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The Role of Teachers' Feedback in Improving EFL Students' Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT: Writing is a demanding skill for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly in contexts where opportunities for authentic English communication and sustained writing practice are limited. Teacher feedback can help learners recognize problems in their texts, understand standards of effective writing, and make purposeful revisions. Nevertheless, feedback does not automatically lead to improvement. Its value depends on its relevance, clarity, timing, tone, and the extent to which students understand and use it. This article examines the role of teacher feedback in developing EFL students' writing skills through a narrative and analytical review of recent research. It discusses feedback on language accuracy, content, organization, coherence, and writing processes; considers direct, indirect, written, oral, peer-supported, and technology-mediated feedback; and explains the importance of student engagement and feedback literacy. The reviewed literature indicates that corrective feedback can support linguistic accuracy, while comments addressing meaning and organization are necessary for broader writing development. Research also suggests that feedback is more productive when students have opportunities to revise, ask questions, compare examples, and reflect on their decisions. The article argues that feedback should be treated as an instructional process rather than as the correction of a completed assignment. It concludes with practical recommendations for EFL teachers and institutions, including manageable feedback priorities, revision cycles, peer-review training, and context-sensitive assessment practices. As this is a literature-based article, it does not report original field data or claim findings from a local sample.

KEYWORDS: EFL writing, teacher feedback, written corrective feedback, writing development, feedback literacy, formative assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex language activity through which learners organise ideas, communicate meanings, and demonstrate control of vocabulary, grammar, and discourse conventions. For EFL students, it is often more demanding than receptive skills because successful writing requires the coordination of several processes: generating ideas, selecting relevant information, structuring paragraphs, constructing sentences, monitoring accuracy, and revising a text for a reader. These demands can be especially challenging in educational settings where English is mainly used in the classroom and learners have limited access to authentic writing communities.

Teacher feedback is one of the principal ways through which students receive guidance during this process. It can identify strengths, draw attention to weaknesses, explain expectations, and suggest practical ways to improve a draft. However, the presence of comments on a student's paper does not prove that learning has occurred. Students may misunderstand a comment, feel discouraged by extensive correction, or make changes without understanding the underlying problem. Feedback can therefore be useful, ineffective, or even counterproductive, depending on how it is designed and used (Yu et al., 2021).

Recent research has moved beyond the simple question of whether teachers should correct students' writing. Scholars increasingly examine the type and focus of feedback, the learner's engagement with it, the role of peer and digital feedback, and the ability of teachers and students to participate productively in feedback processes (Carless & Boud, 2018; Crosthwaite et al., 2022; Lee & Mao, 2024). This broader perspective is important because writing development involves more than eliminating grammatical errors. Students also need to learn how to develop arguments, organise information, establish coherence, and make independent decisions as writers.

This article examines how teacher feedback can contribute to EFL students' writing development and what conditions make it more effective. It addresses three questions:

1. In what ways can teacher feedback improve the linguistic and communicative dimensions of EFL writing?
2. Which feedback practices are most likely to encourage meaningful student engagement and revision?
3. What practical principles can guide feedback in resource-constrained university EFL settings?

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The discussion is based on published research and does not present original empirical findings.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article uses a narrative and analytical literature-review approach. Relevant scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles published mainly between 2018 and 2024 were examined. Priority was given to research on second- and foreign-language writing, written corrective feedback, student engagement, feedback literacy, peer review, and technology-mediated feedback. Sources included empirical studies, conceptual papers, and meta-analyses published in established academic journals, together with specialist books on second-language writing and writing pedagogy.

The literature was analyzed thematically rather than statistically. The themes were: feedback and writing development; linguistic accuracy and textual quality; feedback strategies and sources; student engagement and feedback literacy; and implications for EFL teaching. The review is not presented as a systematic review or meta-analysis: it does not claim an exhaustive database search, formal screening protocol, or pooled effect estimate. Its purpose is to synthesize relevant findings and derive practical implications. Because the reviewed studies were conducted in different countries, educational levels, and language-learning conditions, their findings should be applied to other contexts with appropriate caution.

3. UNDERSTANDING TEACHER FEEDBACK IN EFL WRITING

Feedback may be understood as information that helps learners evaluate the quality of their current work and decide what to do next. In writing instruction, it includes comments, questions, corrections, conferences, rubrics, and responses from teachers or other readers. A useful distinction is between feedback as a product and feedback as a process. As a product, feedback is the information written or spoken by a teacher. As a process, it involves the learner interpreting that information, making decisions, revising the text, and applying the learning to later writing tasks.

Carless and Boud (2018) describe student feedback literacy through four related capacities: appreciating feedback, making informed judgements, managing emotional responses, and taking action. This framework highlights that teachers cannot achieve improvement simply by supplying comments. Students must be supported in understanding why feedback matters and how to use it. In a similar direction, Lee and Mao (2024) emphasize the knowledge, values, and abilities that contribute to teachers' feedback literacy in second-language writing.

Feedback also serves a formative function when it is used during learning rather than only to justify a final grade. A mark may tell a student how well an assignment performed against a scale, but it may provide little guidance about how to improve the next draft. Formative feedback, by contrast, identifies a manageable learning need and provides an opportunity to act on it. This requires alignment among the learning objective, the writing task, the feedback, and the revision activity.

4. DIMENSIONS OF WRITING THAT BENEFIT FROM FEEDBACK

4.1. Linguistic accuracy

Written corrective feedback draws attention to language problems such as verb tense, subject–verb agreement, articles, prepositions, word forms, punctuation, and sentence structure. Teachers may provide direct correction by supplying the correct form, or indirect correction by marking an error and asking the learner to identify and repair it. Metalinguistic feedback adds a brief explanation or code that helps students understand the type of error. Brown et al. (2023) report, in a Bayesian meta-analysis, evidence for the continuing effectiveness of written corrective feedback in improving L2 accuracy over time. Their analysis also cautions against assuming that one correction format is universally superior across all contexts.

Direct correction can be appropriate when learners do not yet possess the knowledge needed to correct a particular form. Indirect feedback can encourage analysis and self-editing when students have sufficient language knowledge. A teacher may therefore combine approaches according to the learners' proficiency and the purpose of the task. Correcting every error in every draft, however, can overwhelm students and obscure the most important learning priorities. Selective feedback, focused on a limited number of recurring or instructionally relevant errors, is often more manageable.

4.2. Content and idea development

Effective writing communicates meaningful and adequately developed ideas. Teacher comments can help students clarify a thesis, provide relevant evidence, explain examples, avoid unsupported claims, and maintain a clear purpose. Comments such as "Explain

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how this example supports your point" or "What evidence could strengthen this claim?" invite thinking rather than merely indicating that a paragraph is weak. Feedback on content should be specific enough to guide revision while leaving the student responsible for developing the argument.

4.3. Organization and coherence

Students may produce grammatically acceptable sentences but still struggle to organise them into a coherent text. Teachers can comment on paragraph unity, topic sentences, sequencing, transitions, introductions, conclusions, and the relationship between claims and supporting details. Feedback at this level helps students understand writing as a connected whole. The meta-analysis by Scherer et al. (2024) distinguishes surface-level outcomes, such as language accuracy, from deeper outcomes, such as content and organization. Its findings support the importance of combining feedback on language form with feedback on deeper textual qualities when the aim is overall writing development.

4.4. Vocabulary, style, and audience awareness

Teacher feedback can also help learners select precise vocabulary, avoid unnecessary repetition, use appropriate academic expressions, and adjust tone to the intended audience. Instead of replacing every awkward expression, teachers can identify a problem and invite students to consider alternatives. This approach supports lexical development and encourages learners to make choices based on meaning, register, and context. Feedback should not impose a single personal style where several acceptable expressions are possible.

5. FEEDBACK STRATEGIES AND SOURCES

5.1. Written and oral teacher feedback

Written comments allow students to revisit advice while revising, and they provide a record of recurring strengths and weaknesses. Their limitations include the possibility of misunderstanding brief comments and the time required for teachers to write detailed responses. Short individual conferences or whole-class feedback sessions can clarify recurring problems, explain expectations, and allow students to ask questions. A practical approach is to combine concise written comments with brief oral explanations for complex issues.

5.2. Peer feedback

Peer feedback allows students to read one another's work and respond as readers. It can develop critical reading, audience awareness, and responsibility for quality. A meta-analysis by Vuogan and Li (2023), based on 26 empirical studies, found a positive overall effect of peer feedback on L2 writing ($d = 0.73$, 95% CI [0.54, 0.92]). However, peer review should not be introduced as an unstructured instruction to "correct your partner's essay." Students need models, checklists, respectful language, and practice distinguishing major concerns from minor errors. Teachers should monitor the process and correct serious misunderstandings.

Peer review can benefit the student who gives feedback as well as the student who receives it. Rouhi et al. (2020), for example, found that learners who provided corrective feedback could also benefit in their own writing accuracy. Nevertheless, peer comments vary in quality and should not replace teacher expertise. The teacher remains responsible for setting standards, guiding interaction, and helping students evaluate the reliability of suggestions.

5.3. Automated and online feedback

Digital tools can identify certain language errors, provide immediate responses, and support revision outside class time. They may be particularly useful when teacher time is limited. Yet automated systems may overlook context, intended meaning, disciplinary conventions, and rhetorical quality. Zhang and Hyland (2018) show that students' engagement with teacher and automated feedback is an important factor in the outcomes of writing development. Online feedback research also suggests potential benefits, while indicating that effects vary according to feedback source, educational level, and task genre (Lv et al., 2021). Digital feedback should therefore supplement, not replace, informed teacher judgement.

5.4. Combining feedback sources

No single source of feedback can address every writing need. Teachers can provide expert guidance, peers can offer reader responses, students can self-edit, and digital tools can help identify selected language issues. Research on feedback practices and writing motivation indicates that multiple sources and process-oriented comments can contribute to learner engagement (Cen & Zheng,

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2024; Yu et al., 2020). The purpose of combining sources is not to increase the volume of comments but to provide complementary perspectives that students can evaluate and use.

6. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND THE CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

6.1. Feedback must be understood and used

One of the most important conditions for effective feedback is student engagement. Engagement includes emotional responses, visible revision behavior, and cognitive effort to understand comments. Zhang and Hyland (2018) demonstrate that learners may respond differently to teacher and automated feedback, and that engagement mediates the extent to which feedback contributes to writing development. A student who receives a correction but does not understand it may reproduce the same error in a later assignment. Teachers should therefore check understanding and ask students to explain selected revisions.

6.2. Feedback should be specific, prioritized, and actionable

General comments such as “Improve your grammar” or “Your writing is unclear” provide little direction. More useful comments identify a particular issue and suggest a next step: “The paragraph contains two main ideas; separate them and develop each with evidence.” Teachers should priorities the issues that most affect meaning, organization, or the current learning objective. A short set of clear comments is often more useful than a page crowded with corrections.

6.3. Timing and opportunities for revision

Feedback is most educationally useful when students can apply it to the work under discussion or to a closely related task. Returning a paper after the course has ended limits the possibility of immediate improvement. A planned sequence of drafting, feedback, revision, and reflection makes the connection between advice and action visible. Students should be given sufficient time to revise rather than being expected to read comments and move immediately to a new topic.

6.4. Tone, motivation, and learner confidence

Feedback should be honest without being humiliating. Personal criticism, sarcasm, public comparison, or comments that label a learner as weak can damage motivation and willingness to write. Yu et al. (2021) document possible negative effects of feedback on writing practices, emotions, motivation, and social relationships. Constructive feedback focuses on the text and the next learning step, not on a judgement of the learner’s intelligence or worth. Recognition of genuine strengths is important, but praise should be specific rather than formulaic.

6.5. Teacher feedback literacy

Teachers need to make informed decisions about what to comment on, how to phrase comments, and how to help students act on them. Lee and Mao (2024) identify teacher feedback literacy as an important area of second-language writing education. Xu et al. (2024) further show how effective feedback processes can involve collaboration, reflection, refinement, and the facilitation of student engagement over time. These findings suggest that feedback quality is not simply a matter of individual teacher effort; it is also shaped by professional learning, course design, workload, and institutional support.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY EFL CLASSROOMS

The reviewed research has practical implications for university EFL programms, including those operating with large classes, limited teaching resources, and varied levels of student proficiency. First, teachers should establish a small number of explicit writing objectives for each assignment. If the immediate objective is paragraph unity, feedback should give priority to topic sentences, relevance, and supporting details rather than attempting to correct every grammatical feature.

Second, writing should be taught through manageable cycles. Students can submit a first draft, receive a limited set of teacher comments, revise the text, and submit a short reflection explaining the changes they made. This reflection can reveal whether students understood the feedback and can help teachers identify recurring difficulties. Third, teachers can use brief feedback codes for frequent language errors, provided that students receive a key and examples. Codes reduce repetitive writing while requiring learners to interpret and correct errors.

Fourth, peer review should be introduced gradually. The teacher can first model how to identify a clear thesis, evaluate paragraph unity, and offer respectful suggestions. Students can then use a short checklist to review one aspect of a partner’s draft. Peer review should be treated as guided learning, not as a transfer of the teacher’s responsibility to students. Fifth, institutions should support

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teachers through reasonable class sizes where possible, shared assessment rubrics, moderation of marking, and professional development in feedback practices.

Sixth, digital tools should be selected according to a defined instructional purpose. They may assist with spelling, grammar, or surface-level editing, but students should be taught to verify suggestions and retain responsibility for meaning and authorship. Teachers should also discuss the limitations of automated feedback and the importance of academic integrity. Finally, departments should evaluate writing development across several drafts and tasks rather than relying exclusively on a single final examination. Such an approach provides a more credible picture of students' developing ability.

8. DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed in this article indicates that teacher feedback can support EFL writing in several connected ways. Corrective feedback can draw attention to linguistic patterns and improve accuracy; comments on content and organization can help students develop clearer and more coherent texts; and process-oriented guidance can strengthen revision strategies and learner independence. However, these benefits are conditional. Feedback that is too general, excessive, delayed, or discouraging may have little educational value and may sometimes be harmful.

Evidence from meta-analyses reinforces the need to distinguish between different writing outcomes. Brown et al. (2023) report evidence that written corrective feedback can improve L2 accuracy, while Scherer et al. (2024) show that surface-level and deeper-level feedback address different dimensions of writing. Thus, teachers should avoid treating grammatical correction as a complete measure of writing development. Equally, the positive results reported for peer feedback by Vuogan and Li (2023) do not mean that peer review is automatically effective in every classroom; training, task design, and student proficiency remain important considerations.

An additional implication is that feedback is a shared responsibility. Teachers design and guide the process, but students must interpret comments, judge their relevance, and make decisions about revision. The concept of feedback literacy provides a useful way to understand this relationship (Carless & Boud, 2018). In practice, this means that a successful writing course should teach students not only how to write but also how to receive, question, evaluate, and use feedback. For university programs with limited resources, a consistent and focused feedback routine may be more sustainable than attempting to provide exhaustive correction on every assignment.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teacher feedback is an important component of EFL writing instruction, but its effectiveness depends on what teachers comment on and what students do with the information. It can improve grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, content development, organization, coherence, and revision practices. The strongest instructional approach is therefore balanced: it addresses language form without neglecting meaning, and it combines teacher guidance with structured opportunities for peer response, self-editing, and reflection.

The following recommendations emerge from the review:

1. Set clear writing objectives and communicate the criteria before students begin an assignment.
2. Priorities a manageable number of important issues instead of correcting every error in every draft.
3. Combine feedback on language accuracy with comments on content, organization, coherence, and audience.
4. Provide specific, respectful, and actionable comments that explain what needs attention and how students can proceed.
5. Build time for revision into the course and require students to explain selected changes they have made.
6. Train students to give and receive peer feedback through models, checklists, and teacher supervision.
7. Use automated tools selectively and teach students to evaluate suggestions rather than accept them uncritically.
8. Strengthen teachers' feedback literacy through professional development, shared rubrics, and institutional support.
9. Assess progress across multiple writing tasks and drafts instead of relying only on a final product.

Since this article is based on published literature, it does not establish the effectiveness of a particular feedback model in Afghanistan or in any specific university. Further research could examine how university EFL students in Afghanistan interpret teacher comments, which feedback practices they use during revision, and how class size, proficiency, access to technology, and assessment policy influence feedback uptake. Such studies would provide context-specific evidence for improving writing instruction.

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