



What Makes Written Feedback Effective?

What New Research Says About Teacher Written Feedback
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WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

Written feedback is one of the most widely used teaching practices, particularly in writing classrooms. However, simply writing comments on students' work does not guarantee improvement. This study explored how novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers understood written feedback and how those beliefs were reflected in their classroom practice.

Researchers interviewed four university writing teachers and analysed the written comments they provided on students' assignments. The study found that teachers generally believed written feedback should help students improve their writing, and they shared similar views about the overall scope of feedback. Most preferred giving comprehensive feedback by commenting on many aspects of students' work rather than correcting only a few selected errors.

Despite these shared beliefs, differences emerged when researchers examined the feedback itself. Teachers focused primarily on language accuracy, especially grammar, spelling, and sentence structure, while giving comparatively less attention to higher-order features such as ideas, organisation, coherence, and argument development. In other words, the comments students received often reflected what was easiest to correct rather than what would most improve the quality of their writing.

The study also found that teachers' beliefs and classroom practices did not always match. Although teachers recognised the importance of using different feedback strategies, their actual comments were often shaped by classroom realities such as limited time, heavy marking loads, student expectations, and institutional practices. These pressures sometimes prevented teachers from providing the balanced, developmental feedback they intended to give.

The researchers conclude that effective written feedback requires more than identifying mistakes. Teachers need opportunities to develop feedback practices that encourage students to think about their ideas, revise meaningfully, and become increasingly independent writers.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Many teachers spend hours marking assignments, yet students often focus only on corrected errors or grades. This research suggests that effective feedback should guide students towards improving the quality of their thinking as well as the accuracy of their writing. Students make greater progress when written feedback balances attention to language with comments that strengthen organisation, reasoning, and communication. Even a few carefully



chosen comments can encourage deeper revision and more independent learning than extensive correction of every error.

CLASSROOM REALITY

Teachers Want	Students Often Experience
Better overall writing	Feedback focused mainly on grammar
Meaningful revision	Correcting errors without improving ideas
Independent writers	Waiting for teachers to fix every mistake
Balanced feedback	Too many corrections and too little guidance

TRY TOMORROW

Before returning the next assignment:

1. Comment first on the student's ideas, organisation, or clarity before correcting language errors.
2. Identify one or two priority areas for improvement instead of marking every mistake.
3. Ask reflective questions such as, "*Can you explain this idea more clearly?*" or "*How could this paragraph better support your argument?*"
4. Give students time to revise their work using your feedback before assigning a grade.

CAUTION

Written feedback becomes less effective when it overwhelms students with corrections. Marking every error may improve the current assignment but does little to develop independent writers. Prioritise feedback that students can understand, act upon, and apply in future work.

ONE KEY TAKEAWAY

The best written feedback does more than correct mistakes—it helps students become better thinkers, writers, and independent learners.

Keywords: written feedback, EFL writing, teacher beliefs, feedback practices, writing instruction, formative assessment

Reference

Cheng, X., Zhang, L. J., & Yan, Q. (2025). *Exploring Teacher Written Feedback in EFL Writing Classrooms: Beliefs and Practices in Interaction*. *Language Teaching Research*, 29(1), 385–415.