easy to have individual sessions in a synchronous manner, thus opting to share corrective feedback in written form instead.

In addition to written corrective feedback, verbal form of corrective feedback was also utilised in teaching writing. Almost all of them indicated that the strategy is used as a means to provide in-depth explanation, initiate discussion as well as highlight common errors. A few participants mentioned that verbal corrective feedback is applied when the students' errors required detailed explanation and discussion. For instance, P4 would arrange a virtual meeting session with the students who needed in-depth explanation on their errors while P7 resorted to this strategy when he or she felt the students needed detailed show-and-tell of their errors and P10 used the voice messaging function on WhatsApp to provide further explanation to students. Verbal corrective feedback is also used to address common errors. P1 and P3, for example, chose to share verbal corrective feedback in a synchronous or live session following a writing task submission when they wanted to highlight common errors to the students as a whole. P6 explained that he or she listed some common errors done by students and discussed the errors in class as verbal corrective feedback. One participant (P9) added that verbal corrective feedback is also suitable for low proficiency students and sometimes code switch was needed to make sure the students see and understand their errors in writing.

As for direct corrective feedback, only three participants (P3, P7, P10) chose to employ this strategy on students' essay writing in correcting the errors made by the students. P3 and P10 preferred to combine both direct and indirect feedback to correct their students' errors in writing, depending on the situation and errors. P10 added that this strategy was applied when the students contacted him or her personally. P7 also pointed out and stated his or her students' mistakes directly. On the other hand, half of the participants preferred indirect corrective feedback. The participants (P1, P5, and P7) would leave general indirect corrective comments, like check your grammar and sentence structure, to indicate the students errors. Meanwhile, P1 explained that instead of giving general comments, he or she would use indicators where certain symbols or acronyms and different colours were left to indicate mistakes in the essay with their meanings provided at the bottom. He or she further elaborated that he or she rarely gave the correct version of the errors because he or she wanted the students to learn by correcting their mistakes.

Discussions

The analysis of the data revealed that almost all of the participants used Google services that include Google Classroom, Google Meet, email, and YouTube. These services, they explained, provided suitable platforms for their needs in teaching writing such as in sharing materials, assigning tasks, collecting assignments, communicating with students, and sharing feedback. Meanwhile, out of a number of social messaging applications available, WhatsApp was a favourite platform among the participants as a medium to communicate and give comments or feedback to students. Participants' preference in using Google services and WhatsApp to provide corrective feedback and communicate with students appeared to mirror students' preference in receiving online feedback from the teachers compared to traditional written feedback (Chang et al., 2013; Saliem & Ahmed, 2009). This is due to the nature of technology-based corrective feedback which could be done through synchronous and asynchronous

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communication. Hence, the students were more inclined to prefer online corrective feedback since they could access the feedback at any time and anywhere (Warschaver & Ware, 2006). Google Classroom (GC), meanwhile, is one of the most famous applications chosen by educators and students alike as it is considered interactive, learner-centred, and convenient (Nanthinii, 2020).

In addition, almost all participants combined both written and verbal forms of corrective feedback in teaching writing as it is convenient for them to share their feedback to individual students respectively as well as provide in-depth explanation, initiate discussion and highlight common errors to multiple students at once. The use of only one form of corrective feedback provision was considered insufficient as most of the times the participants had to resort to a combination of both to ensure their students were able to not only identify their errors based on the corrective feedback shared, but also understand what made them errors and how to rectify them. Their strategies echoed Rassaei (2019) who reported that both types promote learners' knowledge on the target forms. Even though audio-based corrective feedback was found to be more effective than text-based for the development of the target forms due to its ability in triggering more attention to the target form and enhancing motivation by creating a social aspect of computer-mediated interaction between learners and instructors, ultimately, the mixture of both strategies could actually accommodate students' learning style and preference as well as help influence students' quality of writing in the long run (Rassaei, 2019; Tuzi, 2001).

When it comes to direct corrective feedback, only three participants employed this strategy in correcting the errors made by the students. On the other hand, indirect corrective feedback was more frequently used among the participants as half of them applied it. Two more participants combined both direct and indirect strategies in providing feedback to students' writing. Previous studies also divulged that students preferred receiving indirect feedback as it was more beneficial for their writing performance and encouraged better cognitive learning (Eslami, 2014; Westmacott, 2017). A study done by Sabarun, Sugianto and Elhawwa (2020) unveiled that students had similar writing performance even though they were provided with direct or indirect feedback. In other words, regardless of the type of feedback teachers applied, the students would benefit from the corrective feedback they received.

Conclusion

The spread of Covid-19 has brought about tremendous changes in our lives. In the education setting, instructors and students alike have to adapt to full online teaching and learning, ODL. For language instructors, practices in teaching writing and providing corrective feedback have to be modified so as to stay in line with the course objective and ODL medium. The exploration of their current strategies for corrective feedback provision revealed that Google services (Google Classroom, Google Meet, email, and YouTube) and the social messaging application WhatsApp were the most preferred platforms as they are believed to be the most convenient and effective in developing students' writing skills. Strategies more frequently applied, meanwhile, were the combination of written and verbal feedback and indirect corrective feedback. All these strategies appeared to mirror students' preferences of corrective feedback received in past studies.

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Limitations and Future Studies

Due to the small number of participants, future studies could be done extensively among a greater number of participants and geographical coverage since the research was only conducted in a Malaysian public university. Other related studies should also uncover students' perceptions towards technology-adapted corrective feedback on their written essays as ODL integrated classrooms have just been fully implemented.

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