An analysis of focused metalinguistic written feedback: How would learners react?

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ABSTRACT

Learners of higher education are encouraged to write a scholarly publication in that it helps corroborate them as professionals in their fields of study. Practices in academic writing are thus indispensable to do to achieve a higher level of competency. This study explores learners' reactions towards focused metalinguistic written feedbacks provided by a lecturer. The lecturer used electronic mail to provide constructive feedback to her students. This mixed-method study involved 22 post-graduate students from an Indonesian university. In analyzing the qualitative data, the researchers employed Miles and Huberman's qualitative data analysis approach. Meanwhile, the quantitative data, namely the basic analysis of focused metalinguistic written feedbacks were analyzed by employing Cumming's writing approach. The findings reveal that: (1) learners revised and expanded their draft after getting back their paper; (2) lecturer's feedbacks through email have reportedly motivated learners because such the feedbacks did not lead learners perplexity compared to the handwritten feedbacks; (3) the majority of participants used revising and responding, consulting a dictionary/grammar book, and referring to the previous composition as the ways to handle lecturer's input.

Keywords: *Academic writing; Focused metalinguistic feedback; Learners' reactions*

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1. Introduction

Writing scholarly publication is one of the skills that higher education students should have in an academic writing course. Writing for publication differs from writing for course assignment as it needs special skills to possess (Nolan & Rocco, 2009). Nevertheless, many studies highlighted that students experienced challenges in writing for academic publications, especially in the EFL context. Learners might have less experience writing their publications because they lack proper English writing skills to submit in a reputable journal (Moldovan, 2011). Grammatical issues are where the most higher education students struggle with which consumes teachers' time to correct the mistakes (Jamian, Sankaran, & Abu Bakar, 2006; Nayan, 2002 as cited in Mah, Umar, & Chow, 2013). For instance, grammar, technical vocabulary, sentence formation, and writing style have indicated as the Thai learners' linguistic challenges (Phothongsunan, 2016). Besides, integrating distinct ideas, summarizing perspectives, and broadening theories that request a high composition skill also become one of students' difficulties (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). Furthermore, a study in Indonesia showed that learners still struggle in decision making and problem-solving which are essential points in publication writing, especially in making knowledge claim, organizing and developing the idea, and structuring arguments are also noted as challenges (Azizah & Budiman, 2017).

Due to the challenges learners may face, lecturers need to provide feedback towards learners writing before submitting the manuscript to the journals. Providing enormous Comprehensive Written Corrective Feedback (CWCF) toward learners' writing has been reportedly exhausting as it was time-consuming and offered not that much significant impact (Mah et al., 2013). Learners repeatedly made the same mistakes that the feedback given would not improve their editing skills (Lee, 2019). Hence, Lee (2019) proposed Focused Written Corrective Feedback (FWCF) practice, which was more helpful for learners to develop their English writing skills than CWCF. Learners would take more risks, which will build more confidence through the practice of focused feedback. They would also engage more actively, especially in the class, by having a self or peer assessment. Likewise, focused written corrective feedback was given to promote learners writing skill development to achieve a higher level of critical thinking.

Studies on learner feedback had started in the 1990s (Diab, 2005) for examples by Cohen and Cavalcanti in 1987, Leki in 1991, Eginarlar in 1993, Hedgcock & Lefkowitz in 1994 and 1996 (Ferris, 2006). However, the exploration of learner reactions towards the feedback is limited, especially in the EFL writing context. Besides, most studies also emphasized only the comprehensive corrective feedback of the erroneous forms, not on the lecturers' less feedback. This study attempts to link learners' reactions to Focused Written Corrective Feedback (FWCF).

2. Literature review

Many studies concerned with the significance of a written form of feedback after Truscott (1996) had first acknowledged it through his work (as cited in Kisnanto, 2016). Parr and Timperley (2010) argued that "written feedback quality affects learners' writing achievements" (as cited in O'Brien & Marken, 2016, p. 12). It helps learners measure themselves of the level to which they met the expected outcome. Studies on the feedback have been conducted on some areas such as the effect of feedback on content (Ashwell, 2000; Diab, 2015; Fazio, 2001;) and the impact of direct and indirect feedback on the accuracy of students' grammar and writing skill (Benson, & Dekeyser, 2018; Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Saeb, 2014; Shintani, Ellis, & Suzuki, 2014). Direct feedback "concerns figuring out proof to attain some specific features, while the indirect one relates to enhancing learners' metacognitive skills" (Ferris, 2010, p.190). Written corrective feedback is also categorized into focused or unfocused based on the category of erroneous language form. Focused Written Corrective Feedback (FWCF) denotes a type that focuses on linguistic features while the unfocused one refers to non-linguistic terms.

Scales of emphasis come upon a scale where the most focused feedback aims at only one error type or linguistic structure, while the unfocused one relates to all linguistic features. Comprehensive Written Corrective Feedback (CWCF), which is usually treated as unfocused feedback, has been familiar to nearly all teachers. To provide feedback, teachers would correct all the erroneous language produced by learners (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008). However, some studies have proved that this type of feedback seemed inefficient and brought less benefit to learners (Ferris, 1999; Lee, 2009; Truscott, 1996;). The comprehensive feedback led to a detrimental effect on the learning process (Truscott, 1996). Too many red inks or poor markings result in confusion and discouragements, which make learners losing their attentiveness in writing (Lee, 2008; Lee, Yu & Liu, 2018).

On the other hand, Focused Written Corrective Feedback (FWCF) requires the lecturers to specify feedback types towards learners' writing (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009a, 2009b). With fewer errors to focus on, learners will find it manageable, and it surely facilitates learning aims. Learners would also take advantage of fewer underlines, error codes, circles in that they are less confusing and intimidating (Lee, 2019, p. 4). As a result, they can monitor themselves and conduct self-assessment on the extent to which their learning has improved. Focused written feedback would fit learners' competency in higher education in that they have autonomously adapted to the learning process (Kisnanto, 2016). It also seemingly surge learners' responsibility by offering more chances to involve in self-editing. It corresponds with Vygotsky's view (as cited in Lee, 2019), stating that learning was not merely an unresponsive practice where learners acquire language from being informed or spoon-fed, yet rather than an active building process affected by the contextual element, learners' principle, and schemata.

Ellis (2009) proposed three types of feedback, namely direct, metalinguistic, and indirect feedback. Regarding the erroneous use of simple past tense in the sentence, "I go to his house yesterday", the lecturer might provide feedback as follow:

1. Direct feedback: Give the correct form by substituting 'go' to 'went'.
2. Metalinguistic feedback: provide learners with a clue by associating the nature of error by asking, "Don't you think you should use the past tense?"
3. Indirect feedback: show the error by highlighting, underlining, or circling the word 'go' without explaining.

Metalinguistic corrective feedback requires teachers to provide hints or comments about the nature of the error (Ellis, 2009; Sia & Cheung, 2017). Thus, some studies have confirmed the importance of metalinguistic feedback in EFL writing (Bakri, 2015; Beuningen, 2012; Mansourizadeh & Abdullah, 2014; Sheen, 2007). In a study, Sheen (2007) examined that a focused metalinguistic approach promoted learners' writing accuracy. The research findings illustrated that the teacher focused on providing feedback on the use of articles in EFL writing. At the outset, abundant erroneous forms of articles were marked. However, the practice of focused metalinguistic feedback has helped them generated fewer mistakes in their final writing. In another study, Beuningen (2012) highlighted that metalinguistic written feedback was effective for the non-grammatical errors that profoundly stimulated learners to process the mistakes. In addition, the use of electronic feedback applied in their study has also resulted in better learners' uptake. Likewise, Mansourizadeh and Abdullah (2014) worked on the same interest in employing both oral and written metalinguistic feedback on SLA writing. The result depicted that verbal feedback impacted more significantly than the written one. It helped learners accelerate their performance and was less time-consuming.

The aforementioned studies gave emphasized only on the lecturers' perspectives to investigate whether or not metalinguistic error correction feedback affected learners' outcomes significantly. In contrast, only a few studies on learners' voices toward the feedback have been reported. Leki and Carson's study (1994), as cited in Best, Jones-Katz, Smolarek, Stolzenburg, and Williamson (2014), was a case in point. It pointed upon the importance of the study on the learner perspective as follow:

> I was not interested in the "public transcript" of what they did, how they did it, or whether a particular teaching method or technique improved their writing. Instead, I hoped to learn how they reflected on what they did and how they did it, what they understood from their experiences, how they constructed what was happening to them in L2 [second language] writing classes, what they said amongst themselves (Best et al., 2014, p.3).

Their study implies that understanding how learners reflect on their writing process and making meaning is worth discussing. Regarding learners' reactions to lecturers' feedback, a study asserted that learners first would spot the errors and revised

them all to the correct form. Second, they would like to ask the teacher to provide more specific comments on the writing's content and organization. Last, they requested more self-editing, which means they have developed their metalinguistic awareness (Chen, Nassaji, & Liu, 2016).

3. Method

This study aims to investigate the learners' responses to the written correction feedback given by a lecturer in an academic writing course. The design of this research was a case study with 6 males and 16 females of graduate students in one university in Indonesia as participants. The goal of the course was for the learners to produce a manuscript then submit it to an EFL journal. The lecturer facilitated learners to study by varying teaching methodologies such as self-editing, peer-review, discussion, and presentation. The lecturer also provided both oral and written feedbacks which were beneficial for learners' advancement in writing. The lecturer asked learners to send the manuscript files to the lecturer's email address, and the lecturer would check it for improvement. Later, the lecturer handed them back so that learners could reflect and revised them before submitting them to a journal.

The data for the study were collected through three instruments: 1) The writing samples with the feedback from the lecturer were collected to check the nature of feedback provided by the lecturer, 2) The questionnaires were distributed to find out how the learners handled the lecturer's feedback. This study adopted the questionnaire from Saito's model (1994). 3) A semi-structured interview was conducted to gain learners' in-depth understanding of the chosen feedback handling reasons. The data were analyzed using a technique proposed by Miles and Huberman (1984) namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification and the basic analysis of focused metalinguistic written feedback (FWCF) employed Cumming's thinking form (1989): format, in-text citation, organization, content, and language. This theory originated from former analyses of the thinking processes that SLA learners frequently activated during the writing process (Cumming, 1989; 1990), along with Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) model of "procedural facilitation" to develop cognitive skill in writing. This study aims to answer the following two research questions: (1) what kinds of focused written correction feedbacks do lecturers provide? (2) how do learners respond to their lecturers' feedbacks?

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Type of metalinguistics feedback from the lecturers

From the manuscripts composed by learners, it was noted that the lecturer was prone to provide focused-metalinguistic feedback. The focus of feedback varied depending on learners' writing. A learner might struggle in elaborating the argument while the other hardly organized the ideas neatly. Thus, the lecturers did not treat them

similarly. Table 1 below illustrates the focus of feedback the teacher-generated in EFL learners' writing.

Table 1
The kinds of focused metalinguistic feedback and its percentage.

No	Types of Feedbacks	Percentage
1	Format	15%
2	In-text citations	23%
3	Organization	18%
4	Content	36%
5	Language	8%

In writing scholarly publications, the types of feedbacks proposed by Cumming (1989) reflected the challenges learners might face. The table above depicts that the area of content covered the highest percentage (36%) of the lecturer's feedbacks, followed by less than a fourth (23%) of the overall percentage of the case in citing and referencing. A small number (18%) of focused feedbacks on the writing organization have reportedly ranked the third position. Next, the focus on a format or the appropriateness towards the guideline covered more than a tenth of the total feedbacks. The last, a tiny proportion (8%) was focused on the language form.

The lecturer highlighted the sentences containing the erroneous language form by demonstrating the nature of errors. The lecturer asked a simple question and provided a statement to trigger the learners' cognitive processing so that they could revise the sentences into the correct forms. This finding is in line with previous studies stating that type of focused feedback was beneficial for learners with a higher level of metalinguistic awareness (Ferris, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In addition, the types of errors made reflected some problems most of the participants faced while writing scholarly publications. The lecturer did not mainly emphasize the feedback on the grammatical issue as she already had demanded the learners check their writing to the Grammarly before submitting them to get the feedbacks. Grammarly is the language digital tool utilized to check the accuracy of learners' works. Nevertheless, all participants did not apply for the premium membership, so the double-checking was done by the lecturer herself. The following figure illustrates the types of feedback provided.
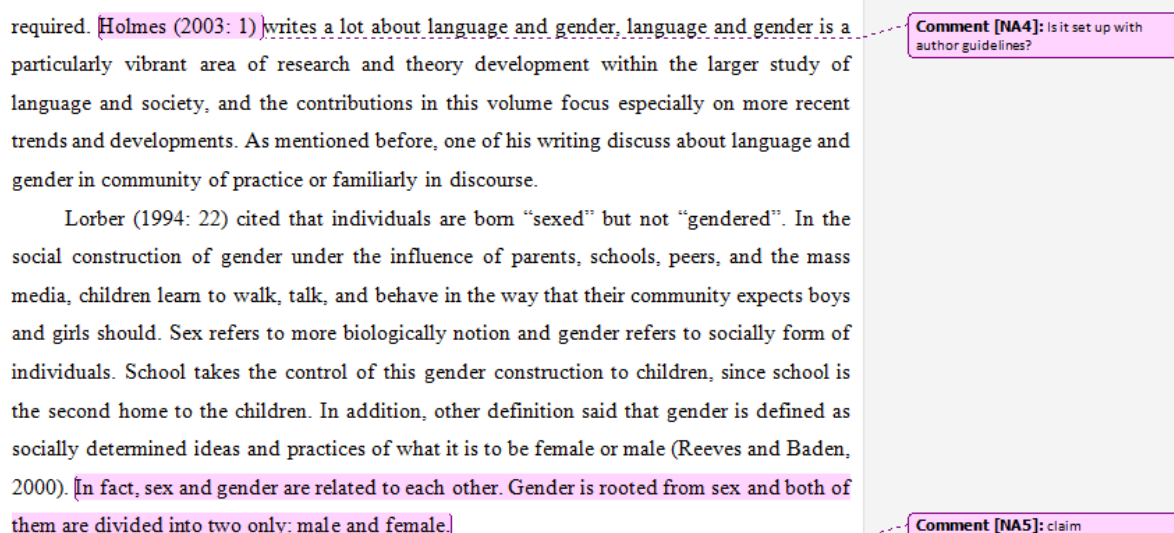
required. Holmes (2003: 1) writes a lot about language and gender, language and gender is a particularly vibrant area of research and theory development within the larger study of language and society, and the contributions in this volume focus especially on more recent trends and developments. As mentioned before, one of his writing discuss about language and gender in community of practice or familiarly in discourse.

    Lorber (1994: 22) cited that individuals are born "sexed" but not "gendered". In the social construction of gender under the influence of parents, schools, peers, and the mass media, children learn to walk, talk, and behave in the way that their community expects boys and girls should. Sex refers to more biologically notion and gender refers to socially form of individuals. School takes the control of this gender construction to children, since school is the second home to the children. In addition, other definition said that gender is defined as socially determined ideas and practices of what it is to be female or male (Reeves and Baden, 2000). In fact, sex and gender are related to each other. Gender is rooted from sex and both of them are divided into two only: male and female.

Comment [NA4]: Is it set up with author guidelines?

Comment [NA5]: claim

Figure 1. An example of a learner's writing and types of feedback provided.

As seen in the table above, the lecturer provided less feedback, which focused only on some mistakes repeatedly made by the student (FWCF). Electronic feedback was devoted to using technology and electronic mail by providing colorful comment boxes to identify the feedback quickly. The effectiveness of feedback using technology has been mentioned by many studies (AbuSeileek, 2013; AbuSeileek & Abualsha'r, 2014; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Elola & Oskoz, 2016; Ene & Upton, 2014; Muranoi, 2000; Sheen, 2007; Suadah, 2014; Shintani, Aubrey, & Donnellan, 2016). A learner assured her opinion during the interview as follows.

> Excerpt 1:
> I think being given the feedback through email is way more motivating than that of the conventional one. The colorfully highlighted words, the erroneous forms, are effortlessly spotted. Compared with the handwritten feedback, it does not lead to confusion.

This response shows that the wrong words were marked in different colors that it helped her tracking the errors easily. This simplicity triggered her to engage more with the writing and to produce a better composition. The finding supports Sia and Cheung's (2017) idea, who reported that providing feedback using technology facilitates self-directed learning of the learners in the 21st century.

4.1.1. Learners' reactions to handle feedback from the lecturers

    Once the learners received the paperback after being checked by the lecturer, they filled out the questionnaires asking for the strategies they applied towards the feedback. Learners responded to one or more strategies due to the concern toward individual preferences. Most of them argued that they would do something after receiving the feedback, yet each learner appeared to have moderately sole tactics to

cope with their writing feedback. This finding is in line with prior studies asserting that individual learners' traits were necessary variable to concern while giving feedback to maximize benefits (Agbayahoun, 2016; Han & Hyland, 2015; Junqueira & Payant, 2015; Kormos, 2012; Li, 2018; Li & Vuono, 2019; Plonsky, & Brown, 2015; Rahimi, 2015; Rummel & Bitchener, 2015; Simard, Guénette, & Bergeron, 2015; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). They exposed that learners' internal motivational aspects; for instance, learners' aims, behaviour, attentiveness, principles, and motivation will affect learners' responses to written corrective feedback.

Based on the questionnaires, their majority responses were categorized into 1) Revising and responding 2) Consult a dictionary/grammar book, 3) Referring back to the previous composition. See the following figure for further information.

Figure 2. How learners handle the feedback.

Strategy	Number of students
Making a mental note	4
Writing down points by type	6
Identifying points to be explained	1
Asking for lecturer's explanation	4
Referring to the previous composition	9
Consulting a vocabulary/grammar book	12
Rewriting by incorporating lecturer's comment	1
Revising and expanding	18
Not doing anything	1

A. First, a majority of participants (75%) responded to the feedback by revising the erroneous forms, followed by more than half (55%) of them handling the feedback by consulting a vocabulary/grammar book. The result depicted that learners would mostly state that they revised and expanded the mistakes noted as the teacher provided the feedback indirectly. The finding of this study corresponds with the previous study by Hillocks (1986), asserting that revising a composition after getting feedback from the lecturer was what most learners did. A learner exposed the process of revising and expanding as follows:

> Excerpt 2:
> I define revising as fixing some wrong things and later expand things I need in case I find other things when I read, and those points were not mentioned by the teacher.

In the process, the lecturer would first only mark the incorrect sentences that the learners pointed as 'wrong things' produced in the composition. The lecturer then provided some prompts so that learners could correct the mistakes. Regarding the mistakes, one of the learner stated that sometimes he struggled with the word choices to

represent the most comprehensible meaning with the context. Hence, he referred to online dictionaries or reference books or words. A further interview was conducted with the same participant to pursue in-depth information on handling the feedback by consulting a dictionary/grammar book. He confirmed the process as follows:

> Excerpt 3:
> Since selecting the most proper word in my writing has been a problem, I usually utilize thesaurus or a dictionary so that I'll find synonymous words. Having figured out the word which I think it's the most appropriate one, finally, I will search in Corpus whether the words go with together or not.

B. Second, the next most favorite strategies to handle the feedback were by referring back to preceding composition, which less than a half participants (41%) have applied it. A learner expressed:

> Excerpt 4:
> The comments provided by the lecturer have urged me to turn back to my previous composition. Sometimes I couldn't figure out what was meant by the feedback. Therefore, I just had a look at the comments and checked in which part of my article I could find the information. Finally, I would revise it and asked my lecturer if I had met her expectation.

C. Third, taking mental notes, asking for teacher explanation, incorporating the lecturer feedback, identifying points to be explained, and did nothing were the not so popular strategies used to handle the feedback. Relating to incorporating the lecturer's feedback, a learner contended:

> Excerpt 5:
> When you thought that you wrote all the things already, but it turns out you missed a couple of things, then there your lecturer comes to give some comments about those missing points found in your writing. I experienced this thing quite often, so yeah, rewriting some other parts by incorporating my lecturer's comment was and will always be what I gotta do.

Additionally, concerning to identifying the point strategy, a learner explained:

> Excerpt 6:
> After I got some comments from the lecturer, I usually take some notes or make some points to be changed instead of directly revising them. Those points are often in the form of categories; at least I name them so, for example, lack of definition, needs some more elaborations, etc.

Furthermore, jotting down points by types was the handling feedback strategy the low number of participants (27%) have made. They would classify the types of feedback and jot them down, enabling them to quickly revised the composition. An

insignificant proportion (4%) responded to the feedback by either making a mental note or asking for the lecturer's explanation. Learners might have asked about the erroneous forms directly to the lecturer to see whether they have different points of view. Besides, confirming what the lecturer intended to say in her/his feedback was proved constructive to the writing. A learner expressed his opinion as follows:

> Excerpt 7:
> Just like what students always do, I'll ask my lecturer if I find something unclear, then I'll take some notes to clear things up for me.

Lastly, a learner wasn't provided with any written feedback, as her writing was nearly neat. The learner has responded to the feedback by asking the lecturer directly, who replied by giving positive oral feedback stating that the composition did not need any revision.

5. Conclusion

All things considered, the focused metalinguistic written corrective feedback towards learners' academic publication drafts were provided in terms of content, in-text citation, organization, format, and language. The way learners handled the feedback varied as they have various characteristics. Some of them would revise and expand the writing while the others checked their online vocabulary platforms. Referring to the previous composition and transferring the lecturer's comment into their writing seemed to be the least favorite thing that the learner would do.

6. Implication

The findings of the study have some implications for the field of scholarly writing publication. The lecturers need to know some strategies most learners do after getting back their manuscripts to see their metalinguistic awareness to be an autonomous writer. Being autonomous means they can reflect on how successful they have achieved the objectives of the writing. The present study provokes some probing questions that future investigation on lecturers' reactions towards learners' strategies on handling feedback.

7. Recommendation

The findings reveal that learners' personalities, such as cognitive and affective variables as well as the learning context, should be the primary concern in providing the feedback. The right method will be helpful to learners so that the results of their writing would be better.

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