

## THE USE OF “TRACK CHANGES” IN MICROSOFT WORD TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK IN STUDENTS’ WRITING

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### *Abstract*

Providing feedback in second language writing is an integral task that must be done by *Writing* teachers. This task, in many cases, is very tiring and time consuming. The purpose of this study is to see how “*Track Changes*” menu in *Microsoft Word* can be used to help L2 writing teachers in providing grammar feedback. This study used 2 groups of students as the control group and the treatment one. The students were taking *Writing 4* Course at College of Languages of Sultan Agung Islamic University (UNISSULA). For the control group, students were required to write their writing work on paper, and submitted them to the researcher (teacher). The researcher then provided feedbacks of grammar inaccuracies found on the work by giving the accurate forms somewhere on their writing sheets and returned them to the students. For the treatment group, students were required to type their writing work on *Microsoft Word document (doc.)* and emailed them to the researcher who then provided feedbacks of grammar inaccuracies directly on the text by activating “*Track Changes*” menu. The work then was sent back to each student. The experiment lasted for four weeks in which in each week a student completed a short piece of writing. At the end of the experiment, each student from both groups wrote an essay on *Microsoft Word document* and emailed it to the researcher. The essays were rated by three different raters. The scores of the two groups were compared to see the effectiveness of the method. The discussion also includes students’ perception on the use of that method. Using “*Track Changes*” menu could be an innovative method of feedback provision.

Key words: writing, feedback, track changes, grammatical inaccuracies

## Introduction

Despite different research findings on the effectiveness of corrective feedbacks on English as a Second Language (ESL) student writing (Bitchener and Knoch, 2009), the writer believes that providing feedback in second language writing is an integral task that must be done by *Writing* teachers. This belief is based on the argument that writing -as Seow suggests (Richards & Renandya: 2002), Harmer (2004 & 2007)- involves 4 stages, namely planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Teachers' feedback – together with peers' – is important input for students to improve their writing. At this revising stage, students usually look back what they have put on papers and see whether they have communicated their ideas effectively to the readers. Comments, corrections and the like from readers represented by the teachers and peers will be very helpful in completing a good writing work.

In writing, revision is necessary because of at least two reasons. First, unlike oral communication, writing tasks do not allow for an ongoing negotiation of meaning through interlocution. Therefore, the intended meaning must be expressed accurately to the reader. Second, the written medium is often reserved by society when important ideas need to be formalized, standardized or made more permanent. Thus, formal writing carries with it certain expectations of clarity, precision, quality and durability.

For writing teachers, responding to students writing as providing feedbacks certainly is a very tiring and the most time-consuming task (Kroll in Celce-Murcia, 2001). It is because there are too many dimensions of writing that need attention. For example, consider the accuracy and substance of what is written; the originality of the ideas that are expressed; the organization, sequencing and flow of those ideas; the attention to the purpose of the writing, including the tone and the various needs of the audience; the use of appropriate devices and conventions associated with various genres of writing; the accurate use of citations and references and so on. These and many other important dimensions of writing may compete for the attention of the teacher and student throughout the learning process.

This condition could be worse when writing students are allowed to collect their work on handwriting format. Some students' hand writings are not clearly readable, reading small letters and close spaces between words may decrease the teacher's "desire" to read through the writing work at the very beginning of revising process. With hand writing, sometimes even to judge whether a word has been spelled correctly or not is difficult.

Computer technology offers a facility which can possibly be used by writing teachers to help them doing their job. The facility is **Track Changes** which becomes one of the menus in Microsoft Word. For Microsoft Word 97-2003 version, this menu is under **Tool**, while for Microsoft Word 2007 version, Track Changes is under the menu of **Review**. When activated, Track Changes can track and record any changes (editing) as new letters typed, delete and changes of format on a text written in Word format. With these features, writing teachers may explore the advantages of **Track Changes** menu to help them do their job. The use of this editing tools has also been advised by Harmer (2007).

This paper presents and discusses the findings of the research on the use of Track Changes to provide grammar feedback on students writing. The research was conducted at English Education Department College of Languages of Sultan Agung Islamic University (UNISSULA) Semarang during the even semester 2009/2010.

## **Review of Literature**

### **The Writing Process**

Writing is a process with 4 stages namely planning, drafting, revising and editing (Seow; 2002), or planning, drafting, editing and final draft (Harmer; 2004). Planning which is also sometimes called as pre-writing is the the stage where writing learners are encouraged to write by jotting ideas and collecting information necessary as through brainstorming, clustering, making WH-questions and the like. When planning writers have to think about three main issues (Harmer, 2004). In the first place they have to consider the purpose of their writing since this will influence not only the type of text they wish to produce, but also the language they use, and the information they choose to include. Secondly, writers have to think of the audience they are writing for, since this will influence not only the shape of the writing but also the choice of language –whether it is formal or informal in tone for example. Thirdly, writers have to consider the content structure of the piece – that is how best to sequence the facts, ideas or arguments which they have decided to include.

Drafting is the stage where writer puts the ideas and information he wishes to share on paper. This is usually done on the assumption that it will be amended later. The focus is usually more on the fluency of ideas rather than the accuracy of grammar and spelling for example or the neatness of the work.

The next stage is revising (Seow) or editing (Harmer). Seow suggests that revising occurs when writer looks back at his / her work by putting feedbacks from both teachers and peers into consideration. The writer will also measure the effectiveness of his / her communication to the audience he / she is targeting. Harmer, on the other side, suggests that what he means by editing is reflecting and revising.

The last stage is editing (Seow) or Final version (Harmer) in which the writer produces the final version. Checking grammar and spelling accuracies, punctuations, and word choices usually becomes the main task to be done at this stage.

Though there are four stages but as a matter of fact writing process is not linear, but rather recursive in the sense that a writer plans, drafts, edits / revises and then re-plans, re-drafts, re-edits before finally has the final work. Seow describes this process from Process Activated to Process terminated, while Harmer describes it as the Process Wheel as the following:

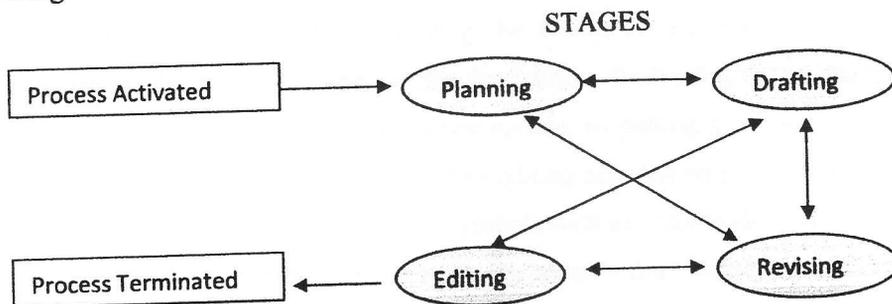


Figure 1  
The Writing Process  
(Anthony Seow in Richard & Renandya, 2002)

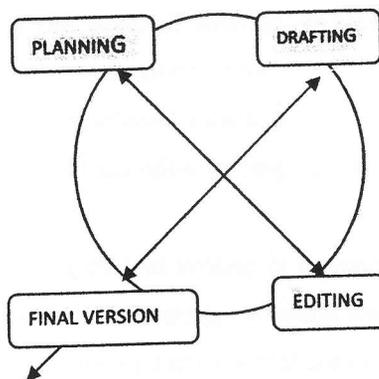


Figure 2  
The Process Wheel (Harmer, 2004)

## Feedback

Feedback is any procedure used by teachers to inform learners whether an instructional response is right or wrong (Kulhavy, 1997), or any inputs from readers to the writer that provide information (Keh; 1990), or just *response* (Reid 1993). Teacher's feedback on student writing is a significant issue related to language errors in writing (Frodesen in Celce-Murcia; 2002).

Feedback can be about content of the writing, stylistics, grammar or the combination of the three. Content feedback focuses much on ideas and the organization of ideas on the writing, stylistics feedback focuses on the word uses, while grammar feedback focuses on grammatical aspects of the writing. Grammar feedbacks are categorized into direct and indirect feedback. Direct feedbacks are the ones provided by teachers / peers directly to the learners both in oral form or in written one. On the case of writing, direct feedbacks are usually given by the teachers by crossing the wrong version and writing the right ones somewhere on the students' paper. While for indirect feedbacks, the teachers only provide signs to show that certain phrases are inappropriate, as putting a check in the margin of the lines where errors occur, underlining or highlighting selected errors, coding errors either in the margins or above selected errors with symbols such as *vt* for verb tense, *wf* for word form, *art* for article and so on, attaching a sheet to the writer's draft with a list of several structural errors along with exercises or handouts to help writer better understand the grammatical system or feature involved.

Frodesen suggests a guideline for providing feedbacks on grammar: 1) indirect feedback is usually more useful than direct correction of errors; 2) Teachers should not provide feedback on all errors in any one piece of writing; 3) Deciding which errors most deserve attention requires consideration of many student variables (e.g. metalinguistic knowledge, proficiency level) and the instructional situation; 4) teachers can alert students to areas of concern in early drafts so that all attention to language errors does not need to be given with the last draft.

Although providing feedbacks in student writing is a common practice, it is often described in negative terms (Lee, 2009) as frustrating, grueling and anxiety ridden, tedious and unrewarding. Truscott (1996) even claimed that grammar correction should be eliminated from L2 writing classes. He declared that the provision of corrective feedback on ESL student

writing was ineffective and harmful and that it should therefore be abandoned. He maintained that there was empirical evidence to show that the practice was not worth continuing (Bitchener and Knoch 2009).

In response to Truscott, Ferris (1999) argued that the research base Truscott was drawing upon was too limited and conflicting in its finding. Truscott may have been a bit hasty in his conclusions and that error correction has helped some students in limited contexts. Ultimately, Ferris and Truscott agreed that further research was needed to help us better understand some of the potential effects of error correction on L2 writing. They suggested that studies should examine whether particular approaches to corrective feedback lead to greater accuracy and whether such approaches will result in greater performance with certain grammatical forms than others (Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1999).

### **Grammatical Error**

Errors are defined as “morphological, syntactical, and lexical deviations from the grammatical rules of language that violates the intuitions of native speakers (Hedgcock, 2005). Errors in second language writing are part of learning, and research on ESL errors has found that they errors are not random, but are regular and rule-governed (Reid, 1993). Types of errors learners have in their second language may depend on the structure of their L1 and their previous learning experiences of the English language (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). L2 writers’ grammatical errors tend to be different from native speakers’ errors, for they have distinct problems with verbs (tenses, modals, passive construction, infinitives, conditionals), subject/verb agreement, nouns (types, plurals, possessives, articles), prepositions, and sometimes spelling (Holt, 1997).

### **“Track Changes” in Microsoft Word**

“Track Changes” is feature on Microsoft Word which -when it is activated- has an ability to record any changes occurred on the documents. Track Changes allow teachers or other respondents to make amendments and corrections, and also leave notes and questions on a word-processed document on the screen (Harmer, 2004). Once Track Changes is engaged, students can either accept or reject the amendments that the teacher or fellow student has

suggested, and look, too, at the notes that have been attached to the documents. A problem with this approach is that it can easily lead to the kind of over marking or over correction.

With Word 2003 (XP), Track Changes can be activated with the following steps:

1. Select Tools / Track Changes (if "Track Changes" is not visible, double-click on Tools)
2. Select Show / Options.
3. Click on Change Tracking Options
  - for Insertions, confirm the choice is "Underline" and change the color to Blue
  - for Deletions, confirm the choice is "Strikethrough" and change the color to Red
  - for Changed lines, change the choice to (none)
  - for Use Balloons, change the choice to Never
  - click on OK
4. Changes are easier to select if you turn off the feature that automatically selects an entire word. Use Tools > Options > Edit, then clear the box beside "When selecting, automatically select entire word".
5. At the bottom of your window, the abbreviation "TRK" should be bold. If it is not, double-click it to turn on Track Changes. (This symbol can be double-clicked at any time to turn the feature on or off.)
6. You'll see a box in the upper left with a downward arrow. If the box says "Final" or "Original", click on the downward arrow and select "Final Showing Markup".

With Word 2007, Track Changes can be activated with the following steps:

1. In Word, click the Review tab at the top, then click on the words "Track Changes".
2. Click on Change Tracking Options
  - for Insertions, confirm the choice is "Underline" and change the color to Blue
  - for Deletions, confirm the choice is "Strikethrough" and change the color to Red
  - for Changed lines, change the choice to (none)
  - for Use Balloons, change the choice to Never
  - click on OK

3. Click on the Office button (large, in the upper left corner), then Word Options, then Advanced. Look for "When selecting, automatically select entire word." If there is a checkmark there, remove it and click OK.
4. To turn Track Changes on or off at any time, click the Review tab at the top, then click on the icon ABOVE the words "Track Changes"
5. You can switch back and forth between two views of the document (you'll see a box under the Review tab that lists the current view) -- try "Final Showing Markup", and "Original"
6. Please don't use the "New comment" feature (it's not compatible with some versions of Word)

## Method

### Participants

The study was conducted at the English Education Department College of Languages of Sultan Agung Islamic University (UNISSULA) Semarang. The subjects of the research were two groups of students of semester 4 who were taking *Writing IV* course. They were group E2 and group E3. There were 24 students in Group E2, and 25 students in Group E3. The selection of Groups E2 and E3 to be respondents of the research was simply by convenient sake, that the researcher was the Writing teacher of them. There were actually 4 groups of students taking that subject namely E1, E2, E3 and L, but Group E1 and Group L were taught by different teachers.

Group E2 was selected to be the Treatment Group (TG), while Group E3 became the Control Group (CG). The decision was based on a coin throw. Group E2 was represented by the number side of the coin, while Group E3 was represented by the picture side. Before the throw, each group represented by its leader had agreed that the up-side would be the Treatment Group. The coin was then thrown and it was found that the Number side was up. So Group E2 was set to be the Treatment Group.

Each member of both groups has completed the courses of *Writing 1*, *Writing 2* and *Writing 3*. *Writing 4* is Genre-Based Writing. (At the same time, the participants were also taking Grammar 4 course). Though the participants completed the previous Writing courses

with different grades, but the researcher assumed that they have almost the same level of proficiency in Writing.

At the end of the experiment, some students were excluded from being participants of the research because they either did not attend all classes conducted or did not collect all the writing tasks required. Finally it was decided that 20 participants for TG and 20 participants for CG were the subjects of the research.

### **Target Structure**

In this research, there was no specific structure being targeted. All the grammatical errors found on the student writing were subject to correction. Though those could be a problem concerning the conclusiveness of the finding (Bitchener and Knoch, 2009), the researcher thought it didn't really matter since at the end of the experiment, student score was based on overall performance rather than on a very specific grammar problem.

### **Treatment**

TG received different treatment from CG in the case of how the feedback was provided. The respondents of TG were required to write their work on Microsoft Word document (.doc.) then they emailed them to the researcher. The work was then read and corrected. Direct feedbacks were provided as Track Changes was activated. The files were then emailed back to each of the respondents.

For CG, the respondents were required to write their work on paper (either hand writing or type) and collected them to the researcher. Direct feedbacks were also provided of each work by writing down the correct forms of the grammatical errors close to the error or at the end of the lines where the error was found. The essays were then returned to the respondents.

### **Instrument**

Besides the writing tasks, a questioner was also administered to the respondents. It consisted of 3 parts. Part 1 was directed to find information about the respondents as name,

semester, and sex. Part 2 was directed to collect information on the participants' perception about grammar for writing and their reactions to feedbacks provided by their teachers. Part 3 was exclusively prepared for the TG. It was directed to collect information on their perception about the practice of Track Changes use for grammatical feedback provision. The questioner was administered after the treatment was completed.

Part 2 and Part 3 of the questionnaire consisted of statements which required a response in 5-items Likert Scale with 1) *Strongly Disagree*; 2) *Disagree*; 3) *Undecided*; 4) *Agree*; and 5) *Strongly Agree*. There are 5 statements in Part 2. They are 1) *When writing, I do not think about my grammar*; 2) *When writing, grammar is not a problem for me*; 3) *I've never reread my writing tasks which were returned by my teacher*; 4) *I always check the grammar feedbacks I find on my writing tasks*; 5) *Teacher's feedback improves my grammar*.

In Part 3, there are 5 statements: 1) *I can understand the grammar feedbacks provided by Track Changes easily*; 2) *Reading grammar feedbacks by Track Changes is more interesting*; 3) *Reading grammar feedbacks by Track Changes is more practical*; 4) *Track Changes helps improve my understanding on Grammar*; 5) *I suggest writing teachers to use Track Changes to provide grammar feedbacks for their students*.

## Procedure

The procedures of the research were administered according to the following schedule:

Week	Activity / Treatment
Week 1	Pre research activity: the research design, procedures, the use of Track Changes were informed to the participants both from CG and TG.
Week 2	Task 1: Writing a recount text (250 – 300 words) Day 1: Respondents wrote the tasks and collected them (out of classroom session) Day 2&3: The tasks were corrected, feedbacks were provided. Day 4: The tasks were returned to the participants.
Week 3	Task 2: Writing a narrative text (250 – 300 words)
Week 4	Task 3: Writing a procedure text (250 – 300 words)
Week 5	Task 4: Writing a descriptive text (250 – 300 words)
Week 6	Post Task: Participants were given a picture and were required to write

a descriptive text about the picture in 250 - 300 words.

- Notes: 1) The treatment of Task 2 to 5 is the same as the one in Task 1.  
2) The Post task was written on Word document and e-mailed to the researcher.  
3) Post task were rated by 3 different raters.

## Result and Discussion

### Grammar in Writing

When participants were asked to comment on the statement saying that when writing, he / she does not think about grammar, participants from both groups have the same tendency of declining the statement. It means that they do consider grammar accuracy when they are doing writing. Different tendency occurred when they were required to respond to the statement that grammar is not a problem for them. It is found that for CG, the majority of the participants (15% and 60%) stated that grammar was a problem, while there were only 10% of participants responded *Agree* and 5% responded *Strongly Agree*. For TG, 50% of the participants were on the position of declining the statement (10% *Strongly Disagree* and 40% *Disagree*). But the number of respondents who responded *Agree* was high enough (45%). It can be concluded that students of the TG had better competency on grammar –since grammar was not a problem- than their friends in CG. Table 1 shows participants' perception about grammar and writing.

Table 1  
Participants' Perception about Grammar and Writing

Statements	Strongly Disagree (%)		Disagree (%)		Un-decided (%)		Agree (%)		Strongly Agree (%)	
	CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG
<i>When writing, I do not think about my grammar</i>	30	20	45	60	15	10	10	10	5	0
<i>When writing, grammar is not a problem for me</i>	15	10	60	40	10	5	10	45	5	0

Does returning students' writing work help students? The study revealed that majority of students reread the writing tasks which were returned to them. Responding to the statement "*I've never reread my writing tasks which were returned by my teacher*", 85%

participants of the CG declined it as having *Strongly Disagree* (25%) and *Disagree* (60%). Though a little lower, the participants of the TG did the same. It means that writing tasks – after being corrected – should be returned to the students, because they may be reread by their writings. In this way, the writing works are useful for the students.

Concerning whether providing written feedback on writing tasks is worth doing, these two statements will help determine the answer. Responding to the statement “*I always check the grammar feedbacks I find on my writing tasks*”, 85% participants of both group said *Agree* and *Strongly Agree*. The rests are *Disagree* (10%) and *Undecided*. The second statement “*Teacher’s feedback improves my grammar*”, 100% of participants from CG responded by *Agree* (50%) and *Strongly Agree* (50%). For Treatment Group, 80% responded *Agree* and 10% *Strongly Agree*.

These responses clearly show that actually providing feedbacks, especially grammar feedbacks, is worth doing. It is an integrated task that should be done by the writing teachers.

Table 2  
Participants’ Perception about the Usefulness of feedback

Statements	Strongly Disagree (%)		Disagree (%)		Un-decided (%)		Agree (%)		Strongly Agree (%)	
	CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG
<i>I’ve never reread my writing tasks which were returned by my teacher</i>	25	5	60	50	0	30	15	15	0	0
<i>I always check the grammar feedbacks I find on my writing tasks</i>	0	0	10	0	5	15	50	80	35	5
<i>Teacher’s feedback improves my grammar</i>	0	0	0	5	0	5	50	80	50	10

Students’ reaction towards the use of Track Changes for providing grammar feedback in their writing is very positive. According to them, grammar feedbacks provided by Track Changes are easily understood, more interesting, more practical, and helpful in improving their understanding on grammar. Even when asked to respond to statement: “*I suggest writing teachers use Track Changes to provide grammar feedbacks for their students*”, 60% of the participants chose *Agree*, and the rest (40%) chose *Strongly Agree*. The complete responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3  
Participants' Reaction towards the Use of Track Changes

Statements	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Un-decided (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
<i>I can understand the grammar feedbacks provided by Track Changes easily</i>	0	0	0	70	30
<i>Reading grammar feedbacks by Track Changes is more interesting</i>	0	0	5	85	10
<i>Reading grammar feedbacks by Track Changes is more practical</i>	0	0	20	65	15
<i>Track Changes helps improve my understanding on grammar</i>	0	0	15	75	10
<i>I suggest writing teachers use Track Changes to provide grammar feedbacks for their students</i>	0	0	0	60	40

The writing post task was scored by three different raters. Before doing their jobs, the raters were informed that grammar was the most important factor in deciding the scores. Stylistics problems as paragraphing, punctuation, generic structures etc. –though they might affect their judgment- were not the main consideration. Besides that, the raters were also informed that the scores ranged from 60 (the lowest) to 90 (the highest). The inter-rater reliability both for Control Group and Experiment Group was measured by Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) by SPSS 16.0. For the Control Group, the value of significance is 0.052, and for the Experiment Group, it is 0.069. They are above 0.05. It means that the three raters were reliable enough and consistent.

Table 4  
Inter-Rater Reliability for Control and Treatment Groups

Control Group

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	244.300	2	122.150	3.108	.052
Within Groups	2240.550	57	39.308		
Total	2484.850	59			

Treatment Group

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	142.500		71.250	2.803	.069
Within Groups	1448.750	57	25.417		
Total	1591.250	59			

To find the effectiveness of the method, an independent- sample t-test was conducted. The scores of the post task between the TG and the CG were analyzed by using SPSS version 16.0. The analysis shows that the means of the two groups were different. TG scored higher. But it doesn't mean that there was a real difference between the two groups because it was found that the significance coefficient is high enough (0.355). This shows that although there was a difference, it was not strong enough to assume that the effect of the two different methods in providing feedback was significantly different.

Table 5  
Statistical Output of T-Test

Group Statistics

Grouping	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores experiment group	20	77.1250	6.03035	1.34843
control group	20	75.4500	5.26633	1.17759

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
scores	Equal variances assumed	1.235	.273	.936	38	.355	1.67500	1.79024	-1.94916	5.29916
	Equal variances not assumed			.936	37.323	.355	1.67500	1.79024	-1.95131	5.30131

The participants think that the use of Track Changes for providing feedbacks is easily understood, interesting, practical and helpful but it could not make a significant difference from the conventional method. This may be explained by:

1. The experiment was done relatively very short. It was only in 4 weeks with 4 writing tasks. The effects of the feedback was not strong enough to influence the habit of using the right grammar. Besides, the feedbacks that the participants had had on their previous tasks might not be the same as the grammar problems that occurred on the post task.
2. The corrective feedback was unfocused in the sense that all grammar mistakes were corrected. As Bitchener and Knoch (2009) mentioned, the unfocused approach that was taken with regard to the range of error categories treated fails to produce conclusive answers to the question of efficacy of the feedback.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the result and the analysis several conclusions can be drawn. First, grammatical feedbacks in writing are useful for students. Students read and check the feedbacks provided by their teachers. In this way, students learn from the mistakes. It is also revealed that feedbacks help students improve students' grammar competency. Secondly, Track Changes can be used to provide feedbacks and students found that it was interesting, practical, and easy to understand. However, the effect of the method of feedbacks provision was proven to be better than the ordinary method of providing feedbacks manually on students' paper. This ineffectiveness of the application may result from the fact that the experiment was conducted in a relatively short period. The second problem may concern about the focus of the feedbacks under study.

In the future the weakness can be improved by having longer time period for experiment so that students experience enough exposure grammar correction through feedback and by focusing on certain grammatical problems.

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