



## Feedback Techniques in English Writing Course: Exploring Adult English Language Learners' Perceptions and Experiences

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### Abstract

**Background:** Research and attention around English writing in the second/foreign language context is increasing. Learning to write in English is essential to developing other language skills including speaking, listening, and reading. One of the most important aspect of learning how to write in English is feedback. **Purpose:** The present study explored the feedback techniques used by English teachers during ESL/EFL English writing classes in an intensive English program. Specifically, the study aimed to examine English language learners' perceptions regarding what feedback strategies they believe are useful and why. **Method:** Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with adult language learners who study English as a second language. **Results:** The study confirmed that several types and sources of feedback – such teachers' and peer feedback – were used and preferred by the language learners. However, the participants seemed to accept or refuse the provided feedback depending on whom they received the correction from. They showed signs of confidence when accepting their teachers' feedback, while showed hesitation in accepting their peer feedback. **Implications:** The study suggests that more emphasis should be placed on learners' own abilities to provide corrective feedback. There is a need to increase learners' confidence to accept feedback provided by their peers.

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**Keywords:** Corrective Feedback; English writing; writing errors; Peer feedback; ESL; EFL

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the theoretical perspectives on teaching English writing in second-language (ESL) contexts have become more prominent in the field of second-language acquisition. Researchers have continued their efforts to understand how language acquisition occurs and how reading and writing are learned and acquired. The practice of teaching writing has been influenced by many learning and literacy theories that perceive writing as an essential skill in language learning development. Some of these were developed to understand and explain how writing is learned and taught. As an example, Sociocultural Theory provides an explanation of the importance of social context in learning how to read and write. Bazerman (2016) states that Sociocultural theorists perceive writing as a social act in which individuals write to “participate in social situations” (p.11). This social view of writing allows for an understanding

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of how individuals can use writing to communicate, construct, and gain voice and identities within a community or a society. Cognitive Learning Theory, developed by Jean Piaget, emphasizes the role of the brain and memory in literacy development. This theory perceives literacy as a mental process in which the child is impacted by both internal and external factors that lead to learning development. MacArthur and Graham (2016) point out that cognitive theories have made and still make important contributions to the understanding of writing learning and teaching. They add that cognitive perspectives perceive writing as a complex goal-directed problem-solving process that is associated with writers' knowledge, techniques, language, skills, and motivational resources.

However, the most recent theories associated with literacy learning are New Literacies & Multimodal Theories. These theories have resulted from the rapid economic, cultural, and social changes in today's world. Grabill and Hicks (2005) summarized teaching how writing should be taught during today's technological revolution:

If we want to teach writing or help students learn how to write more effectively, then we have to see writing in the same ways that they do and be with them where they write. Networks are classrooms. Digital writing is socially situated in a collaborative, recursive and responsive space in which teachers must participate with their students (p. 306).

In the second/foreign language context, the body of research concerning the teaching and learning of English writing is substantial. That is because writing is one of the most fundamental skills in second-language development. Haynes and Zacarian (2010) point out that learning how to write in English is vital to the development of other language skills such as speaking, listening, and reading. They add that learning to write in English is a "developmental process" that includes the ability to meaningfully communicate using writing, to write for different purposes, to use appropriate language, and to use correct grammar and forms. Cook (2016) noted that learning to write is a complex process that involves both low- and high-level processing skills. In other words, when learning to write in English, language learners go from learning how to form letters to higher-level skills such as spelling and writing essays. Cook added that learning writing also involves being able to receive and learn from feedback provided by writing teachers.

### *1.1. Purpose and Significance*

Lee (2014) indicated that feedback is a significant aspect of the learning and teaching of English writing. It plays a pivotal role in improving learners' writing skills (Cunningham, 2019; Lv et al., 2021; Mekala & Ponmani, 2017). In fact, feedback has remained one of the most researched topics related to teaching and learning English (Lee, 2014). However, though much research has focused on the strategies used to teach and learn English writing, research concerning language learners' perceptions about the types of feedback used in ESL/EFL writing courses is limited. There is a dearth of literature that examines feedback from the language learner's perspective. Thus, the current study aims to find out what types of feedback strategies are used in English courses and what types of feedback strategies English Language Learners (ELLs) find useful and helpful to their writing skills and why. As such, the current study seeks to explore qualitatively adult language learners' perceptions regarding the most effective and beneficial feedback strategies that can be used to develop their writing abilities.

Exploring ELLs' perceptions is important because it will provide second/foreign language educators with valuable information about the most effective and desired feedback strategies that can be used to develop the writing skills of ELLs. Moreover, such knowledge will extend the understanding of what types of feedback strategies ELLs find more useful and why. This knowledge helps ELLs have a voice and allows English teachers to be aware of learners' preferences in terms of how to develop their writing skills.

### *1.2. Research questions*

In an attempt to explore language learners' perceptions, the following research questions guided the study:

- What types of feedback strategies are used in English writing classes?
- What types of feedback strategies do language learners find useful in developing their English writing skills?

## 2. Literature Review

Research on second-language writing has increased as researchers have studied and explored different approaches to teaching English writing. Second-language researchers have recognized feedback as a significant aspect of English writing, learning, and teaching (Amara, 2015; Bitchener, 2008; Fareed et al., 2016; Karim & Nassaji, 2020; Klimova, 2015; Mishima, 2018; Tian & Zhou, 2020; Selvaraj & Aziz 2019). Lee (2014) states that one of the most vital aspects of English writing, teaching, and learning is feedback. It plays a fundamental role in enhancing and improving the writing skills of English language learners. Feedback and error correction has remained one of the most researched topics related to teaching and learning English (Lee, 2014). Van Beuningen (2010) reports that research in the field of second language learning has focused on whether corrective feedback develops students' writing skills and helps them become more competent writers. Over the years, researchers have examined the effects of different types of corrective feedback used to develop ELLs' writing skills.

A study by Ismail, Maulan, and Hassan (2008) discusses the effect of teachers' feedback on English learners' writing. This study was conducted to better understand whether teacher feedback had a direct impact on developing students' writing abilities. The study sample involved 187 English diploma students. The study was an experimental study in which students were given three different essay topics to write about. The participating students then were asked to rewrite these essays based on their teachers' feedback. The students' original and revised essays were scored based on content, organization, and language. The study findings revealed that even a minimal amount of feedback from the teacher helped students improve their writing abilities. There was a significant difference between the students' original and revised work. The study suggested that feedback provides students with more self-correction opportunities, which in turn prepare them for more improved writing in the future.

Maarof et al. (2011) also investigated the role of different feedback strategies in developing the writing skills of English-language learners. Specifically, the study aimed to examine students' perceptions of the use of teacher feedback and peer feedback during ESL writing classes. The participants included 150 English language learners from five different secondary schools in Malaysia. The participating students responded to a questionnaire that was designed to elicit students' opinions regarding how teacher and peer feedback enhanced their English writing skills. The researchers found that the students valued the combined use of both teacher and peer feedback. In other words, the participating students believed that both teacher and peer feedback played a major role in developing their ESL writing skills. Maarof et al. (2011) concluded by stating that feedback, whether it is from teachers or peers, is an important aspect of any ESL writing class. That is because feedback plays a complementary role in enhancing ELLs' acquisition of English writing skills.

Additional research on different feedback strategies used to develop English writing skills was presented in a 2010 study by Zhao (2010). In this study, the researcher compared the use of peer and teacher feedback strategies among English-language learners. Specifically, the study was undertaken to examine Chinese ELLs' understanding of and use of peer and teacher feedback as ways to develop their English writing skills. Eighteen Chinese university-level language learners participated in the study for sixteen weeks. The research method included content analyses of students' use of feedback and interviews about their understanding and responses to feedback provided by English teachers. The study findings suggested that it is difficult to compare the value of teacher and peer feedback strategies used to enhance the writing skills of ELLs. The participating language learners preferred teacher feedback more than peer feedback because they viewed it as more important and trustworthy. However, the researcher reported that because they used their first language when interacting, the learners tended to understand peer feedback more. Zhao (2010) concluded by stating that language learners need to understand the values of both strategies and be exposed to different types of feedback techniques to develop their writing proficiency.

Like the Zhao (2010) study, Erlam, Ellis, and Batstone (2013) conducted a study in which two writing oral feedback approaches were compared. The researchers used "graduated" feedback with some learners, while other students were exposed to explicit feedback. Graduated feedback helps language learners correct their work with a minimal amount of assistance. Explicit feedback corrects students' errors directly and explicitly. The researchers were interested in examining and understanding students'

interactions with both approaches. The results of the study indicated that graduated feedback is an effective feedback strategy that promotes more self-correction and autonomy. Explicit feedback, in contrast, promotes less self-correction but can be accomplished more quickly and easily. Erlam et al., (2013) concluded by stating that even though both the graduated and explicit approaches are effective in developing learners’ writing skills, explicit feedback requires less effort and time than graduated feedback, and for this reason “it can be considered more efficient” (p. 12).

Ultimately, developing ELLs’ writing abilities is one of the most important goals of all language teaching and learning. For language researchers (Lee, 2014; Van Beuningen, 2010; Rahimi, 2021; Zhao, 2010), learning to write facilitates learning and mastering other language domains including reading, speaking, and listening. The literature shows that when learning to write, feedback is an important factor that leads to improved writing ability.

### 3. Method

This study used a qualitative research method to collect and analyse the data. The qualitative research inquiry allowed the researcher to explore ELLs’ perspectives and opinions regarding what types of feedback strategies they find useful. This method allowed for an in-depth examination of the participants’ opinions and preferences in terms of learning and teaching of English. Smith (2015) mentions that qualitative research methods allow researchers to gain in-depth understanding of the participants’ opinions and motivations.

Data were also collected through face-to-face interviews. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with language learners enrolled in advanced writing classes. Galletta (2013) states that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to deeply explore the participants’ opinions and provide them with the opportunity and space to add new meaning to the study. Also, the semi-structured interview “offers great potential to attend to the complexity” of the research topic (Galletta, 2013, p. 24).

One of the most significant advantages of the semi-structured interview is that it has ready-guided questions and at the same time it creates chances for the researcher to alter or include other questions to the interview to make the interview points clearer and more obvious. As well as, adding prompting questions or changing the interview questions also help investigators to elicit circumstantial information from interviewees. In the same vein, Bryman (2016) suggests that an investigator can conduct an interview implying a model which contains the main interview questions and possible prompting and interrogating questions which help the investigator to be consistent, to ensure that the interviewer does not miss or forget the discussion ideas. Moreover, this suggested model helps the investigator to ensure uniformity of treatment in all interviews

The participants included 20 adult language learners enrolled in intensive and volunteer English programs. The participants differed in their learning backgrounds and were learning English for different purposes including but not limited to developing their language proficiency, pursuing a university degree, and learning to communicate fluently in English. The participants were in an advanced English course in which writing is required for all students. The age of the participating learners ranged from 19- 40 years old. In terms of their educational background, four have a Master’s degree, while the others will pursue Bachelor’s degrees. Purposive sampling was employed in this research to ensure that all participating learners are currently studying English as a second language. Table 1 provides more information about the participants. Note: Pseudonyms were used for the participant’s names.

**Table 1.** The participants.

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Proficiency Level</i>	<i>Education</i>
Nora	32	Advanced	Master
Sai	2	High-intermediate	Bachelor
Jin	3	Low- intermediate	Bachelor
Chen	33	Advanced	Master
Alaa	19	High-intermediate	Bachelor
Sali	22	High-intermediate	Bachelor
Den	24	Low- intermediate	Bachelor
Quin	26	Low- intermediate	Master
Alan	19	Advanced	Bachelor
Sehi	20	High-intermediate	Bachelor

Mandi	21	Advanced	Bachelor
Sami	40	Low- intermediate	Bachelor
Ahmed	19	Advanced	Bachelor
Jin	20	High-intermediate	Master
Salenm	30	Advanced	Bachelor
Mera	24	High-intermediate	Bachelor
Qun	32	High-intermediate	Bachelor
Eli	29	Low- intermediate	Bachelor
Asma	28	Advanced	Bachelor
Abad	20	Low- intermediate	Bachelor

Finally, for the data analysis, thematic analysis was used to answer the research questions. Figure 1 illustrates the data collection and analysis procedures used in the study.

**Figure 1.** Data collection and analysis procedures



The data analysis comprised two stages. First, the interviews with the participants were transcribed verbatim. The researchers read through the responses to gain insight into which feedback strategies language learners found useful and why. Second, codes were assigned to the participants' responses. The first and second cycles of coding led to the creation of categories and more general themes that reflect the research questions. In the first cycle coding, In-Vivo and descriptive coding strategies were used. These techniques help identify codes using the participants' own words (Saldaña, 2016). In the second cycle coding, pattern coding strategies were used. Pattern coding helps narrow down the data into more focused and direct categories. Figure 2 provides more information about the data analysis process with samples of codes, categories, and the emerged themes

**Figure 2.** The data analysis process

Sample of Codes	Categories	Themes	Definition
Direct error correction Grammatical errors Guidelines Self-correction Indirect feedback	Explicit Feedback Implicit Feedback	<b>Feedback Provision</b>	This theme reflects the way corrective feedbacks were provided to students during writing classes and how language learners received them.
Classmates feedback More correction Lack of experience Teachers' knowledge Peer knowledge	Teachers' Feedback Peer Feedback	<b>Feedback Sources</b>	The theme represents learners' perceptions about the sources in which the students receive corrective feedback and whether it is from teachers or their peers.
Lack of confidence No experience Type of feedback Lack of skills	Accepted Feedback Rejected Feedback	<b>Feedback Acceptance</b>	This theme reflects the participants' decisions of either accepting or refusing the provided error correction.

## 4. Results

In terms of revealing what types of feedback ELLs think is useful for improving their writing skills, the thematic analysis of the data revealed three main themes and subthemes: feedback provision, different sources of corrective feedback, and feedback acceptance. These themes and subthemes reflect the research questions and identified the most useful and effective feedback strategies that can be used in English writing courses. The following section will unpack each of these themes in detail. The names of the participating students are pseudonyms.

### 4.1. Theme 1: Feedback Provision

The first theme that emerged from the data was feedback provision. This refers to the way corrective feedback, whether explicit or implicit, was provided to students during writing classes. Students reported that they received different types of corrective feedback. Some participants preferred to receive feedback about their writing explicitly, while others preferred implicit error correction. The students described the benefits of both feedback strategies.

#### *Explicit Feedback*

The students' responses revealed that explicit feedback is a beneficial corrective feedback strategy that helped them develop their writing. According to the students, explicit feedback provides clear and helpful teaching moments, allows them to know their strengths and weaknesses in terms of writing, and develops their writing abilities. This was exemplified in these three responses:

We receive many types of feedback from our teachers in writing classes. I prefer when he/she directly shows me my errors. For me, this is a learning moment because I know where my errors are. I usually learn from correcting these errors. [Salem]

My writing got really better when I read my teachers' feedback. Also, when I see my errors, I know my strengths and weaknesses. I mean, when writing teacher mentions that there is a grammatical mistake here or wrong verb tenses there, I immediately know that I have to work on developing my writing in this certain topic. [Jin]

One of the ways that develops my writing abilities is correcting my errors directly. I think this way helps me develop my writing accordingly. When I know my mistakes, I can learn from them. Not knowing my mistakes is confusing for me and requires me to waste a lot of time trying to figure them out [Mera]

In general, the data showed that some participants preferred the explicit or direct corrective feedback strategy. They believed this type of feedback offers a learning moment that helped them identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop their writing skills.

#### *Implicit Feedback*

Another subtheme identified in the students' responses is implicit feedback. Some participants believed that implicit or indirect feedback helped them develop their writing skills. This strategy increases their learning autonomy, allows them to be more engaged in the learning process, and increases their motivation. As mentioned by these three students:

For me, I really like indirect feedback for my errors. It helps me be responsible for my own learning. To correct the error, I have to read and try to figure out my mistake. In other words, Indirect feedback helps me control my own learning. [Sami]

Our writing teacher uses direct and indirect feedback methods to correct our mistakes. I personally prefer indirect feedback because it allows me to be engaged in my learning. It is more interactive way of learning because I have to think about the errors before correcting it. [Mandi]

I like when my teacher let us think about the errors before correcting them. He did not correct them immediately. We have to think and figure out what is wrong with the sentence. This really motivate us to write and learn from our mistakes. [Den]

From the students' responses, it was clear that some of them preferred implicit or indirect feedback over explicit feedback. Implicit feedback developed their self-learning, improved their engagement in their learning, and increased their motivation.

#### 4.2. Theme 2: Feedback Sources

The second theme that reflects the participants' responses is feedback sources. This refers to the sources from which the students receive corrective feedback (teachers or their peers). In other words, the participating students reported that they prefer teacher or peer feedback depending on their writing needs.

##### **Teacher Feedback**

Feedback from teachers was mentioned consistently by the participants as their most preferred source of corrective feedback. The students have more confidence in the feedback when teachers correct their writing. They believe that feedback from teachers typically focuses on three language elements: grammar, word choice, and writing coherence. This was illustrated in these responses:

There are many types of feedback we received in every written assignment. Most of the time, our teacher focuses on correcting our grammatical errors such as verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, and prepositions. These corrections helped us develop our grammar by learning these rules. I think the purposes of correcting our writing is to develop my grammar and word choices. [Alan]

Beside grammar errors, I always have some issues in writing incorrect words or words that do not fit in the sentences. That is why I prefer teachers' feedback because they usually suggest better words for better writing. For instance, I learn many academic vocabulary words by reading teachers' corrections. [Den]

Writing is really difficult for us. We try to write like native speakers. However, sometimes our writing is not clear. Writing teachers helped us make our writing clear and readable. [Sali]

##### **Peer Feedback**

Another source of corrective feedback mentioned consistently by the participants was peer feedback. This refers to students working in groups or pairs to correct each other's writing. Even though this type of correction does not inspire much confidence among students, they indicated that there are benefits to this method. For example, they develop a sense of collaboration in their writing classes, improve their autonomous learning skills, and become more independent language learners.

One of the activities that we do in writing classes is correcting each other's writing. In all honesty, I find it really useful. However, I cannot expect it all the time because we do not have the language skills that our teacher has. I believe these activities make us work in groups, and that is really beneficial. Working in group makes the writing classes more interesting and enjoyable. [Aala]

Sometimes, we were asked to correct each other's writing in class. The teachers arrange us in pairs and we have to read and edit our papers. I like these types of activities because they make us responsible for our own learning. We have to depend on each other and not our teacher to develop our writing. [Chen]

The participants consistently identified peer feedback as an important source of corrective feedback in terms of their writing. The responses indicated that peer feedback improves the classroom interaction and allows for more collaborative and autonomous English learning.

#### 4.3. Theme 3: Feedback Acceptance

Finally, feedback acceptance is another theme that was consistently mentioned by the participants. This theme reflects the participants' decision to either accept or refuse the provided corrections. Most of the time, acceptance was associated with the source of the feedback. In other words, students tended to accept, without hesitation, their writing teachers' corrections because of their confidence in the

proficiency of the teacher. On the other hand, the participants showed some signs of hesitation in accepting their own or their peers error corrections. The following quotes illustrate this theme:

I usually have many conversations with my classmates when they correct my writing. In many cases, we go to the teacher because I believed that their corrections were not accurate. Also, they usually do the same thing with me. We are still learning the language, so mistakes happen. However, when my teacher corrects my errors, I know they are accurate and 100% correct. [Jin]

So, as I mentioned previously, we work together in fixing our writing. We do that many times during the writing classes. I, sometimes, don't like it when some of my classmate do the error correction. It not always true. In many times, we had these conversations about why they correct this or that. In some cases, I don't accept their judgment and we go to our teachers. [Sai]

I think it depends on the person who correct my writing...For example, writing teachers know or strengths and weakness. It's their language. Their correction is like final. On the other hand, my correction or even my friend correction is not as good as teachers'. We are learning, and that why I don't always take mine or my friends' correction. As I said, we are not professional, and we are learning this language. [Nora]

The participants reported that their acceptance of feedback depends on who provides the feedback. They had confidence in their teachers' feedback, but often hesitated to accept feedback from their peers.

## 5. Discussion

The present study explored language learners' perceptions regarding the feedback strategies that best help them develop their writing abilities. Specifically, the study aimed to determine, according to language learners, what types of feedback they find useful in developing their English writing skills. Eighteen ESL learners participated in this qualitative research study. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data source. The findings demonstrate that language learners prefer to receive different types of feedback on their writing, including explicit and implicit feedback. Explicit or direct feedback was seen as providing immediate and effective teaching moments for the participants, whereas implicit feedback helped develop the students' learning autonomy and engagement in the learning process.

Language learners also described the different sources they prefer to receive feedback from (either their teachers or peers). On one hand, teachers' feedback focused more on developing students' grammar, word choices, and writing coherence. On the other hand, peer feedback develops a sense of collaboration among students, which improves their autonomous learning. Finally, the participants seemed to accept or refuse feedback depending on who provided it. They showed signs of confidence in their teachers' feedback but often hesitated to accept their peers' feedback.

Significantly, the study has some limitations. First, the participants included only 18 language learners who were enrolled in intensive ESL programs. The small group of participants reduced the possibility of generalizing the findings to all language classes. Second, the researcher used only semi-structured interviews to collect data. More data methods, such as surveys and direct observation of classes, would have increased the understanding of the participants' preferences and opinions. Finally, the participants included only ESL learners who were studying English in high-intermediate language courses. Involving teachers in this research study would have helped shape a more in-depth understanding of the actual feedback strategies used in ESL classrooms.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite the abundance of research regarding corrective feedback in the ESL/EFL context, few research studies have examined corrective feedback from the language learner's perspective. In terms of revealing what types of feedback ELLs think is useful for improving their writing skills, the present study revealed three main themes and subthemes: feedback provision, different sources of corrective feedback, and feedback acceptance. These themes and subthemes reflect the research questions and identified the most useful and effective feedback strategies that can be used in English writing courses.

Hence, because of its examination of learners' perceptions and preferences, the present research can offer some recommendations related to English teaching and learning. First, more attention should be paid to learners' opinions and preferences regarding the teaching strategies used to develop their



language skills. Involving language learners in the teaching and learning process increases their learning motivation and autonomy. Involving language learners in the teaching and learning process increases their learning motivation and autonomy. ESL/EFL teachers must listen to language learners to discover their teaching and learning preferences (Mao & Lee, 2020; Rafique, 2017). Doing so will bridge the gap between the actual language teaching and students' expectations. This finding resonates with Ferris's (2012) study, which emphasizes the significance of allowing language learners to voice their preferences regarding receiving and accepting writing feedback.

Second, language teachers should work harder to increase students' confidence in their own error corrections and those provided by their peers (Cave et al., 2018). One study finding suggests that language learners tend to refuse their peers' feedback because of their lack of confidence in their peers' language proficiency. Language learners must feel confident in their and their classmates' language abilities, which will increase their motivation to learn (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019; Fan & Xu 2020; Ferris et al.2013; Huisman et a., 2018; Salinas, 2020).

Third, the findings of this research study emphasize the importance of using implicit feedback to improve language learners' writing. Corrective implicit feedback increases students' autonomy and allows for more self-learning opportunities (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Chong, 2019; Elboshi, 2021; Hyland & Hyland, 2019). That is why language instructors are encouraged to use implicit feedback to develop learners' abilities and skills.

In terms of future research, the present study focuses on corrective feedback from the student perspective. In other words, the study did not identify what types of corrective feedback language teachers find more useful in terms of improving the English writing of their students. As such, more research is needed to explore teachers' perspectives on the most effective types of corrective feedback that can be used to develop students' writing. Exploring these perceptions will provide more insight into teachers' perspectives on the teaching of writing in ESL classes.

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