

# 'How Can I Correct What I Don't Know?': Exploring Low-Level Learners' Incorporation and Perceptions of Written Metalinguistic Explanations

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While providing language learners with written corrective feedback (WCF) is a widespread methodology among L2 teachers, classroom-based studies in which feedback practices are fully integrated into the curriculum are still scarce. In addition, most of what we know about feedback provision and use comes from data gathered from learners at intermediate and advanced levels, while low-level learners are an under-researched group. The present classroom-based study investigates the incorporation of direct and indirect metalinguistic explanations (ME) by 27 low-level EFL first-year university students of tourism, as well as their views on WCF. Results show that (i) low-level learners were able to correct most of their mistakes when given ME, (ii) vocabulary-related mistakes were equally resolved through both types of ME while grammar mistakes benefited more from direct ME, and (iii) low-level learners perceived ME as highly useful, particularly those which were direct

## INTRODUCTION

Providing students with written corrective feedback (WCF) in their texts is a widely employed practice in language classrooms. In particular, the role of feedback in foreign language (FL) contexts, where learning to write in the second language (L2) and learning the L2 occur simultaneously, is usually twofold: it is employed not only with the aim of helping learners improve the accuracy of their L2 texts, but also with the objective of aiding the learners' L2 development through reflection on language form (Leow, 2020; Manchón, 2011). Given that WCF is such a widespread practice and that learners generally expect and value feedback provision (e.g., Ferris, 2003; Westmacott, 2017), an ever-growing body of research has focused on the possible effects that different types of feedback techniques may have on accuracy (see Chen & Renandya, 2020 for a recent meta-analysis) and acquisition (e.g., Nicolás-Conesa, Manchón & Cerezo, 2019). Nonetheless, many questions remain unanswered, partly because certain methodological designs or populations have been under-investigated.

To begin with, many studies have been conducted under highly controlled, often decontextualized conditions. However, to conduct WCF research that is more pedagogically

relevant and ecologically valid it is necessary to adopt a situated approach to feedback practices that originates from the premise that no single type of feedback will be the ‘most effective’ one (Lee, 2020). Instead, research should aim at identifying which kind of learners may benefit more from which types of feedback while taking into account possible moderating factors (e.g., learning context, individual differences, tasks characteristics, error types, among others) (Ferris, 2010; Bitchener, 2019). To achieve this aim, controlled studies should be complemented with longitudinal, classroom-based research that includes authentic text production and feedback provision within a given syllabus (Lee, 2020; Leow, 2020; Manchón & Leow, 2020). In addition, most of what we know about feedback provision and use comes from data gathered from learners at intermediate and advanced levels, while low-level learners are an under-researched group (Park et al., 2016). However, this population should receive more attention, particularly as existing research points towards low-level learners’ lack of understanding of WCF (Bitchener, 2012; 2019), which may result in low percentages of successful incorporations of such feedback into their revisions. One possible way to help elementary learners understand the nature of their mistakes is to provide more informative feedback, such as brief metalinguistic explanations of the nature of their mistakes (Bitchener, 2019).

The present exploratory study attempts to contribute to the emerging line of research of classroom-based WCF studies by investigating an under-researched population, that is, low-level EFL learners. We analysed how an intact class of A2-level first-year students of Tourism incorporated metalinguistic feedback into the second versions of the texts they had to write for an English module. In this module, writing practice, feedback provision and the production of second drafts were fully integrated into the curriculum, so data were gathered from real tasks written by students during a four-month period. Specifically, the study first explored the extent to which they were able to successfully correct their errors when they received direct versus indirect metalinguistic explanations, and second, to what extent different types of errors benefitted from these two types of metalinguistic feedback. In addition, given the importance that students’ perceptions have in the way they approach and incorporate feedback into their texts (e.g., Westmacott, 2017), the study also investigated the kind of feedback that was perceived as more useful by the group of low-level EFL learners.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Written Corrective Feedback in Instructed Language Contexts**

In instructed language contexts, the WCF provided by teachers usually serves a twofold purpose: to help learners improve the accuracy in their texts and to pay attention to language issues that may be relevant for their general language development (Leow, 2020; Manchón, 2011). Given that providing WCF is a widespread technique employed by teachers around the world, and probably one of the most time-consuming practices they engage in (Polio, 2012), abundant research has been devoted to trying to ascertain the types of feedback that may better contribute to these purposes. There is a wide range of feedback techniques applied by teachers, which vary in terms of their explicitness and the amount of information provided (see, for instance, classifications by Ellis, 2009, Sheen, 2011, or Bitchener, 2019). One of the basic differentiations established in research is between direct and indirect feedback: while in direct feedback the correct form is provided to the students, in indirect feedback it is withheld, and thus the task of finding it is left to the learner.

From an SLA perspective, engaging with WFC is considered a trigger of noticing and language reflection, and thus an aid for L2 development. As Leow (2020) explains, “whether the feedback processing allows for potential restructuring of the[ir] inaccurate knowledge may depend upon how deeply the feedback is processed or the level of awareness in relation to the mismatch between the learner’s prior knowledge and the feedback” (p. 104). In this sense, when provided under the same conditions (for instance, having to revise one’s text using the teacher’s feedback), direct and indirect feedback have been claimed to present different language learning opportunities. In particular, indirect feedback is thought to promote deep engagement and foster long-term retention of forms, as students have to engage in autonomous problem-solving to find a solution to their mistakes (Leow, 2020) and to produce more accurate output (Sheen, 2007). In turn, the benefit of direct feedback has been associated with the fact that it provides learners with a correct form that facilitates noticing the gap between their performance and the target language, as well as testing their hypotheses about the L2 (e.g., Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Van Beuningen et al., 2012). This type of feedback, that is input-based, would be more efficient in reducing confusion and helping learners resolve their errors, particularly those which are complex or more idiosyncratic (Leow, 2020).

The provision of a clear solution is thought to be particularly beneficial for low-level learners, since they are considered to lack the necessary linguistic resources to self-correct their mistakes after having received indirect feedback (Park & Kim, 2019). Until very recently this was an untested assumption, given that research exploring the provision of indirect feedback (alone or as compared to other types of feedback) had traditionally gathered data from learners at intermediate and advanced level. However, a handful of studies have started to shed light on how low-level learners in different contexts process and incorporate WCF into their texts.

### *Low-level learners and written corrective feedback*

Park et al. (2016) and Kim and Park (2017) investigated the extent to which elementary and intermediate learners of both Korean as a foreign (KFL) and a second (KSL) language were able to self-correct their errors after the provision of indirect feedback in the form of underlining. Taken together, data showed that elementary KFL learners were able to successfully self-correct 35% of their mistakes, while their counterparts in a KSL context corrected 40% of them. Since these percentages were similar to those achieved by intermediate learners, the authors concluded that underlining appeared to be an effective feedback technique even for beginner learners. In addition, the authors found that learners' ability to self-correct seemed to be affected by the type of error at hand, with lexical errors being more difficult to solve autonomously and orthographic and grammar errors being easier to edit. The insights gathered from these two studies were complemented by a third one that sheds light on the processing that took place when low-level learners attended to feedback. Park and Kim (2019) analysed the think-aloud protocols collected for their 2017 study and found that elementary learners did not engage in the correction of up to 29% of the errors underlined. In the case of those errors that were processed with a great effort, but were not correctly resolved, the qualitative analysis of the protocols showed that in many cases learners were in fact addressing a wrong error type, thus not having understood the nature of the error made. These data led the authors to hypothesize that direct feedback may be more beneficial for low-level learners in resolving vocabulary problems.

This lack of understanding of the nature of the error and/or the feedback given by low-level learners has been reported in two other studies that explored feedback processing through learners' verbalizations and interviews (Zheng & Yu, 2018) and learners' written languaging (Nicolás Conesa et al., 2017). Zheng and Yu (2018), who investigated how L2 low-proficiency

EFL Chinese undergraduate students engaged with their teacher's feedback, showed that successful modifications in the students' revised texts were more associated with direct feedback than with indirect feedback in the form of underlining. Nonetheless, a qualitative analysis of the students' verbalizations while reading their teacher's feedback evidenced that participants had difficulties understanding both indirect and direct feedback. Learners found particularly confusing the corrections that addressed word choice, even when direct feedback was provided.

Nicolás-Conesa et al. (2017) also found that low-level learners may benefit more from direct than from indirect feedback. They explored the written languaging produced by 30 EFL high school students whose L2 proficiency level was elementary (A2). In this case, the design employed was experimental, and participants were divided into two groups and given either direct or indirect feedback (in the form of error labels such as 'verb form', 'word choice') after writing short texts. Participants were asked to read the corrections and to write down what they thought was wrong and why or "Don't know" if they did not understand them. The authors found that low-level learners reflected on 67% of the errors indicated through indirect feedback, as compared to 51% of the mistakes corrected through direct feedback. However, the qualitative analysis of the written languaging showed that 49% of the episodes in the indirect group were "Don't know" episodes, versus 27% in the direct group. This lack of understanding of indirect feedback seemed to affect learners' revisions of their texts (which were done under time restrictions and without any access to the feedback), since students in the indirect group successfully corrected only 22% of their original mistakes as opposed to 34% for the direct group.

Taken together, these studies show that when low-level learners are provided with indirect feedback in the form of underlining or error codes, they are able to self-correct their mistakes only to a certain extent. In addition, the analyses of their languaging reveal that in many cases elementary learners don't understand the nature of their mistakes and/or of the feedback provided, particularly when dealing with vocabulary-related problems. This lack of understanding, which appeared even when direct feedback was provided (Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2017), may hinder the potential for language learning associated with feedback provision, since understanding is considered a crucial factor in its processing (Bitchener, 2019). In higher proficiency students, a lack of understanding is associated, for instance, with lower chances of

text revision (Sachs & Polio, 2007) and with less successful corrections of grammatical errors (Kim, 2013).

Given the importance that understanding feedback has even for higher level learners, underlining their mistakes or providing them with codes may not be the most appropriate indirect feedback approaches to foster low-level learners' autonomous problem-solving. Instead, instructors can use more informative types of feedback, such as metalinguistic explanations. These include rules and examples that help students ascertain why the error is an error and thus may prompt feedback incorporation to a larger extent (Bitchener, 2019; Zheng & Yu, 2018). Though metalinguistic explanations have usually been associated with indirect feedback (Guo & Barrot, 2019), we concur with Sheen (2011) in that they can be provided either in isolation (indirect metalinguistic explanations or IME) or together with the correct form (direct metalinguistic explanations or DME).

Theoretically, both types of metalinguistic feedback may positively impact low-level learners' processing and understanding of feedback. First, DME has been suggested to prompt deeper engagement with the language than direct corrections. When dealing with the latter, learners may merely identify and copy the given form into their second versions, an act that does not necessarily require high levels of processing (Shintani & Ellis, 2013). Such brief revision behaviour would not be likely to leave any lasting trace in the learner's mind, thus having little chance to alter the learner's L2 system in any way (Leow, 2020). However, providing direct metalinguistic explanations could improve learners' chances of a higher engagement, since they are given, not only the correct form, but also clarifications of the nature of their mistake, that they can read and process. In fact, an advantage of direct metalinguistic explanations over direct-only feedback has received some empirical support (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Sheen, 2007). In turn, indirect metalinguistic explanations which include clear rules and/or examples of use may provide the guidance elementary learners' need to retrieve the necessary declarative knowledge and engage in autonomous problem-solving that leads to successful self-correction. However, to our knowledge, these are still hypotheses since no empirical study has been conducted that explores to what extent low-level learners incorporate both types of metalinguistic explanations (DME and IME) into second versions of their texts.

## **Additional Factors Affecting Learners' Response to Feedback**

Irrespective of the type of feedback provided, for it to be incorporated into students' texts or to be further processed, one basic condition is that learners attend to it (Ellis, 2009). As Polio (2012) puts it, feedback will be “essentially useless if learners do not have to do anything with [it]” (p. 385). Whether learners pay attention to feedback will depend on numerous variables, however, for the purpose of the present study we will focus on two: what learners are asked to do with the corrections they receive, and their perceptions and beliefs about WCF.

Concerning the first variable, it is clear that just providing students with WCF on their texts does not guarantee that they will pay attention to it, much less incorporate it into their L2 system or use. In this sense, recent research has explored different ways to draw learners' attention to WCF. On some occasions, particularly in feedback processing studies (e.g., Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2017), students have been asked to “study” or reflect on the corrections provided, without editing their texts. In order to test feedback retention, several days or weeks after the reflection session students are required to write a new version of the text without access to the original text nor to the feedback. Though interesting for research purposes, this technique is not widely employed in foreign language classrooms, since it is considered that it is more ecologically valid to require students to revise their texts using the feedback provided to edit their errors, thus prompting them to produce more accurate output. In spite of the popularity of this second approach, almost no study has focused on how low-level learners repeatedly incorporate feedback in a real classroom setting during a whole semester (Park et al., 2016; Zheng & Yu, 2018). Therefore, more research is needed to ascertain the way in which low-level learners incorporate feedback into their revisions when they are encouraged to do so as part of their curriculum, in a real classroom context (Leow, 2020; Manchón & Leow, 2020).

Regarding the second variable, that is, learners' perceptions and beliefs about WCF, these have been shown to have an impact on the extent to which learners make use of the feedback they receive (e.g., Chen et al., 2016). Recent research has shed light on concepts such as learners' perceptions of WCF usefulness and their preferences over specific types of feedback. For instance, students in most EFL contexts seem to believe that error treatment is useful (Westmacott, 2017), particularly when it is comprehensive. Several studies have also provided evidence that, when learners do not believe that feedback is helpful, they may decide to simply

ignore it (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010; Rummel & Bitchener, 2015). With regard to learners' preferences over different types of feedback, research so far has shown that different populations of students may present different preferences, related to whether they want to adopt a more passive or active role not only in their error correction, but in their general learning process. For instance, a group of adolescent Cantonese learners of English investigated by Lee (2008), who were divided into different ability groups, favoured receiving a direct solution to their mistakes, irrespective of their proficiency level. In turn, other students prefer not to be given the solution because in this way they have to resolve the problems on their own, which is perceived as more conducive to their learning (Mawlawi Diab, 2015; Westmacott, 2017). In Hyland (2011), for example, while participants declared that receiving direct solutions was easier for them, they were aware that the more indirect method was more advantageous when it came to language learning. In this sense, learners' beliefs would go hand in hand with the idea that indirect feedback provides them with opportunities to engage in problem solving (Ferris, 2010). However, studies tapping learners' preferences have traditionally addressed fairly advanced L2 learners. Therefore, conclusions from these studies cannot be directly applied to other populations, which may feel their linguistic resources do not allow them to profit from indirect feedback.

## **THE PRESENT STUDY**

Given that the scarce research that has focused on low-level students has shown that they have difficulties incorporating the feedback provided by their teacher, we believe it is pedagogically relevant to explore these students' appropriation and perceptions of written metalinguistic feedback within a real classroom context. We did so by investigating the writing and feedback use practices that an intact class of undergraduate EFL students engaged in during one semester.

Our first objective was to explore the extent to which low-level learners were able to self-correct the mistakes signaled through indirect metalinguistic written correction in comparison with those that received direct metalinguistic written correction. This was done in an attempt to ascertain, particularly, whether brief metalinguistic explanations of the errors provide guidance for the problem-solving process students need to engage in to make the most out of their teacher's feedback (Ferris, 2010). For this purpose, we formulated the following research question:



RQ1: To what extent are low-level EFL learners able to successfully incorporate metalinguistic explanations (direct vs. indirect) into second versions of their texts?

Second, given that previous research on low-level learners has shown that lexical problems tend to be more difficult to understand and correct when low-level learners are provided with indirect feedback, and that this is not in agreement with research conducted at other levels of proficiency (Van Beuningen et al., 2012), our second aim was to explore the relationship between types of errors and types of metalinguistic feedback.

RQ2: Does the type of error (grammatical vs. lexical) affect low-level learners' appropriation of different types of metalinguistic explanations (direct vs. indirect)?

Finally, taking into account the fact that learners' preferences and perceptions about the usefulness of WCF have been shown to affect how they engage in the feedback provided by their teachers, we decided to further explore this dimension through the following research question:

RQ3: Which types of WCF are preferred and perceived as more useful for learning by low-level EFL learners?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants and Learning Context**

An intact class of first-year undergraduate students majoring in Tourism participated in this study (n=27). They were all Catalan/Spanish bilinguals and learners of English as an L2. During their first semester at university, the students were required to take an English module aimed at future professionals of the tourism industry. The materials selected for this module were aimed at level A2 (CEFR). This level was decided by the English department after testing incoming students repeatedly throughout the years.

The module, taught by one of the authors of the present chapter, lasted for sixteen weeks, and focused on five learning units, each of them with a series of communicative objectives and linguistic targets. After each unit, students had to submit a writing task related to such contents (See Appendix 1). Thus, within the module, writing practice was seen as having a double role:

first, learning-to-write, since the writing tasks included texts that are typically produced by professionals in the tourism industry and which the students are likely to encounter during their careers; and second, writing-to-learn the L2, providing individualised practise and feedback on the language targets covered in the module.

## **Instruments**

Two main instruments were used to answer the different research questions in the study: student portfolios including the students' writing tasks, and an online questionnaire.

### *Student texts and portfolios*

Students were asked to complete a digital portfolio including the different written assignments they had completed throughout the semester. After each learning unit, students handed in a piece of writing, and three to five days later they received their texts with the teacher's feedback on them (see section 3.3. for explanations on feedback provision). Students were explicitly encouraged to read the feedback and use it to write an improved version of their text. At the end of the semester, students had to submit their portfolios, which included ten texts: five first versions and five second versions. The completion of the portfolio was part of the module evaluation and accounted for 20% of the final grade. In order to obtain the maximum grade students' second versions had to show that they had attempted to improve their texts through the use of their teacher's feedback.

### *Online questionnaire*

Once the semester had ended, students were asked to complete a voluntary online questionnaire concerning their opinions about different aspects of the writing component of the module. A subset of students (n=20) agreed to participate in this task.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, both closed and open, that explored different dimensions of the feedback practice applied in the module. For the present study only three questions were selected in order to answer our third research question. The first question was a multiple-choice one in which students were asked their preferred feedback strategy and were given four options (direct, indirect, DME, IME). For the sake of clarity, technical terms were substituted for explanations that students would be able to understand (e.g., 'direct metalinguistic

explanations' was paraphrased as 'indicating the error, providing an explanation of why it is wrong and providing the solution'). The two remaining questions were open-ended: the first one encouraged participants to explain the reasons for their choice of preferred strategy. The second one required them to indicate the feedback strategy they thought was more beneficial for learning (even if it was not their preferred choice) and to provide reasons for their answer.

## **Feedback Provision**

Students received asynchronous digital feedback through Google Docs on their submitted pieces of writing. The approach to feedback adopted by the teacher included providing comments on those aspects that were considered within the students' reach and that were directly relevant to the module (Lee, 2020). This included not only feedback on linguistic items, but also on aspects which are as important, such as clarity of ideas, content, and relevant genre conventions. This feedback was provided through clarification requests, suggestions, and encouraging comments on positive aspects.

The feedback provided attended to Evans et al.'s (2010) principles that state that, for it to be effective, WCF has to be manageable, meaningful, timely, and constant. It was considered manageable because the focus of feedback was what Lee (2020) has called "selective" in that it focused on those language items that were covered in the curriculum and thus did not target all students' mistakes, as this would overload the students' attentional capacities. In addition, feedback was cognitively and linguistically meaningful because, as mentioned above, it focused on those aspects that were being described during the classes. This was done to ensure that the teacher's feedback was within the students' linguistic level of achievement or zone of proximal development. Moreover, a minimum amount of time (less than a week) elapsed between the submission of the writings and the reception of WCF, so as to make sure that feedback was timely given that "long lapses of time between writing and feedback will minimize learning opportunities" (Evans et al. 2010, p. 453). Finally, research shows that feedback will only be effective if constant. That is, students will have more chances of benefiting from feedback and develop habits of self-analysis and correction only when feedback is constant, which is why it was decided to complete five written tasks throughout the semester rather than focusing on only one or two.

Concerning feedback on linguistic features, three types of feedback were provided, following specific criteria:

**Direct feedback** was given on mechanics (spelling and punctuation), in the form of editions to be confirmed by the student in the online document.

**Direct metalinguistic explanations (DME):** errors were marked, metalinguistic explanations were given, and solutions were provided. This type of feedback was given when the mistake was within students’ reach or developmental stage but had not been covered in class (yet).

**Indirect metalinguistic explanations (IME):** errors were marked, metalinguistic explanations were provided, but no solution was given. This feedback was provided for those linguistic targets that had been covered in the curriculum and, hence, for which the students supposedly had at least some knowledge.

Examples of both DME and IME can be found in Table 1.

*Table 1. Examples of DME and IME*

Student text	Direct metalinguistic explanation	Indirect metalinguistic explanation
From the most <b>incredibles</b> landscapes...	Adjectives never take a plural ‘s’ in English. It’s ‘incredible’.	Remember that adjectives never take a plural ‘s’ in English.
In Andorra <b>actually</b> ...	‘actually’ doesn’t mean ‘actualment’; it is a false friend. You can use ‘nowadays’.	‘actually’ doesn’t mean ‘actualment’; it is a false friend.

Metalinguistic explanations were kept as short and simple as possible, and metalanguage that students had seen in class was used to ensure familiarity with the concepts. Hence, feedback provision in the present study was designed to be ecologically valid as it targeted specific error types covered in the curriculum and focused on the students’ immediate needs. As suggested by Lee (2020), decisions about feedback provision need to be taken considering the learners’ proficiency level, the written task, and the stage of the writing process so that the whole process is efficient for the students’ development.

In addition, in order to facilitate learners' engagement with feedback, it was visually provided in the following way: the incorrect fragment was highlighted, and the corresponding explanation was presented in a comment bubble, thus appearing right next to the error and facilitating its identification and use. In the case of DME, the solution was provided at the end of the explanation to make both types of feedback as similar as possible, but also to encourage students to read the explanation first.

## Data Coding and Analysis

### *Analysis of student portfolios*

For the coding and analysis of the portfolio data we followed Westmacott (2017). First versions were examined in terms of (i) the metalinguistic feedback provided, that was classified as direct or indirect, and of (ii) broad error types (grammar vs lexis). In terms of grammar, verb form and tense, morphology, and word form were taken into account. Lexis errors were those related to incorrect word choice, use of false friends or literal translations and of words non-existent in English (see Table 2 for examples).

*Table 2. Examples of type of error*

Type of error	Student text
Grammar	I like <b>visit</b> different cities
Lexis	I am sure I will <b>give the size</b> .

Subsequently, errors that had received metalinguistic feedback in their first versions were traced into the second versions and further classified in terms of the successfulness of students' revisions. Three categories were created for such revisions (correct, incorrect, uncorrected) of which examples are provided in Table 3 below. The data obtained were analysed in terms of descriptive statistics.

Table 3. Examples of types of revision

Type of revision	First version	Metalinguistic explanation	Second version
Correct	I get along well on my own	'get along well' is used to describe relationships with other people ( <i>tenir una bona relació amb algú</i> )	I work well on my own
Incorrect	the most important things for us is	'things' is plural, you need a plural verb form	the most important thing for us are
Uncorrected	Paris receive a lot of tourists every year	'Paris' is singular, you need a singular verb form	Paris receive a lot of tourists every year

### *Analysis of the online questionnaire*

Students' answers to the three questions from the online questionnaire were examined to explore their perceptions towards WCF. The multiple-choice question was analysed in terms of descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis of the thematic trends that appeared in the open-ended answers was performed in order to answer our third research question.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results concerning the three research questions that guided the study are presented and discussed below.

### **Students' incorporation of Direct and Indirect Metalinguistic Explanations**

The first research question explored the extent to which low-level EFL learners were able to appropriate from metalinguistic feedback provided by their teacher in the form of DME and IME, and successfully incorporate it into their second versions. Table 4 shows that, when given metalinguistic explanations, our participants successfully revised the majority of their mistakes (77%) when writing their second versions. In turn, they wrote incorrect solutions for 8.9% of their problems and left 13.6% uncorrected.

Table 4. Error revision according to feedback type

Feedback type	Total N	Correct N (%)	Incorrect N (%)	Uncorrected N (%)
DME	172	139 (80.8)	12 (7)	21 (12.2)
IME	152	112 (73.7)	17 (11.2)	23 (15.1)
Total	324	251 (77.5)	29 (8.9)	44 (13.6)

Concerning learners' revisions according to feedback type, our data showed a slight advantage for DME, since the percentage of successful corrections prompted by this type of feedback was somewhat higher (80.8%) than that generated by IME (73.3%). Interestingly, the number of uncorrected problems remained higher than that of incorrect solutions when both types of feedback were considered separately. Even when provided with an explanation and the correct form, learners left 12.2% of their errors unchanged, a percentage that is very close to IME uncorrected mistakes (15.1%).

In this sense, our findings seem to be in line with low-level learners' feedback-processing research (Nicolás Conesa et al., 2017), which has shown that, irrespective of the type of WCF given, students always left unattended at least some of the feedback provided by their teacher. In turn, if we focus on the rates of successful corrections, those in the present study were much higher than those reported in previous research with elementary learners, particularly when it comes to indirect feedback (e.g., Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2017; Park et al., 2016). These differences in students' ability to self correct their mistakes can be due, first, to the types of indirect feedback employed in previous studies (underlining and codes), which are less informative than metalinguistic explanations. In contrast, IME proved to be less challenging for students to understand and interpret (Bitchener, 2019), and led them to actively search for, and most often find, successful solutions on their own.

In addition to the type of feedback, the high degree of successful feedback incorporations in our study as compared to previous research could additionally be attributed to certain motivating factors. To begin with, revising and improving their texts was part of their

curriculum, as opposed to a one-shot treatment (Nicolás-Conesa et al.), and this may have had an impact on students' motivation to actively revise their texts. In addition, the whole process (writing, receiving feedback and revising) took place in a digital environment, while other studies have employed pen-and-paper writing (e.g., Zheng & Yu, 2018). Engaging in digital practices may therefore have facilitated our participants' processing and incorporation of feedback, as previous research (e.g., Chong, 2019; Tafazoli et al., 2014) has shown that students tend to prefer electronic feedback to feedback on paper and that they introduce more revisions into their texts when they are working online. Finally, as will be discussed in relation to our third research question, the fact that the students considered metalinguistic explanations useful may have had an impact on the high degree of incorporations and successfully corrected items (e.g., Rummel & Bitchener, 2015).

All in all, our findings somehow contest the hypothesis that indirect feedback may not be appropriate for low-level learners since they may not possess the necessary knowledge to self-correct their mistakes (Bitchener, 2012). When, as part of their curriculum, elementary learners are asked to write improved versions of their texts using indirect feedback that is informative, manageable and relevant, they do engage in autonomous problem-solving processes that lead to more accurate output production. In addition, low-level students in EFL contexts may be particularly good candidates for receiving metalinguistic explanations, since they experience considerable grammar instruction that helps them understand more technical metalinguistic explanations that activate their explicit knowledge (Ferris et al., 2013).

### **Students' Incorporation of DME and IME According to the Type of Error**

Our second research question asked whether the type of error (grammatical vs. lexical) had an impact on the participants' incorporation of the different types of metalinguistic feedback into their second versions. As learners received more corrections related to grammar (n=178) than to lexical issues (n=146), we have used percentages instead of raw numbers when discussing our results.

As shown in Table 5, when revising their texts, our participants were able to successfully correct both types of errors to a very similar extent, with a minimal advantage for lexis-related problems (78.5%) over grammar concerns (76.4%). However, once we observed the correction



rate of both error types in relation to the kind of feedback provided, differences became apparent. While vocabulary-related errors benefitted from both types of feedback to quite a similar extent, this was not the case for grammar-related issues. These findings are further detailed below.

*Table 5. Error revision according to error and feedback type*

<b>Error type</b>	<b>Feedback type</b>	<b>Total N</b>	<b>Correct N (%)</b>	<b>Incorrect N (%)</b>	<b>Uncorrected N (%)</b>
Grammar	DME	95	78 (82.1)	6 (6.3)	11 (11.6)
	IME	83	58 (69.9)	9 (10.8)	16 (19.3)
	Total	178	136 (76.4)	15 (8.4)	27 (15.2)
Lexis	DME	77	61 (79.2)	6 (7.8)	10 (13)
	IME	69	54 (78.3)	8 (11.6)	7 (10.1)
	Total	146	115 (78.5)	14 (9.6)	17 (11.6)

Specifically, our participants were able to successfully correct their grammar mistakes to a higher extent when they received the correct solution through DME (82.1%) than when they were given IME (69.9%). For both kinds of feedback, the percentage of incorrect revisions (8.4%) was lower than that of uncorrected mistakes (15.2%). In the case of IME, the amount of grammar elements unchanged was quite high (19.3%). In contrast to grammar problems, the percentage of correctly solved lexical mistakes was almost similar for those problems addressed through DME (79.2%) and IME (78.2%). Concerning those lexical problems that were not correctly resolved, unsurprisingly, IME prompted slightly more incorrect solutions (11.6%) than DME (7.8%). More striking is the fact that learners left slightly more lexical mistakes uncorrected (13%) when provided with DME than when they received IME (10.1%).

Concerning the advantage of direct metalinguistic explanations for grammar mistakes, our results would be in line with those of previous studies conducted with higher-level learners

(e.g., Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2019; Van Beuningen et al., 2012). Even when a clear metalinguistic explanation was provided, if it did not include the correct solution elementary learners left almost 20% of their mistakes uncorrected and provided an incorrect target form in 10.8% of them. These percentages may have been caused by different factors. For instance, they may indicate that learners' explicit knowledge of certain grammar patterns was not consolidated to the point that they were able to independently apply the rule to their own text (Benson and Dekeyser, 2019). It may also be related to the nature of the range of grammar rules that were covered under the broad category "grammar". As hypothesised by Wulf (2021), grammar rules that involve binary choices (e.g., singular versus plural) may be more amenable for metalinguistic explanations than others, and there might have been specific mistakes in the data that were of an intrinsically more complex nature.

In spite of this, the rate of corrections for grammatical errors edited through indirect feedback was quite high as compared to that in previous research with lower-level learners (Nicolás et al., 2017; Park et al., 2016). This may have been influenced by the fact that the items targeted by indirect feedback were the ones explicitly covered in class, and thus knowledge of the rules could have been more easily accessible for students in the present study than for participants in other contexts in which feedback was provided but not directly related to classroom instruction. In spite of this, the amount of IME corrections left unchanged also indicated that providing learners with an explicit explanation of a grammar issue covered in the curriculum did not guarantee that students revised such mistakes.

In turn, our data on lexis-related mistakes indicate that when provided with brief metalinguistic explanations that clarified the nature of their mistakes, low-level learners were able to correctly self-correct most of their problems, and to the same extent to which they did when they were provided with an explanation and the correct solution. Our data also showed that lexical mistakes benefited more from indirect metalinguistic explanations than grammatical mistakes. This finding agrees with previous research conducted with higher level learners (Van Beuningen et al., 2012) and somehow challenges the conception that vocabulary problems may be highly idiosyncratic and therefore "non-treatable" through indirect feedback (Ferris, 1999). Our hypothesis is that the high percentage of correct revisions of lexical issues is related to our participants' proficiency level and the scope and nature of their mistakes. Being low-level

learners, most of their mistakes focused on single words and were related to word choice problems, false friends, and the production of non-existing terms. This allowed the teacher to create brief metalinguistic explanations that, without revealing the solution, offered students many clues about the nature of their lexical mistakes. Such informative feedback on specific words was more effective in promoting problem-solving than IME on grammar, since it resulted in both higher percentages of successful solutions (78.3% vs. 69.9%) and lower percentages of uncorrected items (10% vs. 19.3%). As we can see, this contrasts with findings in previous research conducted with low-level learners (e.g., Zheng & Yu, 2018) which showed that elementary learners found it particularly difficult to understand indirect feedback that indicated word choice problems when this was not accompanied by metalinguistic explanations.

From our results we hypothesize that erroneous vocabulary items produced at this elementary level may be particularly good candidates for the provision of indirect metalinguistic explanations with the view of fostering L2 knowledge, since they prompt the kind of deep engagement with form that is believed to leave traces in learners' memories and thus be more likely to restructure the learner's interlanguage (Leow, 2015, 2020). In addition, providing IME at this level is more feasible and less time consuming for the instructor than at higher levels of proficiency, where lexical problems may be too complex to address through brief explanations. Finally, our results also seem to confirm the fact that errors cannot be easily classified as treatable or untreatable, as there is no simple way of determining whether an error is treatable or not (Sheen, 2011).

### **Students' Feedback Preferences and Perceptions of Usefulness**

The third research question explored low-level EFL learners' feedback preferences as well as their perceptions of feedback usefulness in terms of learning. To answer this question, we first present quantitative data and then complement these results with the analysis of the participants' open-ended answers. Concerning the type of feedback preferred by our participants, most learners (n=14; 70%) claimed that DME was their preferred feedback type, five learners (25%) chose IME, and only one student declared preferring indirect feedback only. When asked about the type of feedback that they considered more useful for learning, the student who preferred indirect feedback only also chose it as the most useful type, DME was considered the best approach by 11 students (55%), and IME was chosen by 8 participants (40%). This change in

percentages between the first and the second questions was due to the fact that three students who had chosen DME as their preferred method claimed that IME could indeed be more useful for learning. In turn, no student who had chosen IME in the previous question chose DME as the best option for learning.

Moving on to the analysis of the open-ended answers, our data showed, first, that irrespectively of the type selected (DME or IME) all students valued the usefulness of metalinguistic explanations. Particularly, most participants explicitly verbalised the idea that simply being told that something is wrong is rather limited or even ‘useless’, and that metalinguistic explanations helped them understand the nature of their mistakes. In the words of Rita<sup>1</sup>, “(...) it is useless to have a mistake indicated if you don’t know the reason why it is wrong”. Even though valuing being given a metalinguistic explanation was a common topic in 19 out of 20 responses, a detailed analysis of the answers revealed two different trends concerning how students approached the language learning process and the values they attributed to the two types of metalinguistic feedback.

Students who preferred DME and considered it was useful for language learning attributed its value to the fact that it was highly informative and very clear. Four learners explicitly claimed that it was the most “complete” type of feedback, as “it shows you where the mistake is, the reason why it is wrong, and it provides you with the correct form” (Daniel). In fact, their answers revealed that students believed that the combination of understanding the nature of their mistake and being given a clear correct form would help them avoid making those mistakes in future texts. Five participants explicitly included this statement in their answers, using expressions such as “in this way it is easier not to make the mistake again” (Judith), or “next time you probably won’t miss the correct form” (Gabriel). Paula’s answer included a quite elaborate reflection on this issue, as she stated that not knowing the nature of the mistake would make it highly possible for them to repeat it, and thus knowing this together with getting the correct form would “prevent them from making the same mistake ever again, or at least only a few times”.

This feeling of not wanting to repeat the same mistakes in future texts was also combined with a strong focus on accuracy as a goal for their second versions. In the words of Lorena, “if we are given the solution, we make sure that our revision is correct”. In fact, several answers

revealed that getting the correct form was reassuring for students, which expressed the idea with sentences such as “in this way you make sure you know the correct form” (Lorena), “the right answer is 100% clear” (Alicia), or “in this way you always know that it is right” (Alina). In fact, several students expressed their willingness to receive not one, but several correct alternative forms, thus adopting a somewhat passive role as receivers of information. Jaime, for example, said: “We need the solution to learn how to write correctly; in fact, I would suggest writing different solutions, not only one”. Samuel added that including different options would allow students “to apply them in future [texts]”.

Finally, their need of being provided with a clear correct form (or several) may be related to the fact that many participants who preferred DME stated that their writing and revision processes were affected by their low level of proficiency and/or their insufficient L2 knowledge. Several of them claimed that this lack of knowledge is what prompted them to make mistakes in the first place. For instance, Carol felt DME helped her improve her English because it helped her become aware of what she did not know: “Making a mistake means that you were not even aware that it was a mistake, so receiving the explanation and the solution is really helpful”. In addition, several participants put an emphasis on the importance of receiving the correct form, as their lack of knowledge prevented them from self-correcting their mistakes even when a rule was provided. As Tatiana expressed, “you cannot self-correct something that you don’t know”.

In turn, all the students who chose IME as their preferred feedback type attributed its value to its language learning potential and three of them explicitly acknowledged the importance of autonomous discovery. As Jordi put it, “you always have to try and find the solution. I believe it is the only way to learn from your mistakes”. In general terms, these students’ answers revealed that they adopted a more active and process-oriented approach to learning and were ready to engage in problem solving. As Mónica claimed, withholding the solution fostered their willingness to “discover” the correct form by themselves. She added that this process “is longer this way but the result is more satisfactory”, thus highlighting her views on how taking an active role in her learning is more rewarding for her.

Specifically, they believed that the combination of mistake identification together with an explanation offered by IME assisted them in the process of finding the correct form: “If an error is highlighted and we get an explanation of why it is wrong we can get to a solution or, at least,

try to” (Laura). Interestingly, even though they used expressions such as “trying to find” the correct form, none of them referred to any lack of resources or L2 knowledge that would hinder this search process. Therefore, their perception of their own ability seemed to be higher than that of the learners who chose DME.

In fact, three of the students attributed the learning value of IME to the fact that it provided an opportunity to “remember” or even “test” what had been explained and practiced in class. For instance, Marta explained that through the metalinguistic explanation the students could “remember the ‘theory’ explained in class” (by ‘theory’, students meant some of the grammar explanations and metalanguage covered in class). This idea of feedback as an aid to retrieve previously-learned items was in stark contrast to the feelings of “lack of knowledge” or inability for self-correction expressed in the group who preferred DME, who perceived WCF was not an aid but as a remedy.

Finally, the different values of direct and indirect metalinguistic explanations are clearly captured in the responses of the students who preferred DME but declared that IME might be more beneficial for language learning. This view is illustrated by Ana’s response to the second question: “DME is very clear as it provides the correct form and this may help you avoid mistakes in the future. However, through IME you have to ‘think’ actively, and it is also a way to test the items learned in the module”.

Our results concerning students’ feedback preferences are in agreement with previous research (e.g. Chen et al., 2016) and support Bitchener and Ferris’ (2012) contention that when given the opportunity, students usually choose the more explicit and informative feedback option (p. 151). In our case, 19 out of 20 students chose feedback that included metalinguistic explanations as their preferred method, with 14 of them choosing DME. In addition, the fact that some participants expressed the idea that when you receive DME you are completely sure about the correct form and this prevents you from making the same mistake again would be in agreement with the hypothesis that direct feedback provides a clear, unambiguous L2 correct form towards which the students can compare their own production (Bitchener, 2012). However, it also reveals that some low-level students seem to have misled conceptions about the learning potential of feedback, since they believe that attending to a particular correction once will be enough for them to remember such information in the future. Furthermore, as it was the case

with Lee's (2008) secondary students of English in Hong Kong, most of our participants preferred to adopt a somewhat passive role as recipients of elaborate feedback created by the teacher, some of them even demanding not just one, but several correct alternative forms they could learn from.

We also observed that learners' preferences concerning direct and indirect metalinguistic feedback seemed to be guided by different goal orientations (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). While students favouring DME seemed to be concerned about the accuracy of their second versions (and thus valued a clear correction), those who preferred IME spontaneously mentioned that looking for a solution would help them remember such a solution better, thus evidencing that for them writing and receiving feedback provided opportunities for learning beyond that particular task. This finding connects our students' perceptions with Ferris' (2010) contention that both types of feedback do not exclude each other and could be used in combination in order to foster both accuracy and acquisition.

This idea is also closely related to the second question asked, concerning students' perceptions about the usefulness for learning of the different types of feedback. In this sense our data suggests that proficiency may play an important role. While only a minority of our low-level participants acknowledged that indirect feedback may be more useful for learning, higher-level learners in previous studies (e.g., Hyland, 2011; Mawlawi Diab, 2015; Westmacott, 2017) have expressed that indirect metalinguistic feedback had more learning potential as they had to look for the solutions on their own. In contrast, many of our participants seemed to feel that their linguistic resources did not allow them to engage in this autonomous search process and several of them openly expressed that they made mistakes because they were not aware of their lack of knowledge or that they were not able to solve problems they did not even know they had. However, their high rate of successful revisions proves that they were able to solve most of the problems on their own, particularly in terms of vocabulary choices. Due to this lack of awareness of their own abilities, we believe low-level learners would highly benefit from receiving a second round of explicit feedback that (dis)confirms the hypotheses created during their revision process.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The present study is an attempt to answer recent calls for ecologically-valid investigations that include data collections in which writing and feedback are fully integrated into the curriculum (Leow, 2020), therefore reflecting real practices. The contribution of the study, that is, being classroom-based, represents one of its limitations, as its small scale prevents us from making generalisations to other contexts. Instead, the study can be considered as a starting point that opens new avenues for research focusing on low-level learners, particularly in terms of the language learning potential of metalinguistic explanations and learners' revision behaviours.

Concerning the role that WCF may have in assisting the language learning process, our study showed that IME were as effective as DME in terms of vocabulary problem. Since indirect feedback is considered to foster deeper engagement with language than direct feedback, and thus to be potentially more beneficial for language learning (Leow, 2020), it would be highly relevant to explore to what extent IME can foster long term retention of lexical items as compared to DME. In addition, in our data, the number of uncorrected errors was higher than that of incorrect solutions for both feedback types, evidencing that, even when provided with an explanation and the correct answer, learners may fail to pay attention to some of the feedback given (Nicolás Conesa et al., 2017). It would thus be highly relevant to further explore the reasons behind learners' lack of engagement with certain feedback points, in order to ascertain how to better foster learners' attention to and benefit from WCF. Finally, given the classroom-based design of the study, our participants did not revise their texts under any time constraints nor in a controlled environment, thus being able to use any resources at their disposal. Future studies could adopt an ethnographic approach that explores the time and materials employed to self-correct their mistakes so as to gain a better understanding of the revision behaviours that low-level learners engage in for successful self-editing.

## **CONCLUSION**

This classroom-based study shows that, when WCF is fully integrated in the curriculum and it includes metalinguistic explanations, low-level EFL learners engaged in revisions of their drafts that led to successful corrections of most of their mistakes. This was true even when the correct form was withheld, and particularly for lexical mistakes, showing that low-level learners



are able to self-correct their mistakes when provided guidance in their problem-solving process. In addition, our participants valued metalinguistic explanations and believed that they were very useful in order to understand the nature of their mistakes, particularly when they provided them with the correct form. This positive attitude is one of the factors that may have led to their high degree of feedback incorporation.

Therefore, we believe that providing indirect metalinguistic explanations in electronic format can be an optimal way to promote low-level learner autonomy, given that feedback focuses on linguistic items included in the course curriculum. Even though metalinguistic feedback has been claimed to be laborious and time consuming for teachers (Ferris, 2010), its provision to low-level learners can be considered feasible due to two main reasons: first, explanations are usually brief due to the nature of the mistakes made by low-proficiency learners (i.e. mistakes that are related to basic grammar rules or simple word choices); second, they are fast to write and easy to format when given in digital environments such as web-based word editing programs, which not only facilitate the provision of feedback, but also its incorporation into new drafts (Elola & Oskoz, 2017).

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Participants' names have all been changed. Responses were given in Catalan or Spanish and have been translated for the sake of clarity.

## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Direct Feedback:** Feedback technique that consists in indicating a mistake and providing the writer with the correct form.

**Indirect Feedback:** Feedback technique that consists in indicating a mistake but not providing the correct form.

**Low-level Learners:** Learners who have not reached the level of “Independent user” (B1) as defined by standards of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Also called “Basic users”.

**Metalinguistic Explanations:** A type of written corrective feedback that includes simple explanations, rules and / or examples of use that clarify the nature of a mistake.

**Student Perceptions:** Students' opinions and beliefs towards a certain practice.

**Written Corrective Feedback:** In a broad sense, it is written input from a reader (usually a teacher) to a writer (usually a student) which provides information to the writer for revision.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Learning units, tasks, and temporal distribution

<b>Learning unit</b>	<b>Task</b>	<b>Submission</b>	<b>Feedback provision</b>
What is tourism?	Cover letter	Week 3	Week 4
Travel agencies	Job vacancy	Week 5	Week 6
World destinations	Persuasive text: Selling a destination	Week 7	Week 8
Tour operators	Descriptive text: An inclusive package tour	Week 10	Week 11
Tourist motivations	Comparison and contrast text: Old and new tourism	Week 12	Week 13
-	Portfolio including first and second versions	Week 16	-