



# THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE (ELS) WRITING IN SOUTH AFRICA: KEY PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES

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## ABSTRACT

The existing literature in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing education has explored the role of feedback but often lacks a comprehensive examination of the specific characteristics of feedback that lead to meaningful improvements in student performance. While studies have addressed feedback timing, the format of feedback, and its content separately, there is a notable research gap in synthesizing these aspects to provide a holistic view of effective feedback practices in ESL writing contexts. Furthermore, the impact of technology and peer feedback on ESL writing remains an underexplored area in the literature. Effective feedback plays a pivotal role in enhancing students' performance in ESL writing. This research explores the nature of feedback in ESL writing contexts to identify the specific types of feedback that yield the most significant improvements in students' writing skills. Methodologically, this study is drawn upon a comprehensive review of existing literature. To understand the nature of feedback that improves students' performance in ELS writing, the authors used a thematic content analysis approach to analyse existing literature from different datasets. The study adopted a Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura in 1986. The SCT provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals learn and acquire new skills, including language skills like ESL writing. SCT emphasizes the role of social interaction, observational learning, and self-regulation. This study found that there is a lack of clarity in feedback. The feedback provided to students is often vague or general comments that fail to offer specific guidance for improvement. Therefore, this study recommends providing clear and targeted feedback. This can be done by ensuring that feedback is specific, clear, and directly related to areas that need improvement, offering actionable guidance.

**Keywords:** *English as a Second Language, Performance, Feedback, Students, Language Proficiency*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The realm of English as a Second Language (ESL) education has gained increasing prominence on the global stage, driven by the growing importance of English as a lingua franca in academic, professional, and international communication contexts. In South Africa, a nation characterized by its linguistic diversity, the role of ESL instruction is particularly significant as it bridges language barriers and fosters inclusive education. South Africa stands as a unique ESL educational setting due to its rich linguistic diversity, with eleven (11) official languages in addition to English (Sibanda & Begede, 2015). The multilingual nature of the country presents both challenges and opportunities in ESL writing instruction. In this context, educators encounter the complex task of providing feedback that caters to the diverse linguistic backgrounds and needs of

their students. While there is a substantial body of literature on feedback in ESL writing, the South African context demands a more localized and context-specific investigation (Taole, 2022). This research seeks to address this gap by conducting a case study that not only contributes to the global discourse on ESL feedback but also offers insights and recommendations tailored to the South African ESL education landscape. By examining the kind of feedback that effectively enhances students' performance in English Second Language writing within the South African context, this study aims to provide valuable guidance for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers working to facilitate English language proficiency and written communication skills among the nation's diverse student population.

Central to the effectiveness of ESL education is the provision of constructive feedback, which is pivotal in guiding learners towards linguistic competence and effective written communication. This study delves into the intricate landscape of feedback in ESL writing, focusing on the South African context, to elucidate the specific types of feedback that wield the greatest influence on students' performance and language development.

### **1.1. Problem Statement**

There is a prevalent concern among educators, lecturers, and students regarding the efficacy of feedback provided to learners throughout the academic year and its potential benefits (Fathman & Whalley, 1990). Specifically, there is growing apprehension about the impact of this feedback on enhancing student performance in the domain of English academic writing (Wiliam, 2011). Competent language use is undeniably a cornerstone of effective and meaningful communication, making it imperative to scrutinize the nature of feedback imparted to English as a Second Language students. As such, this study seeks to investigate the specific characteristics of feedback that hold the potential to bolster students' performance in English academic writing, thereby addressing this critical concern (Wiliam, 2011).

Feedback is widely recognized for its educational value. It enhances the learning experience, narrows the gap between current abilities and desired goals, informs teachers in guiding their instruction, reinforces learning, alters learners' thinking and behaviour, and directs their focus toward improvement. Effective feedback should possess specific qualities, such as being goal-oriented, well-presented, and recognizing learners as active participants in the learning process (Kheradmand & Sayadiyan, 2016). However, it's important to note that not all feedback is beneficial; it can be counterproductive, especially if delivered negatively or restoratively. Despite the crucial role feedback plays in education, many learners appear disengaged from it (Jonsson 2013). Taole (2022) indicates that the reasons for this disengagement include feedback not being helpful, lacking personalization, being overly prescriptive, requiring strategies for utilization, and using wording that learners struggle to understand.

The problem statement in this study is that the existing literature in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing pedagogy has explored the role of feedback but often lacks a comprehensive examination of the specific characteristics of feedback that lead to meaningful improvements in student performance. While studies have addressed feedback timing, the format of feedback, and its content separately, there is a notable research gap in synthesizing these aspects to provide a holistic view of effective feedback practices in ESL writing contexts. Furthermore, the impact of technology and peer feedback on ESL writing remains an underexplored area in the literature. However, this study intends to explore the nature of feedback in ESL writing contexts to identify the specific types of feedback that yield the most significant improvements in students' writing skills.



## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology. The study specifically reviewed secondary data or existing literature to understand the nature and types of feedback that improve ELS student's writing skills in South African universities. The author reviewed both national and international sources from accredited and non-accredited journals, dissertations, books, thesis, internet sources and other published readable materials. To gather this data, different databases have been used such as Google, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The thematic content analysis approach was used to analyse the data. To ensure validity and reliability, the authors were not biased in the selection of secondary data, different keywords were used to search for relevant data.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1. Theoretical Framework

Nabavi (2012) indicates that the Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT) is a theoretical perspective founded upon the concept that individuals acquire knowledge through the observation of others' actions, and it places human cognitive processes at the core of comprehending personality development. By the mid-1980s, Bandura's research took a more holistic turn, shifting its focus towards offering a more comprehensive understanding of human cognition within the context of social learning. Consequently, the theory that evolved from social learning theory came to be recognized as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999). This theory furnishes a conceptual framework for comprehending, forecasting, and influencing human behaviour (Green & Peil, 2009; Nabavi, 2012). Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) started as the Social Learning Theory (SLT) in the 1960s by Albert Bandura. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura in 1986 provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals learn and acquire new skills, including language skills like ESL writing. SCT emphasizes the role of social interaction, observational learning, and self-regulation (LaMorte, 2022). In the context of feedback, SCT can be used to explore how students observe and learn from the feedback provided by instructors and peers, influencing their writing performance. Here's how SCT can contribute to the understanding of the nature and types of feedback to improve students' performance in ESL writing:

#### 1. Observational Learning

- **Imitating Models** - SCT posits that individuals learn by observing and imitating others. In ESL writing, this means that students can learn from exemplary writing samples (Bandura, 1986). When feedback includes annotated corrections and explanations, it serves as a model for students, showcasing correct language usage. This helps learners grasp not just what's wrong but why it's incorrect and how to rectify it (Smith, 2005).
- **Peer Feedback** - SCT places importance on peer interactions (Bandura, 1986). In ESL writing, this implies that when students provide feedback to their peers, they observe and learn from their peers' approaches to writing and language use. Effective peer feedback becomes a form of observational learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), where students gain insights into different writing styles, techniques, and approaches (Brown & Atkins, 2013).

#### 2. Self-Regulation

- **Setting Goals** - Setting goals is a crucial aspect of learning (Bandura, 1999). In the context of feedback, it is imperative that feedback not only identifies errors but also guides students in establishing specific improvement goals (Green & Peil, 2009). For instance, feedback can recommend that students concentrate on aspects such as grammar,

vocabulary, or sentence structure to enhance their writing skills. Smit (2020) indicated that in the context of feedback, effective feedback should not only identify errors but also guide students in setting specific improvement goals.

- **Self-Monitoring** - Self-monitoring is another key concept in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999). It suggests that individuals can regulate their behaviour by monitoring their progress. In the realm of ESL writing, feedback that emphasizes areas needing improvement encourages students to engage in self-monitoring practices. This heightened self-awareness is instrumental in facilitating continuous improvement (Green & Peil, 2009). Equally, Jones & Brown (2018) indicate that feedback that highlights areas for improvement prompts students to self-monitor their writing.

### 3. Social Interaction

- **Teacher-Student Interaction** - SCT highlights the significance of the teacher-student relationship. Effective feedback should result from constructive interactions between teachers and students. This interaction allows for personalized guidance, encouragement, and a deeper understanding of the individual learning needs of students. It fosters a supportive learning environment (Bandura, 1999; Green & Peil, 2009; Sundani et al., 2021).
- **Collaborative Learning** - SCT promotes collaborative learning experiences. In the context of feedback, it encourages group discussions and collaborative writing activities. Students learn not only from their teachers but also from each other's strengths and weaknesses. Collaborative feedback sessions can help students refine their understanding of effective writing collectively (Bandura, 1999; Green & Peil, 2009).

### 4. Self-Efficacy

- **Feedback and Confidence** - SCT emphasizes self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to perform a task. Constructive feedback that identifies areas for improvement while also recognizing achievements can significantly boost students' confidence in their ESL writing abilities (Bandura, 1999). It reinforces their belief that they can improve their writing skills.
- **Mastery Experience** - SCT suggests that feedback acknowledging progress and mastery of specific writing skills can enhance students' self-efficacy (Bandura, 1999). When students see that their efforts result in improvements in their writing, they become more motivated to continue working on their skills, leading to further mastery.

The authors of this study believe that SCT underscores the significance of social interaction, observational learning, self-regulation, and self-efficacy in the learning process. When designing feedback strategies to improve students' performance in ESL writing, educators can use SCT principles to inform the nature and types of feedback provided, ensuring that it aligns with how learners acquire and refine their language skills.

## 3.2.Literature Review

### Nature and types of feedback to improve students' Performance in ESL writing in South African Universities.

Improving students' performance in ESL writing in the South African context, like in any other educational setting, often involves providing effective feedback. Feedback is essential for

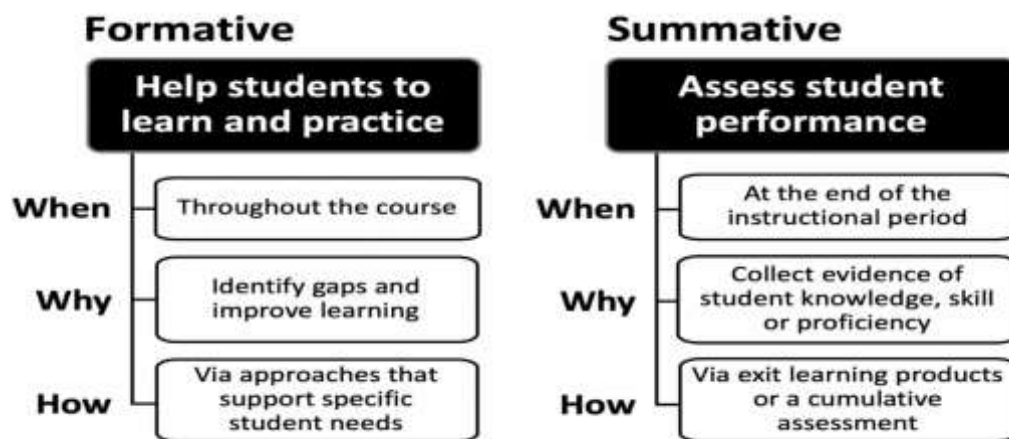


helping students identify their strengths and weaknesses and guiding them towards improvement. Here's an overview of the nature and types of feedback that can be used to enhance ESL writing performance in the South African context:

## Nature of Feedbacks that are often Used to Improve ESL Writing Skills of the Students

Feedback is described as a pivotal element in curriculum delivery, as pointed out by Wahyuni in 2017. However, it is worth noting, as observed by Wahyuni in the same study, that the effectiveness of feedback remains a matter of contention and lacks a clear consensus. This discrepancy arises from varying viewpoints regarding the role of feedback in curriculum assessment (Wahyuni, 2017; Taole, 2022). In South Africa, there are two natures or forms of feedback which are common practice in public universities, namely formative and summative feedback (Lam, 2017). The distinction between the two forms or nature of feedback is outlined in **Figure 1** below and further discussed in detail:

*Figure 1: Distinction between Formative and Summative Feedback*



*Source: Adkins (2018)*

## 4.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1.Formative Feedback

In the South African ESL context, where English is often a second language for students, formative feedback plays a critical role in nurturing language proficiency and effective communication skills. This feedback helps students not only correct grammatical errors but also develop their ability to articulate their thoughts clearly in writing, an essential skill for academic and professional success (Manuel, Kaiser & Geduld, 2021). The formative feedback is given during the learning process. It focuses on providing constructive comments and suggestions to help students improve their writing skills. Formative feedback can be both written and oral (Taole, 2022). Furthermore, Taole (2022) implies that many educators consider written feedback as a crucial element in the learning and achievement of students. It is assumed that feedback has the potential to influence how learners think or act regarding their assignments or ELS essays, serving to direct their focus towards enhancing their learning as outlined in **Figure 1** above. Nevertheless, despite the advantages associated with written or formative feedback, there is a prevalent belief that a significant number of ESL students are not fully engaged with the feedback they are provided.

Adkins (2018) implies that the process of giving feedback continuously and repeatedly while learning is known as formative evaluation. Utilizing active learning techniques is solidly supported. It is diagnostic and gives both students and teachers feedback on crucial data like:

- What has been discovered thus far?
- Obstacles and misunderstandings.
- Positivity and room for development.

It is also corrective because it provides chances for learning and improvement. It is preferable or best to approach formative comments constructively. However, the distinction between formative and summative feedback will be made.

#### **4.2. Summative Feedback**

Summative feedback is administered to students upon completing a course, with the purpose of gauging the abilities and information acquired by the student throughout the entire teaching duration. The intention behind summative feedback is to provide students with insights into their performance about the overarching learning objectives of the course (Taole, 2022). Summative feedback is a crucial aspect of educational assessment, usually administered after a learning activity or assessment, aiming to evaluate a student's overall performance (Brookhart, 2013). Unlike formative feedback, which is more detailed and interactive, summative feedback provides a comprehensive, endpoint assessment of a student's work, focusing on outcomes and the overall quality of the work. It may also be used comparatively for ranking or grading purposes, either against specific criteria or by comparing the student's performance to that of their peers. However, it generally offers fewer opportunities for revision or further discussion, making it a conclusive evaluation tool (Taras, 2005; Sadler, 1998; Andrade & Du, 2007; Braskamp & Ory, 1994). In the context of this study, summative feedback focuses on the technical aspects of writing such as spelling, tense and punctuations and usually takes the form of marks and grades while formative feedback takes the form of qualitative comments and specific comments related to the task (Lam, LW, Peng & Lau, 2017). Researchers are not in agreement as to which form of feedback is more effective in improving learners' learning. Agricola et al. (2020), however, consider both summative and formative feedback as important and valuable feedback tools and as a form of interaction that will increase the effectiveness of feedback. Both summative and formative assessment feedback should include the provision of quality constructive and timely feedback. Therefore, it can be concluded based on **Figure 1** that summative feedback is typically given at the end of an assessment or writing task. It provides an overall evaluation of the student's performance. While it may not be as detailed as formative feedback, it offers a summary of strengths and areas for improvement.

#### **4.3. Technology-Enhanced Feedback**

Kim (2018) indicates that technology-enhanced feedback refers to the use of digital tools and software to provide feedback on various aspects of writing, including grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and overall clarity. This approach can be particularly beneficial in educational contexts where technology is widely available and integrated into the learning process. Alamri (2021) indicates that technology-enhanced feedback to enhance essay writing skills for English as a Second Language (ESL) students presents both challenges and opportunities. Challenges include potential overreliance on automated feedback, which might neglect nuanced language and cultural aspects, and the requirement for reliable internet access, which can be a limitation for some students. Additionally, technology may not fully address the need for personalized feedback.



However, there are substantial opportunities: technology can offer quick and accessible grammar and spelling correction, empower self-directed learning, and provide tailored exercises that target specific language weaknesses. It also allows for data-driven insights into student performance, aiding instructors in adapting their teaching strategies. When thoughtfully integrated with human feedback, technology can be a valuable tool in advancing ESL students' essay writing skills (Benali, 2021; Alamri, 2021).

#### 4.4. Barriers Often Experienced by Students in Dealing with Different Kind of Feedback That Intends to Improve Students' Performance in English Second Language Writing

Manuel, Kaiser & Geduld (2021) indicate that students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) often encounter several barriers when dealing with various types of feedback aimed at improving their performance in writing. These barriers include a lack of clarity in feedback, where vague or general comments do not provide specific guidance for improvement (Mahabeer & Akoo, 2021). Additionally, students may struggle with processing and incorporating feedback efficiently due to language barriers and limited familiarity with writing conventions (Chand, 2021). Emotional barriers such as frustration or discouragement can hinder their willingness to engage with feedback constructively. Furthermore, students may find it challenging to prioritize and act on feedback when faced with a high volume of corrections or suggestions. Overcoming these barriers requires clear, targeted, and supportive feedback, as well as strategies to help students better understand and apply it effectively (Chand, 2021; Mahabeer et al., 2021).

#### 4.5. Key principles and strategies for providing feedback that can enhance ESL students' writing skills.

The author (s) of this study propose the following key principles and strategies for ESL writing feedback. The principles and strategies as outlined in **Table 1** intend to improve both students' and lecturers' relationship and writing skills. Below are some of the twelve (12) proposed principles and strategies:

*Table 1: key principles and strategies for ESL writing feedback*

<b>1. Clear Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Define specific writing goals and expectations.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Set clear learning objectives for each writing task.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Constructive Feedback</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Encourage improvement and growth.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Focus on strengths, suggest areas for improvement, and offer solutions.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Error Identification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Address grammar, vocabulary, and structural errors.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Highlight errors and explain why they are incorrect.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Cultural Sensitivity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Respect cultural differences.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Be aware of cultural nuances in language and content.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Timely Responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Provide feedback promptly.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Set realistic timelines for feedback delivery.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Positive Reinforcement</b>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Motivate and boost confidence.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Praise effort and improvement alongside corrections.</li> </ul>
<b>7. Individualized Approach</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Tailor feedback to each student's needs.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Consider the student's proficiency level and specific challenges.</li> </ul>
<b>8. Rubrics and Guidelines</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Ensure consistency and clarity.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Use rubrics and guidelines to assess and provide feedback.</li> </ul>
<b>9. Peer Review</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Promote collaborative learning.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Encourage students to review each other's work constructively.</li> </ul>
<b>10. Revision Opportunities</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Foster continuous improvement.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Allow students to revise and resubmit their work.</li> </ul>
<b>11. Feedback Discussion</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Promote understanding and dialogue.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Schedule one-on-one or group discussions about feedback.</li> </ul>
<b>12. Technology Tools</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Objective:</b> Leverage technology for feedback.</li> <li>○ <b>Strategy:</b> Use online tools for tracking changes and providing comments.</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled by the Authors (2023)

As outlined in **Table 1**, the key principles and strategies for ESL writing feedback encompass a comprehensive framework for enhancing ESL students' writing skills. It begins by emphasizing the importance of setting clear learning objectives for writing tasks, followed by the constructive feedback approach that encourages growth by focusing on strengths, addressing errors, and providing solutions (Defazio et al., 2010). Cultural sensitivity is underlined, highlighting the need to respect diverse backgrounds and nuances in language and content. Timely responses and positive reinforcement play pivotal roles, ensuring prompt feedback and motivating students through praise. An individualized approach, guided by proficiency levels and unique challenges, ensures personalized feedback. Rubrics and guidelines ensure consistency, while peer review promotes collaborative learning. Revision opportunities and feedback discussions support continuous improvement and open dialogue (Allman, 2019; Singh et al., 2020). Lastly, technology tools are leveraged for efficient feedback delivery, tracking changes, and facilitating communication, collectively forming a holistic strategy for ESL writing enhancement (Alamri, 2021).

## 5.CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

### 5.1.CONCLUSION

Feedback continues to hold significance within the realm of teaching and learning, as the way lecturers provide feedback plays a pivotal role in influencing whether learners derive value from the assignment or not. Thus, improving students' performance in English as a second language (ESL) writing involves providing effective feedback. Constructive feedback can be a powerful tool for enhancing language skills. Effective feedback for ESL writing should be targeted,





balanced, and encouraging. It should help students understand their mistakes, encourage them to reflect on their writing, and guide how to improve. Additionally, fostering a supportive and growth-oriented classroom environment is crucial for students to feel comfortable receiving and applying feedback.

In this study, it is discovered that students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) encounter multiple barriers when receiving feedback to enhance their writing performance. These barriers encompass:

- Lack of Clarity in Feedback - Vague or general comments that fail to offer specific guidance for improvement.
- Processing and Incorporation Challenges - Difficulty in efficiently processing and integrating feedback due to language barriers and limited familiarity with writing conventions (Chand, 2021).
- Emotional Barriers - Emotional hindrances such as frustration or discouragement, can impede constructive engagement with feedback.
- Overwhelming from High Volume of Corrections: Difficulty in prioritizing and acting on feedback when faced with a substantial number of corrections or suggestions.

## 5.2.SUGGESTIONS

- Provide Clear and Targeted Feedback: Ensure that feedback is specific, clear, and directly related to areas that need improvement, offering actionable guidance.
- Supportive Feedback Environment: Create a supportive and encouraging atmosphere that helps students overcome emotional barriers, fostering a positive attitude towards feedback.
- Language and Writing Conventions Support: Offer additional resources and support to help ESL students better understand and adhere to writing conventions.
- Feedback Prioritization Strategies: Teach students how to effectively prioritize and act on feedback by breaking it down into manageable tasks.
- Feedback Strategies Education: Educate both teachers and students on effective feedback strategies to enhance the feedback process for ESL learners.

By implementing these recommendations, educators can better support ESL students in their writing improvement journey by addressing the identified barriers to feedback effectiveness.

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