

Effectiveness of Teacher and Peer Feedback in EFL Writing: A Case of High School Students

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to assess and compare the effectiveness of three types of EFL writing feedback: teacher direct, teacher indirect, and peer feedback, while also exploring student perceptions of the feedback they receive. For this purpose, a mixed-method approach was used, combining a quasi-experimental and a survey design. Eighty-two EFL learners (aged 17-18 years old) were divided into four groups (three intervention groups who received feedback and one control group who did not) and practised EFL writing skills for a two-month period. After the intervention, the students from the intervention groups (62) answered a questionnaire related to their perceptions about the feedback received. The results of pre- and post-tests showed an improvement in EFL writing skills in all the groups. Likewise, there was a statistically significant difference in the results of the post-test between the groups who received feedback and those who did not, which means that feedback was effective. However, when comparing the three types of feedback, there were no statistically significant differences among the intervention groups. As for the perceptions of the feedback received during their EFL writing practice, students believed that feedback was a positive aspect of writing instruction. They thought that feedback was important for their learning, and they would like to receive a combination of teacher and peer feedback. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion around the effectiveness of different types of feedback on EFL writing skills.

Keywords: Written Corrective Feedback, Direct Feedback, Indirect Feedback, Peer Feedback, Writing Skills.

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is part of the curriculum in Ecuadorian high schools. However, students face difficulties in reaching the required English proficiency level set by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education upon completing high school (El Comercio, 2017). Teaching EFL is a challenging task for teachers who often lack the necessary resources and training, particularly in public high schools (Gonzalez et al., 2015). This problem is also evident in the teaching and learning of EFL writing skills, which are difficult for students, even in their mother tongue.

In the context of teaching EFL writing skills, feedback is regarded as an important part of the learning process (Shen & Chong, 2022). However, the effectiveness of written corrective feedback depends on several factors, such as the frequency, strategies employed, class size, and proficiency level of students (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). Given the importance of feedback in the EFL teaching-learning process, it is necessary to determine the effectiveness of the strategies used to provide feedback. It is also essential to understand students' opinions about the feedback they receive.

Previous studies have shown the efficacy of different forms of feedback (e.g., Mirzaii & Aliabadi, 2013; Saukah et al., 2017; Deng et al., 2022; Tan & Manochphinyo, 2017; Yang et al., 2006). Other studies, however, have questioned the effects of feedback over time (e.g., Truscott & Hsu, 2008; Karim & Nassaji, 2019). This controversy has captured the attention of numerous researchers in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) because of some diversity in the results of the studies conducted. For these reasons, the present study focuses on studying the effectiveness of teacher and peer feedback on L2 writing in an Ecuadorian context; thus contributing to the debate regarding the effectiveness of different types of feedback in EFL teaching, specifically

writing skills.

Literature Review

Relevance of EFL Writing Skills

Writing is a complex process in language that requires time and effort to learn and teach. Language programmes must acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of writing, given its importance as a core component of language (Harmer, 2004). In other words, writing is a fundamental but challenging skill in language production.

Writing is a basic building block for life, leisure, and employment. Basically, it is a crucial skill in academic and professional success (National Commission on Writing, 2004), which becomes even more challenging when it comes to writing in a second or foreign language (Li, 2013). The cognitive process of writing skills involves memory, thinking ability and verbal skills, so proficiency in writing is an indicator of effective learning in a second language (Hyland, 2019).

As English is regarded as a universal language, the rises of globalisation and technology have intensified the relevance of English writing (McKinley, 2022). In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing skills are also challenging, although they are a fundamental component of EFL programmes. In these programmes, grammar and vocabulary are considered essential elements in the development of all EFL skills (Cabrera et al., 2021) since grammar allows students to build accurate sentences (Mart, 2013), and vocabulary facilitates the use of structures and functions that enable communication (Cook, 2013). It is worth mentioning, however, that other elements, such as coherence, cohesion, unity, and mechanics are also essential in writing. In addition, the purposes of EFL writing programmes include tasks such as writing letters, stories, or reports (Harmer, 2007).

The relevance of EFL/ESL writing has led to an increase in current research in this field (Bui et al., 2023; Algburi & Razali, 2022). This research benefits from various approaches that have been employed for writing (e.g., psychological, pedagogical, linguistic, psycholinguistic) (Nation & Macalister, 2020).

Feedback on L2 Writing

One of the main interests of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is understanding how individuals learn a second language, with the aim of aiding learners in overcoming errors made during language acquisition. Recently, the role of errors and their treatment has been a prominent area of research in SLA, leading to an interest in written corrective feedback as a subject of study (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

The provision of feedback in classroom assessment is deemed crucial as it offers insights into the students' learning, performance, knowledge, or understanding. Nonetheless, it does not always prompt self-correction and improvement among students (Lee, 2017). According to Kim and Emeliyanova (2021), the feedback provided is believed to be beneficial in enhancing the learners' linguistic knowledge, thus improving their accuracy writing skills. In essence, written corrective feedback refers to information given to students to enhance their writing abilities (Alvira, 2016).

In terms of feedback strategies, there are various approaches that can be employed. Lee (2017) asserts the importance of involving students in the learning process through the use of the three main types of feedback: peer feedback, technology-enhanced feedback, and teacher feedback.

Extensive research has been conducted on the use of peer feedback in L2, which requires learners' training before its implementation. Peer feedback offers several benefits, such as enhancing students' awareness of their writing strengths and weaknesses, promoting critical thinking, and fostering learners' autonomy. However, some drawbacks include the limited L2 proficiency of learners and the size of the class.

In L2 contexts, the teacher is often considered the primary source of error correction. While teacher feedback research has been conducted primarily in university settings, our understanding of teacher feedback in L2 school contexts is limited. This type of feedback has mainly focused on language form rather than other aspects, such as content or organisation. Teacher feedback is the most common method of supporting students as they attempt to apply newly acquired knowledge (Borup et al., 2015). In this type of feedback, two primary strategies can be identified: direct feedback and indirect feedback (Westmacott, 2017). Direct feedback entails providing learners with the correct

form, whereas indirect feedback involves hinting at the presence of an error without explicitly providing the correct form (Sheen, 2011).

It is important to understand the impact of different types of feedback on learners' writing performance. In this respect, there have been studies on the effect of different types of feedback on students' L2 written work. In what follows, we briefly discuss the results of this research.

Previous work on peer feedback for L2 writing has demonstrated that this type of feedback is an aid to improve learners' written production, provided that they receive appropriate training in providing feedback and the strategies are appropriate (e.g., Levi Altstaedter, 2018; Yu & Lee, 2016).

On the other hand, research on teacher feedback for L2 writing has found that certain forms of teacher feedback can be more effective than others. For instance, indirect feedback has been shown to be more effective than direct feedback (e.g., Ghandi & Maghsoudi, 2014; Tan & Manochphinyo, 2017). This may be because amending is a more active process (Westmacott, 2017). However, some studies suggest that direct feedback is more effective than indirect feedback (e.g., Mirzaii & Aliabadi, 2013), while others that have found no significant difference between these two types of feedback (e.g., Elola et al., 2017). It is worth noting that direct feedback can yield better results than indirect feedback when students have lower L2 proficiency levels (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014).

With respect to indirect feedback, we can have two subtypes: coded and un-coded feedback. Research regarding this topic has demonstrated that indirect coded feedback could be more effective than indirect un-coded feedback (e.g., Salimi & Valizadeh, 2015; Saukah et al., 2017).

Research has also demonstrated that focused feedback (focusing feedback on particular linguistic features) is generally more effective than unfocused feedback (the correction of all types of errors) (e.g., Deng et al., 2022), although a few studies have found no difference between these two types of feedback (e.g., Frear & Chiu, 2015).

When it comes to the comparison of teacher and peer feedback, which is the focus of our study, we address some related research in the following section.

Previous Work on Teacher versus Peer Feedback

Studies that have compared the effects of teacher and peer feedback on writing in ESL/EFL contexts, and relevant research related to the theme of the present study are summarised below.

Yang et al. (2006) compared peer and teacher feedback in an EFL writing class to address the small amount of feedback provided in large classes at a university in China. The participants included 79 Chinese students from an EFL writing class, who were divided into two groups. Both groups worked on three rounds of multi-draft compositions for the same writing tasks. The data for the analysis was collected from three sources: textual and questionnaire data from both groups, as well as video recordings and interviews with 12 students. The results revealed that teacher feedback had a greater impact on student's writing skills and was more likely to be considered. Conversely, peer feedback was associated with increased student autonomy.

Zhao (2012) conducted case study research to analyse how learners utilised and comprehended teacher and peer feedback in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing course at a university in China. The participants involved were 18 second-year English majors who participated for 16 weeks. To investigate the use of feedback, the researcher applied content analysis of the first and revised drafts of 26 writing assignments (e.g., letters, poems, arguments). Recall interviews were used to examine the learners' understanding of feedback. The findings indicated that teacher feedback resulted in more changes in learners' subsequent drafts than peer feedback. However, the recall interviews revealed that the students internalised peer feedback more effectively.

Demirel and Enginarlar (2016) evaluated the effectiveness of combining teacher and peer feedback to enhance students' writing skills when working on multiple drafts. For this purpose, 57 Turkish learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) worked on writing activities for 15 weeks. Learners in both the intervention and control groups received different types of feedback on their drafts, after which they revised their written work. The results showed that there were no statistically significant differences between peer and teacher feedback in terms of the number of revisions and writing quality. Nevertheless, a combination of the two types of feedback was more beneficial when obtaining positive reactions from students regarding peer feedback and self-revision.

A study aimed at comparing the effectiveness of peer feedback versus teacher feedback for

improving writing revision quality in EFL students involved 56 Chinese EFL students who were given either peer or teacher feedback before and after a peer feedback training period (Cui et al., 2022). Over five writing assignments, feedback conditions were changed within and between the class sections. The findings revealed that peer reviewers were better able to provide meaning-focused feedback than teachers were, and the quality of revisions improved after the peer feedback training period. Additionally, it was found that peer feedback with appropriate training can have an impact on revision comparable to that of teacher feedback, particularly in situations where there is a high workload.

Sun and Wang (2022) investigated the impact of teacher intervention on students' utilisation of various forms of peer feedback and self-revision skills. They employed a quasi-experimental design, in which two groups were exposed to direct correction from the teacher for incorrect peer feedback or symbols denoting inaccurate feedback, whereas the control group received no teacher intervention. The sample consisted of 110 graduate students who were not majoring in English and who participated for one and a half months. During the study, the students produced two essays, conducted peer feedback, and revised their drafts based on the received feedback. The results showed that the groups that received teacher intervention made more accurate revisions in their subsequent essays than the control group did.

Previous research has reported mixed findings on the effectiveness of teacher feedback, peer feedback, or both, on EFL writing performance. However, these studies have not been conducted in Latin-American Spanish-speaking contexts, and specifically in Ecuador, which must meet significant challenges in EFL teaching and learning (Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2023). This study aims to address this research gap by comparing the effectiveness and students' perceptions of two common types of teacher feedback (direct and indirect) and peer feedback in an Ecuadorian high school setting. The results of this study will contribute to the ongoing discussion on how to improve the EFL teaching and learning process in Ecuador by identifying effective feedback strategies that can be incorporated into EFL writing instruction.

Based on the above, the research questions to be answered are:

How effective is direct feedback, indirect feedback, and peer feedback for improving the written production of Ecuadorian EFL learners?

What are the students' perceptions of the feedback provided on their written work?

Method

Setting and Participants

A total of 82 senior high-school students from a public school in Ecuador participated in the present study. Their ages ranged from 17 to 18 years old and their English proficiency levels varied (A1, A2, and B1), based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020). These students were enrolled in the Second Year of the Diploma Programme and were divided into four classes, each with a similar number of students. Three of these classes were intervention groups (62 students in total) for the three types of feedback applied (direct feedback: 21 students; indirect feedback: 21 students; peer feedback: 20 students). One group (20 students) was the control group that did not receive any teacher or peer feedback.

Instruments

Students were administered a writing pre-test and post-test that consisted of short descriptive essays (minimum 120 words and maximum 150 words) in which they had to write about their favourite vacation (pre-test) and their favourite movie (post-test).

Furthermore, a questionnaire was given to students from the intervention groups. The seven items of this instrument were designed to gather information about students' thoughts and opinions regarding the feedback that they had received. Before distributing the questionnaire to all students, it was tested on a randomly selected group of 30 students from the intervention groups, and the results showed a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha was 0.832). To prevent any confusion among students with lower English proficiency, the questions were translated into Spanish.

Procedure

The present study employed a mixed-method approach that integrated a quasi-experimental

design (based on pre-test and post-test) and results of questionnaire responses. A quasi-experimental design study involves non-random sampling to evaluate the impact of an idea, practice, or procedure on a particular outcome (Creswell, 2015). In this instance, the students were chosen according to the class in which they were enrolled. This means that we used purposeful sampling in the selection of the groups of students since these students had the characteristics required for the study.

Before starting the writing practices, students took writing pre-test to evaluate their writing skills at the beginning of the intervention. The pre-tests were graded jointly by two teachers and were based on a rubric developed for the pre-test and post-test. The score assigned was out of 10 points.

The students from the four groups, who usually took five hours of General English a week, worked on a weekly writing activity for eight weeks. Two of those five hours per week were devoted to practising writing informal e-mails, blog entries and short essays (with a minimum of 120 words and a maximum of 150 words). The students from the control group did not receive any teacher or peer feedback on their tasks; however, learners from all of the four groups participated in short weekly sessions with the whole class in which common writing errors were pointed out and addressed.

Owing to the relevance of grammar and vocabulary in EFL writing (Cabrera et al., 2021; Mart, 2013; Cook, 2013) and the effectiveness of focused feedback in comparison to unfocused feedback (Deng et al., 2022), the students from the intervention groups received feedback on grammar and vocabulary that they were either already familiar with or were studying in class. As focused feedback was provided, it did not address content, mechanics, or style. In the teacher direct feedback group, the teacher underlined the errors and indicated the correct form using arrows and comments. In the teacher indirect feedback group, the teacher used codes that had been previously indicated in class. These codes were related to grammar (verbs, wrong order, prepositions, etc.) and vocabulary errors (false cognates, misspelling, calques, incorrect meaning, etc.).

With respect to peer feedback, students received two hours of training before providing feedback. They worked in pairs and used oral communication and a peer feedback rubric to implement this type of feedback. The feedback was provided in the form of indirect feedback in which students had to circle the errors related to grammar and vocabulary. If the students who received feedback were unsure about the error, they asked their classmate to clarify their doubts.

The intervention groups revised their drafts based on the feedback provided (by their teacher or peer) and submitted their final products. After receiving feedback on their drafts and revising them, students were given a qualitative grade (very good, good, needs improvement) for each revised task.

At the end of the intervention, the students took a writing post-test, which was used to obtain data about their progress after the writing lessons. Like the pre-test, the post-test was graded jointly by two teachers (out of 10 points) based on a rubric. The students in the intervention groups also answered a questionnaire about their perceptions of the feedback received in their writing sessions after the intervention period.

The statistical analysis of the scores obtained in the pre- and post-tests in each group was performed by using the paired t-test, as the data came from the same group of students. This was done to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the results of the pre- and post-tests in each of the four groups.

To compare the results of the pre-tests and post-tests of the four groups, we used one-way ANOVA and the Tukey post-hoc tests in order to determine if there were significant differences in the scores. First, we ran the one-way ANOVA with the results of the pre-tests to compare the scores of the writing tests among the four groups. Then, ANOVA was used to find significant differences in the scores of the writing post-test after receiving the different types of feedback.

Results

Effectiveness of the Different Types of Feedback Used

Below (Table 1) we present the mean scores (out of 10 points) obtained by the students in the pre-test for each group. There is no statistically significant difference in the results of the writing pre-tests among the four groups ($p\text{-value} > 0.05$).

Table 1: Results of the pre-test

	Group 1 Indirect teacher feedback	Group 2 Direct teacher feedback	Group 3 Peer feedback	Group 4 No feedback
Mean	5.4286	5.2857	5.325	5.55
Standard deviation	1.3536	1.1244	1.4075	1.3268
p-value (ANOVA) = 0.916 F=0.17				

Table 2 displays the mean scores (out of 10 points) obtained by the students in the post-test. The p-value obtained after running the ANOVA test indicates statistically significant differences among the four groups. However, the Tukey post-hoc test shows statistically non-significant differences, except for Groups 2 and 4, so there is a statistically significant difference in the scores obtained by the direct teacher feedback group and the no feedback group.

Table 2: Results of the post-test

	Group 1 Indirect teacher feedback	Group 2 Direct teacher feedback	Group 3 Peer feedback	Group 4 No feedback
Mean	7.2143	7.4524	6.525	6.425
Standard deviation	1.0905	1.1822	1.0939	1.2904
p-value (ANOVA) = 0.012328 F=3.87				

In both Tables 1 and 2, it is evident that there was an improvement in mean scores for all groups at the end of the intervention (Group 1 mean score improvement = 1.7857; Group 2 mean score improvement = 2.1667; Group 3 mean score improvement = 1.2; Group 4 mean score improvement = 0.875). Application of the paired t-test to compare the pre-test and post-test scores in each group showed that the improvements from the pre-test to the post-test were statistically significant in all four groups ($p\text{-value} < 0.0001$). Moreover, groups that received teacher feedback showed higher improvements in mean scores than those who received peer feedback or no feedback at all. However, there was no statistically significant difference when comparing teacher and peer feedback.

Students' Perceptions of the Feedback Provided

After receiving feedback, the three intervention groups completed a questionnaire based on a Likert scale containing 7 items. Table 3 shows the percentages of the answers provided by the 42 students who received teacher feedback and the 20 students who received peer feedback (total = 62 students). The majority of students in all three groups tended to agree or strongly agree with the statements.

As presented in Table 3, the majority of students in the three groups believed that the feedback they received helped them improve their written production (Agree = 42 students; Strongly agree = 12 students). They also felt comfortable with the feedback provided on their work (Agree = 29 students; Strongly agree = 33 students) and thought that feedback had helped them identify errors they had not noticed before in their writing (Agree = 25 students; Strongly agree = 37 students). The students also felt motivated after realising that their work improved owing to the corrections (Agree = 45 students; Strongly agree = 9 students), and considered that the corrections were related to the grammar and vocabulary studied in class (Agree = 43 students; Strongly agree = 14 students). Finally, the students expressed a preference for combined feedback from both the teacher and their classmates (Agree = 36 students; Strongly agree = 29 students). They regarded this feedback as crucial to their learning process (Agree = 26 students; Strongly agree = 36 students).

Table 3: Students' answers to the questionnaire (percentages)

Statement	Disagree	Partially agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1) My English written production has improved because my English teacher/classmate helped me with the	0%	12.9%	67.74%	19.35%

corrections.				
2) I felt comfortable when my teacher/classmate corrected my written work.	0%	0%	46.77%	53.23%
3) The correction of errors provided by my teacher/classmate helped me to identify errors that I did not notice before.	0%	0%	40.32%	59.68%
4) I felt motivated when I saw that the texts I wrote improved after receiving feedback from my teacher/classmate.	0%	12.9%	72.58%	14.52%
5) The corrections that I received were related to the grammar and vocabulary that I have studied in the classroom.	0%	8.06%	69.35%	22.58%
6) I would like to receive feedback from both my teacher and a classmate.	0%	0%	53.23%	46.77%
7) I think that the error correction provided is important in my learning process.	0%	0%	41.94%	58.06%

Discussion

First of all, the EFL writing skills in the four groups under study are similar, as demonstrated by the mean scores and p-value (>0.05) obtained in the writing pre-test. This is an important basis for the comparability of the groups.

Once the instruction period finished, all the groups obtained higher mean scores after the eight weeks of training, which means that the four groups improved their use of grammar and vocabulary in EFL writing. This is reflected in the results of the post-test. However, the intervention groups showed greater improvement in their mean scores when the results are compared with those obtained in the pre-test. There are statistically significant differences between the teachers direct feedback group and the control group, which means that the direct feedback was much more effective in this sample of students, perhaps because their English proficiency level was low. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Ferris and Hedgcock (2014), which suggests that direct feedback on writing can be more effective than other types of feedback, especially for students who struggle with L2 proficiency. Based on these results, it is evident that teacher direct feedback is a more effective approach for teaching students with lower levels of English proficiency. This finding underscores the importance of tailoring teaching approaches to the specific needs of individual students to maximize their learning outcomes.

No statistically significant differences were found when comparing the other groups, suggesting that the improvements after receiving indirect teacher feedback and peer feedback are not significant in comparison with the control group. There were no significant differences among the three types of feedback either. These results seem to be different from other, similar studies that compare types of feedback in which indirect feedback is more effective than direct feedback (e.g., Ghandi & Maghsoudi, 2014; Tan & Manochphinyo, 2017), and more in line with literature that has not found significant differences between these two types of feedback (e.g., Elola et al., 2017). In other words, the results indicate that indirect teacher feedback and peer feedback may not be the best alternative for teaching students with a low English proficiency level. This has important implications for determining the circumstances under which direct or indirect feedback should be provided.

When it comes to comparing teacher and peer feedback, the results of the present study are not completely aligned to studies that have found that teacher feedback is more effective than peer feedback (e.g., Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2012) or studies that favour peer feedback (Cui et al., 2022). The results of the present study are more in line with literature that shows no statistically significant difference between teacher and peer feedback (e.g., Demirel & Enginarlar, 2016).

Regarding the students' perceptions, students from the intervention groups seem to have a positive attitude towards the feedback received on their written production. In fact, feedback is considered helpful in improving learners' writing skills (Kim & Emelianova, 2021). Furthermore,

the students would like to receive a combination of teacher and peer feedback in L2 writing, which would be an ideal scenario in teaching EFL writing.

Overall, this study offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of different feedback types in improving the writing skills of students with low English proficiency levels. The findings can assist teachers and educators in designing effective feedback strategies for their students. However, it is important to note that further research is needed to fully test the effectiveness of these types of teacher and peer feedback with larger samples of high-school students across different English proficiency levels.

Therefore, it is recommended that the feedback provided considers students' English proficiency and that a combination of teacher and peer feedback, with appropriate preparation, is used. Additionally, continuing research in this area with students from different English proficiency levels and education levels can further improve EFL writing instruction.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study suggest that receiving feedback, either from teachers or peers, is more beneficial for improving writing skills than not receiving feedback. Specifically, the group that received direct feedback showed a significant improvement in their writing skills compared to the control group, indicating that this approach may be more effective for students with lower English proficiency levels. However, when comparing direct teacher feedback with indirect teacher feedback and peer feedback, the improvement in writing skills was not significant. This suggests that the students' proficiency level may not have been sufficient for providing peer feedback and working on the corrections given by the teacher, especially in the case of indirect coded feedback. In terms of students' perceptions, they hold positive opinions about written corrective feedback. They favour receiving teacher and peer feedback, as well as a combination of both types of feedback. They feel that feedback is a helpful strategy that helps them identify errors that they usually do not notice, and improves their writing skills. Students also feel comfortable and motivated when receiving feedback related to the content studied in the EFL classroom.

To sum up, the findings of the present study indicate that providing written corrective feedback does help students to improve their written production in a foreign language. Nevertheless, some factors must be taken into account when providing this type of feedback, including class size, L2 proficiency level, frequency, and strategies. It is also crucial to know how students feel about the feedback received in order to determine if the teacher can continue implementing the feedback strategies in the EFL classroom. Finally, it should be noted that the sample size for this study was not large enough, and therefore, studies with larger groups and a fully experimental approach would be recommended in future studies.

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