

The Effect of Online Corrective Feedback (OCF) on Learners' Relative Clauses Competency

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Abstract

The study explored the use of OCF for giving feedback in constructing relative clauses for Indonesian English learners. Using a quasi-experimental design, the sample covers 47 learners. The two classes were randomly assigned as the experiment group (N=25) using the OCF method and the control group (N=22) with the conventional one. Pre- and post-tests were given by asking learners to construct two sentences into relative clauses based on the theory of English grammar (Azar, 1998; 2009). The independent sample t-test and Mann-Whitney U test with the SPSS software program were used to analyze the data. The result revealed there was a statistically significant score difference.

Keywords: *English grammar, relative clause, online corrective feedback.*

Introduction

Grammar proficiency is very important in learning English. EFL learners need to master the grammar to listen, speak, read, or write in the language they are learning (Widdowson, 1990). Mastering the grammatical rules of the target language is a pivotal aspect (Wilkins, 1976) and cannot be neglected as it contributes (Long and Richards, 1987). One of example is relative clauses which need serious attention to know the specific grammatical features of the language. Based on our observation, the students have low ability in constructing the relative clauses, especially in distinguishing between antecedent (main clause and relative pronoun), the different grammatical roles of possessive relative (whom), and identifying restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses with separation markers (Hendrayana, 2016). Moreover, basic forms of English relative clauses are still problems for learners in using adjective clauses (Princess et al., 2020; Haryani, 2020). The challenges of learners in constructing relative clauses are a lack of awareness of grammar, low competence in adjective clause rules, and the influence of cultural internalization of the Indonesian language (Syarif, 2017). In addition to this, some EFL learners also face problems of unawareness of the particular system or rule that exists in the English language's component as a result, low competence in grammar has been an obstacle in second or foreign language acquisition (Biaggi, 2003). However, mastering relative clauses would support learners to have the ability to specify what is being expressed and talked about (Quirk, et al., 1987; Biber et.al., 1999), as English relative clauses are preferred in written language (Berk, 1999).

To communicate effectively, an interlocking system in grammar is essential to form communication (Chalker 1993). Interestingly, it is to emphasize the ability of learners to understand the language code, consistency, and fluency in second and foreign language development (Gao, 2001; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2010). We also know that the ability to recognize word formation, correct sentences, and how to organize sentences into texts are considered as essential parts of grammatical competence. It could be argued that teaching grammatical rules has been a pivotal step in language pedagogy (Ellis et al., 2002). Overall, a

few studies reveal that mastering grammatical competence enables learners to perform in speaking and writing skills (Bradshaw, 2011; Hans and Hans, 2017).

To solve the issue, corrective feedback from lecturers plays a pivotal role in correcting learners' grammar in writing in which researchers and language instructors have been highly interested in it (Truscott, 2004; Ferris, 2002, 2004). Moreover, technology development in today's education era has been a global trend (Zhang & Yu, 2021) in supporting the English language teaching and learning process (Ahmani, 2019). As a result, OCF has the potential to enhance learners' writing skills and can be effectively implemented in academic writing classes. (Rintaningrum, 2022). In line with this, it was discovered that students were more inclined to receive feedback via email than through traditional corrective feedback (Li, 2000).

The use of OCF has been discussed by numerous studies, for instance, the writing skills of learners can be improved by receiving OCF (Yoke, et al, 2013), and EFL learner's responses to OCF in teaching of academic writing (Nurya, et al, 2022), the implementation of this feedback method resulted in significant improvement in the students' writing skills (Wydianingsih, 2018), corrective feedback in language teaching (Soe, 2022), content teachers' and lecturers' corrective feedback in English-medium instruction classes in high school and university settings (Hong, 2023), and benefits and challenges on technology integration in English language teaching and learning (Rintaningrum, 2023). However, the effect of corrective feedback which is integrated with technological resources, for instance, OCF in teaching relative clauses was rare. Therefore, I sought to research to explore more detail about the role of OCF as an alternative method to correcting learners' sentences in relative clauses. Moreover, it is a more practical and effective way to assist learners in improving their competence in grammar skills, particularly in constructing relative clauses in writing.

Literature Review

A. The Nature of Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback refers to teachers' effort to inform the learner of errors, is commonly associated with the term treatment of errors (Chaudron, 1988), and then it may be necessary to put in a lot of effort to obtain a revised student response and get true correction for modifying the learner's interlanguage rule and eliminate the error. This term is known as "teacher and peer responses to learners' erroneous second language production" (Li, 2014) and is also widely called as a form of negative feedback that responds to a linguistic error in a learner's utterance (Ellis, 2009). It also alerts learners that their use of the target language is incorrect (Lightbown and Spada, 1999) as stated: *"When a language learner says, 'He go to school every day', corrective feedback can be explicit, for example, 'no, you should say goes, not go' or implicit 'yes he goes to school every day', and may or may not include metalinguistic information, for example, 'Don't forget to make the verb agree with the subject'."* (p. 171-172). Moreover, feedback can be both explicit and implicit in a language teaching context (Schachter, 1991), in which the description of grammatical explanation and overt error correction is explicit, and then the use of confirmation checks, repetitions, recasts, clarification requests, silence, and even facial expressions that express confusion is done implicitly. In addition, corrective feedback leads the students to realize of the mismatch in the second language acquisition and how they correct it (Gass and Varonis, 1994; Schachter, 1991) through the acquisition process such as noticing, comparing, and integrating (Ellis, 1991).

Some studies reveal corrective feedback has been proven to be important in the hypothesis testing model of acquisition (Bley-Vroman, 1986, 1989) in which learners are expected to formulate hypotheses in the study about the target language and compare these

hypotheses with the target norm. The role of corrective feedback also enables students to correct their work and compare it with others when teachers provide the correct form, as a result, it allows students to develop their second language (Ohta, 2001). Moreover, some studies conducted by Canadian researchers have shown formal instruction and corrective feedback improve students' accuracy in using the target language (Lightbown & Spada, 1990; White, 1998). Interestingly, CF provides positive evidence for formal instruction in improving the accuracy level of students in particular designed linguistic features (Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Tomasello and Herron, 1988, 1989; Trahey & White, 1993; White, 1991).

b. Online Corrective Feedback (OCF)

Education, learning process, and social interaction are greatly influenced by the integration of internet technology (Papanis, Giavrimis, & Papani, 2010) where it supports many people to use computers, gadgets, mobile phones, and all devices to connect with cyberspace (Nobles & Paganucci, 2015). Not only in a language teaching context, but also in teaching some courses including Mathematics and Statistics at the university level revealed that students' successful results can be positively impacted by online teaching and the convenience of watching lessons from home, time savings, and flexibility in class attendance were the main advantages that students believed in online teaching (Konderla & Říhová, (2023). Furthermore, in teaching structure and writing, online corrective feedback through email is integrated to improve student's competence (Liaw, 1998; Li, 2000; Razagifard and Razzaghifard, 2011). The result of the study revealed that more complex essays were produced by students in terms of syntax and lexical complexity (Li, 2000) and also they were significantly motivated by the online system in the learning process (Hosseini, 2012; Nezami 2012). Moreover, both synchronous and asynchronous communication are preferred by students for the provision of corrective feedback based on technology (Seliem & Ahmed, 2009; Truscott, 2007).

Despite the use of OCF significantly in the learning process, the perception of corrective feedback from students and language teachers is discussed in many studies. Identifying errors and providing coded feedback is the preferred method for students to improve their writing skills (Liang, 2008). In Hong Kong, direct corrective feedback is preferred by secondary school students since they know language teachers are more proficient in teaching language (Lee, 2005). Not only students, but a recent study also shows that providing corrective feedback on a learner's written work is preferred by language instructors who they can identify every single mistake in students' work (Ellis et al., 2008). In addition, pre-service teachers from remote locations were positively impacted by OCF where feedback was effective in increasing the targeted technique in all five preservice teachers (Scheeler, McKinnon, and Stout, 2012).

C. Relative clauses

The use of English relative clauses in written language is probably due to the necessity of expressing specific information. Clauses where the relative pronoun agrees with the antecedent as a post-modifier are called relative clauses, which was proposed by Biber, et al. (1999), and the term relative clause is used for embedded clauses (Quirk, et al. 1987), in another word it is employed to create a sentence by combining two different sentences (Wallwork, 2013). The proper learning of relative clauses requires breaking down the study into its basic components, which is essential because they come in a variety of forms (Newmeyer, 2003). Relative clauses are dependent clauses that modify a noun and provide some information about the person or thing indicated by that noun phrase as relative pronouns (Yule, 2009) and they can refer to persons (who, whom, whose); a thing (which and that) (Torres-Martinez, 2017; Frank, 1972) and it may also be introduced by subordinate conjunctions such as time (when); place (where) and reason (why) (Percy, 2017). It is common in grammar texts to treat the relative pronoun as

a form that substitutes for a noun and to present a sentence (Azhar & Hagen 2009) as stated in the sentence *I know a man **who** always writes magazine articles* in which it is worth noting that the whole noun phrase (*the man*) and not only the noun (*man*) is replaced by the relative pronoun (*who/that*). Moreover, a relative pronoun with an anaphoric reference is often used to introduce relative clauses for instance *a car* is referred by *which* in the clause *There is a car which I saw yesterday* (Collin and Hollo, 2000).

There are three kinds of relative clauses, they are defining relative clauses, non-defining relative clauses, and connective relative clauses (Torres-Martínez, 2017). Yules (2009) divides relative clauses into restrictive relative clauses and non-restrictive relative clauses. He defines a relative clause is to define or restricting the reference of the antecedent noun which it helps to identify or classify the person or thing being identified. Hence, a restrictive clause is used to restrict the meaning of a noun phrase that has been modified (Berk, 1999). However, Davis (1977) contends that it is essential to state that in writing non-restrictive relative clauses, they are usually marked by commas as non-restrictive gives extra and additional information about the antecedent in the sentence *Professor Wilson, who teaches Chemistry 204, is an excellent lecturer* where noun that it modifies is a proper name *Professor Wilson*.

Therefore, it is more advantageous to use English relative clauses in the written language since as the writer desires to clarify the subject matter being discussed (Syarif, 2017). However, Azhar (1998) notifies some possible issues that should be considered in constructing adjective clauses such as a combination of relative clauses with another complete sentence is required, it must have a subject and a complete verb; relative clauses do not permit the use of a pronoun; no repetition of pronoun with an relative clause; the placement of relative clauses is after the noun they describe; and if we are describing something very simple, especially using one adjective, it is usually better to put the adjective in front of the word.

Methodology

A. The aim of the study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of OCF use in giving feedback in the teaching process of relative clauses to undergraduate learners in the English Department. The primary objective was to determine if the treatment was effective by comparing pre-and post-test results (York, 2016; Dimitrov, 2003). To guide this study, the research question was: Are there any significant differences in learners' ability to construct relative clauses between participants of the experiment group who were assigned OCF and the participants of a control group using conventional feedback with a red pen?

B. Participants and the context

The study involved 47 learners comprising Class A and Class B in the fifth semester from the English Department at one university in Jambi Province, Indonesia. The participants of this study were purposively selected. The researcher used the purposive sampling technique to gather potential participants based on research needs (Fadillah et al., 2020). The reason for selecting the participants as learners just studied Grammar courses, such as Structure 1, Structure 2, and Structure 3 in the previous semester. Moreover, they had low ability when given grammar exercises mostly the use of adjective clauses. Class A (N = 25) which was randomly assigned as an experiment group comprised 5 males and 20 females, while Class B (N = 22) as a control group consisted of 2 males and 19 females. The age range of the participants was between 20 and 22 years old.

C. Design and procedure

A pre-test and post-test were used in this study to conduct a quasi-experimental design. The research design was carried out in a way that did not involve a random selection of participants (Creswell, 2012; Indrayadi et al., 2020). However, the researcher was able to assign individuals to the experiment and control groups at random (Alimorad & Bidoki, 2021; Quiroz et al., 2021). A grammar test was first administered to the learners consisting of 20 grammar tests in which each test consisted of two sentences and learners were asked to combine the sentences into relative clauses to elicit their competence before implementing OCF treatment. Based on the result, learners' problems in constructing adjective clauses were on distinguishing between the antecedent, typically in a main clause, and the relative pronoun in the relative clause, the differences between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses with their separation markers, and the use of possessive relatives.

The research question was answered in some sessions during nearly March-May 2022. In the first session, a pre-test was administered to see the learners' ability to construct relative clauses. The experiment group had to do the test by handwriting on the piece of paper to be submitted and the control group did the test by typing-written work to be sent soft copy via email. In the second session, the learner's work was graded and corrected. In the experiment group, comments and corrections were written with a red pen or conventional feedback, while for the experiment group, OCF was provided by using Microsoft Word enabling features such as highlighting, commenting, and reviewing to be returned to learners via email. In the next session, learners corrected their test in constructing relative clauses based on comments or inputs given. Then, grading was provided. In the last session, the post-test was given to both groups to investigate a significant difference in learners' ability to construct relative clauses after receiving different treatments.

D. Data collection tools and procedures

A grammar test was employed for both groups in the form of pre-test and post-test. The pre-test was used to examine learners' ability on relative clauses before receiving treatment, while the post-test was to evaluate the effect of the treatment. The grammar test comprised 10 paired sentences and each paired sentence was combined into a single sentence with a relative clause by considering the use of relative pronouns, and restrictive and nonrestrictive relative clauses. Before administering to the participants, the grammar test was sent to two English lecturers who taught grammar as expert judgment to be evaluated for content validity and reliability of the test.

To gather the data of pre-test and post-test for both groups, the researcher used several steps as; Firstly, the test was administered to learners. Secondly, the number of learners taking the test was noted, and the learners' grammar tests of both groups were collected to be graded and commented. Then, data were obtained from the test results. After all data were collected, the researcher calculated the scores. One grammar test that was combined correctly was given a score of 5, while the incorrect were given 0. Then, a statistical analysis was employed to determine the significant improvement in the learners' scores after the treatment. Shapiro-Wilk was used to conduct the normality test and determine the distribution of data. The significance level of data normal distribution was .05 (Coolican, 2014, p. 453). To distribute the data, an Independent Sample T-Test was utilized. The Mann-Whitney U test was employed when the data was not normally distributed. Both tests were used to analyze the Mean difference between students' pre-test and post-test scores.

Findings

This study looked at how OCF, as opposed to the conventional method, supported learners to raise good scores in constructing relative clauses. To decide which tests to use—

parametric or non-parametric—the researcher examined the normality and homogeneity of the data from the experiment and control groups. The data from the experiment group and control group were normally distributed, according to the Shapiro-Wilk test result ($p > .05$). The independent sample t-test was performed since the data were normal. The mean, standard deviation, and standard error are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Experiment and Control Groups Pre-test

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	Experiment Group	25	58.20	16.06	3.21
	Control Group	22	58.40	11.89	2.54

Table 1 shows that the data of the experiment group ($M = 58.2000$, $SD = 16.06497$) and the control group ($M = 58.4091$, $SD = 11.89101$) were nearly equal. To determine the statistical significance, an independent sample t-test was conducted. The result of the experiment and control group tests are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Independent sample t-test of Experiment and Control Group Pre-test

		Levene's Test		t-test	
		F	Sig.	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	Experiment Group	2.89	.096	45	.96
	Control Group				

The outcome of the independent sample t-test showed that $p = .96 > .05$. As a result, it showed that, before getting various treatments during the teaching and learning process, there was no significant difference in the Mean score between the experiment group and the control group. The Mann-Whitney U test was employed to look at how the treatment affected both groups in the post-test. If one or both of the data do not meet the assumption of variance analyses ($p < .05$) or are not normally distributed based on the normality test, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed to measure phonemic proficiency. The experiment group and control group's Mean Rank and Sum of Rank are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean and Sum of Experiment and Control Groups Post-test

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Rank
Post-test	Experiment Group	25	19.38	484.50
	Control Group	22	29.25	643.50

The experiment group's mean ($M = 19.38$, Sum of Rank = 484.50) and control group ($M = 29.25$, Sum of Rank = 643.50) are displayed in the table. Table 4 below shows the significant Mean for the effect of several treatments on the experiment group and control group in the post-test.

Table 4. Significance Score of Experiment and Control Groups Post-test

		Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post-test	Experiment Group	-2.499	.012
	Control Group		

The result shown in Table 4 indicates that the significance score was lower than .05 ($p=.012<.05$). In other words, there was a significantly different score for both groups after receiving different treatments. This means that learners who received online corrective feedback outperformed those who received conventional one. Employing OCF is a viable approach.

Discussion

The study results have provided insight into whether OCF is more effective than traditional methods for grammatical competence. The achievement of learners who were assigned with OCF to construct relative clauses and those who were not is shown to be significantly different in the results presented above. Independent sample t-tests showed nearly identical p-values for pre-test or before-experiment groups and control groups receiving different treatments. It can be concluded that both groups were capable of constructing relative clauses with similar competence. However, after one month of OCF implementation, the post-test of the *Mann Whitney U* test resulted in p-values below .05 ($p=.00<.05$). According to the *Mann Whitney U* test result, the OCF experiment group has constructed a more precise relative clause than the control group. As a result, it confirms the use of OCF supported to improve the learners' competence in constructing relative clauses and they were able to use relative pronouns (*that, who, whom, which, and whose*) and relative adverbs (*when* and *where*) correctly and classify restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses grammatically. The results align with previous studies that OCF is an effective way to correct the learners' writing skills (Liang, 2008) and has a significant motivational effect on learners to do correction of their work (Razagigard & Razzaghifard, 2011). Moreover, Li (2000) looked into the application of online task-based activities in writing classes. His study showed that students were capable of composing essays that were more complex in syntactic and lexical terms. He concluded that compared to the traditional corrective feedback method using pen and paper, students were found to be more receptive to receiving feedback via email.

In terms of learners' and lecturers' perceptions of using OCF in language learning classrooms, this study also revealed that upon receiving feedback from lecturers, learners quickly revised their work. In addition to this, it is more flexible and practical to understand corrections given by lecturers. The user-friendly facilities on computers made Malay learners prefer receiving online corrective feedback (Yoke, et al, 2013) and teachers assigned more notes to Hong Kong's secondary schools for every mistake they made and the correction notes provided were deemed helpful by the students (Lee, 2005). It is commonly difficult for students to interpret the conventional feedback given by the lecturers (Lee, 1997). At the same time, this study reveals OCF provided aid to English language lecturers in underlining errors, adding notes or comments, and even using the editing features available to support and detect errors in students' works. As a result, the conventional class seems to generate more errors or mistakes than the computer-mediated one (Tafazoli, Nosratzadeh, & Hosseini, 2014).

To sum up, corrective feedback provided by English language lecturers supports EFL learners to learn grammar effectively, particularly the use of relative clauses. In addition to this, lecturers can correct whenever and wherever they are and learners can receive and correct feedback anytime and anywhere. Learners were motivated by receiving multiple e-feedbacks to rethink their work and revise it further (Tuzi, 2004).

Conclusion

The use of OCF is better than the conventional feedback in correcting learners' grammar tests about adjective clauses and the study showed the effectiveness of OCF on learners' understanding in constructing relative clauses was examined quantitatively in which they were able to use relative pronouns (*that, who, whom which, whose*) and relative adverb (*when, where*) correctly, and identify restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses with their separation marker very well. It can be also clearly stated the comparison of the result of the *Mann-Whitney U test* between the experiment group and the control group post-test. The learners in the experiment group assigned through OCF raised a higher score than the control group.

The study presented several implications. Firstly, OCF can be implemented to improve learners' competence on relative clauses as learners who received online corrective feedback via email outperformed those who did not. Moreover, the online system supported learners to hand in the test on time. Secondly, computer-mediated learning supported lecturers to be more practical in correcting learners' work by using available Microsoft Word application features such as underlining errors and adding notes or comments. Thirdly, submitting assignments through email or electronic format would keep them saved, thus easy to do by learners and accessible for lecturers to provide feedback anytime and anywhere.

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