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The Role of Teacher Feedback in Enhancing ESL Learners' Writing Proficiency

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Abstract:

Teacher feedback plays a vital role in enhancing writing proficiency among ESL learners. This paper explores how different types of feedback—direct, indirect, formative, and summative—impact learners' language development, with a focus on improving grammar, structure, and content in writing. By combining error correction with opportunities for learners to engage in self-reflection and revision, feedback helps students develop a deeper understanding of language mechanics and fosters learner autonomy. However, challenges such as the heavy workload for teachers, varying student receptiveness, and balancing constructive criticism with motivation are significant considerations in delivering effective feedback. This study also highlights case studies that demonstrate the practical application of feedback strategies in diverse ESL classrooms. Overall, the role of feedback in ESL writing instruction is essential for promoting sustained improvement and developing students' confidence and independence in writing. The article concludes with recommendations for balancing personalized feedback with innovative teaching practices to enhance ESL learners' writing proficiency.

Introduction

Teacher feedback is an essential aspect of the language learning process, particularly in the context of writing proficiency in ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. Effective feedback serves not only as a tool for correcting errors but also as a critical means for fostering language development, encouraging learner autonomy, and enhancing overall writing skills. Writing is often

considered one of the most challenging language skills for ESL learners to master due to its complexity, requiring the integration of grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, cohesion, coherence, and cultural appropriateness (Zhang & Zhang, 2022). Consequently, targeted and meaningful feedback from teachers plays a pivotal role in helping learners overcome these challenges.

Feedback serves multiple functions in the ESL classroom, guiding learners to understand their mistakes, identify areas for improvement, and refine their writing abilities. Studies have shown that teacher feedback, whether direct or indirect, can significantly impact a learner's ability to internalize writing conventions, grammar rules, and organizational strategies, leading to long-term improvements in their writing proficiency (Alisoy, 2023). This process is particularly crucial in ESL contexts, where learners are often grappling with structural differences between their native language and English, which can result in persistent errors if not addressed effectively.

The role of feedback extends beyond error correction, as it can also encourage critical thinking and self-reflection. Metacognitive feedback, for instance, prompts learners to engage with their writing on a deeper level, helping them develop strategies for self-assessment and revision. Feedback that focuses on higher-order concerns, such as content development, argumentation, and coherence, can further improve learners' ability to construct meaningful and well-structured texts (Zhang & Zhang, 2022). When combined with regular formative assessments, feedback becomes a powerful tool for fostering writing development over time.

However, while feedback is undoubtedly beneficial, its effectiveness depends on various factors, including the feedback method, learners' response to it, and their cultural and educational backgrounds. Teachers must carefully balance corrective feedback with encouragement to maintain student motivation and engagement. Instructors should also be mindful of the potential challenges in providing feedback, such as time constraints and the varying needs of individual learners (Alisoy, 2023). Despite these challenges, teacher feedback remains a cornerstone of effective ESL writing instruction, contributing significantly to learners' proficiency and confidence in their writing.

This article explores the role of teacher feedback in enhancing ESL learners' writing proficiency. It examines the different types of feedback, their impact on learners' writing abilities, and strategies for overcoming challenges in providing meaningful and constructive feedback in diverse ESL contexts.

2. Types of Teacher Feedback

Teacher feedback is a critical component in guiding ESL learners toward improved writing proficiency. However, not all feedback is equally effective; the type and delivery of feedback can greatly influence its impact. In this section, we will explore several key types of feedback—direct and indirect feedback—as well as formative and summative feedback, and their respective roles in ESL writing development.

2.1 Direct Feedback

Direct feedback involves the teacher explicitly pointing out errors and providing the correct form or structure. This method is often employed to correct grammar, spelling, or syntactical issues, especially in the early stages of language learning when students may not yet have the skills to self-correct. Direct feedback can be especially beneficial for lower-proficiency ESL learners, as it reduces ambiguity and helps them quickly identify and correct mistakes. By explicitly showing

learners the correct forms, teachers provide concrete examples for students to learn and internalize correct language patterns (Alisoy, 2024).

For example, a teacher might directly correct a student's sentence from *"He go to the school yesterday"* to *"He went to school yesterday,"* offering an immediate learning opportunity. Direct feedback offers clarity, especially for learners still developing their foundational understanding of English grammar and syntax (Alisoy, 2022). Research supports the use of direct feedback for accuracy in writing, particularly for beginners who benefit from seeing the correct forms explicitly laid out (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

2.2 Indirect Feedback

Indirect feedback, on the other hand, involves the teacher indicating the presence of an error without providing the correction. This method encourages learners to engage with the feedback and attempt self-correction, thus fostering greater language awareness and autonomy. Indirect feedback can come in the form of underlining errors, using symbols (e.g., "sp" for spelling mistakes), or posing questions to prompt the student to reflect on their work.

For example, instead of directly correcting the error in *"She don't like pizza,"* the teacher might underline "don't" and add a note such as "verb agreement?" This encourages the student to think critically and revise the sentence to *"She doesn't like pizza."* Indirect feedback promotes cognitive engagement by pushing learners to actively consider the language rules and apply them in their revisions (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

While indirect feedback requires more cognitive effort from learners, it has been shown to promote deeper learning and long-term retention of language rules. ESL learners, particularly those at intermediate and advanced levels, can benefit from this feedback type as it fosters independence and self-monitoring skills. However, teachers must gauge learners' proficiency levels before employing indirect feedback, as lower-level learners may find it confusing or overwhelming without sufficient guidance (Alisoy, 2023).

2.3 Formative vs. Summative Feedback

Formative feedback is provided continuously throughout the learning process and focuses on helping students improve incrementally. It is a critical component of **process writing**, where students receive feedback at various stages of drafting, revising, and editing. Formative feedback can focus on multiple aspects, such as grammar, content development, organization, and coherence. Its purpose is to guide learners through the writing process, allowing them to refine their work over time and build their writing skills progressively (A Comprehensive Guide to English's Most Common Vowel Sound, 2024).

For example, a teacher might provide formative feedback on the organization of ideas in a student's draft, suggesting improvements like clearer topic sentences or more cohesive paragraphs. This type of feedback is dynamic and responsive, tailored to individual student needs and progress. Summative feedback, in contrast, is typically provided at the end of a writing task or course and focuses on assessing the overall quality of the finished work. While summative feedback is essential for evaluating learners' progress, it does not offer the same opportunities for improvement during the writing process. Teachers should strive to balance formative and summative feedback to ensure that learners have the opportunity to develop their skills throughout the course while still being held accountable for their final performance (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

In conclusion, both direct and indirect feedback, as well as formative and summative feedback, play essential roles in ESL writing instruction. By employing a combination of these strategies, teachers can provide learners with the tools they need to improve accuracy, foster independence, and develop a deeper understanding of the writing process.

3. Impact of Feedback on Writing Proficiency

Teacher feedback plays a significant role in enhancing the writing proficiency of ESL learners by addressing errors and helping students improve their language accuracy, content development, and overall writing quality. The effectiveness of feedback depends not only on the type provided but also on how it influences learners' cognitive and linguistic development. In this section, we explore the impact of feedback on language accuracy, the development of ideas, and learner autonomy.

3.1 Error Correction and Language Accuracy

One of the primary functions of teacher feedback is to help learners correct errors and improve their language accuracy. Common mistakes in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure are frequent challenges for ESL learners, and teacher feedback provides critical guidance for addressing these issues. Research indicates that **direct feedback**, where teachers correct errors explicitly, can lead to significant improvements in learners' grammatical accuracy (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

For instance, correcting recurring errors in verb tense, word order, or article usage helps ESL learners internalize the correct forms over time. This process of error correction becomes especially important for beginners who may struggle with fundamental grammatical structures. Teachers may employ various feedback strategies, such as **coded feedback**, where specific symbols represent different types of errors, encouraging students to think critically about their corrections, while providing enough guidance to lead them in the right direction (Alisoy, 2023). Over time, learners exposed to systematic feedback show marked improvements in their overall language accuracy.

3.2 Encouraging Development of Ideas and Structure

While error correction is essential, it is equally important for feedback to address higher-order concerns such as content development, coherence, and organization. Many ESL learners struggle with structuring their writing effectively, which can result in unclear or disorganized essays. Feedback that focuses on helping learners develop their ideas, create strong thesis statements, and connect their arguments logically can significantly enhance their ability to produce well-organized texts.

For example, providing feedback on an essay's structure might involve suggesting clearer topic sentences, better transitions between paragraphs, or the inclusion of supporting details for a central argument. **Formative feedback** during the drafting stage encourages students to refine their ideas and improve the coherence of their writing, helping them understand how to present their thoughts more clearly and logically (Zhang & Zhang, 2022). This kind of feedback not only improves immediate writing outcomes but also strengthens the learner's ability to structure and organize their thoughts in future tasks.

3.3 Enhancing Learner Autonomy

A key goal of feedback in ESL writing instruction is to develop learner autonomy, which allows students to take ownership of their learning and become more independent writers. **Indirect**

feedback, where learners are prompted to identify and correct their own errors, plays a crucial role in fostering this autonomy. By encouraging learners to engage in self-correction and reflection, indirect feedback helps students develop greater self-awareness about their writing strengths and weaknesses, which is vital for long-term language development (A Comprehensive Guide to English's Most Common Vowel Sound, 2024).

Moreover, metacognitive feedback, which encourages learners to reflect on their writing processes and strategies, can deepen students' understanding of how to approach writing tasks effectively. Feedback that highlights areas for improvement while prompting students to think critically about how to resolve issues independently helps build confidence and promotes sustained progress. As learners gain more experience with self-correction and reflection, they become more adept at editing and revising their own work, reducing their reliance on teacher feedback over time.

In conclusion, teacher feedback is a powerful tool that addresses both surface-level errors and deeper structural and content-related issues in ESL writing. By providing a balanced approach that incorporates direct, indirect, and metacognitive feedback, teachers can significantly enhance learners' writing proficiency while promoting their autonomy and critical thinking skills.

4. Challenges and Considerations in Providing Feedback

While feedback is an essential tool in improving ESL learners' writing proficiency, it is not without its challenges. Teachers must navigate several obstacles, including the workload associated with providing personalized feedback, variations in student receptiveness, and the need for balancing corrective and motivational aspects. These factors can significantly influence the effectiveness of feedback and must be addressed to optimize learning outcomes.

4.1 Teacher Workload and Time Constraints

One of the most significant challenges in providing feedback is the considerable time and effort required, particularly in classes with large numbers of students. Writing feedback, especially personalized and detailed, demands a substantial commitment from teachers, who often have limited time due to other professional obligations. This issue can lead to a tendency to provide superficial or generic feedback that may not fully address individual learners' needs (Alisoy, 2023). To manage this, teachers can implement strategies like peer feedback sessions or the use of technology-driven tools, such as automated feedback systems, which help lighten the workload. However, while these methods can supplement teacher input, they should not entirely replace the personalized guidance that learners need to advance their writing proficiency (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

4.2 Student Response to Feedback

Another challenge is how students respond to feedback, which can vary significantly based on their cultural backgrounds, learning experiences, and levels of proficiency. Some learners may feel discouraged or overwhelmed by extensive corrective feedback, particularly when it focuses heavily on errors. Others may misunderstand indirect feedback and struggle to make the necessary corrections without clear guidance. Teachers need to tailor their feedback to align with students' levels of understanding and cultural expectations to avoid discouraging or confusing learners (Babazade, 2024).

For example, students from educational systems where teachers are viewed as authority figures may be less likely to challenge or engage with feedback critically. Teachers can mitigate this by

encouraging students to view feedback as a learning tool, fostering an environment where students feel comfortable asking questions and seeking clarification (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

4.3 Balancing Positive and Constructive Criticism

Striking a balance between providing constructive criticism and maintaining student motivation is another crucial consideration. While error correction is necessary for writing development, overly critical feedback can harm learners' confidence and reduce their engagement in the learning process. Teachers must therefore carefully balance their feedback by offering praise for what students have done well alongside suggestions for improvement (Alisoy, 2023).

Research suggests that feedback is most effective when it is delivered in a balanced manner, focusing not only on what needs correction but also on highlighting progress and achievements. This helps maintain students' motivation and encourages them to view writing as an evolving skill that improves over time through practice and reflection (Babazade, 2024).

In conclusion, while feedback is invaluable in improving ESL learners' writing proficiency, teachers must be mindful of the challenges they face, including workload, student receptiveness, and the need for balanced criticism. By considering these factors, educators can create a supportive and effective learning environment that fosters growth and development in ESL writing.

5. Case Studies and Examples

Case studies provide valuable insights into how teacher feedback functions in real-world ESL classrooms and the various outcomes it can generate. By examining specific examples, we can see how different types of feedback strategies are applied and the ways in which they affect student learning, motivation, and overall writing proficiency.

5.1 Case Study 1: The Effectiveness of Formative Feedback in a South Korean ESL Classroom

In a South Korean university ESL class, formative feedback was integrated throughout a semester-long writing course. The teacher provided **indirect feedback** on grammar and syntax errors by underlining mistakes without explicitly correcting them. This approach encouraged students to engage more deeply with the feedback and self-correct their errors. For higher-order concerns, such as structure and argument development, the teacher provided **formative feedback** during each stage of the writing process.

The result was an increase in both student confidence and writing proficiency. By the end of the course, students had significantly improved their ability to self-correct and exhibited a deeper understanding of writing mechanics. The teacher also noted that students' ability to organize and structure their essays improved, thanks to the continual formative feedback that guided them through the process (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

This case study highlights the importance of combining indirect feedback for language accuracy with formative feedback for content development, as it fosters both learner autonomy and deeper engagement with writing tasks.

5.2 Case Study 2: The Role of Feedback in Fostering Writing Independence in a Multilingual ESL Classroom

In a multilingual ESL classroom in Canada, students from various linguistic backgrounds received targeted feedback based on their individual language challenges. The teacher used a combination of **direct and indirect feedback** to correct grammatical errors and encourage students to self-correct. The class was diverse, with students speaking different native languages, and the teacher

tailored feedback to address the unique challenges posed by each learner's first language (L1) interference in English writing (Alisoy, 2024).

For example, Chinese-speaking students struggled with article usage and verb tense, while Arabic-speaking students faced challenges with word order. By providing **culturally responsive feedback** and drawing connections between L1 structures and English, the teacher helped students better understand their recurring errors. The class also included peer feedback sessions where students could offer suggestions to their classmates, further promoting autonomy and a collaborative learning environment.

This case study illustrates the importance of customizing feedback to meet the needs of multilingual learners and incorporating peer feedback to enhance engagement and self-directed learning. As a result, students in the class not only improved their writing proficiency but also developed stronger editing and revision skills, essential for independent writing in English (A Comprehensive Guide to English's Most Common Vowel Sound, 2024).

6. Conclusion

The role of teacher feedback in enhancing ESL learners' writing proficiency is a multifaceted one, involving various strategies and approaches tailored to meet the individual needs of learners. This article has explored the importance of feedback in error correction, content development, and learner autonomy. By utilizing both direct and indirect feedback, teachers can address surface-level grammatical issues while also encouraging learners to engage in self-correction and reflection, which fosters deeper understanding and retention. Additionally, the integration of formative feedback throughout the writing process plays a crucial role in guiding students to improve their organizational skills and content development. The case studies presented highlight the effectiveness of feedback in various classroom settings, demonstrating how different feedback types can be employed to suit diverse learner populations.

Feedback remains one of the most potent tools available to educators for improving ESL writing proficiency. However, the success of feedback depends on its delivery, the students' receptiveness, and how feedback aligns with the learners' proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. A thoughtful and balanced approach to providing feedback—one that corrects errors while motivating learners to take ownership of their writing—is essential for promoting lasting improvement in writing proficiency (Alisoy, 2023; Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

As ESL classrooms become increasingly diverse and technologically advanced, there is a growing need for teachers to adapt their feedback strategies to address these changes. Incorporating digital tools and peer feedback into the feedback process can ease the workload on teachers while providing learners with more opportunities to refine their skills. Ultimately, effective feedback not only enhances writing proficiency but also builds learner confidence, autonomy, and motivation, all of which are essential for achieving long-term success in ESL writing.

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