

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effects of Interpersonal Written Feedback on the Writing Achievement of ESL Learners in Online and Distance Mode

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of interpersonal written feedback in an ESL classroom in an online and distance learning (ODL) mode. This study aims to examine the effects of feedback. Interpersonal written feedback is a contentious and complex task that has long piqued the interest of scholars and educators. This paper discusses the effects of interpersonal written feedback on the writing achievement of ESL learners in online and distance learning modes. A quasi-experimental design was employed involving ESL learners enrolled in different online courses. Data were collected from 30 students in the ODL mode from different institutes of distance education in Aligarh. The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The participants reported positive perceptions of the clarity of interpersonal feedback in the online environment because they could review the written feedback repeatedly. They could go back to the feedback written by their teachers and evaluators. Future research should focus on maximising the potential of interpersonal written feedback and on contextual variables in feedback, while also shedding light on how teachers can best deliver feedback in ODL modes to suit learners at different levels.

Keywords: interpersonal written feedback, online and distance mode of learning

FULL RESEARCH PAPER**Introduction**

The introduction and expansion of online and distance learning have reshaped pedagogical practices, modes of interaction, and the way ESL learners receive feedback. Online and distance modes of learning are known for their flexibility in time and space and often mask inequalities that shape students' access to sustained academic interaction. This paper aims to contribute to teachers' knowledge of how to write effective interpersonal written feedback to improve students' English performance in ODL (online and distance learning) mode. This study might also contribute to the formulation of new educational policies for teachers, educators, institutes, and even tutors, for effective feedback practices and the use of interpersonal written feedback in English to improve students' writing achievement at all levels. ODL offers flexibility in place and time, but giving feedback in this mode becomes even more complex, as it presents its own challenges. One of the important problems faced by many institutes offering open and distance learning services is the difficulty of interacting with learners, due to the high learner numbers and insufficient academic staff. Problems such as delays and disruptions arise when giving continuous, quick, and effective feedback to learners, which is among the most important elements of feedback. The existing literature continues to privilege classroom-based instruction, thereby marginalising the pedagogical realities, internal constraints, and communicative avoidance of digitally mediated learning environments. For several decades, researchers in educational psychology and assessment have considered feedback as an important component in student learning and developmental progress, enabling students to evaluate their own work and enhance self-regulation (Gan, 2020).

Background of ESL writing in Online and Distance Learning

ODL is not a new concept. The term online and distance learning (ODL) encompasses various concepts, including correspondence studies, home studies, independent studies, and remote learning. Distance learning/education was defined as a set of methods that foster learning habits and facilitate communication between students and teachers. The rapid expansion of online and distance education has accelerated since COVID-19; as a global event, it accelerated the maturation of technologies for distance education and online learning in general. Asynchronous learning and virtual classrooms have become modes of ESL and language instruction. Writing, as a complex skill, requires rhetorical and sociocultural competence along

with foundational knowledge of linguistics. Written feedback carries a heavy informational load, offering suggestions that facilitate improvement and creating opportunities for interaction between teachers and students. Interpersonal written feedback can prove to be even more helpful in different classroom settings. Feedback is not merely writing extensive comments on students' texts to provide a reader's response; it is also useful in helping them improve as writers, treating writing as a skill. The teacher who provides written interpersonal feedback enables students to read and understand their errors and use them to improve, while also helping them produce written text with minimal errors and maximum clarity for the reader. Students must be provided with feedback that is focused, encouraging, applicable and clear. Thus, distance learning is an educational mode that requires communication between a teacher and a student through modern audiovisual technologies. Providing effective feedback in an English classroom is critical to facilitating students' learning and language acquisition. Feedback, both positive and negative, serves as a vital tool for supporting second language development in learners. In the field of second language acquisition, the role of corrective feedback has been extensively studied and debated, with researchers offering various perspectives on its efficacy and implementation. (Fathimah, 2020).

Significance of Written Feedback in Second Language Learning

Before discussing feedback, it seems appropriate to define the term. You (1996) states, 'feedback is the information given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually to improve their performance'. The concept of feedback has been taken from mechanics. In a machine, the arrangement of an automatic signal of the degree of performance or nonperformance is called feedback. Effective interpersonal written feedback is a fundamental component in the pursuit of academic and professional growth. Studies have shown that constructive feedback, when provided thoughtfully and promptly, can significantly impact an individual's learning, motivation, and overall performance. Writing demands skills and conventions, such as writing readiness and grammatical rules, for students to become proficient and effective writers (Younes & Albalawi, 2015). Past research on similar topics has emphasised the importance of providing timely and effective feedback and evaluation in the context of open and distance learning, noting that feedback and evaluation mechanisms are vital because if any part of the system breaks down, the entire system is endangered. By drawing attention to the feedback processes in distance education institutions, it should be emphasised that learners submit their homework via communication technologies to receive evaluation and feedback, thereby fostering a

sense of participation in the course for both the teacher and the learner. Although some learners can tolerate delays in this process, most want feedback sent immediately. It is emphasised that teachers and educators play an important role in the application of digital technologies, providing continuous feedback to learners in online teaching, closely monitoring learning processes, and addressing problems that may arise between teacher and learner. Hyland and Hyland (2006) stated that ESL students consistently rate written feedback more highly than alternative forms of feedback, such as peer or oral feedback.

While writing achievement is a complex and multifaceted concept encompassing various aspects of an individual's ability to communicate through the written word, it fundamentally involves coordinating cognitive skills, linguistic knowledge, and the strategic management of memory resources to set goals, solve problems, and convey ideas. It is a measurable impact of a person's writing, evident in the classroom through a well-written essay or an informative report. It reflects a student's ability to apply knowledge of sentence structure, vocabulary, and critical thinking to produce written work that is engaging, well organised and appropriate for the audience and purpose. Despite the acknowledged benefits, the practical application of teacher feedback often faces challenges due to contextual constraints, including time limitations, large class sizes, and diverse student proficiencies (Cheng & Zhang, 2024).

Traditional feedback models emphasise cognitive dimensions of writing achievement. However, emerging literature on interpersonal written feedback also includes the socio-affective factors in the process of giving and receiving feedback. Online and/or distance learning environments change the ecology of feedback. The advantages of which include time for thoughtful comments and remarks by the educator. The lack of conclusive evidence on the efficacy of feedback across contexts has contributed to the ongoing debate about its impact on student learning. (Lee, 2013)

Rethinking ODL Curriculum

This paper presents the theoretical underpinnings that inform the investigators' understanding of how interpersonal written feedback influences writing achievement, conceptualising writing as a multifaceted process rather than merely a product. Specifically, interpersonal written feedback, including forms such as written corrective feedback, offers a valuable lens for examining the intricate interplay of factors that contribute to the development of robust discourse practices. However,

some challenges that also crop up in this type of setting are that, in the absence of immediate clarification of dialogues/remarks provided to the student in ODL mode, these are often left ambiguous. Social presence theory suggests that when learners feel that the instructions are real or accessible, they are more likely to act on guidance, making interpersonal cues critical in virtual spaces. The research literature has not been unequivocally positive about the role of feedback in writing development, with some studies highlighting the challenges and limitations of various feedback modalities, including teacher-written, peer, and computer-mediated feedback. (Hyland & Hyland, 2019)

As academic and professional environments have become increasingly complex, the need for robust interpersonal feedback mechanisms has become more pronounced. Institutions and organisations are prioritising the development of feedback-rich cultures and classrooms in which individuals should feel supported, valued, and empowered to reach their full potential. Written and interpersonal feedback can be among the best tools for doing so. In a recent study, 58% of students expressed a desire for more timely and abundant feedback, underscoring the demand for a thoughtful and engaging approach to interpersonal written feedback (Sawicki & O'Rourke, 2017). By embracing the transformative power of interpersonal written feedback, we can cultivate an environment of continuous learning, growth, and excellence, ultimately enhancing the academic and professional pursuits of individuals and organisations alike.

A critical review of the existing literature on interpersonal written feedback in ESL writing reveals several notable gaps warranting further investigation. While written feedback has been extensively examined in traditional face-to-face classroom settings, studies focusing on interpersonal written feedback in online and distance learning contexts remain very limited. Existing research examines written feedback in traditional classroom settings or online feedback, without addressing its interpersonal dimension. There is a need for empirical studies comparing interpersonal feedback with conventional written feedback in ESL virtual, online, and distance learning contexts. The existing research prioritises classroom-based instruction, thereby overlooking the dynamics and constraints of virtual learning environments.

Moreover, there is a contextual gap in non-Western and multilingual settings, particularly in ESL contexts within developing countries and distance education systems. The socio-cultural backgrounds of the students, access to digital resources and exposure to feedback practices may significantly shape how written feedback is interpreted and utilised. However, these factors have remained underrepresented in

existing research. There is a scarcity of studies that directly compare the impact of online interpersonal written feedback on ODL learners' writing achievement in a single study. By elucidating the rationale behind successes and shortcomings, descriptive feedback provides actionable insights that foster deeper understanding and promote self-regulation (Lin et al., 2024). The present study, in light of these gaps, seeks to systematically examine the effects of interpersonal feedback on the writing achievement of ESL learners in online and distance modes, thereby contributing grounded insights to this field.

Objectives Of the Study

- To examine the effects of interpersonal written feedback on the writing achievement of ESL learners in online and distance learning contexts.
- To compare the writing performance of ESL learners who receive interpersonal written feedback and those who don't, to assess how feedback may contribute to unequal learning outcomes in online and distance education.
- To analyse the impact of interpersonal written feedback on specific components of writing, like content, organisation, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics

Research Questions

- What effects does interpersonal written feedback have on the writing achievement of ESL learners in online and distance learning modes?
- How does the writing performance of ESL learners differ between those who receive interpersonal written feedback and those who do not receive interpersonal written feedback in online and distance learning settings?
- How does interpersonal written feedback influence specific components of writing, like content, organisation, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics?

Methodology

The participants in this study were ESL learners enrolled in a tertiary-level English course delivered in an online/distance mode. A total of thirty learners were selected to ensure relevance to the research. The participants in the study shared a broadly similar linguistic background and had comparable English proficiency, as established by a pre-test administered before the intervention.

The study employed a descriptive survey research design to examine the effects of interpersonal feedback on the writing achievement of ESL learners in an

online and distance learning mode. A survey-based approach was considered appropriate, as it enables the systematic collection of learners' perceptions and self-reported experiences of interpersonal written feedback in ODL mode. Qualitative data were analysed to identify patterns related to engagement, motivation, and feedback effectiveness.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher based on existing literature and written feedback in online ESL instruction. It was administered online using Google Forms on a 5-point Likert scale. Reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with 10 learners enrolled in an online and distance learning program; the value was 0.91, indicating that the questionnaire was reliable for the main study. The participants were informed of the study's purpose before completing the survey and were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to measure learners' perceptions of interpersonal written feedback and its effects on their writing achievement and satisfaction. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies and reviewed by subject experts in ESL and language education. The results of a one-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant positive perception of interpersonal written feedback among ESL learners in ODL mode ($p < .05$).

Results and Discussion

Based on the experiments, Interpersonal written feedback has a measurable impact on ESL learners' writing achievement in the ODL context. Survey responses indicated learners had positive perceptions of interpersonal feedback in the ODL mode of learning. A majority of participants reported that interpersonal comments helped them understand their weaknesses more clearly and guided them in revising their writing. Learners' feedback also indicated that feedback that focused on specific areas was more helpful than general comments. Many learners reported that receiving written interpersonal feedback made them feel supported in the online learning environment and gave them a greater sense of responsibility for improving their writing. However, after decades of research, applied linguists now generally agree that we are unlikely to identify the perfect recipe for giving feedback to language learners.

It is understood that, for feedback to be effective, it must take into account a very wide range of linguistic, individual and contextual variables, meaning that what works for one learner on one occasion may not work for another. It is not uncommon

for teachers to spend considerable time giving feedback on spoken and written language yet still feel they could be doing it better (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). The findings demonstrate that interpersonal written feedback plays a significant role in improving learners' writing achievement. The study also highlighted the importance of interpersonal written feedback for affective factors, such as motivation and confidence.

Conclusions

The present study examines the effects of interpersonal written feedback on the writing achievement of ESL learners in an online distance-learning context. Drawing on the understanding of feedback as a dialogic process, the study sought to move beyond traditional corrective approaches and explore how interpersonal written feedback contributes to improvements in learners' writing performance. The findings indicate that written interpersonal feedback plays a significant role in enhancing ESL learners' writing achievement, particularly in grammar, content development, and overall coherence.

The study further demonstrates that online and distance learning environments, when effectively utilised, can facilitate meaningful feedback interactions that support learner engagement. By situating the research within an online and distance-education framework, the study highlights the pedagogical potential of interpersonal feedback practices in technologically mediated learning environments within underrepresented ESL contexts. Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. Future research may extend this work by employing longitudinal designs, examining diverse learners and populations. Further studies could explore the long-term effects of interpersonal feedback and compare its effectiveness with other forms of feedback in online learning environments, such as peer feedback. The study confirms that interpersonal feedback is an effective and meaningful instructional strategy for enhancing ESL learners' writing achievement and learning experiences in online and distance education modes.

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