

# Effect of Metalinguistic Feedback on Chilean Preservice Teachers' Written Use of the Third Person Singular Suffix -s<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This study addresses the impact of 2 types of written corrective feedback (WCF) on the acquisition of the third person singular -s in English. The study followed a quasi-experimental design: 2 experimental groups and 1 control group that included 57 preservice teachers from a Chilean university. The experimental groups underwent a treatment based on the provision of direct metalinguistic feedback (group 1) and indirect metalinguistic feedback (group 2). The control group did not receive any type of WCF. At the end of the treatment, a posttest was run and, 1 month later, a delayed posttest was given. Finally, a semistructured interview was conducted in order to identify the L2 learners' perceptions about the provision of WCF through a Wiki environment. There was no significant difference between the experimental groups on the posttest. However, on the delayed test, group 2 outperformed group 1.

**Keywords:** Direct Metalinguistic Feedback; Indirect Metalinguistic Feedback; Learners' Perceptions; Suffix -s; Wiki

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## 1. Introduction

This study starts with the assumption that EFL teachers must demonstrate both pragmatic and declarative competence, especially when it comes to academic English. The role grammar plays in the context of language teaching and learning has always been the focus of discussion among researchers and teachers. The discussion has mainly focused on the decontextualized teaching of grammar and what prevents students from practicing grammar under effective communication. Current methodologies suggest that errors cannot be treated in isolation, but in a meaningful context. That being said, poor-quality texts in EFL preservice teachers' essays reflect that academic writing development in EFL is a very difficult task. One aspect in students' academic texts that is considered problematic in the Chilean context is the accurate use of grammar. This issue could be observed and confirmed in a group of preservice teachers of English, whose most commonly found error was the third person singular -s when writing an argumentative essay. Although this morpheme has been considered a basic form for ESL learners (Brown, 2000; O'Grady, 2006; Hsieh, 2009), it has been observed that students experience a particular difficulty acquiring this morpheme, regardless of their language competence in English.

It is important to point out that even though grammar errors may not have a significant impact on the communication of a message, they do constitute a problem in an academic context. Studies related to the provision of feedback to individual students are numerous. However, the provision of feedback at a group level has been weakly explored (London & Sessa, 2006). This may be due to the difficulty of viewing learning from a social perspective, especially in the field of error treatment. These issues lead to examine the role of feedback strategies within a collaborative context.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Acquisition of Final -s in the Third Person Singular*

It is common that learners face different types of obstacles during L2 acquisition. In this context, accuracy seems to be particularly difficult for EFL learners. According to Ellis (1997), the third person singular is considered among the most difficult to acquire by non-native-speakers of English. This confirms that there is no direct relationship between linguistic complexity and learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2008).

Pienemann (2005) and Ellis (2006) attempt to explain the difficulty of acquiring the final -s. Pienemann (2005), in his processability theory, declares that L2 learners can only acquire those linguistic structures they can process. This means learners acquire the structures following a strict order, which is independent of their

L1. According to Brown and Larson-Hall (2012), learners who share the same L1 should follow the same order of acquisition. As to the acquisition of the final -s, Pienemann (2005) points out that this morpheme is the last structure in this order and, therefore, learners will not acquire it until they master the elements that are at an earlier level.

On the other hand, Ellis (2009), in his associative learning theory, highlights one element in the process of acquisition of some morphemes: *blocking*. Blocking occurs when two or more linguistic elements make up the meaning of an utterance. Thus, the most important element in a sentence is acquired by learners, and they tend to ignore the element that is less relevant. In the case of the suffix -s, this element would be the less relevant, whereas the prominent elements would be the learning of the constituent parts of the sentence. Likewise, van Patten (1990) declares that, for learners, it is usually difficult to notice formal features, especially within a communicative context where the focus is more on meaning than form. Besides, the author adds that it is common that L2 learners employ process language, using the patterns they are more familiar with.

## **2.2. Focused Corrective Feedback**

Focused corrective feedback means that the teacher corrects a specific error (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Han, 2002; Ellis, 2009). To date, few studies have explored the effect of focused feedback. Some researchers have compared the effect of focused and unfocused feedback. The results of these studies have shown that focused feedback seems to be more effective than unfocused feedback (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Ferris & Robert, 2001; Han, 2002; Sheen, 2007, 2011). However, other studies have shown that both types of feedback have been equally effective at treating grammatical errors (Bitchener & Ferris, 2011).

Supporters of focused feedback state that it is unnecessary to correct all students' errors in a text. Some authors (Ferris & Robert, 2001; Han, 2002; Sheen, 2007, 2011) declare that feedback provided to one or two grammar structures makes the acquisition process easier. Cassany (2009), for example, states that learners, especially beginners, cannot assimilate a very large number of corrections at once. Cots, Armengol, Arnó, and Llurda (2007), Hyland (2003), and Truscott (1996) also agree that too many comments can overwhelm learners' cognitive capacity.

## **2.3. Direct and Indirect Feedback**

The difference between direct feedback and indirect feedback is that in the former, the teacher identifies the error and provides the correct answer, and in the latter, the teacher indicates the learner that an error exists but he does not provide the answer (Sheen, 2001).

Studies conducted in the field of direct and indirect feedback cannot ensure that one type of feedback is more beneficial than the other. Some studies have shown that direct feedback is more beneficial than indirect feedback on the acquisition of specific linguistic structures (Bitchener, Youngm, & Cameron, 2005; Sheen, 2011). These studies suggest that direct feedback encourages learners to make more corrections in their texts compared to indirect feedback. However, other studies (Ferris & Helt, 2000) have found that indirect feedback may have equal or better effects than direct feedback on grammatical accuracy. Similarly, some authors (Chandler, 2003; Srichanyachon, 2012) indicate that indirect feedback may change learners' perception of their responsibility for learning.

Studies conducted by van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) indicate that direct feedback might be more effective than indirect feedback in the long term. These ideas are consistent with Bitchener and Knoch (2008), who also declare that both indirect and direct feedback would be equally effective in the short term.

#### ***2.4. Use of Metalinguistic Feedback***

Metalinguistic feedback is defined as the feedback that explains the nature of the error (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Sheen, 2007). Ellis (2009) and Sheen (2011) argue that explicit knowledge provided through metalinguistic feedback could support learners in the development of an L2. The delivery of this type of feedback helps learners, on the one hand, to reflect on their errors, and on the other hand, to understand the nature of them. In this context, Bitchener (2008), Bitchener and Knoch (2008), Cots et al. (2007), and Sheen (2007) have concluded that the use of written feedback supported by a metalinguistic explanation may have a beneficial effect on the acquisition of some grammatical features. In particular, the metalinguistic component involves the learner's ability to reflect on the language and go beyond its use. According to Gass, Behney, and Plonsky (2013), the ability to reflect on language is associated with a better ability to learn a language, as the focus is on the language itself and this is supposed to lead to a deeper and more conscious reflection on learning.

#### ***2.5. Role of Corrective Feedback During a Collaborative Writing Task***

Within the sociocultural theory, corrective feedback plays an essential role. Anton (1999, cited in Ellis 2009, p. 22), affirms that "dialogue allows strong support from experts to novice during error correction." From this perspective, collaborative writing may provide an appropriate environment to address grammar errors.

To engage students in collaborative writing tasks may have several advantages over individual writing. Learners discuss, exchange knowledge, make decisions, among other actions. During this process, collaborative dialogue can help

solve language problems. Swain (2000, p. 6), declares that “verbalization is a powerful cognitive tool to internalize meaning and to acquire grammar.” In like manner, Swain (2000) and Swain and Lapkin (2001) state that the use of collaborative tasks facilitates the identification of linguistic errors during the dialogic phase. This instance allows students to talk about the language, negotiate meaning and discuss linguistic errors.

On the other hand, metalinguistic awareness, a concept that means that attention is directed to the language itself, can be activated while working in collaboration. When the use of metalanguage is promoted, there is an explicit awareness of the language, meaning that language becomes the subject of study and students can focus on information that usually passes unnoticed, as normally happens during communication (Cots et al., 2007). Hence, this is not only an instance to put pragmatic knowledge into practice, but also declarative knowledge.

## **2.6. Focused Feedback Provided Through Wiki**

A Wiki is an online collaborative tool considered as one of the most useful for online writing, as it provides a dynamic set of applications for task development (Hunzer, 2012; Richardson, 2006). This tool provides opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous communication and group editing. It also has a banner which allows online feedback from teachers and peers. This application, compared to the tedious task of giving feedback in a traditional way, facilitates the teacher’s task during the revision phase because feedback can be given at different levels of the writing process. Furthermore, the feedback and the written text changes remain online, which helps learners keep track of their progress.

According to Meskill and Anthony (2005), Pellettieri (2000), and Ware and O’Dowd (2008), writing a text in a virtual environment favors reflection and attention to form, and it also gives learners the possibility to work at a slower pace. Furthermore, some authors (Lai & Zhao, 2006; Lee, 2010; Sotillo, 2000; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000) declare that this context would promote *noticing* and self-correction.

Some studies that have been conducted in this field (Lee, 2004; Meskill & Anthony, 2005; O’Rourke, 2005) have shown that this instance promotes the development of grammatical competence, students’ attention on linguistic error, and the use of the L2 to solve problems. Similarly, it has been stated that, on the one hand, students review their drafts more often when they receive online feedback, and on the other, teachers provide frequent feedback on learners’ writing (Ashwell, 2000; Hyland, 2003; Lui & Sadler, 2003). Based on previous assumptions, the use of a collaborative learning environment might have several benefits on written error correction.

Scarce research has focused on the students' perception on feedback given in a virtual collaborative environment (Álvarez, Espasa, & Guasch, 2012; Lee, 2008). In those reviewed studies, a positive attitude towards online feedback is observed. In this regard, Tuzi (2004) states that providing feedback online would foster reflection, as well as the frequent revision of the written texts. In turn, Liu and Sadler (2003) indicate that the students exhibit a greater reception to feedback given through a virtual environment than that given through paper and pencil. Similarly, Nezami and Sandraie (2012) declares that online feedback, of the recast and metalinguistic type, is well received by learners. On the other hand, Warschauer and Meskill (2000) argue that the learners show a better disposition towards feedback given within a virtual environment.

Even though the previous studies described indicate that L2 learners' perception on feedback is mainly positive, it is important to carry out further research on the topic, especially when it comes to a study in which the English language is not in an immediate context.

In brief, the current study addressed the following research questions and hypotheses:

1. What is the impact of indirect and direct feedback metalinguistic feedback in the acquisition of the third person singular -s in English in an online collaborative writing task?
2. What are preservice teachers' perceptions about the provision of feedback through a Wiki environment?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants were 57 Chilean EFL teacher candidates, including 65% women and 35% males. Their ages ranged between 19 and 22 years.

#### 3.2. Design

From a quantitative perspective, the study followed a quasi-experimental research design that consisted of two experimental groups and one control group. The two experimental conditions are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. *Types of Feedback and Examples*

Type of Feedback	Examples
Indirect Metalinguistic Feedback	Student: <i>She go to the cinema every day.</i> Teacher: <i>What element should be added to the base form of the verb in the third person singular?</i>
Direct Metalinguistic Feedback	Student: <i>She go to the cinema every day.</i> Teacher: <i>After he, she and it, the verb takes -s.</i>

From a qualitative perspective, it was a descriptive study in which 22 participants were interviewed.

### 3.3. Procedure

The participants were divided into three groups: The control group, which was made up of 19 participants and the experimental groups which were made up of 18 and 19 participants, respectively. The experimental group 1 received indirect metalinguistic feedback, and experimental group 2 got direct metalinguistic feedback (see Figure 1):

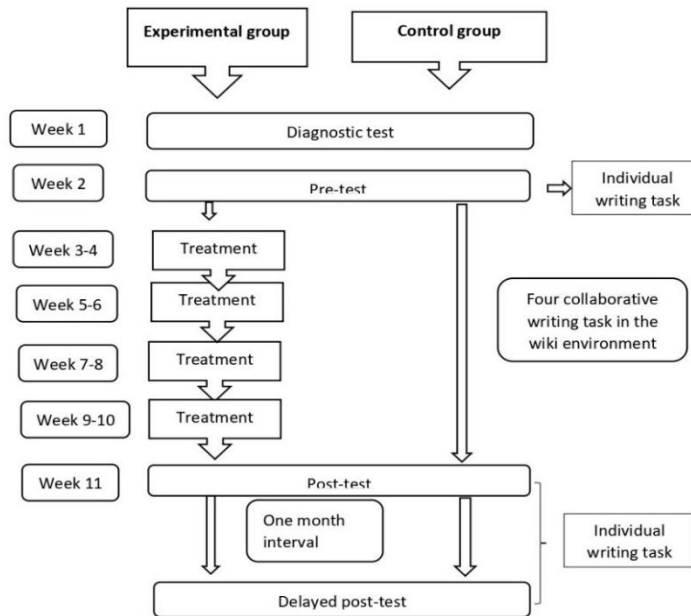


Figure 1. Study Design

Then, a pretest was given and a 4-month intervention started. The intervention consisted of the collaborative writing of four academic texts in a Wiki environment. The participants in the experimental and control groups attended the language lab once for 2 h. To control the task, the students wrote and revised the text at the lab, with the teacher's presence. In the next phase, the posttest was administered. Finally, 1 month after the posttest, a delayed test was given. The data collected were analyzed through the SPSS statistical software (version 25). Figure 1 shows the design of the study.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The linguistic error chosen in the research was the one which occurred most frequently in the diagnostic test (the third person singular -s). The error analysis was done by calculating the percentage of correct usage of the third person singular -s. This operation was based on the type of obligatory occasion analysis proposed by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005). The authors provide the following formula:

Table 2. *Obligatory Occasion Analysis*

$\frac{n \text{ correct suppliance in contexts}}{n \text{ obligatory occasions} + n \text{ suppliance in nonobligatory contexts}} \times 100$
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Then, in order to identify the participants' perceptions about the focalized corrective feedback, a semistructured interview was carried out. For data categorization, content analysis was performed using software Nvivo 10.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Quantitative Results

Figure 2 compares the two mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the pretest:

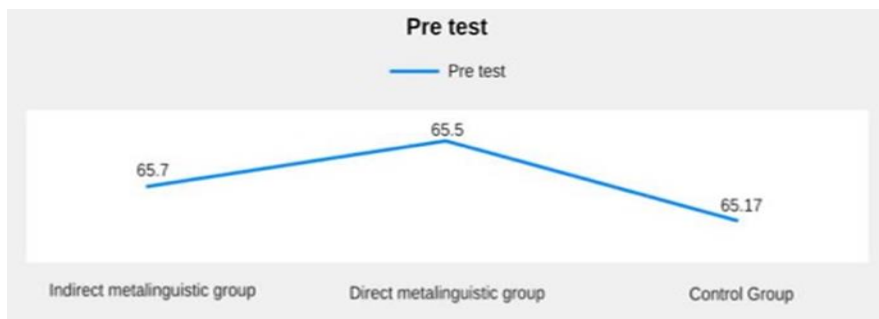


Figure 2. Group Mean Comparison on the Pretest

The Kruskal Wallis Test showed that there were not statistical differences on the pretest among the three groups (*Sig.* 940;  $p > = 0.005$ ). This means that the participants in the three groups were comparatively equal in the use of suffix -s on the pretest.

Then, in order to address the respective research questions and hypotheses, the data were analyzed through the U de Mann Whitney test, a nonparametric statistical test. The findings will be shown below:



#### 4.1.1. Comparing experimental groups for statistical differences on the posttest and delayed posttest

Table 3 reveals that the difference between the experimental groups on the posttest is not statistically significant ( $p > 0.005$ ). However, on the delayed posttest, the difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.005$ ). According to Ellis (2009), a delayed posttest could lead to long-term acquisition:

Table 3. *Statistical Differences Between Experimental Groups on the Posttest and the Delayed Posttest*

Groups	<i>U</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Posttest	150.000	0-.894	.371
Delayed Posttest	59.000	-3.307	.001

The indirect metalinguistic group outperformed the direct metalinguistic group in the acquisition of the third person singular -s in English, as can be seen in Table 4:

Table 4. *Mean Scores of the Two Experimental Groups*

Mean score	Indirect M. Group	Direct M. Group
Posttest	84.9	81.91
Delayed Posttest	93.2	80.1

#### 4.1.2. Comparing experimental and control groups for statistical differences on the posttest

Table 5 compares the difference between the experimental groups and the control group:

Table 5. *Statistical Differences Between Experimental and Control Groups on the Posttest*

Groups	<i>U</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Indirect Metalinguistic Group and Control Group	72.500	-3.020	.003
Direct Metalinguistic Group and Control Group	71.500	-3.368	.001

Table 5 reveals that the difference between the experimental groups and control group on the posttest is statistically significant ( $p < 0.005$ ). This supports the fact that feedback had a significant effect on the participants' performance.

#### 4.1.3. Comparing statistical differences between experimental and control groups on the delayed posttest

Table 6 illustrates the differences between the experimental groups and the control group on the delayed posttest:

Table 6. *Statistical Differences Between Experimental and Control Groups on the Delayed Posttest*

Groups	<i>U</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Indirect Metalinguistic Group and Control Group	61,500	-3,020	,001
Direct Metalinguistic Group and Control Group	72,500	-3,368	,003

The findings reveal that the difference between the experimental groups and control group on the delayed posttest is statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.005$ ). This result may support the fact that feedback provision can help learners retain information for a long period of time. The two experimental groups outperformed the control group in the correct use of the third person singular -s, being the indirect metalinguistic group the one which obtained the highest score.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis illustrates the identified categories and subcategories, together with the respective evidence (see Tables 7, 8, and 9):

Table 7. *Category Feedback Disposition and Subcategories*

Subcategory	Evidence
Permanent Access	“... the difference between one and the other is that maybe in the virtual environment, access is easy and always available, the virtual environment is safer ...” (Participant 16)
Simultaneous Revision	“... the teacher sends them and, then, we can make the changes and work at the same time, it is more simultaneous ...” (Participant 15)

The second category, Feedback Delivery, refers to the participants' perception towards the way the teacher provides feedback of their work. The subcategory Immediacy was established, from which a positive valuation was inferred regarding with how quick the feedback is given, which has a favorable impact on the development of the written task and mistake correction. The subcategory Efficiency was also identified, from which a positive valuation is inferred regarding the way the feedback delivery process is organized. In Table 8, each subcategory is presented with its respective pieces of evidence:

Table 8. *Category Feedback Delivery and Subcategories*

Subcategory	Evidence
Immediacy	“... it is quicker since you can see at the time the teacher sends it, ...” (Participant 3)
Efficiency	“Yes, because you never rewrite on paper, and sometimes we do not understand the teacher’s comments.” (Participant 13)

The third category identified is Feedback Effect, which indicates the participants’ perceptions about the impact of the virtual environment for feedback provision. In this regard, the subcategory It Facilitates Learning shows that the use of the virtual environment facilitates the configuration of a learning context that allows effective feedback (see Table 9):

Table 9. *Category Feedback Effect and Subcategories*

Subcategory	Evidence
It facilitates learning.	“... I think that it obviously facilitates learning because all the members can participate in correcting, in paper it is harder ...” (Participant 20)

## 5. Discussion

The results may have different theoretical explanations, as more than one factor might have contributed to the impact of corrective feedback. First of all, it can be inferred that one of the factors that could have facilitated the experimental groups’ attention on the third person singular suffix -s was the provision of focused feedback.

Another factor that may have had a significant impact on the effectiveness of corrective feedback in the experimental groups on the posttest and the delayed tests was the use of metalinguistic clues, as Bitchener (2008), Bitchener and Knoch (2008), Sheen (2007), among others, affirm. The provision of indirect feedback with metalinguistic clues encourages students to reflect and talk about the language. This instance of talking about the language leads to a series of metalinguistic processes that should be considered as a necessary practice for preservice teachers of English.

It can also be argued that an important factor that may have influenced the significant improvement of the experimental groups on both tests is the consistency and frequency of both direct and indirect metalinguistic feedback. In this regard, during the treatment both experimental groups progressively decreased their errors each time they wrote a new text. As Ferris says (2010, 2013), the fact that the feedback is frequently delivered can positively influence the appropriate use of linguistic forms. This provides students with an opportunity to review and rewrite a text more often. This consistent and frequent feedback was facilitated by the Wiki environment.

On the other hand, the nonstatistical difference between the experimental groups on the posttest shows that both types of feedback would have a similar effect for a short period, as Ellis (2009) declares. On the contrary, the statistical difference between both experimental groups on the delayed test shows that indirect metalinguistic feedback might help learners to retain a linguistic structure over time. These results corroborate the views of Ellis (2009), Ferris and Helt (2000), and Chandler (2003), among others, who claim that indirect feedback could contribute to longer-term learning.

The fact that the control group scored lower on both posttest and delayed posttest reaffirms the idea that input and interaction are not enough elements in L2 learning, and that corrective feedback has a role in the acquisition of certain forms of the L2 (Dekeyser, 2005; Ellis, 2009; Piscitelli, 2005; Sheen, 2007, 2011; Spada & Lightbown, 2008; Truscott & Hsu, 2008).

On the other hand, no statistical difference between the experimental groups on the posttest shows that both types of feedback have similar short-term effects. This suggests that students may retain the information for a short period. On the contrary, the significant difference between the indirect metalinguistic feedback group and direct metalinguistic group shows that indirect metalinguistic feedback may be more effective in the acquisition of the third person singular -s in the long term. These results corroborate the claims of Ellis (2009), Ferris and Helt (2000), and Chandler (2003), among others, who point out that indirect feedback could contribute to longer-term learning.

The participants' answers regarding their perception show that, in general, there is a positive valuation of feedback provision through the Wiki environment. The learners value Wiki due to its accessibility because this feature allows greater student participation and facilitates feedback provision. This is because it is hard for the teacher to respond to each individual need in the classroom. Therefore, the use of new technologies can modify the methodology and provide more attractive and significant learning for the student.

The participants' perceptions about the virtual environment agree with other studies, such as the one by Warschauer and Meskel (2000). These scholars point out that students show a greater willingness towards feedback given through a virtual environment. In this regard, students' opinions mainly indicate that feedback received through Wiki is more immediate and efficient. These data indicate that L2 learners value a type of feedback that is proportionate, as immediate as possible and adequate to the learning ways. Immediacy has to do with the fact that if L2 learners receive feedback after a long time, as it is common, the results will not most likely be the best, given that learners may not remember the mistakes they had made. On the other

hand, learners also value the fact that they can all work at the same time, indicating a phenomenon that is common in the classroom: Whereas some learners write, others become distracted. Therefore, that L2 learners value a Wiki feature that is not part of classroom work is relevant for the learning goals because it can be more effective for certain purposes (Cabero, 2007; Elgort et al., 2008; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; O'Rourke, 2005).

The valuation that learners give to Wiki as learning facilitator confirms that this tool does make a difference in writing development and mistake correction. In fact, with this tool, learners can modify the text at any time, from any place, and as many times as they wish. Therefore, Wiki, as a tool, promotes writing development and error correction, which is highly valued by learners. This makes learners approach a learning experience that adapts to their environment and life habits, in which technology is part of their needs to communicate and relax. The positive replies of students regarding Wiki justify the conclusion that, thanks to the tool, accessibility and feedback provided by the teacher or student through a virtual environment can be very effective (Bitchener, 2008; Braine, 2001; Hyland, 2000; Lui & Sadler, 2003). The possibility of accessibility given by Wiki would largely facilitate teachers' work because one of the most common problems in writing is the lack of frequent error correction.

In short, the Wiki tool facilitates feedback corrective provision for a written text, which is valued by most learners. This is positive for the learning process and teaching practices because feedback is a fundamental strategy for this process. As a result, in view of a positive disposition from learners towards a methodology supported by new technologies, teachers should frequently integrate it in their teaching and learning activities, as in the classroom more engaging methodologies are required for the development of writing tasks that can be hard or tiresome.

## **6. Conclusion**

Definitive conclusions in the context of corrective feedback are still premature because further research is required (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008). Nevertheless, this study contributes to the existing theories by confirming its findings. The major conclusion of this study is that both indirect and direct metalinguistic feedback play an important role in the acquisition of linguistic structures that are difficult to acquire by L2 learners. It can, likewise, be concluded that for L2 structures difficult to learn, conscious learning is relevant, as this may be the first step for learning (Ashwell, 2000; Gass, 1997; van Patten, 2003; Zhang, 2012).

Another conclusion derived from this study is that the use of metalinguistic clues is an opportunity for learners to acquire knowledge of the language. This

metalinguistic information in collaborative writing promotes reflection and provides an instance in which language becomes the object of study. The results also suggest that collaborative work through mediated computer communication may strengthen the effect of corrective feedback. Finally, it can also be concluded that the teacher-delivered feedback and the degree of frequency and consistency are relevant in grammar correction.

The semistructured interview allowed the participants to reflect upon the importance of error correction in English and the impact that the context can have on online feedback provision. In this regard, one of the conclusions arising from the students' opinions is their positive valuation of feedback provided through a virtual environment, such as Wiki. The categories and subcategories derived from the analysis, such as Permanent Access, Simultaneous Revision, and Immediacy and Efficiency, make it clear that Wiki is an online tool with characteristics that empower feedback. These features are not to be found in the traditional paper-and-pencil feedback given in writing. Therefore, given the positive perceptions of most participants that were interviewed regarding online feedback, it would be advisable to incorporate this methodology more frequently within the teaching and learning process of collaborative writing and for providing corrective feedback.

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