

# THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

Vol.4 No.2 2026

ISSN P : [3006-3329](#)

ISSN E : [3006-3337](#)

## CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING DEVELOPMENT: A MIXED-METHOD STUDY OF PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY ESL LEARNERS

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### **Abstract**

Despite recent advances in the literature and field studies, written corrective feedback (WCF) continues to be one of the most debated interventions within second language writing pedagogy. The current mixed-method study examines the impact of corrective feedback on the development of writing skills in Pakistani university ESL learners using the error analysis of student writing in three drafts and semi-structured interviews conducted with five senior university writing instructors. A total of 25 undergraduate students enrolled in an ESL program at a private university in Karachi, Pakistan, took part in the six-week writing intervention. The effect of focused vs. unfocused feedback on accuracy gains was examined using paired samples *t*-tests and effect size calculation based on Cohen's *d* index. Results show a significant advantage for focused over unfocused feedback, with large effect sizes associated with verb tense feedback ( $d = 1.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and subject-verb agreement feedback ( $d = 1.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but small, non-significant effects for unfocused lexically-targeted feedback ( $d = 0.27$ ,  $p = .141$ ). Analysis of interview transcripts shows that the dominant feedback strategy in Pakistani university writing classes is a combination of direct and unfocused feedback used due to contextual factors rather than a lack of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Written Corrective Feedback, L2 Writing, ESL, Error Analysis, Pakistani University Learners, Focused Feedback, Metalinguistic Feedback, Mixed Methods, South Asian EFL

### **1. Introduction**

The question of whether and how teachers should correct errors in second language (L2) writing has generated more sustained controversy in applied linguistics than almost any other pedagogical question. At the centre of this debate stands written corrective feedback (WCF), the set of practices through which teachers respond to grammatical, lexical, and discourse-level errors in student writing with the intention of supporting accuracy development over time. Despite decades of research, practitioners and researchers remain divided on fundamental questions: which feedback types are most effective, for which error categories, at which proficiency levels, and in which instructional contexts.

The controversy was given its sharpest formulation by Truscott (1996), who argued that grammar correction in L2 writing is ineffective, potentially harmful, and should be abandoned. Truscott's position rested on theoretical and empirical grounds: he argued that the mechanisms through which correction might produce acquisition are not well supported by what is known about interlanguage development, and that the existing research evidence for feedback effectiveness was methodologically too weak to support confident claims. The response from the field, led most prominently by Ferris (1999, 2004, 2010), contested both the empirical basis and the theoretical framework of this position, and subsequent experimental research has generated substantial evidence that WCF, under the right conditions and of the appropriate type, does produce measurable accuracy gains in L2 writing.

What remains less explored is the role of WCF in South Asian EFL contexts, and in Pakistani university writing instruction in particular. Pakistan presents a distinctive case for applied linguistics research. It is a multilingual society in which English functions as the medium of higher education and as a gatekeeping mechanism for professional advancement; however, the majority of students arrive at university with limited exposure to formal writing instruction in English and with L1 interference patterns reflecting the phonological and morphosyntactic structures of Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, and other regional languages. The feedback practices operating in this context, and their effects on student writing development, have received minimal systematic attention in the WCF research literature.

This study addresses that gap through a mixed-method design combining quantitative error analysis of student writing across three drafts with qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured teacher interviews. It investigates three questions: the types of corrective feedback currently employed in Pakistani university ESL writing classrooms, the effects of those feedback types on student error patterns across drafts as measured by paired-samples t-tests, and the attitudes of students and teachers toward different corrective feedback approaches. By situating empirical findings within the local institutional context, the study aims to produce recommendations that are both research-informed and practically applicable in the conditions in which Pakistani university ESL writing teachers actually work.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of written corrective feedback do Pakistani university ESL writing teachers currently employ, and what beliefs and constraints shape those practices?
2. What is the effect of different feedback types on the grammatical accuracy of Pakistani university ESL learners across three writing drafts, as measured by error frequency and paired-samples t-test analysis?
3. What are student attitudes toward different corrective feedback types, and how do these attitudes relate to reported uptake behaviour?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Truscott-Ferris Debate

The modern debate on written corrective feedback originates with Truscott's (1996) intervention in Language Learning, in which he argued that grammar correction serves no useful purpose in L2 writing instruction and should be abandoned. Truscott's argument rested on three claims: that the research evidence for error correction effectiveness is weak and methodologically flawed; that the mechanisms through which correction might support acquisition are not empirically supported; and that correction may harm students by diverting attention from fluency and meaning to surface form. The third claim, that correction is not merely ineffective but potentially counterproductive, was the most provocative element of the argument.

Ferris (1999) responded directly, arguing that Truscott had overstated the weakness of the evidence base, had collapsed different types of correction into a single undifferentiated category, and had ignored substantial teacher and student testimony indicating that feedback is valued and used. Ferris also raised a practical challenge that has never been satisfactorily answered by those sympathetic to Truscott's position: if correction is abandoned, what replaces it, and how should teachers respond to the institutional expectation that student errors will be addressed?

Truscott and Hsu (2008) subsequently conducted a study assessing whether correction produces improvement on new pieces of writing rather than simply on revised drafts, a methodological distinction with significant implications for whether observed gains reflect acquisition or editing. Their findings suggested that much of the improvement documented in pro-correction studies may reflect the latter. Ferris (2010) responded by distinguishing between short-term accuracy effects and longer-term developmental effects, arguing that different research designs are required to detect each, and that even short-term accuracy gains have instructional value within the specific context of a writing course.

### 2.2 Types of Written Corrective Feedback

The literature distinguishes among several major feedback types that differ in explicitness and cognitive demand. Direct feedback provides the correct form by crossing out the error and supplying the correction, or inserting missing elements. This approach requires minimal processing effort from the learner but also reduces the inferential work through which deeper learning may occur. Indirect feedback indicates that an error has occurred, typically by underlining or circling, without supplying the correction. This requires learners to identify the error type and generate the correct form themselves, promoting deeper processing of the relevant grammatical rule.

Coded feedback, a variant of indirect feedback, uses symbols or abbreviations to indicate error type, for example, T for tense or Ar for article, without providing the correction. Metalinguistic feedback provides an explicit grammatical explanation alongside or instead of the correction and has been found in multiple studies to produce the most durable accuracy gains, particularly for rule-governed error types. The focused versus unfocused distinction, central to the contemporary WCF literature since Ellis (2009), refers to whether feedback targets specific error

types or addresses all errors simultaneously. Focused feedback concentrates learner attention and provides massed practice on specific grammatical targets; unfocused feedback reflects the reality of most classrooms but consistently produces smaller and less consistent accuracy gains in the experimental literature.

### **2.3 Key Empirical Studies**

Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) conducted one of the early controlled experiments on WCF effectiveness, working with 53 ESL students in New Zealand over twelve weeks. Their study compared groups receiving direct feedback plus metalinguistic explanation, direct feedback alone, and no feedback. The combination condition produced the greatest accuracy gains on preposition and article use, and gains persisted on new pieces of writing produced two months after the intervention, addressing the concern that observed improvements reflect editing rather than acquisition.

Bitchener (2008) extended this work with a pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test design examining article accuracy gains for ESL learners, finding that all feedback conditions produced significantly greater gains than no feedback, with the combination of direct correction and metalinguistic explanation again producing the largest and most durable effects. This finding is particularly relevant to the present study given that the English article system is systematically difficult for L1 Urdu speakers, whose L1 lacks an equivalent grammatical category.

Building on this focus, Sheen (2007) compared focused and unfocused written corrective feedback with ESL learners in Canada. The results showed that focused feedback on article errors produced meaningfully greater accuracy gains than unfocused feedback that addressed a wide range of error types. This study used a control group and delayed post-test, and its findings on the superiority of focused feedback have been among the most influential in shaping subsequent research design. Ellis et al. (2008) replicated and extended this finding in a Foreign Language context, adding the qualification that focused feedback advantages are most pronounced for rule-governed error types such as articles and prepositions, and less pronounced for variable error types such as lexical choice and discourse organisation.

In a related line of inquiry, Stefanou and Revesz (2015) examined the cognitive processes underlying direct and indirect feedback using think-aloud protocols during revision tasks. Their findings showed that indirect feedback promotes more elaborate cognitive processing, with learners engaging more extensively with the relevant grammatical rules, while direct feedback is processed more superficially but produces faster and more confident revision behaviour. This processing difference is consistent with the longer-term advantage of indirect and metalinguistic feedback documented in retention studies, and it provides a theoretical mechanism connecting feedback type to acquisition outcomes that has direct implications for instructional design.

### **2.4 WCF in South Asian and Pakistani EFL Contexts**

Research on WCF in South Asian EFL contexts is sparse relative to the volume of work in North American, European, and East Asian settings. Studies examining writing instruction in Pakistani universities have tended to address the status of English as a medium of instruction and

teacher attitudes toward English language teaching rather than specific classroom feedback practices. Mahboob and Talaat (2008) provide a foundational overview identifying the gap between research-informed practice and classroom reality in Pakistani EFL instruction, noting a pervasive transmission-oriented pedagogy that prioritises surface accuracy over communicative competence. Canagarajah (2006) and Pennycook (2010) provide theoretical frameworks for understanding how global ELT practices are appropriated and transformed in local South Asian contexts, frameworks that inform the present study's interpretation of teacher feedback behaviour as shaped by institutional and cultural context rather than simply by pedagogical choice.

The specific L1 transfer challenges facing Pakistani ESL writing learners are well documented in the South Asian English literature. Urdu lacks the English article system entirely, differs from English in verb phrase structure in ways that generate systematic tense errors, and employs preposition equivalents whose semantic and syntactic distribution does not map onto English preposition use. These interference patterns, which are visible in the error profiles of the student participants in the present study, provide a principled basis for the selection of error categories examined and for the interpretation of differential feedback effectiveness across those categories.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs a mixed-method design integrating quantitative error analysis with qualitative teacher interview data. The quantitative strand uses a within-subjects repeated measures design, tracking the same 25 student participants across three writing drafts over six weeks and applying paired-samples t-tests to compare error frequency from Draft 1 to Draft 3 for each error category. Cohen's d effect sizes are reported alongside significance values to allow assessment of the practical magnitude of observed changes, not only their statistical significance. The qualitative strand uses semi-structured interviews with five teachers, analysed through inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Integration of the two strands follows an explanatory sequential design: quantitative findings on error reduction are presented first, and qualitative teacher data are used to explain the institutional and pedagogical conditions that produce those patterns.

#### **3.2 Participants**

Twenty-five undergraduate ESL students and five ESL writing teachers participated in the study. Student participants were recruited from a single intact writing course at a private university in Karachi. All were Pakistani nationals with Urdu or a regional language as L1, enrolled in an English-medium degree programme in which academic writing in English is a core requirement. The sample comprised 14 female and 11 male participants aged 18 to 23, representing Years 1 through 3. Proficiency levels were mixed, as is typical in Pakistani university writing courses that do not stream by language ability.

Five teacher participants were recruited through purposive sampling from universities in Karachi, targeting teachers with a minimum of five years of university-level ESL writing

experience. The sample comprised three female and two male teachers with experience ranging from five to eighteen years (mean: 10.4 years), all holding postgraduate qualifications in English language teaching or applied linguistics. All five reported familiarity with the concept of WCF, though their engagement with specific research findings on feedback effectiveness varied considerably across participants.

**Table 1: Participant Profile**

Feature	Student Participants	Teacher Participants	Detail
Number	25	5	Total N = 30
Gender	14 female, 11 male	3 female, 2 male	Mixed
Age range	18-23 years	28-47 years	Students: mean 20.1
Level	Undergraduate Years 1-3	University ESL faculty	Karachi institutions
Teaching experience	N/A	5-18 years	Mean: 10.4 years
Qualification	Enrolled undergraduates	MA/MEd Applied Linguistics	All postgraduate qualified
L1	Urdu / regional languages	Urdu / Sindhi	All bilingual/multilingual

*Note: All participants were based in Karachi, Pakistan. Student participants were drawn from a single intact writing course.*

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Student data were collected through three writing drafts, a structured attitude questionnaire, and an open-ended written reflection completed after the final draft. All drafts were argumentative essays of approximately 250 words on a common topic provided by the class teacher. Draft 1 was produced at the start of the study period; Draft 2 followed teacher feedback on Draft 1; Draft 3 followed a second round of teacher feedback on Draft 2. The same topic and length requirements were maintained across all three drafts to allow direct error frequency comparison. The attitude questionnaire consisted of 10 Likert-scale items (SA/A/D/SD) addressing beliefs about feedback helpfulness, preferences for feedback type, and self-reported uptake behaviour. An open-ended reflection prompt asked students to describe in 3 to 5 sentences what they do when they receive teacher feedback on their writing. This item was included to provide qualitative texture to the quantitative questionnaire data.

Teacher data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes each, conducted in English and audio-recorded with participant consent.

The interview protocol addressed five areas: current feedback practices, rationale for feedback choices, awareness of WCF research, constraints on feedback practice, and perceptions of student uptake and engagement. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and checked against recordings for accuracy before coding.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Student writing samples were coded for errors in six categories: verb tense, article use, preposition selection, subject-verb agreement, lexical choice, and sentence structure. The coding framework was adapted from Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) and operationalised through a detailed codebook developed for this study. All drafts were independently coded by the researcher and a second coder with postgraduate applied linguistics training. Inter-rater reliability was calculated at Cohen's Kappa = 0.87, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted using SPSS 27 to compare Draft 1 and Draft 3 error frequencies for each category. Cohen's d was calculated as the mean difference divided by the pooled standard deviation. Effect sizes were interpreted following Cohen's (1988) conventions:  $d = 0.20$  as small,  $d = 0.50$  as medium, and  $d = 0.80$  as large.

Teacher interview transcripts were analysed using six-phase thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were generated inductively from the data by the primary researcher and independently by a second coder. Code comparison produced a Cohen's Kappa of 0.81 at the thematic level, indicating strong inter-rater agreement. Three overarching themes were identified through recursive review: the dominance of direct unfocused feedback as default practice, the role of institutional and logistical constraints, and teacher ambivalence regarding student uptake.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to any data collection. All participants provided written informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Student writing samples were anonymised using participant codes, and all teacher interview data were anonymised in transcripts and in all subsequent analysis and reporting. Audio recordings were stored on a password-protected device and deleted upon completion of data analysis. Teachers were explicitly assured that their responses would not be shared with their institutions or used in any way that could affect their employment or professional standing.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Error Analysis: Quantitative Results**

Paired-samples t-tests comparing Draft 1 and Draft 3 error frequencies reveal significant reductions for error categories that received focused corrective feedback and non-significant reductions for categories addressed through unfocused marking. Table 2 presents full results including t-values, significance levels, and Cohen's d effect sizes.

**Table 2: Error Frequency Across Three Drafts with Statistical Analysis**

Error Category	Draft 1	Draft 2	Draft 3	Reduction	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Verb tense	187	134	89	52.4%	t(24)=6.31	p < .001	d = 1.29
Subject-verb agreement	96	71	48	50.0%	t(24)=5.87	p < .001	d = 1.18
Article use (a/an/the)	143	119	97	32.2%	t(24)=4.12	p < .001	d = 0.83
Preposition errors	112	98	84	25.0%	t(24)=3.44	p = .002	d = 0.69
Lexical errors	78	74	69	11.5%	t(24)=1.52	p = .141	d = 0.31
Sentence structure	64	61	58	9.4%	t(24)=1.18	p = .249	d = 0.24

*Note: t-values based on a paired-samples t-test comparing Draft 1 and Draft 3 per participant (df = 24). Effect sizes interpreted as small (d = 0.20), medium (d = 0.50), and large (d = 0.80) following Cohen (1988). Non-significant results in italics.*

Verb tense errors showed the largest reduction, from 187 total errors in Draft 1 to 89 in Draft 3, a 52.4% decrease with a large effect size (d = 1.29, t(24) = 6.31, p < .001). Subject-verb agreement errors showed a comparable pattern (50.0% reduction, d = 1.18, p < .001). Both categories received focused direct feedback in which the teacher provided the correct form and highlighted the error type consistently across all marked scripts. The concentration of feedback attention on these two categories, applied across all three drafts with explicit correction, produced the conditions for rapid and measurable accuracy improvement.

Article errors showed a significant but more modest reduction of 32.2% (d = 0.83, p < .001). Despite the large effect size, the absolute error count remained high at Draft 3, suggesting that while focused metalinguistic feedback produced meaningful gain, the underlying difficulty of article acquisition for L1 Urdu speakers was not resolved within a six-week period. This is consistent with Bitchener's (2008) observation that article gains, while statistically significant and pedagogically meaningful, tends to be partial rather than complete even under optimal feedback conditions.

Preposition errors showed a medium effect (d = 0.69, p = .002) with a 25.0% reduction, reflecting the idiomatic and collocational nature of English preposition use that makes it less

amenable to rule-based correction than the more categorical article and tense systems. Critically, lexical errors ( $d = 0.27$ ,  $p = .141$ ) and sentence structure errors ( $d = 0.24$ ,  $p = .249$ ) showed small, statistically non-significant reductions.

Both categories received unfocused direct feedback in which the teacher marked all instances without explanation or code. The near-zero effect sizes for these categories provide quantitative confirmation that unfocused feedback, even when it is direct and clearly marked, does not produce the accuracy gains achievable through focused approaches.

**Table 3: Focused vs Unfocused Feedback Conditions: Summary Comparison**

Feedback Condition	Mean Draft 1 Errors	Mean Draft 3 Errors	Mean Reduction	Effect Size (d)
Focused direct (verb tense + SVA)	11.32	5.48	51.6%	$d = 1.24$ (large)
Focused metalinguistic (articles)	5.72	3.88	32.2%	$d = 0.83$ (large)
Focused indirect/coded (prepositions)	4.48	3.36	25.0%	$d = 0.69$ (medium)
Unfocused direct (lexical + structure)	5.68	5.08	10.6%	$d = 0.27$ (small)

*Note: Mean errors calculated per participant across the 25-student sample. Effect sizes calculated using Cohen's d comparing Draft 1 and Draft 3 per condition.*

Table 3 consolidates the comparison between feedback conditions and makes the differential effectiveness of focused versus unfocused feedback visible at a glance. Focused feedback, regardless of whether it is direct, metalinguistic, or coded indirect, consistently produces large or medium effect sizes. Unfocused feedback produces a small, non-significant effect. This pattern is consistent across all error categories and represents the central quantitative finding of the study.

#### 4.2 Teacher Interview Findings

Thematic analysis of the five teacher interviews produced three overarching themes. Table 4 presents each theme with a representative verbatim quote and the frequency of endorsement across participants.

**Table 4: Thematic Summary of Teacher Interview Findings with Verbatim Quotes**

Theme	Representative Verbatim Quote	Frequency
Direct unfocused feedback as default	"I correct every single error. If I don't, students think I haven't read their work properly." (T2, 14 years experience)	5 out of 5 teachers
Awareness but non-use of focused feedback	"I know focused feedback is supposed to be better. But in practice, how do you tell a student their other errors don't matter?" (T4, 9 years)	3 out of 5 teachers
Time as primary barrier	"I have three writing classes. That is 90 scripts. I cannot write grammar explanations on every one." (T1, 18 years)	5 out of 5 teachers
Doubt about student uptake	"They check the grade and close the file. I've started asking them to resubmit with corrections highlighted just to force them to look." (T3, 7 years)	4 out of 5 teachers
Institutional / syllabus pressure	"The syllabus doesn't really build in time for revision cycles. We're expected to move on. Feedback becomes a formality." (T5, 5 years)	3 out of 5 teachers

*Note: Quotes are reproduced verbatim from interview transcripts. Participant codes T1-T5 used throughout to protect anonymity.*

The first and most prominent theme is the dominance of direct unfocused feedback as default practice across all five teachers. When asked to describe their typical feedback approach, all five reported marking all or most errors and providing the correct form directly. The rationale offered most consistently was the cultural and institutional expectation of comprehensive correction. As T2, a teacher with fourteen years of experience, stated:

*I correct every single error. If I don't, students think I haven't read their work properly. Their parents think the same. The expectation here is that the teacher finds everything and fixes everything.*

This response illustrates the social and relational dimensions of feedback practice in the Pakistani university context, in which the teacher's authority and diligence are signalled through the comprehensiveness of correction rather than through the strategic selection of feedback targets. Three teachers, T1, T3, and T4, explicitly described their awareness that focused feedback is more effective by the research literature's standards, while simultaneously explaining why they did not use it. T4, with nine years of experience, articulated the tension directly:



# THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

Vol.4 No.2 2026

ISSN P : [3006-3329](#)

ISSN E : [3006-3337](#)

*I know focused feedback is supposed to be better. But in practice, how do you tell a student their other errors don't matter? They'll think you missed them. Or they'll think those errors are fine and keep making them.*

The second theme concerns institutional and logistical constraints as the primary structural barrier to research-informed practice. All five teachers identified marking load as the most significant constraint, with class sizes ranging from 30 to 45 students and all teachers responsible for multiple writing classes simultaneously. T1, the most experienced teacher in the sample, described the arithmetic of the situation with particular clarity:

*I have three writing classes. That is 90 scripts. I cannot write grammar explanations on every one. If I did focused feedback properly, with metalinguistic notes for every targeted error, I would spend my entire weekend on marking. Every week.*

This finding is consistent with the broader literature on teachers' practical constraints as mediators between research knowledge and classroom practice, and it suggests that institutional interventions, including reduced class sizes, structured peer feedback activities, and technology-assisted feedback tools, may be as important as teacher professional development in closing the gap between WCF research and Pakistani university classroom reality.

The third theme concerns teacher ambivalence about student uptake. Four of the five teachers expressed doubt about whether students engage meaningfully with the feedback they receive. T3, with seven years of experience, described the response behaviour that had led her to introduce a mandatory correction resubmission requirement:

*They check the grade and close the file. I've started asking them to resubmit with corrections highlighted just to force them to look. It's extra work for everyone, but at least I know they've opened the feedback.*

This improvised response to the uptake problem is noteworthy because it represents exactly the kind of structured accountability mechanism that the WCF literature identifies as a necessary complement to feedback provision. T3 had arrived at this intervention through practical experience rather than through engagement with the research literature, and her description of its effects, increased revision activity, and greater error correction between drafts, was consistent with what the research predicts.

### 4.3 Student Attitude Questionnaire

Table 5 presents the student attitude questionnaire results across seven selected items, including Likert-scale response distributions and mean scores on a four-point scale (SA = 4, A = 3, D = 2, SD = 1).

**Table 5: Student Attitude Questionnaire Results (N = 25)**

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
Teacher corrections help me improve my writing	14 (56%)	9 (36%)	2 (8%)	0	3.48
I prefer when teacher writes the correct answer directly	18 (72%)	5 (20%)	2 (8%)	0	3.64
I understand rules better when teacher explains them	11 (44%)	12 (48%)	2 (8%)	0	3.36
I look at feedback carefully before my next draft	6 (24%)	10 (40%)	7 (28%)	2 (8%)	2.80
Indirect feedback (underline only) makes me think harder	8 (32%)	13 (52%)	4 (16%)	0	3.16
I feel anxious when I receive a lot of corrections	10 (40%)	9 (36%)	5 (20%)	1 (4%)	3.12
I revise more carefully when only some errors are marked	7 (28%)	14 (56%)	3 (12%)	1 (4%)	3.08

*Note: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree. Mean scores on a four-point scale. Items ordered by mean score.*

The highest mean score (3.64) was recorded for the item expressing a preference for direct correction, confirming that the feedback mode most consistently delivered by teachers is also the mode most preferred by students. This alignment between teacher practice and student preference might appear to validate the status quo, but the questionnaire data also reveal important qualifications to this picture.

Notably, 76% of students agree or strongly agree that indirect feedback makes them think harder (mean 3.16), and 84% agree or strongly agree that they understand rules better when teachers explain them (mean 3.36). These responses indicate that students recognise the cognitive value of less explicit feedback approaches even while preferring the more comfortable option of direct correction. This preference-competence gap is directly relevant to instructional design: it suggests that students can be guided toward more cognitively demanding feedback engagement if the pedagogical rationale is made explicit and if the expectation of engagement with indirect feedback is clearly established.

The most concerning finding in the questionnaire data is the relatively low mean score (2.80) for the item assessing whether students look carefully at feedback before writing their next draft, with 36% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement. The open-

ended reflection responses provided qualitative texture to this finding. Several students described checking grades before reading feedback, and a number described the volume of corrections as discouraging: one student wrote, when there are red marks everywhere I feel like I cannot fix it all so I just try to write better next time without really looking at each one. This response captures precisely the cognitive overload effect that the WCF literature associates with unfocused feedback, and it was echoed in multiple open-ended responses across the sample.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Focused Feedback and Error Reduction: Confirming the Literature**

The quantitative findings of this study confirm the central claim of the focused WCF literature: focused feedback on specific error types produces significantly greater accuracy gains than unfocused feedback addressing all error types simultaneously. The large effect sizes documented for verb tense ( $d = 1.29$ ) and subject-verb agreement ( $d = 1.18$ ) under focused direct feedback conditions, compared to the small and non-significant effects for lexical and sentence structure errors under unfocused conditions, provide clear empirical support for this conclusion in a Pakistani university context that the existing literature had not examined.

The differential effect sizes across focused feedback conditions, with article accuracy ( $d = 0.83$ ) and preposition accuracy ( $d = 0.69$ ) showing smaller effects than tense and agreement, are consistent with the research literature's characterisation of these error types as more resistant to corrective intervention. The article finding replicates Bitchener's (2008) observation of significant but partial gains for L1 articleless language speakers even under optimal focused metalinguistic feedback conditions. The preposition finding replicates Ellis et al.'s (2008) characterisation of prepositional errors as less amenable to focused WCF than more rule-governed grammatical categories. These cross-study replications, now extended to a South Asian EFL context, strengthen the generalisability of both findings.

### **5.2 The Theory-Practice Gap in Pakistani University Context**

The teacher interview findings document a gap between research-informed feedback practice and classroom reality that is structural rather than individual. Three of the five teachers in this study were aware of the research case for focused and metalinguistic feedback and could articulate its rationale, yet none applied it consistently in their classes. The barriers they identified, class size, marking load, curriculum pressure, student and institutional expectations, are not idiosyncratic features of their individual practice but systemic features of Pakistani university writing instruction that would face any teacher attempting to implement research-informed feedback strategies in this context.

This finding has theoretical implications for how the theory-practice divide in WCF research is understood. The dominant framing in the applied linguistics literature characterises this divide as a problem of knowledge transfer, the implication being that teachers who know the research will change their practice. The present data suggest that in institutionally constrained contexts like Pakistani higher education, knowledge of research findings is a necessary but not sufficient condition for practice change. Structural interventions, including manageable class sizes,

curriculum designs that build in revision cycles, and institutionally supported peer feedback activities, are required alongside professional development if research-informed WCF practice is to move from the exception to the norm.

### **5.3 Student Preferences, Uptake, and the Feedback Engagement Problem**

The student data reveal what might be termed the feedback engagement paradox of Pakistani university writing classrooms: students receive the feedback type they prefer (direct, comprehensive correction), yet a substantial proportion do not engage carefully with that feedback before producing subsequent drafts. This paradox is explicable within the framework of cognitive overload theory. When all errors are marked simultaneously, the volume of correction signals to students that their writing is comprehensively inadequate rather than specifically improvable. The student who wrote that when there are red marks everywhere I feel like I cannot fix it all so I just try to write better next time captures this dynamic precisely: comprehensive marking produces discouragement and disengagement rather than focused revision.

Focused feedback, by contrast, gives students a specific, manageable set of corrections to engage with, creating the conditions for the kind of targeted revision that produces measurable accuracy gains. The student questionnaire data support this interpretation: 84% of students agree that they revise more carefully when only some errors are marked (mean 3.08), a finding that suggests students are capable of recognising the revision value of focused feedback even though they continue to prefer direct comprehensive correction as a default. The implication for practice is that changing the feedback mode requires changing student expectations and revision habits as well as teacher practice, through explicit instruction about how to engage productively with different feedback types and through assessment designs that reward revision engagement rather than simply final draft accuracy.

### **5.4 Implications for Pakistani University ESL Writing Instruction**

The convergent findings of the quantitative and qualitative strands of this study point to three concrete implications for ESL writing instruction in Pakistani universities. First, the adoption of focused feedback cycle targeting specific error categories within designated writing units would both improve student accuracy outcomes and reduce teacher marking burden. A semester-long writing course might designate the first four weeks for focused feedback on verb tense and agreement, the next four for articles, and the final weeks for sentence structure and coherence, rotating the feedback focus while maintaining student progress on previously targeted categories through periodic review task.

Second, the development of culturally and linguistically contextualised metalinguistic resources for Pakistani ESL writers would provide teachers with ready-to-use explanatory materials that reduce the time cost of metalinguistic feedback. Contrastive explanations of the English article system that explicitly address its absence from Urdu and other regional L1s, and that provide examples drawn from the error patterns characteristic of Pakistani ESL writing, would be more effective than generic grammar references and more practical for teachers working under time constraints.

Third, the introduction of mandatory feedback engagement activities, such as correction logs, resubmission with annotations, or structured peer discussion of teacher feedback before producing subsequent drafts, would create accountability for uptake that the current practice of providing feedback on completed scripts without structured follow-up does not ensure. The precedent set by T3 in this study, who introduced her own resubmission requirement in response to observed uptake failure, suggests that such interventions are practically achievable within existing course structures even without institutional mandate.

### **5.5 Limitations**

Several limitations of this study require acknowledgement. The sample of 25 students from a single writing course at a single private university in Karachi limits the generalisability of the quantitative findings to other institutional contexts, student populations, and proficiency levels within Pakistani higher education. Public sector universities in Pakistan operate under substantially different resource constraints and institutional cultures from the private university context of this study, and the error profiles, teacher practices, and student attitudes documented here may not be representative of those contexts. Replication in public university settings, and in institutions outside Karachi, is needed before generalised claims about WCF in Pakistani higher education can be made.

The six-week study period allows for assessment of immediate and short-term feedback effects but not of longer-term acquisition outcomes. The study could not determine whether the improvements observed in focused feedback categories would continue over a longer period or transfer to writing tasks in different academic settings. To examine these issues more effectively, future research should follow the same participants across an entire academic year through a longitudinal design. Another limitation is the absence of a no-feedback control group. Because all participants received feedback, it is difficult to determine whether the improvements resulted directly from corrective feedback or simply from repeated practice on similar writing tasks. Future studies should therefore include control groups to establish clearer evidence about the actual impact of feedback on writing accuracy.

### **6. Conclusion**

This mixed-method study has investigated the role of corrective feedback in the L2 writing development of Pakistani university ESL learners, combining paired-samples t-test analysis of error frequency across three writing drafts with thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with five experienced ESL writing teachers. The quantitative findings confirm the superiority of focused over unfocused corrective feedback with large effect sizes for verb tense ( $d = 1.29$ ) and subject-verb agreement ( $d = 1.18$ ) medium effects for article use ( $d = 0.83$ ) and prepositions ( $d = 0.69$ ), and small non-significant effects for lexical and structural errors addressed through unfocused marking. These findings replicate the dominant pattern of the WCF literature in a South Asian EFL context that had not previously been examined with this level of methodological rigour.

The qualitative findings reveal that direct and unfocused feedback dominates Pakistani university writing classrooms not because teachers are unaware of the research case for focused



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ISSN P : [3006-3329](#)

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approaches but because the institutional conditions of Pakistani higher education, large classes, heavy marking loads, curriculum constraints, and strong cultural expectations about comprehensive correction, make research-informed practice difficult to sustain. This finding reframes the theory-practice gap as a structural problem requiring institutional solutions, not only a knowledge problem requiring professional development.

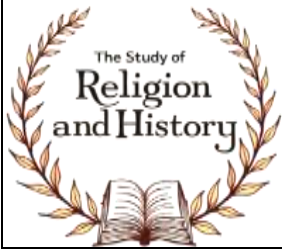
Student attitude and uptake data reveal a feedback engagement paradox: students receive the feedback type they prefer yet a significant proportion do not engage carefully with it, producing the cognitive overload and discouragement effects that the WCF literature associates with unfocused comprehensive marking. The recognition among students that focused and indirect feedback promotes more careful revision suggests that changing feedback mode, supported by explicit instruction about feedback engagement and by assessment designs that reward revision, is both evidentially justified and pedagogically feasible.

The contributions of this study are threefold. Theoretically, it extends the WCF evidence base to a Pakistani university context and confirms the cross-contextual generalisability of the focused feedback advantage. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of integrating statistical effect size reporting with qualitative institutional analysis for producing accounts of WCF practice that are both empirically grounded and contextually situated. Practically, it offers a set of concrete, locally informed recommendations for feedback practice, curriculum design, and institutional support that take account of the conditions in which Pakistani university ESL writing teachers actually work.

Future research should pursue longitudinal designs tracking feedback effects across full academic years, comparative studies across public and private university contexts in Pakistan, and experimental designs incorporating control groups to allow causal inference. The development and evaluation of culturally contextualised metalinguistic resources for Pakistani ESL writers represents a particularly productive direction, and one with direct practical application in a context where the gap between what WCF research recommends and what Pakistani university writing classrooms deliver remains wide but, as this study suggests, is not beyond the reach of informed and institutionally supported pedagogical change.

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