

## **The Effect of Meaning-focused Feedback as well as Language-focused Feedback in Journal Writing on Indonesian EFL Students' Writing Ability**

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the effect of two types of journal writing feedback, i.e. meaning-focused feedback and language-focused feedback on EFL students' writing. Three classes of Indonesian EFL students taking Essay Writing course were involved in this quasi-experimental study. They were assigned into two experimental groups and one control group. Following the pre-test conducted to check the homogeneity, students from the experimental groups were asked to write journal entries as out-of-class assignment twice a week for 8 weeks. One group (MF) received meaning-focused feedback, i.e. feedback focusing on the message conveyed in their journal, while the other group (LF) received language-focused feedback focusing on the language errors found in students' journal. Meanwhile, the control group, (CG) did not write journal entries. At the end of the treatment, a post-test was conducted to see the writing performance of the three groups. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in the means between MF group and both LF and CG groups; however, there is no significant difference in the means of LF and CG groups. This implies that students with journal writing assignment achieved better writing ability when provided with meaning-focused feedback.*

**Key Words:** *Indonesian EFL students, meaning-focused feedback, language-focused feedback, journal writing, writing ability*

### **Introduction**

Journal writing has long been used for various purposes in the field of education. Originally journal writing is intended for communication, but it turns out that the benefits go far beyond that such as to improve students' writing, to communicate and build a good rapport with the

students, to be used as an assessment tool, and to promote reflective practice among students and teachers themselves. Journal writing has also been proven useful to be applied in different educational contexts with students of all ages and many types.

Dialogue journal is the most commonly used in language learning, especially in improving students' writing. The 'dialogic' feature in dialogue journal may have added the value of personal journal written privately due to its possibility for teachers to provide feedback on students' writing. The first documented use of dialogue journaling, as reported by Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed (1988) was conducted by Reed in 1964, who used the journal with sixth grade native speakers of English students to know what their students were thinking about and learning each day, so she asked them to write on a piece of paper what they learnt that day. Soon, she became involved and started writing back. This dialogue was then written in a notebook which she bought specially for each of her students. She then considered it as a routine and an important part of her day.

Dialogue journal with non native speakers of English was started in 1980 when Reed was transferred to other school in which most of her students were English language learners. With students coming from 14 different countries with 9 language background, Reed continued her dialogue journal practice and it was found that dialogue journaling helped students acquire English as their second language. After the dissemination of the result of both studies on the use of dialogue journal, this practice was widespread and some teachers started to use in different educational levels and settings.

Dialogue journals can be introduced as early as people are able to use written communication. A simple dialogue journal, for example, can be conducted with kindergarten students using symbols or pictures to convey the meaning ( Brock, 1992). Dialogue journal was also practised with elementary students (Murphy-Lee, 2000; Colleen, 2010), secondary school students (Liao & Wong, 2010), and college students (Tuan, 2010, Lin, Li, Hung, Huang, 2014). Other types of students, such as deaf students (Staton & Peyton, 1986), and gifted students (Thevasigomoney & Yunus, 2013) also experience this journaling activities. Lately, journal writing is gaining popularity in teacher education. In this context, journals are commonly used by teachers as a means of reflection ((Daloglu, 2001; Reichman, 2001; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2001; Tsang, 2009).

Dialogue journals with its 'interactive' nature can be a useful tool to be applied in any academic field beyond language education. For foreign language learning, however, it is beneficial due to its ability to provide a channel for a genuine communication which is sometimes rare to be found in a formal language setting. This is because teachers responded to students' journal entries in the form of commentary or meaning-focused feedback in order for a genuine communication to take place . No error correction or feedback on language is recommended because it is against the nature of communication. However, in practice, there is often a temptation for teachers to provide error correction, especially because in EFL setting, grammatical accuracy is the most noticeable errors teacher can repond to. Besides, there are always students who do want error correction rather than just merely comment on the meaning conveyed in their journal. As in a study by Holmes and Moulton (1987) in which one of the respondents (Dang) explicitly mentioned that he preferred grammar correction in order for him

to improve his English. Thus, language-focused feedback is still considered worth doing by some language instructors.

Providing appropriate feedback for students' journal entries is, therefore, one of the challenges in incorporating journal writing in language teaching, especially in writing instruction. Feedback is indeed a crucial aspect in any writing instruction. Many teachers feel they must write substantial comments on papers to provide a reader reaction to students' efforts, to help them improve as writers and to justify the grade they have been given (Hyland 2003). Feedback for journal writing is equally important, although it may not work like feedback for other classroom writing practice. This is because in journal writing there is no obligation to revise their writing, which may result in students' lack of attention to the feedback given (Fazio, 2001). Thus, the extent to which the feedback will be effective may depend largely on students' attitude to the feedback, whether they will consider it as a learning source or mere teachers' notes.

As mentioned previously that when a journal is used in language classes, usually the feedback is focused on the message conveyed by the students (meaning) rather than on the form (language) and therefore it is not intended to be evaluative. The commentary usually takes form of exchanges in which the teacher is "a participant in an ongoing written conversation with the student, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the students' writing" (Worthington, 1997, p. 3). Despite the non-evaluative nature of the comment, it is believed that this type of feedback will affect students' writing ability. Kreeft (1984) referring to the use of dialogue journals, says "when the learner participates in meaningful communication with a native speaker of the target language and with the focus on the message rather than the forms of the language, the competence on the forms will follow" (p.1).

This type of feedback is often referred to as meaning-focused feedback (Duppenthaler, 2004), commentaries (Fazio, 2001) or message-related comment (Kepner, 1991). Though different in terms, they both refer to the same thing, that is feedback which is focused on the content/meaning of students' writing as opposed the feedback focusing on the form, which can be referred to error-focused, form-focused, corrections or language-focused feedback.

With the feedback focusing on meaning only, dialogue journal writing's benefit for the development of students' writing ability as a whole which cover the content, vocabulary, organization, mechanics, and language use is often questioned. Some researchers, therefore, modified the feedback for journal writing by providing language-focused feedback which tries to correct linguistic errors instead of meaning-focused feedback which is a response to the message students convey in their journal.

The result of studies on different types of feedback on students' writing varies, with those in favour of meaning-focused feedback (Semke, 1984; Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Duppenthaler, 2004; Baghzou, 2011; Rezai, 2011), language-focused feedback (Chandler, 2003; Hyland, 2003; Ferris, 2006; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008), and a combination of the two (Song, 1998; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ashwell, 2000; Ruegg, 2010).

Semke (1984), for example, found that students who received meaning-focused feedback (which was referred to as content-focused written comments) on their journal spent more time writing and became more fluent than did those who received error-correction. Kepner (1991) also investigated the effectiveness of message-related comments vs surface error corrections on students' journal assignment and it was reported that while error correction in journal did not

result in any significant improvement in students' accuracy, a 'message-related comment' type of written feedback was 'significantly' related to the production of higher-level writing in college intermediate-level L2 students' journals (p. 311). The effectiveness of meaning-focused feedback is also proven in Duppenenthaler's (2004) study investigating the effect of three different feedback (meaning-focused, error-focused and positive response feedbacks) on EFL students' writing. The group receiving meaning-focused feedback was found to write more and produce more error-free clauses compared to the other two groups.

A number of other research studies (e.g., Rezai, 2011; Salem, 2007; Sheppard 1992) found the positive effect of meaning-focused feedback. Sheppard (1992) investigated the effectiveness of error and content feedback and it was found that though both group improved significantly, the content group made significant gain in the accurate mastery of sentence boundaries (through appropriate punctuation) and complexity. It seemed that frequent error correction caused fear of making mistakes among the error feedback group and led them to limit the complexity of their writing. Rezai's (2011) study, although not specifically investigated the effect of meaning-focused feedback, found that conversation on journal writing through email has positively influenced the non native students' writing development qualitatively and quantitatively, in that, the students' writing proficiency improved in the aspect of content, language and vocabulary as well as the length of the entry. Another positive impact of journal writing with meaning-focused feedback was found in Salem's (2007) study. He examined the development of students with journal writing supplied with meaning feedback and those without journal writing. It was found that the journal entries of students from the experimental group indicated development in ideas, coherence, cohesion, and voice.

In addition, meaning-focused feedback is found to have a positive effect on motivation (Leki, 1992, Holmes & Moulton, 1997). In Duppenenthaler's study, the group receiving meaning-focused feedback was found to enjoy journal writing the most compared to the groups receiving error-focused feedback and positive comment. The meaning-focused group was also the most eager to get their journal back, which implies that they were motivated to read their teacher's feedback and to write more.

Feedback on error correction, on the other hand, is considered discouraging and ineffective in improving students' writing. A strong opponent of this type of feedback is Truscott (1996) who advocates 'correction-free' approach, claiming that error correction is not only ineffective but also harmful for students' fluency and writing quality. This view was supported by Fazio (2001) who found that feedback on error fails to produce any improvement in students' subsequent writing. Fazio investigated the influence of providing differential feedback (corrections, commentaries, and combination of both) to the journal writing of the fifth grade elementary students in the context of French-language schools in Montreal, Canada and the result indicated that there was no significant change in their accuracy in grammatical spelling and quantity of production as a consequence of receiving corrections, commentaries or combination of the two feedback.

Despite the seemingly less effective correction or form-focused feedback, this practice has long been done by language teachers. There are also some studies which show that error correction improves students' accuracy (Chandler, 2003; Hyland, 2003; Ferris, 2006; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008). Ferris (2006) discovered that the samples provided with error correction made statistically significant reductions in their total number of errors over a semester in five major

grammar categories with a particular reduction in verb and lexical errors. Similarly, Bitchener and Knoch (2008) found that both migrant and international students outperformed the other group who did not receive written corrective feedback.

Error correction and content feedback can also be combined, which is referred to as integrated or combined feedback. Combined feedback is claimed to be effective as indicated in Song's (1998) study, which found that students receiving combined feedback gained higher scores on holistic aspect as well as two analytical aspects such as content/organization and mechanic. Combined feedback in the form of grammar and content feedback also significantly improved students' grammatical accuracy (Fathman & Whalley, 1990) and writing ability (Ashley, 2000).

In sum, there are three main types of written feedback, namely language-focused (form-focused/error correction) feedback, meaning-focused (content) feedback, and combined (integrated) feedback which is a combination of the two (Song, 1998, Fazio, 2001). The result of the studies on the effect of different types of feedback on students' writing has been mixed and this may be caused by the different context in which the research took place

Considering that the result of previous studies is not fixed yet, this study aims at comparing the effect of two types of feedback in improving EFL students' writing especially in Indonesian context. The research questions are stated as follows:

- (1) Is there any difference in the writing ability of EFL students assigned to write journal with meaning-focused feedback and those who were not assigned to write journal?
- (2) Is there any difference in the writing ability of EFL students assigned to write journal with language-focused feedback and those who were not assigned to write journal?
- (3) Is there any difference in the writing ability of EFL students assigned to write journal with meaning-focused feedback and those who were assigned to write journal with language-focused feedback?

## **Methodology**

The aim of this study is to find out which of the two types of journal writing feedback is more effective improving students' writing. A non-randomized pretest-posttest control group design (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2010) was employed because the research was conducted without changing the setting of the class. Also, the research was executed following the time schedule of set by the institution.

The subjects of the research were the fifth semester students of English Language and Letters Department of a university in Malang, East Java taking Writing III course. The first experimental group, henceforth referred to as MF, consisted of seventeen students. They received meaning-focused feedback, in which the researcher responded to the message conveyed in their journal entries. Meanwhile, the second group (referred to as LF) consisted of sixteen students and they received language-focused feedback focusing on the language errors found in the students' entries. Seventeen students in the control group (CG) had their regular writing instruction without journal writing assignment.

The experimental groups were taught by the same teacher and they were required to write journal writing as an out-of-class writing assignment in addition to the regular classroom instruction. The control group was taught by different teacher but they shared the same syllabus. The journals were submitted twice a week during which the researcher provided their journals with one type of feedback for each group. The design of the study is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. The Design for Feedback Types for Experimental and Control Groups**

Group	Pre-Test	Treatment	Post-Test
I (MF)	T1	Journal writing with meaning-focused feedback	T2
II (LF)	T1	Journal writing with language-focused feedback	T2
III (CG)	T1	Regular class without journal writing	T2

**Notes:**

Group I: Experimental Group receiving meaning-focused feedback (MF)

Group II: Experimental Group receiving language-focused feedback (LF)

Group III: Control group (CG)

T1: Pre-test in the form of teacher-prompted writing task to check the homogeneity

T2: Post-test in the form of teacher-prompted writing task

The instruments used in this study were pre-test and post-test and sets of journal entry logs for students to write on. The logs were in the form of loose-leaf format so the students could take one to be submitted and put it back when it was returned to them with the feedback. Keeping the set themselves, they were expected to be able to refer to their previous journal before proceeding with the next entry. The pre-test and post-test were in the form of a prompted writing test, in which students were required to write a 200-250 words composition by responding to the prompt provided in a specified time.

The pre-test was administered before the treatment to check whether the three groups were homogeneous. The result of Levene Test of homogeneity of variance showed that the variability of their mean scores were homogenous. The journal writing assignment was conducted for about eight weeks, with the total of fifteen entries per students. The students' writing in the pre-test and post-test were scored by two raters who had been trained by the researcher so they had the same understanding on how the scoring should be conducted based on the analytic scoring rubric adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981). First, the raters were explained about the scoring rubric and how it would be used. Then they practiced rating a sample of a students' essay. After that, the actual scoring was administered. The scores from the two raters were analyzed using Pearson Correlation to check whether they were highly correlated. It was found that there was a strong correlation between the two raters for both pre-test and post-test,

with the  $r$  value of 0.996 for pre-test and 0.933 for post test. Thus, the scores to be analyzed further was the average score of the two raters.

## Findings

To answer the research question regarding which type of feedback was more effective in improving students' writing, the post test scores of the three groups were analyzed to see whether there was any significant difference among the three. The data on their scores are displayed in Table 1:

**Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of the Post Test Scores of MF, LF, and CG**

Group	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
MF	17	26.5	67.00	93.50	78.5294	7.63313
LF	16	19.5	64.00	83.50	69.3750	6.17117
CG	17	29	56.50	85.50	72.4706	6.67428

It can be seen that there are differences of mean among the three groups. The mean score of MF was the highest (78.5294) followed by CG (72.4726) and the last was LF (69.3750). To know whether the difference was significant, the data should be tested using ANOVA if they fulfill the basic statistical assumptions (homogeneity and normality tests).

Then, normality and homogeneity tests were conducted by using *Shapiro Wilk* and *Levene's test* which found that the data of MF and CG were normally distributed while LF was not. However, the variability of the mean scores among the three groups was homogeneous. Therefore, non-parametric testing is applied by using Kruskal Wallis test as an alternative to ANOVA. The result revealed that the chi square count is bigger than chi-square table and the  $p$  value is 0.002, less than  $\alpha$  (0.05), so it can be concluded that there is a mean difference of post test data among the groups. To know whether the difference between each group is significant, further test, Mann Whitney U test, was used.

### *Comparison between the Means of MF and CG*

From the descriptive data displayed previously, it can be seen that the mean score of MF is higher than that of CG. To test whether the difference is significant, Mann Whitney U test was used. The hypotheses were:

Ho: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean score between MF and CG

H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the mean score between MF and CG

If the  $p$  value (represented by Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)) is less than .05, thus Ho was rejected.

**Table 2. Comparison of the means of MF and CG**

	Post Test Score
Mann-Whitney U	80.500
Wilcoxon W	233.500
Z	-2.207
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.027
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.026 <sup>a</sup>

In Table 2, it can be seen that the  $p$  value (0.027) is less than 0.05 which means that  $H_0$  is rejected, which means that there is a significant difference between MF and CG. Because MF group mean score is significantly higher, it leads to the conclusion that students from MF group improve their writing more significantly than control group students.

#### *Comparison between the Means of LF and CG*

The descriptive data showed that the mean score of LG is lower than that of CG. However, to know whether the difference is significant, Man Whitey U test was conducted. First, the hypotheses were stated as follows:

$H_0$ : There is no statistically significant difference in the mean score between LF and CG

$H_1$ : There is a statistically significant difference in the mean score between LF and CG

**Table 3. Comparison of the Means of LF and CG**

	Post Test Score
Mann-Whitney U	83.500
Wilcoxon W	219.500
Z	-1.894
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.058
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.058 <sup>a</sup>

The test shows that the  $p$  value (0.058) is more than 0.05, so the  $H_0$  cannot be rejected, meaning that there is no significant mean difference between LF and CG.

#### *Comparison between the Means of MF and LF*

The hypotheses are:

$H_0$ : There is no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between meaning-focused group and language-focused group

$H_1$ : There is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores between meaning-focused group and language focused group

The result indicated that the mean score of MF was 78.5294, which was greater than the mean score of LF (69.375). To know whether the difference is significant, Mann Whitney U test was conducted and the result was presented in Table 4 below.

**Table 4. Comparison of the Means of MF and LF**

	Post Test Score
Mann-Whitney U	s46.000
Wilcoxon W	182.000
Z	-3.248
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.001 <sup>a</sup>

From the table, it can be seen that the  $p$  value is 0.01 which is less than  $\alpha$  (0.05) meaning that the  $H_0$  is rejected. There is a significant statistical difference in the mean score between MF and LF.

From the result of the test, it can be concluded that MF group outperformed the other two groups, because there is a statistically significant difference between MF and LF and MF and CG. This suggests that meaning-focused feedback is effective in improving students' writing ability. Meanwhile, there was no significant difference between LF and CG.

This result of the present study was in line with that of most studies (Semke, 1984; Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Duppenhaler, 2004; Baghzou, 2011; Rezai, 2011) which implied that meaning-focused feedback is more effective in improving students' writing. Salem (2007), for example, found that students supplied with meaning-focused feedback in their journal writing indicated development in ideas, coherence, cohesion, and voice. Similar result was found in Rezai's (2011) study, which investigated the effect of conversation on journal writing through email. Meanwhile Duppenhaler (2004) revealed that students receiving meaning-focused feedback write more error-free clauses compared to those receiving error-focused and positive comment.

In this study, there was no significant difference in the mean score of LF and CG, which indicates that language-focused feedback is not effective to improve students' writing. The result supports Truscott's (1996) view on error-correction, to which he strongly opposes. He further claims that that type of feedback is ineffective and it can bring harm to students' fluency and writing quality. Fazio (2001) also found in his study that error correction does not result in any improvement in student's subsequent writing. In contrast, Fazio's (2001) study showed that there was no significant difference in the improvement between students receiving different types of feedback (in Fazio's case, they are commentaries, error correction, and combination of the two feedback). Fazio mentioned that this might be due to the students' low level of attentiveness to the feedback. This seems to be the case in this study as well, especially to the LF group. Despite the feedback, they tended to repeat the same mistakes in their subsequent journals.

The reason for the effectiveness of meaning-focused feedback is probably related to its role in decreasing the students' writing anxiety and increasing their motivation which intrinsically make them write better. Previous studies showed that journal writing with meaning-focused feedback did provide psychological advantages such as increasing motivation (Tuan, 2010, Abdulmanafi-Rokni & Seifi, 2013, Sidek & Yunus, 2012), self efficacy (Baleghizadeh & Mortazavi, 2014), reducing anxiety (Abdulmanafi-Rokni & Seifi, 2013; Thevasigomoney, 2013) and build a good rapport between teacher and students (Tuan, 2010). This is particularly true for silent students who find it difficult to express themselves orally. They can have time to formulate ideas more easily than speaking in real time. Journal writing provides them opportunity to

confidently express their thought in writing, which can in turn increase their motivation to participate more in learning. The non-correction nature of journal writing also helps reduce students' anxiety and fear of making mistakes in writing.

The result of the study answered the research question regarding which of the two types of journal writing feedback is more effective in improving students' writing. MF group is proven to gain significantly higher score than LF. Thus, meaning-focused feedback is more effective in improving students' writing.

This study has some limitations. First, it involved a small number of subjects which makes it difficult to make a generalization to larger population. Second, the different feedback was provided by the same person, which might cause bias or inconsistency. Third, the study only investigate the effect of meaning-focused and language-focused feedback and did not investigate the effect of journal writing with combined feedback and even with no feedback. Future research, therefore, should involve more subjects and different persons providing different types of feedback.

## Conclusion

This study has investigated the differences in the writing ability of three groups of Indonesian EFL students: EFL students assigned to write journal with meaning-focused feedback, those assigned to write journal with language-focused feedback and those who were not assigned to write journal. The result of the study showed that the group provided with meaning-focused feedback achieved the highest writing ability which is significantly different from the writing ability of the other two groups. This study confirms the result of previous research on the benefit of journal writing with meaning-focused feedback in improving students' writing ability. This implies that journal writing is worth incorporating into ELT in general and the teaching of EFL writing in particular with emphasis on meaning-focused feedback so as to get the most effective result. The result of this study conforms to the function of a journal writing activity as a means of communication between the students and the teacher to share ideas related to the teaching of the subject matter, including writing, and those beyond classroom contexts.

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