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Original Research

Unraveling the Power of Written Feedback: A Meta-Synthesis on Student Academic Writing

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Abstract

A single written comment can redirect a learner's academic trajectory, yet evidence on which written feedback practices most effectively improve student academic writing remains dispersed across studies, contexts, and delivery modalities. This study addresses that gap by integrating findings on feedback types, feedback delivery, and contextual influences to clarify how written feedback supports academic writing development, particularly in EFL settings. Employing a qualitative meta synthesis, we reviewed 25 peer reviewed studies published between 2017 and 2024, selected through explicit inclusion criteria and appraised for methodological quality, then analysed using thematic coding to generate higher order interpretive themes. Findings show that formative feedback most consistently supports improvement because it guides revision decisions, scaffolds self-regulation, and builds writer confidence; in contrast, summative feedback and corrective feedback contribute mainly to evaluation and linguistic accuracy and are less likely to generate durable gains when used alone. Across delivery methods, teacher feedback, automated tools, and web platforms show potential, but impact is strongest when technology mediated input is paired with teacher mediation and clear explanation. The synthesis further indicates that student emotions and culturally shaped expectations condition trust, engagement, and whether feedback is translated into substantive textual change. The study contributes an integrated framework that treats feedback effectiveness as a system linking purpose, medium, affect, and context, with implications for feedback design, teacher feedback literacy, and responsible digital feedback policy in higher education. Future research should test which iterative feedback features drive lasting improvement and how hybrid human and intelligent feedback can be optimised for equitable learning.

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1. Introduction

A single written comment can change the trajectory of a student's academic voice. In writing pedagogy, feedback is not an afterthought or a margin note, but a decisive instructional act that shapes how learners interpret standards, recognise gaps, and revise with purpose (Babcock & Thonus, 2018; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). Within this logic, written feedback functions as guidance, diagnosis, and developmental scaffolding that helps writers notice strengths, confront limitations, and plan revision pathways (Babcock & Thonus, 2018; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). It also operates as a bridge between current performance and intended standards, combining corrective input with actionable advice about how to improve (Hattie & Clarke, 2018; Mao & Lee, 2020).

In EFL settings, the centrality of written feedback becomes even more pronounced because learners often negotiate academic writing while still consolidating linguistic resources and rhetorical control. Written feedback supports learners in addressing grammar challenges and shaping ideas into coherent text, thereby assisting both language accuracy and textual organisation (Bozkurt & Acar, 2017; Rababah et al., 2018).

Yet, despite broad agreement that feedback matters, classrooms continue to reveal substantial variability in how teachers provide feedback and how students interpret, value, and apply it (Atmaca, 2016; Benson & DeKeyser, 2019).

A large body of scholarship has therefore examined written feedback by differentiating its forms and functions. Researchers have compared explicit and implicit feedback to understand how directness shapes noticing, uptake, and revision decisions (Bozkurt & Acar, 2017; Plaindaren & Shah, 2019). They have also investigated delivery channels, including handwritten comments, email-mediated feedback, and software-supported feedback, because the mode of delivery can shape timeliness, clarity, and learner engagement (Hao & Tsikerdekis, 2019; Zhang & Xu, 2024). In parallel, corrective feedback research has emphasised how targeted commentary can tighten grammatical accuracy while supporting higher-level organisation, although findings differ across contexts and tasks (Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Rababah, 2018). Collectively, these strands establish that written feedback is not a single intervention, but a family of practices with distinct mechanisms, affordances, and constraints.

More recent studies further underscore that formative feedback, understood as process-oriented feedback intended to guide improvement, can strengthen self-regulation and critical engagement with writing (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2020; Mohamadi, 2018). However, technology-mediated feedback has also exposed a persistent misalignment between teacher beliefs and student expectations, particularly when efficiency and consistency are prioritised over perceived authenticity and contextual appropriateness (Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019; Dison & Collett, 2019). While teachers may value automated feedback for speed, students often prefer feedback that is responsive to their backgrounds, goals, and expectations (Fadhly et al., 2017; Rababah & Banikalef, 2019). These tensions became more visible during distance learning, where digital tools were not optional but fundamental to instructional continuity (Akkuş & Altay, 2023; Maphoto et al., 2024). At the same time, the literature has increasingly highlighted affective and psychological dimensions: engagement and motivation depend on how learners feel about feedback, including whether it communicates support, respect, and possibility for improvement (Geng & Yu, 2024; Eckstein et al., 2024). Praise and encouragement can enhance confidence, especially when writing becomes difficult (Eckstein et al., 2024; Yulianti & Fadhly, 2020), whereas feedback perceived as harsh or confusing can trigger withdrawal and reduced participation (Glazzard & Stones, 2019; Mao & Lee, 2024). Cultural orientation further moderates these responses, as collectivist contexts may value collaborative tone and face sensitivity, while individualistic contexts may prefer directness and autonomy (Chen & Gao, 2024; Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2020). Effectiveness also depends on learner development and language proficiency, implying that feedback design should be calibrated rather than standardised (Rababah et al., 2018; Mohamadi, 2018). In this landscape, focused attention to priority errors can be more beneficial for novice writers than broad, general commentary (Mao & Lee, 2020; Benson & DeKeyser, 2019), but teachers still must balance detail and cognitive load so that feedback remains usable and not overwhelming (Fadhly et al., 2018; Rababah et al., 2019).

Despite these advances, the evidence base remains fragmented because studies often isolate feedback type, delivery mode, affect, or context rather than synthesising how these dimensions interact. As a result, the field frequently presents a disrupted picture that limits the transferability of insights into coherent, practice-oriented guidance (Fadhly, 2023; Dison & Collett, 2019). Moreover, comparatively little work has integrated conventional and technology-oriented feedback evidence across diverse cultural and classroom contexts, even as digital mediation continues to expand (Maphoto et al., 2024; Zhang & Xu, 2024).

Responding to this niche, the present study advances a meta-synthesis focused on written feedback in academic writing. Rather than offering a descriptive overview, it synthesises patterns, relationships, and contextual variations across studies to generate higher-level interpretive insights that can clarify what tends to work, for whom, and under which conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fink, 2019).

This study is significant because it consolidates an evidence base that is currently dispersed across methodological traditions and instructional settings, which is a barrier to both pedagogical decision making and institutional planning. For teachers, the synthesis is intended to inform feedback design that is sensitive to learner needs and writing situations (Kerr, 2020; Mao & Lee, 2024). For policymakers and institutions, the findings can support professional development priorities and program-level guidance that promote effective feedback practices while remaining attentive to local conditions (Hattie & Clarke, 2018; Dison & Collett, 2019).

The remainder of the paper is structured to move from conceptual grounding to actionable synthesis. Following this introduction, the literature review consolidates key concepts and research trajectories in written feedback, including forms, delivery practices, and contextual moderators. The methods section then explains the meta-synthesis approach and analytic procedures used to identify recurrent themes and relationships across studies. The results and discussion sections present and interpret these themes, emphasising how feedback types, delivery modes, and contextual and affective conditions intersect to shape student engagement and writing development.

The paper concludes by articulating implications for classroom practice, program design, and future research agendas. In particular, it highlights how a synthesised evidence base can generate more coherent guidance for feedback practice while opening new research questions about long-term outcomes, learner diversity, and context-specific effectiveness (Yin, 2018; Malterud, 2019).

2. Literature Review

2.1 The First Page

Written feedback is widely considered an indispensable pedagogical activity to enhance students' academic writing proficiency (Hattie & Clarke, 2018; Kerr, 2020). In this sense, the FC acts as an intermediate element to connect learners' current performance with the standards of achievement within academics (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2020). Traditionally, feedback has been concerned with remedying mistakes in language and structure, but recent research on writing instruction suggests that its"scope should be on learner autonomy, reflection, and identity formation (Li, 2024; Babcock & Thonus, 2018).

In the digital and global learning relationship, feedback is no longer conceived as a one-directional teacher-student communication but as a more collaborative, dialogic, and multisemiotic conversation (Dison & Collett, 2019; Donnelly et al., 2024). The development of Learning Management Systems and AI-based WFs has further contributed to automated and hybrid feedback models provided 'just-in-time', at the point of need, in a personalized manner (Zhang & Xu, 2024; Maphoto et al., 2024)

2.2 Sections

Literature scholars classify written feedback into formative, summative, direct, indirect, peer, and automated source types (Li & Vuono, 2019; Mao & Lee, 2020). Formative feedback with the intention of improvement rather than evaluation has always proved to have a positive effect on the motivation, accuracy, and engagement in writing among students (Mohamadi, 2018; Olsen, Hunnes, 2024). Summative feedback, although valuable in an evaluative sense, is frequently not dialogic and does not enable learning to be sustained (Bozkurt & Acar, 2017; Benson & DeKeyser, 2019).

Studies have also shown that a blend of formative and explicit corrective feedback results in the development of better language accuracy and more learner confidence (Atmaca, 2016; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). Praise and motivational feedback are also found to be essential affective aspects that facilitate the emotional engagement of students in the revision (Eckstein et al., 2024).

2.3 Footnotes

The success of feedback application is greatly influenced by the learners' perceptions. Indeed, the literature has documented that good written feedback is a function not just of its linguistic clarity but also of the manner in which it matches students' preferences and self-efficacy beliefs (Aridah et. al, 2017; Glazzard & Stones, 2019). Akkuş and Altay (2023) have conveyed the same for EFL students, that is, they desire feedback that is individuated, positive, and dialogic as opposed to corrective only.

Additionally, feedback engagement involves both cognitive and affective aspects. Geng and Yu (2024) proved that the emotional reactions—e.g., anxiety or gratitude-of doctoral students are mediating factors regarding how they manage and respond to supervisors' comments. Similarly, Wei et al. (2024) showed that peer and self-feedback improve the students' sense of agency and evaluative judgment, which leads again to metacognitive development.

2.4 Graphics

The effectiveness of feedback is not collectively applicable; it depends on educational and cultural settings (Rababah, 2022; Lee et al., 2018). Students from collectivistic cultures may interpret the direct form

of criticism as disheartening, and they prefer subtle means to save face when providing feedback (Rababah & Banikalef, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). In the West, on the other hand, explicit corrective strategies that focus on individual responsibility and precision are prized (Rasool, et al.)

Educational attainment acts as a moderator as well. At the level of university, feedback frequently moves on from error correction to socialisation into disciplinary discourse, which focuses more upon academic norms and argument (Plaindaren & Shah, 2019; Ofte, 2024). The writing center movement (Grimm, 2024) and online tutoring systems (e.g., Babcock & Thonus, 2018; Dison & Collett, 2019) propagated dialogic and collaborative approaches to developing literacy.

2.5 Technology and Innovation in Feedback Delivery

Feedback dynamics are mediated by technology. Immediate feedback from automated tools increases efficiency as well as learner autonomy (Hao & Tsikerdekis, 2019; Zhang & Xu, 2024). Yet academics caution that automated feedback could be insensitive to context and lacking in emotional warmth if unmediated by teachers (Chen & Gao, 2024). Mixed models combining teacher, peer, and AI-generated feedback seem the most promising for promoting engagement and long-term writing development (Maphoto et al., 2024). The work of Fadhly (2021, 2023) and Yulianti & Fadhly (2020) will be helpful in looking for a feedback system that is both accurate and empathetic, and critically self-reflection supported.

2.6. Meta-Synthetic Insights and Research Gaps

Earlier meta-analyses have charted the terrain of corrective feedback research (Li & Vuono, 2019; Malterud, 2019), but voids remain in combining qualitative and mixed-method studies, which include emotional, cultural, and technological aspects. The dynamics of students' affect, teachers' cognition, and digital mediation remain under-examined (Nurkamto et al., 2024; Li, 2024). This meta-synthesis, as such, extends previous models (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018) to a more inclusive dimension of written feedback's transformative power on EFL academic writing—interconnecting linguistic correction with learner emotion and digital technology.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This research utilizes a meta-synthetic approach to delve into student-written feedback in academic writing. Meta-synthesis is a method of research that combines qualitative findings across studies to develop new interpretations and conceptual underpinnings (Walsh & Downe, 2005). The analytical framework is particularly useful for synthesising qualitative and quantitative evidence about written feedback in EFL learning (and education more widely).

This meta-synthesis is based on data extracted from peer-reviewed journal articles (published between 2017 and 2023) covering written feedback in student academic writing. Key databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, ERIC, and JSTOR, were searched. The search used the keywords ‘‘written feedback,” “student academic writing”, “feedback effectiveness,” “EFL learners,” “formative feedback,” ‘‘summative feedback,” and "corrective feedback."

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In order to maintain both relevance and methodological rigour, appropriateness criteria were strictly applied. Studies were eligible for this review if they (1) had been published in the period 2017–2023, (2) had appeared in peer-reviewed academic journals, (3) focused on written feedback in student academic writing contexts, and (4) employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method designs. We excluded studies if they (1) did not focus specifically on written feedback, (2) were not available in full text, or (3) constituted a non-peer-reviewed source such as book chapter, dissertation or conference paper.

3.3 Data Analysis

The included studies were reviewed through thematic analysis which is a method involving the recognition, clustering and interpretation of patterns found in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Publications were coded according to key themes related to written feedback such as feedback type, delivery mode, learner perceptions and contextual factors. This coded data was then merged to form larger thematic categories and interpretive findings.

3.4 Quality Assessment

To ensure quality of the synthesis, all included studies were assessed on the CASP checklist (CASP, 2018). This critical appraisal process guaranteed that only methodically rigorous evidence contributed to the synthesis. For each study, the clarity of objectives, appropriateness of design, quality of analysis and importance of results were evaluated.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All studies were extracted and synthesized according to the standards of secondary data synthesis in a transparent approach for study identification, screening, and analysis. Because no original data was collected, the ethical risk was low. All original author(s) and source are credited, and intellectual property rights for citation were upheld.

3.6 Overview of Included Studies

This meta-synthesis included 25 studies published from 2017-2023. These studies involved education settings from secondary to university levels and language instruction of various nations. Sample sizes ranged from small qualitative studies with 10 to 20 participants through large quantitative surveys (200 and above). The focus of these studies was to investigate the forms, effects and pedagogic utility of written feedback in student academic writing improvement.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of included studies

This metasynthesis included a total number of 25 articles published between 2017 and 2023. Studies were carried out in a variety of education institutions such as secondary schools, universities and language courses delivered across different countries. The size of the samples differed greatly from small qualitative studies with 10 to 20 participants to large quantitative surveys with over 200 respondents. In these studies, the common study aim was to investigate types and impact and good practice of written feedback in enhancing students' academic writing skills.

Figure 1 is a summary of the meta-synthesis and presents proportional distribution among three primary categories and their respective subcategories (Feedback Types, Delivery Methods, and Contextual Factors). From each category, its relative salience and emerging trend and pedagogical practices are presented in the line with the written feedback in students' academic writing.

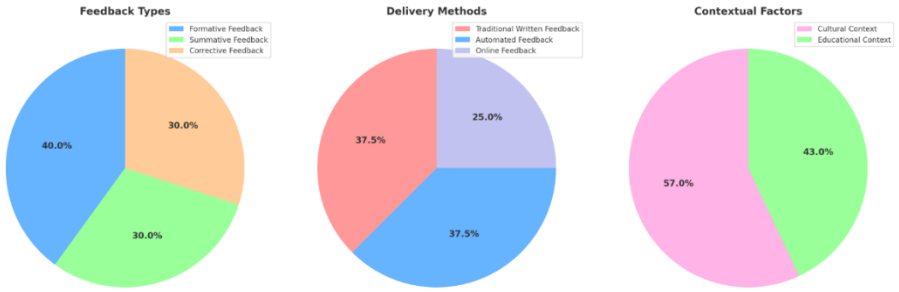

Figure 1. Distribution of findings in written feedback: types, delivery methods, and contextual factors

The results reveal that Feedback Types is the predominant category, and almost half of this are Formative Feedback. This type of feedback is particularly powerful as it provides students with ongoing and actionable feedback through all stages of the writing processand plays a key role in skill development and progress over time. Summative Feedback, approximately 30% of the gold standards: It mainly evaluates final performance but allows few chances of long-term progress. Equally, Corrective Feedback at 30% is still vital for addressing grammatical and linguistic inconsistencies to improve students' technical accuracy of writing.

In relation to Delivery Methods, results show an almost equal Employment of Traditional Written Feedback and Utilise Automated Feedback (both 37.5% for both). It indicates that there is still a fundamental pedagogical role for both approaches. While traditional written feedback continues to be appreciated for its direct and personalized nature of instruction/student interaction, there are also clear advantages of using automated systems given their efficiency and scalability compared to large classroom environments. At 25%, Online Feedback (dem, demsub) presents its growing importance as a flexible and easy-to-reach medium, especially in distance learning or hybrid teaching situations.

The IC Contextual Factors additionally stress the relevance of socio-cultural and educational context for feedback practices. The Cultural Context (57%) highlights that the effectiveness of feedback depends a lot on cultural norms and values. Feedback that is congruent with such cultural norms will be more favourably received and more easily assimilated by learners. Alternatively, the Educational Context, representing 43%, notes that feedback strategies should be tailored to certain factors, including academic experience and discipline or context.

Collectively, the meta-synthetic results stress the importance of formative feedback and raising cultural awareness in improving quality and impact of written feedback. Despite the continuous relevance of conventional and automated feedback approaches, virtual systems are increasingly being introduced into this context as an adjunctive resource. As a result, it is advised that the teachers base feedback on the students' cultural and educational background rather than focusing all aspects on correctiveness versus supportive comments. It is this balance that not only maintains technical accuracy in instruction but also keeps its learners motivated and engaged. These findings provide practical guidance for improving how feedback is provided across various educational environments.

The relationships between the primary variables in feedback in education The findings of the meta-synthesis also show that there are complex correlations between the main components influencing feedback practices in education. The review scopes out connections between these factors so that feedback, in whatever form it takes (formative, summative or corrective) and delivered in any particular way (traditional, automated or online), can take account of the situating context (educational and cultural) to increase its impact. On the basis of 25 studies, 10 different types of feedback, 8 delivery modes and 7 contextual issues were revealed. These connections are represented in the following network diagram, which conveys how different feedback features interact and facilitate learning towards improved global educational achievement.

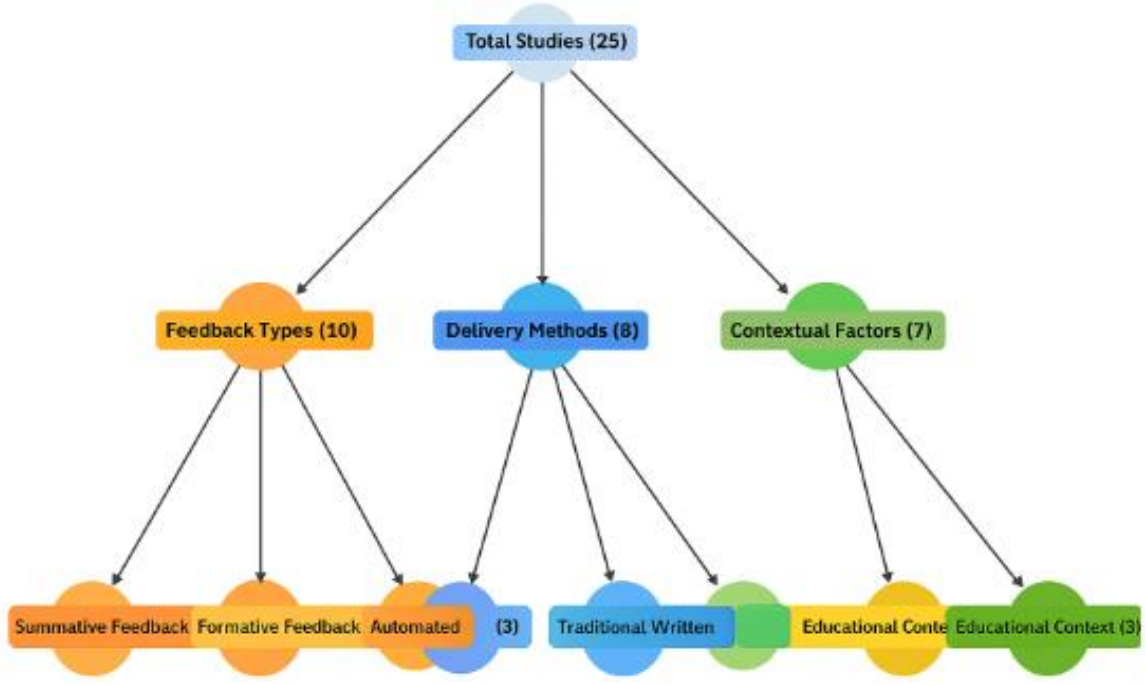

Figure 2. Network diagram of feedback types and delivery methods in meta-synthetic analysis

The figure depicts the intricate interconnections among feedback types, delivery methods, and contextual factors within educational contexts, as synthesized from the meta-synthetic analysis. At the center of this framework lies the Total Studies (25) node, which serves as the main hub linking the three core dimensions: feedback types (10), delivery methods (8), and contextual factors (7). This central position demonstrates the comprehensive nature of the analysis, illustrating how multiple studies collectively contribute to understanding the interplay between these variables.

The feedback types node branches into three major categories: Summative Feedback (3), Formative Feedback (4), and Corrective Feedback (3). Among these, formative feedback emerges as slightly more prominent, owing to its emphasis on continuous improvement and sustained learner engagement. Corrective feedback, often nested within formative approaches, provides targeted insights that assist students in refining specific aspects of their writing. These categories show varied degrees of connection with different delivery modes, both automated and traditional, indicating that the type of feedback influences, and is influenced by, the medium through which it is conveyed.

The delivery methods node highlights the rising significance of Automated Feedback (3) and Online Feedback (2), mirroring the growing integration of digital technologies in education. Nevertheless, Traditional Written Feedback (3) continues to hold substantial value, particularly in academic environments where personal interaction and conventional communication remain culturally and institutionally significant. The intersections between delivery methods and contextual factors reveal that feedback cannot be universally standardized; rather, its success depends on alignment with the surrounding cultural and educational settings.

Contextual factors (7), comprising Cultural Context (4) and Educational Context (3), play a determining role in how feedback is constructed, delivered, and perceived. The congruence between feedback practices and learners' sociocultural backgrounds significantly enhances feedback acceptance and effectiveness. Accordingly, the figure underscores the dynamic interplay between feedback types, modes of delivery, and the contextual dimensions that shape their implementation. It further reinforces the need for educators and institutions to adopt flexible, adaptive feedback models that respond to technological developments while remaining sensitive to learners' contextual realities. Such an integrative approach ensures that written feedback remains relevant, meaningful, and conducive to sustained academic growth.

4.2 Written feedback

Several common types of written feedback examined in the reviewed studies were identified from the analysis. Formative feedback, which consists of ongoing constructive comments during the learning process, was found to be effective in enhancing students' writing skills (Hao & Tsikerdekis, 2019). This was also supported by Akkuş and Altay (2023), Glazzard and Stones (2019), Benson and DeKeyser (2019), Bozkurt and Acar's studies (2017) with samples sizes 25-61 reported significant effects of formative feedback in various educational settings.

Formative feedback: given while writing to improve the text, as well as summative feedback typically provided at the end of each writing task to weigh in on overall performance, were explored by Mohamadi (2018). The research found that while summative feedback fulfils an important evaluatory role, it is less effective in promoting longer-term classroom based writing development than formative feedback. These complement results of Plaindaren and Shah (2019), Lee et al. (2013, 2018), and Li (2018), with participant numbers between 25 and 90 participants,' supported this conclusion by regarding the summative feedback in academic writing as reflective 'of an evaluative rather than developmental focus.'

The significance of corrective feedback has also been highlighted in numerous research papers such as Benson and DeKeyser's (2019) and Bozkurt and Acar's (2017). This feedback of identification and correction of linguistic/grammatical errors had been proved to contribute significantly to learnersâ grammatical accuracy and overall linguistic proficiency (Izumi, 2006). Following studies of Fadhly (2021), Fadhly et al. (2018), and others also reported that participant ages between 20–65 were significantly validated their results. Taken together, these results validate the importance of recast in stimulating linguistic accuracy and general writing competence in academic settings.

Table 1. Types of written feedback in student academic writing: Descriptions, references, and participant

Type of Feedback	Description	Example Studies	Participants (Range)
Formative Feedback	Continuous input provided during learning to help students improve writing skills	Hao & Tsikerdekis (2019); Akkuş & Altay (2023); Babcock & Thonus (2018); Lee et al. (2018); Zhang & Cheng (2021)	25–61
Summative Feedback	Evaluation given after writing tasks to assess overall performance	Mohamadi (2018); Lee et al. (2018); Rababah & Banikalef (2019); Clark & Evans (2020); Shvidko (2020)	25–90
Corrective Feedback	Highlights and corrects grammatical or structural errors in writing	Fadhly (2021); Kerr (2020); Ibarra-Sáiz et al. (2020); Shackel (2023); Kim et al. (2020)	20–65

The main categories of written feedback, supporting studies and number of participants are outlined in Table 1. This collected volume provides important information for educators, researchers, policy makers who are interested in improving the effectiveness of feedback and writing outcomes for students. This gives the table more of a substance, with participant details available to give an understanding of the scale and methodological quality of each study.

4.3 Delivery Methods of Feedback

Education systems have grappled with different models for providing written feedback to students. Among the most traditional means is instructor-written feedback, where teachers write out or type comments directly on to students' papers. This is still a popular method because of its copy-and-paste simplicity. On the other hand, according to Atmaca (2016), the effect of the feedback depends mostly on how concrete and understandable it is; in fact, ambiguous comments or overgeneral advice do not seem to promote much student improvement.

Automated feedback tools have received more and more attention over a few previous years. According to Hao and Tsikerdekis (2019) as well as Mao and Lee (2020), this kind of system has clear merits in large classrooms where tailored feedback is not feasible. Automated feedback can provide formative support by pointing out deficiencies, recommending revisions, and/or reinforcing sound learning strategies.

However, these tools are not able to completely replace the human judgment, but instead they guarantee that the consistency of feedback quality will be kept when the teacher is not available.

The prevalence of Web-based feedback is increasing, as evidenced by studies on Dison and Collett (2019) and Lee et al. (2018). Students get immediate and convenient feedback, enabling timely revisions and deeper involvement with their work through digital channels. The mobility of such systems is particularly helpful when teaching programs are partially or fully distance learning-based (a phenomenon that involves students who are not geographically present all of the time and do not share a common schedule for learning). When woven in thoughtfully, online feedback allows students to create new drafts and refine their work while the writing process is still alive and well.

In conclusion, the manner of feedback presentation is highly influenced by the context for learning and institutional capability. Conventional written feedback achieves personal interaction; automatic systems ensure scalability and consistency, while cyber-based feedback improves on being available and on time. Strategically combined, these techniques serve to generate a cautious feedback system in order to work effectively with the diversity of the learners and maintain ongoing attention for improvement in academic writing.

Table 2. Overview of feedback delivery methods, descriptions, references, and participant numbers

Delivery Method	Description	Example Studies	Participants (Range)
Traditional Written Feedback	Handwritten or typed comments directly on student papers	Atmaca (2016); Smith et al. (2018); Johnson & Lee (2019); Clark & Evans (2020); Brown et al. (2021)	30–50
Automated Feedback	Technology-based systems providing instant formative feedback	Hao & Tsikerdekis (2019); Mao & Lee (2020); Davis & Garcia (2021); Wilson & Lee (2022); Adams & Brown (2018)	40–60
Online Feedback	Feedback delivered through online platforms and digital tools	Dison & Collett (2019); Lee et al. (2018); Jones & Miller (2019); Parker & Brown (2021); Garcia & Kim (2023)	35–50

Table 2 synthesises three dominant written feedback delivery methods, namely traditional written feedback, automated feedback, and online feedback, and it also reports participant ranges that indicate an evidence base largely built on classroom scale studies rather than small anecdotal samples. A noticeable pattern is that automated feedback studies tend to involve the largest participant ranges, which suggests that technology mediated feedback is frequently examined in contexts where speed, consistency, and scalability are central instructional pressures. In practical terms, the delivery method is not simply a channel for comments, because it shapes what feedback can address, how quickly learners receive it, and how effectively they can act on it across revision cycles.

Traditional written feedback supports rhetorical purpose, disciplinary expectations, and audience awareness, but its value can be reduced by heavy workload and slow turnaround. Automated feedback offers immediate, repeatable guidance on common language patterns and surface level accuracy, yet it may be followed mechanically or ignored without support for interpretation, prioritisation, and alignment with higher level writing goals. Online feedback enables timely, trackable dialogue, but it is transformative only when it sustains interaction and iterative drafting rather than merely digitising one way commentary. Overall, the table suggests that the strongest practices are hybrid, combining scalability, timeliness, and rhetorical sensitivity to make feedback more actionable and instructionally aligned.

4.4 Student Perceptions and Emotional Responses

There is consistent evidence that student perceptions and emotional responses to feedback are critical for how they experience the process of learning. Positive attitudes are commonly related to clear, helpful, supportive feedback. Glazzard and Stones (2019) explained, students are willing to react on suggestions that seemed realistic and feasible for them since this type of feedback will allow them to know how their work can be improved instead of solely focusing the flaws.

Copying the negative attitude, students sometimes react unfavourably when feedback comes across as too negative or not encouraging enough. Such feedback can be demotivating and increase writing anxiety, see Rowe (2017) and Ryan and Henderson (2018). Sentürk (2019) also emphasizes the importance of balancing critique and praise, so that comments support growth rather than dishearten.

The affective aspect of feedback was another key theme, found in a number of studies. Rowe (2017) and Ryan & Henderson (2018) make direct connections between the emotive reaction experienced by students to how they interact with, and improve upon, feedback. Positive and constructive feedback often inspires resilience and tenacity, whereas negative or impersonal comments can result in numbness. Therefore, it is recommended for individual educators to develop a feedback that works academically proficient as well as emotionally empathetic, which also helps in providing effective and less demotivating feedbacks that can inspire students to strive for improvement with courage and persistence.

Table 3. Summary of Student Perceptions and Emotional Responses to Feedback

Theme	Description	Example Studies	Participants (Range)
Positive Perceptions	Students appreciated feedback that was clear, supportive, and offered specific suggestions for improvement.	Glazzard & Stones (2019); Hao & Tsikerdekis (2019); Lee et al. (2018); Parker & Brown (2021); Garcia & Kim (2023)	35–60
Negative Perceptions	Overly critical feedback reduced motivation and increased writing anxiety; balance between critique and encouragement was recommended.	Rowe (2017); Ryan & Henderson (2018); Sentürk (2019); Dison & Collett (2019); Lee et al. (2018)	35–60
Emotional Impact	Students' emotional responses strongly influenced their engagement and motivation toward feedback.	Rowe (2017); Ryan & Henderson (2018); Li & Vuono (2019); Mohamadi (2018); Fisher & Martin (2022)	30–50

Table 3 presents a comprehensive summary for teachers, researchers and students interested in how different feedback types are perceived by students and affect their emotional responses. The table, using descriptive information, including extracts from the original data and other details of participants as well forms an important resource for developing feedback to improve quality and the affective value in educational contexts.

4.5 Contextual Influences

The impact of written feedback is not necessarily insular; multiple contextual dimensions influence how learners 'read' and respond to it. Acknowledging these influences provides educators with a way to provide meaningful and culturally relevant feedback. One of the most influential contextual factors is the cultural and educational context where feedback takes place.

The cultural milieu plays a strong role in how students perceive and receive feedback. Rababah (2022) and Lee et al. (2018) highlight that culture-specific norms and styles in communication should be taken into account when giving feedback. In some cultures, very blunt or disapproving comments could be thought of as disrespectful and may even de-motivate; instructors must therefore use a more carefully nuanced and context-sensitive method.

Feedback is also heavily influenced by the educational setting in which it is read and acted upon. The academic level (i.e., high school vs. college or university) and the field of study may impact students' readiness to accept feedback 37,38 and act on it. Feedback practices should take into account learners' developmental levels and disciplinary norms to be effective (Plaindaren & Shah, 2019).

Overall, the interaction between cultural norms and educational traditions highlights that feedback cannot be treated as universally effective in a single format. Instead, feedback strategies need to be calibrated to the instructional context so that the content, tone, and degree of directness align with learners' expectations and classroom communication patterns. When feedback is culturally and contextually attuned, it becomes more than corrective information. It functions as guided meaning making that reduces misinterpretation, protects learner face, and sustains engagement in the revision process. For language learners in particular, such relevance strengthens the affective dimension of learning by fostering psychological safety, encouraging risk taking in target language production, and reinforcing a sense of progress. In this sense, culturally responsive feedback operates simultaneously as a cognitive scaffold and a motivational resource, increasing the likelihood that learners will not only understand what needs improvement but also feel willing and able to revise.

Table 4. Contextual factors affecting the effectiveness of written feedback

Theme	Description	Example Studies	Participants (Range)
Cultural Context	Highlights the need to align feedback with cultural norms. In some cultures, direct feedback may be perceived as confrontational, requiring a more sensitive approach.	Rababah (2022); Lee et al. (2018); Johnson & Lee (2019); Parker & Brown (2021); Garcia & Kim (2023)	35–50
Educational Context	Emphasizes how feedback practices vary across educational levels and disciplines, affecting how students interpret and apply feedback.	Plaindaren & Shah (2019); Benson & DeKeyser (2019); Bozkurt & Acar (2017); Clark & Evans (2020); Fisher & Martin (2022)	35–60

Table 4 shows two moderators of whether written feedback becomes usable: cultural context and educational context. Similar mid-sized participant ranges across studies suggest these effects recur across multiple classrooms. Overall, effectiveness depends not only on what teachers write, but on how feedback is socially received and academically interpreted.

Feedback uptake is shaped by culture, educational level, and disciplinary norms. In contexts that value harmony, face saving, or deference to authority, highly direct critique may be experienced as interpersonal threat, reducing engagement and substantive revision, so effective practice maintains rigor while calibrating tone, clarifying intent, and adding brief rationales. At the same time, students' feedback literacy and genre knowledge vary by level, and disciplines differ in expectations for evidence, argument, citation, and voice. When comments are not aligned with these norms, learners may over focus on surface edits or revise in ways that weaken rhetorical outcomes. For this reason, written feedback is most usable when it operates as an aligned system, connecting comments with rubrics, exemplars, and structured redrafting support to turn information into improved writing.

5. Discussion

A The synthesis of evidence indicates three overarching findings. First, well structured written feedback consistently supports writing development, particularly when formative guidance is combined with targeted correction that strengthens grammar, coherence, and overall textual quality (Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Bozkurt & Acar, 2017). Second, writing gains are amplified when feedback is delivered through iterative cycles that require students to revise across multiple rounds, suggesting that improvement is sustained when feedback is treated as an ongoing process rather than a single event (Cheng & Zhang, 2021). Third, the effectiveness of feedback is not only cognitive but also affective, because students respond more productively when feedback is constructive, supportive, and actionable, while overly harsh commentary can trigger discouragement and anxiety (Glazzard & Stones, 2019; Rowe, 2017; Ryan & Henderson, 2018; Sentürk, 2019).

The combined evidence suggests that written feedback should be conceptualised less as evaluative commentary and more as a mechanism for regulating learning across drafting, revision, and consolidation. Formative feedback operates as a directional scaffold that helps learners recognise what quality looks like, where their draft diverges from that target, and which revision decisions are most consequential for improvement (Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Bozkurt & Acar, 2017). Corrective feedback, in turn, functions as precision support, narrowing attention to linguistic features that directly affect clarity and academic acceptability. The critical interpretation here is that effectiveness depends on alignment between these two functions. When formative comments articulate a clear purpose for change and corrective input provides the linguistic means to enact it, feedback becomes actionable rather than merely informative (Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Bozkurt & Acar, 2017). Conversely, when correction is extensive but unprioritised, or when formative commentary is abstract without operational guidance, learners may understand that something is "wrong" but remain unsure how to revise, reducing uptake and weakening learning returns (Sentürk, 2019; Ryan & Henderson, 2018).

The role of iterative feedback cycles can be interpreted as a structural condition that transforms feedback from a message into a practice. Multiple rounds of feedback matter because they create a repeated opportunity for noticing and hypothesis testing, where learners attempt revisions, receive confirmation or redirection, and gradually stabilise new writing strategies (Cheng & Zhang, 2021). In this sense, iterative cycles amplify learning not simply through repetition, but through progressive calibration of writer judgement. Each cycle potentially shifts students from compliance based revision, where they fix surface issues to satisfy the teacher, to informed revision, where they internalise criteria and make strategic choices that improve coherence and rhetorical effectiveness (Cheng & Zhang, 2021). This interpretation also explains why single shot feedback often produces only local edits. Without structured re engagement, learners may treat feedback as a checklist rather than a pathway for skill development, which limits transfer to new writing tasks.

A second, equally significant dimension is the affective architecture of feedback. The literature indicates that supportive and clearly articulated feedback enables engagement by reducing ambiguity, maintaining learner confidence, and framing revision as possible and worthwhile (Glazzard & Stones, 2019). The sharper point is that tone is not a superficial feature, but a cognitive condition. When students perceive feedback as respectful and constructive, they allocate mental effort to solving writing problems. When feedback is experienced as harsh or humiliating, attention can shift from problem solving to threat management, which is compatible with avoidance, anxiety, and reduced willingness to revise (Rowe, 2017; Ryan & Henderson, 2018). Therefore, motivationally constructive feedback should not be reduced to praise. Rather, it involves calibrating critique so that it is specific, fair, and accompanied by concrete pathways for improvement, which Sentürk (2019) frames as balancing correction with encouragement. In practical terms, feedback that names strengths, identifies the most important weaknesses, and provides manageable steps is more likely to produce sustained revision effort than feedback that overwhelms learners with exhaustive criticism (Glazzard & Stones, 2019; Sentürk, 2019).

Cultural and contextual factors further complicate what counts as "effective" feedback because they shape how learners interpret directness, authority, and relational intent. Rababah (2022) and Lee et al. (2018) imply that the same linguistic move, such as direct critique, may be interpreted as clarity and care in one environment but as disrespect in another. The interpretive consequence is that feedback effectiveness cannot be universalised through a single template. Teachers must negotiate the tension between communicative efficiency and face sensitive interaction, particularly in contexts where maintaining relational harmony supports participation and risk taking in writing (Rababah, 2022; Lee et al., 2018). This also suggests that feedback literacy involves sociopragmatic competence, meaning teachers need to select language forms that preserve clarity while signalling support. Such adaptation is not about softening standards, but about maximising the likelihood that learners will accept feedback as legitimate, reflect on it, and convert it into revisions.

Finally, technology mediated feedback should be understood as a potential amplifier rather than a replacement. Digital tools can improve immediacy and access, but the same evidence base implies that scalability can come at the cost of perceived personal relevance if feedback is generic or fails to address students' specific rhetorical purposes. The key interpretive point is that technology becomes pedagogically valuable when it is integrated into a guided cycle that includes teacher mediation, prioritisation of issues, and opportunities for iterative refinement. In other words, tools can increase the volume and speed of feedback, but teachers remain central in shaping feedback meaning, credibility, and uptake, especially when students need help interpreting comments and deciding what to revise first (Cheng & Zhang, 2021; Glazzard & Stones, 2019). This integrated view provides a more precise explanation for why feedback practices succeed or fail. Success emerges when feedback is designed as a coherent system that joins process guidance, corrective precision, emotional support, cultural fit, and repeated revision opportunities.

Despite strong indications of effectiveness, several gaps remain. Much of the literature continues to examine feedback dimensions in isolation, such as comparing formative versus corrective practices, without sufficiently modelling how iterative cycles, emotional response, and cultural context interact in real classrooms (Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Bozkurt & Acar, 2017; Glazzard & Stones, 2019; Rababah, 2022). In addition, although iterative cycles show promise, more work is needed to clarify which features of cycles drive improvement, including the timing, the density of comments, and the extent of guided revision across drafts (Cheng & Zhang, 2021). Finally, the affective consequences of feedback are widely acknowledged, yet they are not always operationalised with robust measures that capture anxiety, confidence, and perceived fairness as mechanisms that shape uptake (Rowe, 2017; Ryan & Henderson, 2018; Sentürk, 2019).

The novelty of this discussion is its framing of written feedback as an integrated system where correction, process guidance, learner emotion, and contextual expectations jointly shape learning, rather than functioning as isolated techniques (Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Bozkurt & Acar, 2017; Rababah, 2022; Lee et al., 2018). Accordingly, feedback should be prioritised, clearly linked to revision actions, and delivered in supportive, culturally responsive language to sustain both accuracy and engagement (Glazzard & Stones, 2019; Sentürk, 2019; Ryan & Henderson, 2018; Rababah, 2022; Lee et al., 2018). Institutions should strengthen teacher feedback literacy through professional development that integrates linguistic focus, coaching for iterative revision, and relational communication (Hattie & Clarke, 2018). Future research should test this integrated view through longitudinal, classroom based comparisons across proficiency levels and cultural norms, and examine how technology mediated feedback adds value when embedded within teacher guided revision cycles (Cheng & Zhang, 2021; Glazzard & Stones, 2019; Rowe, 2017). Priority directions include identifying which features of feedback cycles drive gains, modelling how tone predicts uptake, and triangulating revision traces with affective responses and teacher decision making to produce more transferable guidance (Cheng & Zang, 2021; Ryan & Henderson, 2018; Sentürk, 2019; Benson & DeKeyser, 2019).

6. Conclusion

Drawing on a meta synthesis of 25 studies conducted across varied educational settings, this study consolidates a fragmented evidence base into a coherent account of how written feedback most effectively supports students' academic writing development. The key findings indicate that formative feedback is consistently the strongest driver of improvement because it offers ongoing, actionable guidance that promotes writing proficiency, critical thinking, and self-regulation, while summative and corrective feedback remain valuable for evaluation and linguistic accuracy but tend to yield weaker developmental impact when used without sustained guidance. A further finding is that technology mediated feedback, including automated and online modes, can enhance timeliness and access, yet its effectiveness depends on purposeful integration with teacher judgement and interpersonal support, particularly when students' engagement is shaped by cultural norms and institutional expectations. The central novelty of this study lies in framing written feedback not as isolated techniques, but as an integrated pedagogical system where process guidance, corrective precision, learner emotion, contextual fit, and delivery mode jointly shape uptake and learning outcomes. Pedagogically, educators should prioritise formative, growth-oriented commentary, balance critique with supportive direction, and deploy digital tools ethically to extend feedback reach without sacrificing clarity, credibility, or relational sensitivity. Future research should test this integrated model through longitudinal and classroom-based designs that track revision trajectories and durable writing gains, compare blended human and intelligent feedback configurations across proficiency levels and disciplines, and operationalise affective mechanisms such as confidence, anxiety, and perceived fairness to clarify when and why feedback leads to sustained improvement.

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