

**AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY OF PAKISTANI ESL SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND TEACHERS' PRACTICES OF WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN WRITING CLASS**Muhammad Nawaz<sup>1</sup>, Sadaf Azfaar Hussain<sup>2</sup>, Farha Sadia Qureshi<sup>3</sup>**Original Article**

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**Abstract**

*This study investigates the Pakistani ESL school students' perceptions and their ESL teachers' practices of written corrective feedback in writing classes at Cambridge system schools in Karachi. This study employed a mixed-method approach to collect qualitative and quantitative data from the participants. Using the purposive sampling technique, a survey questionnaire was administered to 200 Grade IX and X ESL students of 5 Cambridge system schools. At the same time, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 ESL O Level teachers from the same schools. The findings revealed that comprehensive corrective feedback was most frequently given by ESL school teachers to their students, followed by focused feedback and metalinguistic feedback in ESL classrooms. The students wanted their teachers to provide comprehensive and focused feedback on their written work. The qualitative results indicated that all teachers followed Cambridge assessment guidelines in terms of marking their students' essays as they believed that this assessment covers every aspect of the language and helps students improve their writing skills. Overall, the results showed that students' perceptions and teachers' practices are generally aligned. Instructors should be aware of different kinds of written corrective feedback and integrate them into their language teaching according to the proficiency level of the learners. This study is significant to ESL teachers and relevant for language teaching in terms of providing appropriate written corrective feedback and considering the learners' perceptions to achieve better results in ESL writing.*

**Keywords:** Feedback, ESL Writing, Perceptions and Practices.

**Introduction**

Improving writing skills is a conspicuous part of communication skills (Graham, 2018). For the most part, appropriate direction and guidelines given by educators ensure a successful journey in this area. Such directions are doable through feedback. Teachers help students by assigning discrete kinds of composed corrective feedback, for example, indirect, direct, unfocused, and focused feedback (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). However, the lack of competence and experience of educators and the ignorance of students might not help them to improve their writing capability (Nilaasini, 2015; Ganapathy, 2020). Solid writing abilities might improve pupils' opportunities for progress (Alexander, 2008). In examining the importance of writing, Zahid (2017) focuses on the idea that writing is a fundamental part of communication. Any language educational plan should

ponder the diverse nature of written discourse in educational activities, strategies, and proficiency improvement (Zahid, 2017).

In the Pakistani ESL context, recent studies have found various problems in teaching and learning writing skills courses. Some of the most common and frequently occurring problems that teachers face while teaching writing skills courses are related to providing feedback, inadequate assessment, lack of proper attention to the students individually, maintenance of discipline, and keeping students silent in order to control the noise of students in crowded classes (Mari, 2018; Khan, 2015; Bughio, 2013). When it comes to the challenges faced by learners during writing class, the lack of focus and inadequate pre-writing activities related to the writing tasks are the major barriers that create hindrances for students to produce enough ideas in writing tasks (Jokhio, 2020). Moreover, in teaching writing courses, some other common problems are deficiency of students in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and using capitalization inappropriately (Aqeel & Sajid, 2014). Feedback on their writing tasks is also a missing element while checking the notebooks of students; mostly teachers just underline the errors and do not provide corrective feedback on their mistakes because of the long syllabus and less time to cover every aspect of that syllabus (Fareed, 2018).

While teaching writing skills, ELT teachers struggled with different barriers such as insufficient ideas of students for doing a writing task. This happens due to an unorganized way of writing and a lack of prior strategies that prevent students to outline their ideas systematically. Moreover, lack of command over diction, syntax, and punctuation are also major challenges that influence their writing. During the assessment of students' copies, proper feedback is missing as instructors merely underline the mistakes without employing correct forms or necessary comments on them. Sajid (2014) found similar challenges in his work in terms of feedback on ESL writing which was in tandem with Graham (2018), focusing on constrained and extensive course outline surrounded by the insufficient time available to cover the course of writing. In the Pakistani context, students at the secondary school level are struggling to achieve satisfactory results in their writing aptitude (Jokhio & Younus, 2020).

## Literature Review

### Written Corrective Feedback

WCF is widely practiced by ESL instructors in writing classes for measuring the advancement of students writing skills (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Even though it has been widely used, the question of its effectiveness is still debatable. Considering the impact and need for corrective feedback, historically two schools of thought exist. By one group of scholars, corrective feedback is lacking effectiveness and takes an extra amount of time, which might be suitable for revision purposes but not for development purposes (Truscott, 2007; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Panova & Lyster, 2002). However, another school of thought related to corrective feedback accepts and defends the idea of providing feedback on learners' mistakes, thinking that it improves the writing capability of the students. Every individual has a different cognitive style and distinct comprehension level, which affect his engagement, motivation, and perception. Not all learners are similar in cognitive abilities and their beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions vary from one another (Hartshorn, 2010; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Ferris, 2010).

### Indirect CF and Direct CF

Indirect CF refers to the demonstration of the feedback given by the instructor to highlight learners' mistakes, without giving the right structure or giving an amendment, it is an indirect response of the teacher to learners' writing. The feedback is provided in an implicit manner which

may become the source of the retort, but the receiver may not converse the retort directly to you, the writer granting it to the learner (Ellis, 2009). Bitchener (2008) argued that the type of indirect feedback might differ in terms of explicitness such as coding or underlining mistakes. More differentiation is made for the utilization of code, and coded feedback distinguishes the mistakes and the kind included while encoded feedback underlines the mistakes but lets the learners decipher the mistake (Jamalinesari, 2015). The feedback provided in code is worthwhile as it empowers learners to regard mistake rectification as a functioning process, which might help them learn in a better way (Westmacott, 2017).

Direct corrective feedback is used when the instructor denotes the mistakes and gives the right words in place of the wrong ones. This type of corrective feedback is especially preferred by students with lower proficiency as they are unable to address their language issues. Direct feedback in writing involves the correction of students by their teacher through exact words for each wrong one. Direct CF is a form of categorical written correction provided to the students by their instructors related to improper grammatical practice in their writing (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Instructors aim at assisting students to ameliorate their writing proficiency with their corrective feedback. This type of corrective feedback is especially liked by students with lower proficiency as they are unable to address their language issues. However, for researchers, it debilitates deep-rooted learning owing to the decreased intellectual level of the students (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis, 2009; Ferris, 2003).

#### **Unfocused and Focused Corrective Feedback**

According to Bitchener (2012) focused feedback might be helpful for learners whose proficiency level is low because they can easily understand and identify those few selected areas where instructors provide feedback, for students having a better proficiency stage, unfocused feedback is preferable because it aims at a broader range of language mistakes. Similarly, students who are less proficient and highly proficient should be given focused feedback and unfocused feedback respectively (Mollestad & Hu, 2016). Focus feedback explores grammatical aspects, which are based on certain rules instead of items, which shows that such a type of correction could easily be employed (Ferris, 2002).

However, unfocused type of feedback employs a disorganized way of rectifying mistakes. Though this type of feedback may decrease the confidence and motivation level of students to utilize various processes in writing, it assists learners to learn the language and acquire mastery of it, which aggrandizes their accurateness in their drafts (Fazilatfar, Fallah, Hamavandi, & Rostamian, 2014). It supports the results of Aseeri's (2019) research in which instructors' and learners' preferences were aligned in terms of employing unfocused feedback instead of focused one.

#### **Metalinguistic Corrective Feedback**

According to Ellis (2009), metalinguistic is a kind of feedback in which instructors use comments explicitly to indicate the mistakes of learners by employing certain codes, symbols, and grammatical explanations of the errors. As indicated by the Bitchener and Cameron (2005), metalinguistic (coded) feedback indicates the actual place of the mistake and kind; in encoded correction, the teacher highlights the estimated place of mistakes to rectify them. The second kind of rectification is called indirect metalinguistic feedback. In addition, a brief grammatical description is another kind of feedback whereby the instructor gives an explanation with reference to the mistake. The combination of written and oral feedback could be classified into metalinguistic

feedback. The instructors on paper containing the description of mistakes give written feedback but oral feedback involves brief discussion with the whole class (Bitchener & Ferris., 2005; Bitchener, 2008). Giving metalinguistic feedback by employing different languages such as the mother tongue might improve the communication process as it facilitates instructors to point out and discuss the mistakes of L2 beginners (Aseeri, 2019).

**Research Objectives:**

Following are the objectives of the research:

- 1) To explore the perceptions of Pakistani ESL students for WCF on ESL writing
- 2) To examine the practices of Pakistani ESL teachers of written corrective feedback on ESL writing

**Research Questions:**

Following are the questions of the research:

- 1) What are the perceptions of Pakistani ESL students for WCF on ESL writing?
- 2) What are the practices of Pakistani ESL teachers of WCF on ESL writing?

**Research Method**

A mixed-method approach is used to conduct the research. Creswell (2017) defines mixed methods research as 'multi-strategy research', which is employed to, represents quantitative and qualitative research in a single study. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the participants of the research. "A purposive sample is simply available to the researcher by its accessibility" (Creswell, 2017). The study included 200 O-level students and 10 teachers from 5 different schools in (Karachi) Pakistan.

The researcher used two data collection tools for collecting participants' data. The students' questionnaire, the quantitative part of the study, was adopted from previous research (Ganapathy, 2020) which was based on (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Lee, 2004). The semi-structured interview guide was adopted from previous research (Lee, 2009).

**Procedure**

The interviews were conducted by keeping in view the convenience of time and place for the participants. Either most of the interviews took place in an office room or at home, where the noise was at a minimum level so that participants would feel comfortable answering the interview questions. Participants were informed that interview will be recorded and questions will be asked in English but they can be bilingual or use any other language to answer the questions. The questionnaire was filled out by the students of the same teachers at their respective schools.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher used two techniques and analyzed the data quantitatively and qualitatively.

**Quantitative Data Analysis**

The students' questionnaire data were examined through SPSS with descriptive statistics and organized by percentage (%), mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) scores, and frequency (f).

### Qualitative Data Analysis

The teachers' recorded interviews were transcribed and certain themes were extracted from the data through thematic analysis. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes)" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study employed the process that contains six steps while conducting thematic analysis as follows: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, review of themes, labeling themes, and producing the report.

#### Findings of Research Question One.

##### 1. Marking of teachers

Table 1.

Items	1		2		3		4		5	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Comprehensive marking	2	1.00	58	29.00	37	18.50	97	48.50	6	3.00
Important aspects marking	1	0.50	75	37.50	32	16.00	83	41.50	9	4.50
Marking randomly	1	0.50	75	37.50	23	11.50	94	47.00	7	3.50
Specific Marking	1	0.50	79	39.50	31	15.50	84	42.00	5	2.50
Ideas related marking	2	1.00	60	30.00	32	16.00	91	45.50	15	7.50
No marking.	47	23.50	145	72.50	4	2.00	4	2.00	0	0.00
Mean (%)		4.50		41.00		13.25		37.75		3.50

*Scale 1-Strongly Agree 2- Agree 3-Neutral 4-Disagree 5-Strongly Disagree*

After analyzing the items in table-1, the data shows the responses of the students regarding how the teacher marks their errors, majority of the students 51.50% agreed that their 'teacher marks all errors', followed by 47.00% that 'teacher marks most of the errors but not all.' The third mostly agreed response of the students 45.50% that 'teacher points out only those mistakes that change the essence of the concept. Generally, students believed that teachers mark all of their errors, particularly major errors and errors that changed the meaning of the ideas.

## 2. WCF by Teachers to Mark an Essay

Table 2

Items	1		2		3		4		5	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Symbols and codes.	1	0.50	33	16.50	44	22.00	118	59.00	4	2.00
Symbols and codes with WCF.	1	0.50	18	9.00	38	19.00	136	68.00	7	3.50
Learners' comprehension of symbols and codes	3	1.50	25	12.50	34	17.00	133	66.50	5	2.50
Willingness of learners for receiving WCF.	2	1.00	39	19.50	41	20.50	108	54.00	10	5.00
Only WCF	1	0.50	13	6.50	25	12.50	145	72.50	16	8.00
Detailed WCF	3	1.50	36	18.00	38	19.00	118	59.00	5	2.50
Mean (%)		0.92		13.67		18.33		63.17		3.92

Scale 1-Strongly Agree 2- Agree 3-Neutral 4-Disagree 5-Strongly Disagree

The responses in table 2 demonstrate that 63.17% of the total students agreed, followed by 18.33% who were neutral, 13.67% disagreed, 3.92% strongly agreed while 0.92% strongly disagreed with statements under the heading of "Types of WCF by Teachers to Mark an Essay."

## 3. Response of Instructors after Marking an Essay

Table 3.

Items	1		2		3		4		5	
	f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Instructor does not do anything.	21	10.50	147	73.50	17	8.50	13	6.50	2	1.00
Instructor holds a conversation with all students.	3	1.50	12	6.00	28	14.00	140	70.00	17	8.50
Instructor holds a discussion individually.	9	4.50	82	41.00	41	20.50	64	32.00	4	2.00
Instructor ensures that students rectify their mistakes.	1	0.50	16	8.00	32	16.00	137	68.50	14	7.00
Instructor asks students to record the errors.	5	2.50	30	15.00	31	15.50	126	63.00	8	4.00
Mean (%)		3.90		28.70		14.90		48.00		4.50

Scale 1-Strongly Agree 2- Agree 3-Neutral 4-Disagree 5-Strongly Disagree

Based on table 3, it can be viewed that 48.00% of the students agreed with the statements about expectations after marking essays. Followed by 28.70% who disagreed, 14.90% were neutral in opinion, 4.50% strongly agreed and 3.90% strongly disagreed with all statements under the table of "Response of Instructors after Marking an Essay."

## 4. Teachers' Areas of Focus in WCF

Table 4.

Items	1		2		3		4		5	
	f	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	F	%
Introduction of an essay should appeal to the audience	0	0.00	6	3.00	46	23.00	123	61.50	25	12.50
Statement of thesis and topic sentence should be clear	0	0.00	7	3.50	40	20.00	130	65.00	23	11.50
Topic sentence in every paragraph must be there.	0	0.00	2	1.00	27	13.50	146	73.00	25	12.50
Discourse markers (e.g. moreover, nevertheless, however, etc.) must be employed	0	0.00	6	3.00	26	13.00	150	75.00	18	9.00
Appropriate reasons are important to substantiate the point of view	0	0.00	7	3.50	61	30.50	106	53.00	25	12.50
Concluding sentence is compulsory.	1	0.50	4	2.00	10	5.00	151	75.50	34	17.00
Coherence and cohesion is necessary	0	0.00	3	1.50	17	8.50	149	74.50	31	15.50
Quality oriented focus	0	0.00	12	6.00	81	40.50	85	42.50	22	11.00
Specific focus on topic	0	0.00	3	1.50	15	7.50	155	77.50	27	13.50
Comprehension is the key	0	0.00	7	3.50	35	17.50	137	68.50	21	10.50
Irrelevant information should be avoided	1	0.50	4	2.00	34	17.00	144	72.00	17	8.50
Argument must incorporate relevant examples	1	0.50	2	1.00	27	13.50	149	74.50	21	10.50
Avoid repeated structures	1	0.50	9	4.50	25	12.50	152	76.00	13	6.50
Sentence builds on the previous sentence.	0	0.00	10	5.00	20	10.00	155	77.50	15	7.50
Sentence must have clear meaning.	0	0.00	0	0.00	19	9.50	156	78.00	25	12.50
Sentence must flow from one to another.	0	0.00	5	2.50	18	9.00	153	76.50	24	12.00
Every word must be used accurately.	0	0.00	2	1.00	10	5.00	161	80.50	27	13.50
Technical terms need explanation	0	0.00	10	5.00	30	15.00	141	70.50	19	9.50
Correct spelling is vital	1	0.50	0	0.00	9	4.50	160	80.00	30	15.00
Use of punctuation	0	0.00	3	1.50	17	8.50	155	77.50	25	12.50
Appropriate words must be capitalized correctly.	0	0.00	2	1.00	8	4.00	170	85.00	20	10.00
Mean (%)		0.12		2.48		13.69		72.10		11.60

Scale 1-Strongly Agree 2- Agree 3-Neutral 4-Disagree 5-Strongly Disagree

The results of table 4 indicate that most of the students 72.10% agreed with all items of this head followed by 13.69% of the total students who were neutral in opinion. 11.60% of the

students strongly agreed, 2.48% disagreed and 0.12% strongly disagreed with items present in the table.

### 5. Preferences of Learners about WCF

Table 5

Items	1		2		3		4		5	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%
WCF on the grammar	0	0.00	4	2.00	7	3.50	130	65.00	59	29.50
Vocabulary	0	0.00	6	3.00	22	11.00	142	71.00	30	15.00
Content	0	0.00	7	3.50	37	18.50	125	62.50	31	15.50
Structure and organization	0	0.00	7	3.50	25	12.50	139	69.50	29	14.50
All the mistakes.	0	0.00	13	6.50	21	10.50	131	65.50	35	17.50
Coherence and Cohesion	1	0.50	3	1.50	2	1.00	112	56.00	82	41.00
Mean (%)		0.08		3.33		9.50		64.92		22.17

*Scale 1-Strongly Agree 2- Agree 3-Neutral 4-Disagree 5-Strongly Disagree*

It can be viewed from table 5, that most of the students 64.92% agreed under all items of this head followed by 22.17% of the total students who strongly agreed, 9.50% of the students were neutral in opinion, 3.33% disagreed and 0.08% strongly disagreed with items included in the head of students' perception about teacher's written feedback.

### Findings of Research Question 2

#### Theme 1: Kinds of Feedback Utilized by the Teachers in Writing Class

Most of the participants claimed that they use comprehensive feedback as per the guidelines of the Cambridge school system. Comprehensive corrective feedback is commonly practiced at O-level schools as instructors indicated that this is a criterion, which is set by the Cambridge board for language assessment. As respondent 1 mentioned, "Usually, in our Cambridge stream in O level marking is done comprehensively. When I assign them a composition so I assign them vocabulary marks, content marks organization, and grammar marks separately so in this way I assess them." Furthermore, the comprehensive feedback covers all sorts of writing mistakes in which teachers help learners to identify the problematic areas and work on those areas accordingly as respondent 2 discussed, "comprehensive feedback allows teachers to correct all the errors in a learner's written work." When the written composition is not lengthy and detailed, it is generally assumed that the comprehensive corrective feedback is more manageable particularly at the school level as respondent 5 indicated, "For junior students when the compositions are not too long comprehensive marking is manageable."

**Theme 2: Practices of Teachers Regarding WCF**

In connection with the practices of teachers regarding WCF, most of the teachers claimed that they focus on vocabulary and grammar correction as they think that accuracy in terms of grammar and vocabulary is a basic and significant part of writing. Grammar and vocabulary are assessed to ensure that the composition is correct in terms of grammar and word choice because in certain genres of writing students do not use suitable words like a formal letter that requires formal words. As respondent 8 said, "My assessment includes the correction related to grammar and syntax, taking a look at the lexical resource like what type of vocabulary is used." In addition, apart from four important language skills like listening, speaking, reading, and writing, teachers consider grammar and vocabulary as fifth language skill which has a significant role to play in the language and communication skills of the learners as respondent 9 discussed, "the accurate use of grammar and vocabulary in learners' composition is always appreciated and they are encouraged to excel in this skill to get good marks which give them good grades in their academic exams." By keeping in view the vitality of lexical and grammatical precision, it is evident that the teachers and students are equally aware of the significance of this skill. As respondent 4 expressed, "usually instructors pay attention to reading and writing skills but I think other than these skills, vocabulary, and grammar can be considered as a building block of any language."

**Theme 3: Use of Verbal CF on learners' Essay Writing**

The majority of the instructors claimed that they use positive reinforcing verbal feedback. They tend to increase the motivation level of the students in written assignments and point out their weak areas through verbal feedback. Teachers believed that positive verbal feedback can play a crucial role in developing the writing skills of the students. As respondent 4 explained "I give verbal feedback to my students in written composition. I think it would be more beneficial when teachers give positive and reinforcing verbal feedback." By keeping in view the significant role of verbal corrective feedback, ESL teachers tend to provide feedback at the end of the class to cover the range of mistakes that are made by the majority of the students and provide them with the correct use of those errors. As respondent 2 mentioned, "Verbal feedback is effective because it is often given during, or very quickly following, the learning or task. It offers more opportunity for dialogue between you and your pupil, ensuring that they understand the feedback, enabling them to respond to it and to act according to the feedback straight away." Learners respond instantly to verbal feedback as it enables them to recognize their mistakes and try to rectify them immediately during the class or right after the class. As respondent 5 indicated, "the use of verbal feedback informs students about their mistakes right away and they have the opportunity to ask questions in case they do not understand the given feedback."

**Discussion**

The major aim of the study was to investigate the ESL students' perceptions and teachers' practices of written corrective feedback in writing class. The findings revealed that the majority of the student preferred comprehensive corrective feedback followed by focused feedback and then metalinguistic feedback from the teacher to identify their mistakes. Students of O level are fully aware of the Cambridge assessment criteria in terms of marking their essays as they have an examiner's report card which covers every aspect of the language and helps students to figure out their writing performance.

Similarly, instructors provide comprehensive and focused feedback on students' written work. The findings of this question are in accordance with Lee (2020) comprehensive written corrective feedback, wherein students preferred such feedback to enhance their capability to develop their writing skills with more efficiency and accuracy (Brown, 2015). In addition, it is in line

with Ganapathy's (2020) findings that unfocused and coded WCF is frequently practiced by the tutors during their evaluation of ESL writing, as ESL teachers utilized comprehensive corrective feedback, unfocused feedback, and metalinguistic feedback with certain symbols and codes for assessing students' composition, by keeping in view the preferences of students regarding written corrective feedback, students could develop their writing skills at a significant face with precision (Lee, 2009; Kirgoz, 2015).

The findings also revealed that the majority of the teachers used comprehensive corrective feedback followed by focused feedback and then metalinguistic feedback to rectify learners' errors. All teachers followed Cambridge assessment criteria in terms of marking their students' essays as they believed that this assessment covers every aspect of the language and helps students improve their writing skills.

Moreover, students also wanted their teachers to provide comprehensive and focused feedback on their written work. The findings of this question are in accordance with Bimba (2016) for comprehensive written corrective feedback, wherein such feedback could activate learners' long-term and deep-rooted learning (Westmacott, 2017). Additionally, it is in tandem with Rajagopal's (2015) findings that instructors employed unfocused and coded written corrective feedback during their assessment of ESL writing, as instructors in that research utilized symbols and codes to check their pupils' drafts, taking this into account, such kinds of feedback could be beneficial for learners' deep-rooted learning (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Poorebrahim, 2017).

### Conclusion

The research study aimed at investigating Pakistani ESL students' perceptions and teachers' practices of written corrective feedback in the writing classroom. The students, according to their perceptions, consider comprehensive corrective feedback and focused feedback in writing class as more beneficial. Similarly teachers' practices, according to their interviews, are very much aligned with the preferences of the students.

Even though such types of written corrective feedback are considered to be helpful for developing writing skills in the Pakistani ESL classroom, they take a significant amount of time and energy to assess each student's written work. It was emphasized that the use of written corrective feedback should be practiced as per the need of the students and institutions' guidelines.

Therefore, the study recommends that teachers should keep their learners' needs into account and employ written corrective feedback that can serve well as per the proficiency level of the students. The study is significant to Pakistani ESL secondary level schools on its sound effects by illustrating written corrective feedback in the ESL writing context that can be employed in secondary schools. Future research can be done on Digital Corrective Feedback with respect to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century classroom learning demands and challenges.

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