

## Developing ESL Writing through Critical Pedagogical Feedback

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### Abstract

*The indirect written feedback is more effective than direct written feedback to improve the ESL writing skills. The ESL learners can be facilitated with the indirect written feedback which indicates the errors with underlining, circling, and marking the selected errors. The learners can produce better writing if they are being rendered constant critical pedagogical feedback. The indirect corrective written feedback should be feasible to help the learners elevate their academic writing skills. A finding of the study was that the teachers usually adopted oral and direct feedback to improve writing skills.*

**Key words:** Feedback, pedagogy, ESL writing, critical evaluation.

### Introduction

Writing is one of the very important and influential productive skills in language teaching. It plays a vital role to communicate information and ideas beyond space and time. It is used to communicate information, to clarify thinking, and to learn new concepts and information. It is a method of representing language in the visual form using graphology whereby the information and ideas are communicated to the readers. In fact, feelings, emotions, ideas, thoughts, and instructions are communicated either through the mode of writing or speaking. Byrne (1979) argues that writing comprises graphic symbols or letters to form words which are arranged in a particular order and linked together to form sentences.

Tickoo (2003, p. 64) argues that writer should focus on the following points for a good writing.

1. Think of the audience for their product
2. Focus on the main purpose in writing
3. Spend considerable time to plan
4. Make good use of reliable sources of knowledge
5. Let their ideas flow unhindered
6. Follow a rough organizational plan
7. Seek and make use of feedback on drafts
8. Give a lot of attention to choice of words
9. Sillingly (re)revise the writing to perfect
10. Look back at their product at long intervals

The writers should employ their cognitive and metacognitive skills to carry out any academic writing task successfully. Writing is a process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate (Murray, 1973).

### Review of Literature

Feedback is essential in product and process writing to improve writing skills of ESL learners. The ESL writers require three types of feedback: peers feedback, conference (teacher-student interacting), and written comments by the teacher (Jordan, 1997). It plays a vital role in developing ESL writing since ESL learners are very poor at writing. The formative feedback and comments that are provided by teacher facilitate the second language writers to consolidate their writing. The learners can produce better writing if they are catered constant formative feedback from their teachers and peers. The role of the teachers is a real reader, a coach, and an evaluator in second language teaching writing. The oral and written feedback should be feasible to help the learners elevate their academic writing skills. However, written feedback is more advantageous than oral feedback from their teachers and peers. Hyland (2003) argues that many teachers do not feel justice to the learners unless they have written a substantial comments on their papers. In fact, teachers' feedback on the learners' errors of grammatical rules, vocabulary,

mechanics, etc. are the fundamental factors to strengthen their writing. To improve ESL writing, teachers' and peers' feedback are inevitable in the course of process writing. Hence, subsequent writing drafts of learners trigger to produce an error free product.

### Teacher Feedback

Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 206) argue that "written feedback has been seen as purely informational, a means of channeling, reaction and advice to facilitate improvement." The written feedback should be impersonal, objective, and directive to foster the ESL writing. If the ESL learners are provided with written feedback in terms of praise, criticism, and suggestion, they can take the written feedback as the source of stimulation, guideline, and affective motivation to improve their writing skills. The teachers should be impersonal, critical, sympathetic, and helpful in the course of providing feedback to the learners. Moreover, teachers' written feedback should be more specific on the content, grammatical rules, syntactic structures, and vocabulary than global and general. Hence, the learners can rectify their particular errors in ESL writing.

Besides, there should have interpersonal relationship between teacher and the learners in the course of rendering feedback since writing is a very personal, conscious, and cognitive activity which cannot be fostered in the absence of students' motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem. The negative feedback on the ESL writing can play a detrimental effect on the efficacy of the learners and thereby they can be inhibited to develop writing skills. On the contrary, overwhelmingly positive feedback does not yield a good writing. Thus, written or oral feedback has to be neither unduly positive nor negative. However, written or oral feedback should be objective, intelligible, informative, formative, and balanced so that learners can be motivated and self-confidence to cultivate their writing skills. The teachers are to be aware of the importance of consistent, clear,

helpful, transparent, and constructive feedback in developing the ESL writing skills of the learners.

Ellis (2009) classified written corrective feedback into six types such as direct corrective feedback, indirect corrective feedback, metalinguistic corrective feedback, the focus of the feedback, electronic feedback, and reformulation. In direct corrective feedback, the teacher provides the learners with explicit guidance about how to correct their errors by crossing out an unnecessary word, phrase, or morpheme and correcting grammatical errors. Moreover, the teacher inserts missing word, phrase, and morpheme, by writing correct form above or near to the erroneous form. Direct corrective feedback is very useful and beneficial for the low proficient learners to develop their writing skills. However, indirect corrective feedback involves indicating or underlining the errors without correcting the errors of the learners. In addition, the teacher can place a cross in the margin next to the containing errors. The learners are shown the location of the errors without correcting the errors of learners. Indirect corrective feedback can be effective and advantageous for high proficient learners. In metalinguistic corrective feedback, the learners are catered with error codes of article, noun, preposition, lexicon, word order etc. The learners can be facilitated to improve accuracy of grammar, syntactic structure, and vocabulary through the error codes adopted in metalinguistic feedback.

### Electronic Feedback

In electronic feedback, the learners are provided the corrective feedback through email, face-book, and software programme which are sophisticated mode of giving corrective feedback to the learners. In the electronic feedback, the learners can assess their own writing themselves with the access of the software programme and internet.

### Peer Feedback

In fact, the peer responses are the sources of information. The learners can exchange their ESL

writing with each other through commenting and critiquing their contents, accuracy of linguistic features, use of vocabulary, and mechanics with each other to improve their writing skills. The peer responses can be referred as peer review and peer edition which can help enhance ESL writing skills if it is implemented appropriately. Peer response is supported by the process writing, collaborative learning theories, and Zone of Proximal Development of Vygotsky (ZPD of Vygotsky, 1978). There is scaffolding, collection of feedback, negotiation of meaning, and interaction in the peer responses which work as mind mapping and brainstorming activities to assemble information on the content of topic, linguistic features, and vocabulary. As a result, the learners are much facilitated to write through the peer responses.

Moreover, peer response helps the learners to opt for appropriate topic, collect information, and rectify their grammatical errors for effective writing. Peer response is inevitable to incorporate teachers' feedback correctly since teachers' feedback is rather vague, general, unspecific, and equivocal. So peer feedback can stimulate the learners to retrieve information from long-term memory to improve the content and linguistic aspects of their writing.

Rollinson (2005) studied the effect of using peer feedback in improving ESL writing which needs a substantial pre-writing, writing, rewriting, and re-revising before producing a final draft, so the students need a considerable feedback from their teachers as well as from their peers.

### **The Rationale of the Study**

The learners, teachers, policymakers, and researchers can be benefitted from this study since writing skills are essential for ESL learners, teachers, and researchers for their academic careers. Specifically, the language teachers and learners would be facilitated from this study. The main purpose of feedback from teachers and peers is to make the novice ESL writers to be independent, self-regulated, and proficient

professional writers in second language writing. The constant indirect and direct corrective written feedback from their teachers and peers is essential in improving writing skills regarding the content, organization of the ideas, accuracy of linguistic features, vocabulary, and mechanics (spelling, punctuation marks, and capitalization). Specifically, in process writing, the learners require feedback in every dimension of learning and writing. They need to get feedback from prewriting stage to producing a final draft in process approach. If the feedback is appropriate and contextual, the learners can improve ESL writing effectively. The learners of higher secondary school and college levels can progress their writing skills with the help of indirect written corrective feedback from their teachers (Ferris, 1997). The feedback is very necessary to improve writing since writing is thinking process which needs stimulation and concrete information on the contents of topic, knowledge of language use, linguistic competence, and vocabulary to make the writing of ESL learners very informative, purposeful, intelligible, and readers friendly.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The learners of higher secondary schools are deprived from critical pedagogical feedback from their teachers, and peers and thereby they cannot communicate their ideas academically through the mode of writing in the lack of linguistic competence and vocabulary. More importantly, they cannot communicate their ideas and information grammatically with adequate vocabulary and syntactic structures owing to the inadequate knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, and organization. The main root causes of their inadequate performance in writing in English are lack of adequate critical pedagogical feedback from their teachers, untrained teachers, and lack of physical facilities such as, internet, reference books, and library.

## Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are:

1. to find out the attitudes of English teachers towards critical pedagogical feedback to improve writing skills in English of the learners of higher secondary schools.
2. to familiarise the language teachers with various types of feedback that are required to the learners to improve their ESL writing in higher secondary schools in Nepal.
3. to make the language teachers aware of the importance of critical pedagogical feedback in enhancing writing skills of learners.
4. to sensitise them the importance of indirect corrective written feedback to consolidate the writing skills in English of learners of higher secondary schools.

## Research Questions

1. How far is indirect corrective written feedback more effective than oral and direct feedback?
2. Does the critical pedagogical feedback play a pivotal role in developing writing skills in English? Do the English teachers provide critical pedagogical feedback (indirect corrective written feedback) to the learners to improve their writing skills in English?

## Methodology

This is an exploratory study through which the researcher attempted to explore the existing status of providing feedback to improve writing skills of the learner in higher secondary schools in Mid-Western Region of Nepal. The researcher administered questionnaire to 40 English teachers in the initial phase. Subsequently, he employed semi-structured interview to 8 English teachers out of them. Eventually, he conducted 5 classroom observations to collect data to answer the research questions. Having collected data, he analysed and interpreted them using mixed method. The researcher triangulated the data collected from different sources for the validity and reliability of the data.

## Sampling of the Study

The researcher has selected 40 English teachers

from 20 higher secondary schools from Mid-Western Region of Nepal randomly to elicit required data for this study. Furthermore, he selected 8 teachers out of them to administer semi-structured interview pertaining to writing skills in English and the role of critical pedagogical feedback in enhancing writing skills in English.

## Research Instruments/Tools

The researcher has employed questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and classroom observation to elicit data to answer the research questions in this study.

## Analysis and Interpretation of Data

The researcher dealt with the discussion of the data collected from various research tools viz, questionnaire, interview, and classroom observation in this study.

## Discussion of Teachers' Questionnaire

A majority of teachers admitted that feedback is essential to develop writing skills in English. The largest number of teachers agreed that they would provide oral and direct feedback rather than indirect written feedback in enhancing writing skills in English of the learners since there were unmanageable number of students in class, lack of time, unmanageable classroom, and lack of internet, e-library, reference books, and academic journal. About 51% of the respondents admitted that oral feedback is more effective than written corrective feedback. 45% of the teachers admitted that peers feedback facilitates their colleagues to develop learning how to write fluently and correctly. A majority of respondents reported that they usually employed holistic assessing approach to assess writing skills of the learners in higher secondary schools. Furthermore, 60% of the teachers admitted that they virtually employed direct corrective written feedback to improve grammar, vocabulary, syntactic structure, and contents for amelioration of their writing skills. Most of the teachers opined that direct corrective feedback is more effective than indirect written feedback owing to lack of proficiency in organization, content knowledge,



grammar, and knowledge of graphological devices of the learners. The largest number of respondents reported that they used to provide indirect written corrective feedback 'rarely'.

### **Discussions of Teachers' Interview**

#### **1. How far does the feedback facilitate the learners to develop their writing skills and learning?**

A majority of teachers admitted that critical pedagogical feedback facilitates the learners to improve their writing skills.

#### **2. Do you think that written corrective feedback is more effective than oral feedback to enhance writing skills of learners?**

The largest number of the respondents admitted that written corrective feedback is more effective than oral feedback since written corrective feedback would make them self-regulated learners. However, oral feedback is ambiguous, incomprehensive, and obscure and thereby learners cannot improve their writing skills. However, teachers admitted that they were unable to provide written feedback to the learners due to the lack of time, overcrowded class, and unmanageable classroom setting.

#### **3. Do you agree that peers feedback is as effective as teachers' feedback to improve writing skills?**

Most of the respondents admitted that peers feedback is essential to clarify and facilitate the teachers' feedback. More importantly, Peers feedback is more informal, comprehensive, and simpler than teachers' feedback.

#### **4. Which components of writing do you usually prefer to provide feedback?**

A majority of teachers admitted that they virtually provide feedback on grammar and contents. However, they hardly ever render feedback on organisation, cohesive devices, mechanics etc.

#### **5. Do you usually provide electronic feedback to improve writing skills?**

The largest number of teachers responded this question negatively. They admitted that it is not possible to provide electronic feedback to their learners by virtue of inaccessibility of email, facebook, and internet.

#### **6. Do you think that indirect corrective written feedback is more effective than direct corrective written feedback?**

A majority of teachers were in favour of direct corrective feedback since the learners were less proficient in writing in English and they are not self-regulated and autonomous learners. However, indirect feedback would be very beneficial to the bright learners. Moreover, the indirect corrective written feedback helps the learners improve their writing skills and make them self-directed learners.

### **Discussion of classroom observation**

1. The classroom is unmanageable, overcrowded, and dark.
2. It contains lack of electronic devices, such as computer, internet, overhead projector etc.
3. The teachers taught writing skills through traditional methods.
4. The teachers exclusively provided oral and direct feedback to the learners.

There were no collaborative writing practices, experiential learning, and peers feedback in each classroom.

### **Conclusion, Findings, and Recommendations of the Study**

The finding of this study is that a majority of the respondents admitted that they provide oral and direct feedback to the learners of higher secondary schools rather than indirect corrective feedback in enhancing written skills in English. This study indicates that the main cause of inadequate writing skills of learners from government aided higher secondary schools in Nepal is inadequate method of providing feedback to the learners to improve their writing skills. Furthermore, they are other causes in this regard, such as lack of in-service training for teachers, lack of professional skills of English teachers, lack of concrete policy of government in higher secondary schools, inadequate English syllabus and textbook of higher secondary schools, and lack of incentive to the teachers and learners.

In order to ameliorate the writing skills in English of learners, and the teachers have to:

1. provide indirect corrective written feedback rather than oral and direct feedback to improve writing skills. The teachers should provide indirect corrective written feedback using selected errors with standard codes which facilitates the learners to foster their writing skills rather than direct written feedback. The ESL learners can be facilitated with the indirect written feedback which indicates the errors with underlining, circling, and marking the selected errors. The indirect written feedback is more effective than direct written feedback to improve the ESL writing skills
2. focus on peers feedback to improve writing skills of the learners. Peers feedback is required to improve the ESL writing skills. The ESL learners should be trained with the techniques of giving feedback to their peers. The learners should be trained regarding how to locate and annotate the errors of their peers in order to improve ESL writing skills. They can be supportive, collaborative, and cooperative to improve the ESL writing of their peers. Thus, teachers' feedback, peers' feedback, and self-feedback are essential steps in writing process to improve ESL learners' writing skills.
3. adopt process approach and collaborative writing technique to improve writing skills.
4. focus on experiential learning approach to develop writing skills.
5. follow Task-based Language Teaching method to improve writing skills.

In order to improve teaching and learning as well as to improve writing skills of learners in higher secondary schools, policy makers have to:

1. arrange in-service training, workshop pertaining to writing skills in English every six months.
2. emphasise the process writing approach in the syllabus to improve writing skills of the learners.

3. monitor the teaching and learning of English now and again to improve communicative competence of learners as well as teachers.
4. modify the syllabus and textbooks of higher secondary schools every five year for up to date the teaching materials and method of instruction to improve communicative skills of learners.
5. provide experts of writing skills to train the English teachers of higher secondary schools across the country effectively.

The researcher was unable to conduct experimental study on the effectiveness of critical pedagogical feedback to improve writing skills in English in higher secondary schools owing to the constraints of time, economical back up, and human resources, so further study can be conducted on effectiveness of critical pedagogical feedback in enhancing writing skills in higher secondary schools.

#### About the author

Mr. Kadel is Lecturer of English at Surkhet Campus (Education), Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He has taught English literature, ELT, and applied linguistics at undergraduate and graduate level more than a decade. He has presented research papers in several international and national conferences at home and abroad. Presently, he has submitted Ph.D dissertation in ELT at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. His interests cover ELT, SLA, and teacher development.

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4. Peer feedback is comprehensive, informal, and facilitative which helps to ease to understand teachers' feedback in improving writing skills.
    - a. Strongly Agree   b. Agree   c. Neutral
    - d. Disagree   e. Strongly Disagree
  5. Analytic assessing is more effective than holistic assessing of writing skills.
    - a. Strongly Agree   b. Agree   c. Neutral
    - d. Disagree   e. Strongly Disagree
  6. Indirect corrective feedback is more effective than direct corrective feedback to enhance writing skills.
    - a. Strongly Agree   b. Agree   c. Neutral
    - d. Disagree   e. Strongly Disagree
  7. How often do you give corrective written feedback to the learners to improve writing skills?
    - a. Always   b. Often   c. Sometimes
    - d. Rarely   e. Never
  8. How often do you facilitate the learners to provide peer's feedback to enhance their writing skills?
    - a. Always   b. Often   c. Sometimes
    - d. Rarely   e. Never
  9. Which components of writing do you usually prefer to provide feedback to the learners?
    - a. Content and Organisation   b. Vocabulary
    - c. Grammar   d. Mechanics
    - e. All of the components of Writing

#### Semi-Structured Interview

1. How far does the feedback facilitate the learners to develop their learning?
2. Do you think that written corrective feedback is more effective than oral feedback to enhance writing skills of learners?
3. Do you agree that peer feedback is as effective as teachers' feedback to improve writing skills?
4. Which components of writing do you usually prefer to provide feedback?
5. Do you usually provide electronic feedback to improve writing skills?
6. Do you think that indirect corrective written feedback is more advantageous than direct corrective written feedback in developing writing skills in English?

### Appendices

#### Questionnaire for Teachers

Tick the best answer from the following alternatives.

1. Teachers' feedback is essential to develop writing skills of the learners.
  - a. Strongly Agree   b. Agree   c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree   e. Strongly Disagree
2. Teachers' oral feedback is more effective than direct and indirect written corrective feedback to develop writing skills of the learners.
  - a. Strongly Agree   b. Agree   c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree   e. Strongly Disagree
3. Teachers' written feedback is more effective than oral feedback in developing writing skills.
  - a. Strongly Agree   b. Agree   c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree   e. Strongly Disagree