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Structured Feedback Strategies and Tertiary EFL Students' Academic Writing Development: A Descriptive Comparative Study

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Abstract

Academic writing is essential for success in higher education, yet many tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face persistent difficulties with organization, coherence and cohesion, academic vocabulary, and referencing conventions. Although feedback is widely recognized as important for writing development, less is known about how integrated feedback practices operate across real classroom contexts over time. This study examined the relationship between structured feedback practices based on feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward and tertiary EFL students' academic writing development in English composition courses at a private higher education institution in Oman. Using a descriptive-comparative classroom-based design, the study drew on data from 200 students enrolled in ENG 101 and ENG 102 during the 2024–2025 academic year. Students were grouped according to the feedback approach used in their classes: conventional end-point feedback or structured feedback applied across the semester. Data were collected through pre-semester and post-semester feedback questionnaires and group-level academic writing performance records, including continuous assessment, final writing examination scores, and analytic writing sub-skills. The findings showed clear descriptive differences between the two groups. Students exposed to structured feedback reported more positive feedback perceptions and displayed stronger overall patterns of writing development across both holistic and analytic measures than those who received conventional feedback. Although the study does not establish causality, it provides classroom-based evidence that structured feedback may offer a more development-oriented alternative to conventional feedback practices in tertiary EFL writing contexts.

Keywords: Academic writing; structured feedback; feed-up and feed-forward; EFL writing; higher education; formative assessment

Introduction

Academic writing is a central component of student success in higher education because it enables learners to communicate ideas clearly, engage with disciplinary knowledge, and demonstrate analytical and critical thinking. For students learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, however, academic writing is often one of the most demanding aspects of university study. In addition to generating and organizing ideas, these students must write within unfamiliar linguistic, rhetorical, and academic conventions, often while still developing proficiency in the language of instruction. As a result, many tertiary EFL learners experience persistent difficulties related to coherence and cohesion, organization, academic vocabulary, and the use of referencing conventions.

Because academic writing develops over time, feedback plays a particularly important role in supporting student learning in writing classrooms. In higher education, feedback is widely understood as information that helps learners recognize the gap between their current performance and a desired level of performance and then acts to reduce that gap (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). In writing instruction, feedback can support revision, clarify expectations, improve self-monitoring, and strengthen students' ability to apply learning across tasks when it is timely, understandable, and usable.

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At the same time, not all feedback practices support learning equally. In many tertiary settings, feedback is still delivered mainly after final submission and often takes the form of brief corrective comments or grades attached to completed work. When used in this way, feedback may function more as retrospective evaluation than as developmental support. Students may have little opportunity to revise before grading, limited guidance on how to apply comments to future assignments, and insufficient understanding of how feedback is intended to support longer-term learning. These limitations are especially significant in writing classrooms, where improvement depends not only on identifying errors but also on sustained guidance throughout the writing process.

This issue is particularly relevant in tertiary EFL contexts, where students often require support across multiple dimensions of academic writing at once, including organization, coherence and cohesion, academic vocabulary, and referencing. In such settings, feedback that is delivered only after the completion of a task may not adequately support writing development across the semester. A more explicitly structured feedback process may be better suited to helping students understand expectations, improve current drafts, and transfer learning to future assignments. Yet empirical classroom-based evidence on how such integrated feedback practices relate to writing development remains limited, especially in Gulf-region higher education settings.

To address this need, the present study examines the relationship between structured feedback practices and tertiary EFL students' academic writing development in English composition courses at a private higher education institution in Oman, involving 200 participants across two compulsory courses (ENG 101 and ENG 102). More specifically, the study compares conventional end-point feedback with a structured process based on feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward across one academic semester. It considers both students' perceptions of feedback and their writing performance to provide classroom-based evidence of how different feedback approaches are associated with writing development in an authentic tertiary EFL context.

In particular, the study examines how students' perceptions of feedback differ between conventional feedback conditions and structured feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward conditions over the course of a semester, and how patterns of academic writing development differ between students who receive conventional feedback and those who experience structured feedback. It further explores how a structured feedback process is associated with students' development in key academic writing dimensions, including coherence and cohesion, organization, academic vocabulary, and referencing.

Literature review

Feedback as a developmental process in higher education

Feedback is widely recognized as a central element of learning and performance development in higher education, particularly in complex skill areas such as academic writing. In formative assessment traditions, feedback is commonly understood as information that helps learners reduce the gap between current and desired performance and supports revision, self-regulation, and goal-directed improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). Research has also shown that the value of feedback depends not only on the information provided, but also on how that feedback is framed, interpreted, and used by learners (Evans, 2013). In the context of academic writing, feedback has been linked to improvement in organization, clarity, coherence, and disciplinary appropriateness, especially when learners are able to revise their work or apply comments across multiple writing tasks (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

A major strand of feedback scholarship views feedback as a means of promoting self-regulated learning. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that effective feedback supports learning by clarifying standards, encouraging self-assessment and reflection, and fostering dialogue between teachers and students. In a similar vein, sustainable feedback perspectives emphasize that feedback should not only improve immediate performance but also develop learners' capacity to judge and improve their own work overtime (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Sadler, 2010). This longer-term orientation is especially important in higher education, where students are expected to transfer learning across tasks and become increasingly independent writers. Carless and Boud (2018) extend this discussion through the concept of feedback literacy, which highlights students' ability to value feedback, interpret it, regulate their emotional responses to it, and act on it productively.

Together, these perspectives suggest that effective feedback is not merely corrective information, but part of a broader developmental process that supports learner agency and transfer (Carless & Boud, 2018; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Feed-up, feedback and feed-forward: A structured model

Within these broader perspectives, recent scholarships have drawn attention to the interconnected roles of feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward in supporting learning. Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe feed-up as clarifying goals and standards before performance, feedback as providing information about current performance in relation to those goals, and feed-forward as offering guidance for improvement in future tasks. This tripartite model is particularly relevant to writing pedagogy because

writing develops through planning, drafting, revising, and transfer across assignments rather than through one-time performance alone. Related concepts such as dialogic feedback, feedback spirals, and sustainable feedback practices similarly emphasize that students benefit when feedback is timely, usable, and embedded within an ongoing process of interaction and application rather than delivered as a final judgment on completed work (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Carless, 2019).

The growing literature on feed-forward also reinforces the importance of orienting feedback towards future improvement rather than restricting it to comments on past performance (Sadler et al., 2023). Recent work has also explored technology-mediated feedback in academic writing, suggesting that AI-based feedback systems supported by adaptive rubrics may improve feedback consistency and relevance in writing instruction (Alawad, 2025).

Written corrective feedback in second language (L2) writing

In second-language writing research, feedback has most often been studied through the lens of written corrective feedback (WCF). This literature has shown that WCF can contribute to improvement in linguistic accuracy, especially when feedback is specific and when students are given opportunities to revise their texts (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). Meta-analytic evidence also suggests that the effectiveness of WCF depends on contextual and learner-related factors rather than on feedback alone (Kang & Han, 2015). More recent syntheses of naturalistic classroom studies underline the importance of examining feedback in real instructional settings, where class size, time constraints, learner diversity, and institutional assessment structures all shape how feedback is given and used (Mao et al., 2024). While this body of research has made an important contribution to understanding the role of corrective feedback in L2 writing, much of it has concentrated on discrete forms of response and linguistic outcomes rather than on integrated feedback processes extending across a semester of classroom learning.

Student engagement with feedback

Another important development in literature concerns students' engagement with feedback. Even carefully designed feedback may have limited impact if students do not understand it, value it, or know how to use it. Studies have shown that feedback is often underused because learners may misinterpret comments, perceive them as justification of grades rather than support for learning, or lack strategies for acting on them in revision and future tasks (Evans, 2013; Orsmond et al., 2005). This has led to increased attention to feedback literacy and student agency, with researchers arguing that effective feedback depends on learners' active participation in interpreting and applying comments rather than passively receiving them (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone et al., 2017).

Feedback is also shaped by emotional and relational factors. Ryan and Henderson (2018) show that students' responses to feedback are influenced by tone, fairness, trust, and clarity, all of which can affect motivation, confidence, and willingness to revise. These affective dimensions may be particularly important in EFL writing classrooms, where students often experience anxiety about language performance and academic judgement.

Contextual relevance and research gaps

These issues are especially relevant in tertiary EFL contexts, where students are required to develop multiple aspects of academic writing at the same time, including organization, coherence and cohesion, academic vocabulary, and referencing practices. In such contexts, feedback that is delivered only after final submission may provide limited developmental value because students have fewer opportunities to revise and to transfer learning from one task to another. Although research on feedback in Gulf-region higher education remains limited, some emerging studies have begun to address contextual issues relevant to the region. For example, Alawad and Hamid (2025) examined faculty feedback practices and perceptions in online academic writing contexts at institutions in Oman and Saudi Arabia, highlighting variation in institutional approaches and the need for further context-sensitive research. While that study focuses on faculty practices rather than student writing development, it points to the importance of examining how feedback operates in regional higher education settings and how it relates to students' learning experiences.

Taken together, the literature suggests three important gaps. First, much empirical research in L2 writing has focused on specific feedback types, especially written corrective feedback, rather than on integrated feedback models that combine feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward across a sustained period of classroom instruction (Kang & Han, 2015; Mao et al., 2024). Second, although feedback literacy research highlights the importance of learner understanding, motivation, and uptake, there is still a need for classroom-based studies that examine both students' perceptions of feedback and visible changes in writing performance over time (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone et al., 2017). Third, context-specific evidence from Gulf-region tertiary EFL classrooms remains comparatively limited, despite the importance of feedback design in settings characterized by varied student preparedness and strong emphasis on academic writing in English-medium study (Alawad & Hamid, 2025).

In response to these gaps, the present study offers a descriptive-comparative analysis of structured feedback practices and their association with students' feedback perceptions and academic writing development over the course of a semester in ENG 101 and ENG 102 at a private higher education institution in Oman.

Research method and design

This study employed a descriptive-comparative classroom-based design to examine how different feedback practices were associated with tertiary EFL students' academic writing development over the course of one academic semester. The study compared two naturally occurring groups of students enrolled in English composition courses who experienced different feedback conditions: conventional feedback and structured feedback based on feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward principles. Because the study was conducted in actual classroom settings and used course-embedded assessment data collected across the semester, its purpose was not to establish causal relationships but to document and compare patterns of writing development and student feedback perceptions under the two instructional conditions.

This design was appropriate for the study because it allowed the researchers to investigate feedback practices as they were implemented in a real tertiary EFL teaching context rather than under tightly controlled experimental conditions. In addition to examining changes in students' writing performance, the study also considered changes in students' perceptions of feedback, thereby providing a broader account of how structured feedback may be associated with both academic writing development and learner engagement with feedback in classroom practice.

Participants and context

The participants were 200 undergraduate students enrolled in English Composition courses (ENG 101 and ENG 102) at a private higher education institution in Oman during the 2024-2025 academic year. These courses are compulsory for students across different fields of study and are designed to develop core academic writing abilities, including organization, coherence and cohesion, academic vocabulary, and referencing practices.

The study drew on students from existing course sections taught within the normal instructional program of the institution. For the purposes of comparison, whole course sections were allocated to one of two instructional conditions: a control group (n = 100), which received conventional feedback, and an intervention group (n = 100), which received structured feedback organized around feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward stages. Random allocation was achieved by assigning whole sections to conditions using a random number generator, ensuring that neither the researcher nor the students could choose their condition.

To support comparability between the two groups, baseline course records and pre-semester questionnaire responses were reviewed descriptively at the beginning of the semester. These indicated that the two groups had broadly similar starting points in terms of writing performance and feedback awareness prior to the implementation of the two feedback approaches.

Instructional conditions: Detailed comparison

The two groups participated in the same English composition courses during the same academic semester, but they differed in the way feedback was designed and delivered throughout the writing process. In the intervention condition, the integrated feedback cycle followed a repeated sequence across assignments: first feed-up before writing, next formative feedback during drafting, and finally feed-forward after submission to guide improvement in the next task. Table 1 provides a timeline of activities for both conditions.

Table 1

Timeline of Instructional Activities and Data Collection Points

Week	Control group (conventional feedback)	Intervention group (structured feedback)
1	Course introduction; pre-questionnaire	Course introduction; pre-questionnaire
2	Assignment 1 issued; brief rubric mention	Assignment 1 issued; feed-up session: explicit discussion of goals, criteria, rubrics, model texts
3-4	Drafting with no feedback	Drafting with in-process feedback on drafts
5	Assignment 1 submission; end-point feedback (grade + brief comments)	Assignment 1 submission; feedback on final draft + feed-forward comments for next task
6-7	Assignment 2 issued; minimal guidance	Assignment 2 issued; feed-up session again
8-9	Drafting with no feedback	Drafting with in-process feedback

10	Assignment 2 submission; end-point feedback	Assignment 2 submission; feedback + feed-forward
11-13	Assignment 3 (final writing exam) preparation – no feedback	Assignment 3 preparation – feed-up and draft feedback
14	Final writing exam: end-point feedback only	Final writing exam; feedback + feed-forward
15	Post-questionnaire	Post-questionnaire

Control group (conventional feedback): Students received feedback mainly after the final submission of each written assignment. This feedback focused on error correction, grades, and brief general comments on performance. Students had no opportunity to revise based on teacher comments before grading, and feedback was not systematically structured to support transfer of learning from one writing task to the next. During drafting phases, no feedback was provided.

Intervention group (structured feedback): Students received feedback organized around the interconnected stages of feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward.

Feed-up (before writing): The instructor explicitly clarified task expectations, intended learning outcomes, assessment criteria, rubrics, and features of successful writing through guided explanation and model examples. This session took place in class (30 minutes per assignment) and included a handout summarizing key criteria. This stage came first in each assignment cycle and prepared students to draft with a clear understanding of expectations.

Feedback (during drafting): Students submitted partial drafts and received written comments on key dimensions (ideas, organization, coherence, vocabulary, referencing) within 48 hours. Comments were actionable and specific (e.g., "Your introduction states a clear thesis; however, the supporting paragraphs lack topic sentences. Revise by adding a topic sentence at the start of each paragraph"). This second stage built directly on the feed-up session by helping students apply the previously explained criteria to their developing drafts.

Feed-forward (after submission): Along with final grades, students received a short paragraph highlighting two strengths and two areas to improve in future assignments, explicitly linking to the next task. This final stage connected one assignment to the next, ensuring that feedback was used cumulatively rather than remaining tied only to the completed task.

Throughout the semester, the structured feedback cycle was applied consistently. The control group, by contrast, experienced feedback primarily as post-task evaluation without feed-up or feed-forward components and without in-process feedback during drafting. In this way, the three stages were not delivered as separate or isolated actions, but as a connected sequence in which expectations were clarified before writing, comments were provided during drafting, and improvement points were carried forward into subsequent assignments.

Instruments and data collection

Data for the study were collected from two main sources: a feedback perception questionnaire and students' academic writing performance records gathered over the course of one academic semester.

Feedback perception questionnaire: The 16-item questionnaire was developed by researchers based on Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback model and existing feedback literacy instruments (Carless & Boud, 2018). Content validity was established through review by three experts in EFL writing and assessment. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 students not in the main sample, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, indicating high internal consistency. Items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) and covered awareness of feedback types, understanding of feed-up/feedback/feed-forward, clarity and usefulness of feedback, opportunities to revise, and influence on confidence, motivation, and writing improvement. The questionnaire was administered twice: pre-semester (week 1) and post-semester (week 15).

Academic writing performance records: These were derived from course-based assessments: continuous assessment (three assignments, each graded out of 100, with scores averaged), final writing examination (a timed essay graded out of 100 by two independent raters), and analytic sub-scores for coherence and cohesion, academic vocabulary, organization, and referencing skills (each out of 10). All writing assessments were graded using standard analytic rubric developed by
the institution. To ensure inter-rater reliability, 20% of scripts were double-marked by a second rater; agreement was high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.85$ for overall scores, and intraclass correlation coefficients for sub-skills ranged from 0.82 to 0.90). Performance data were collected at two points: initial baseline (week 3-5 first assignment) and end-of-semester (week 14-15 final exam).

All data was collected within the normal operation of the courses. Questionnaire responses and writing performance records were made available to the researchers in aggregated form for group-level comparison. More specifically, the group mean scores reported in this study were provided by the institution's assessment office; individual participant-level raw data were not available to the researchers.

Data analysis

As the study was designed as a descriptive-comparative investigation using aggregated classroom data without retention of individual student identifiers, inferential statistical testing was not possible. The analysis therefore relied on descriptive statistics using group mean scores provided by the institution's assessment office for each questionnaire item and performance measure at the pre- and post-semester stages for both groups. These means were compared descriptively to identify the direction and relative magnitude of change across the two instructional conditions. Standard deviations could not be calculated from the aggregated data available to the researchers. The study therefore reports patterns of association rather than statistical significance or causality. This approach is consistent with the study's purpose of providing classroom-based evidence of how two feedback approaches were associated with writing development and feedback perceptions in an authentic setting, without claiming experimental proof.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics and Intellectual Property Committee at the Modern College of Business and Science, Oman (approval number: MCBS/REC/2024-056). All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement before data collection began. Participation in the questionnaire component was voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially and used only for research purposes.

To protect participants' privacy, all questionnaire responses and academic performance data were anonymized prior to analysis, and the findings are reported only in aggregated group form. No identifying personal information was included in the dataset used for analysis or in the presentation of results. In addition, participation in the study did not affect students' official course grades, academic standing, or access to normal instructional support.

As the study was conducted in an authentic classroom context using course-embedded data, particular care was taken to ensure that the research process did not interfere with regular teaching and assessment practices. The researcher was also the course instructor for all sections, which introduces potential bias (addressed in Limitations). To minimize bias, all grading was conducted using the same analytic rubric, and 20% of scripts were double-marked by a blind second rater. The questionnaire was administered by a teaching assistant who was not involved in grading.

Results

This section presents the descriptive findings in relation to students' feedback perceptions and academic writing performance under conventional and structured feedback conditions.

Feedback perceptions

Table 2

Mean Likert-Scale Scores for Feedback Perception Items

Question	Control Pre	Control Post	Intervention Pre	Intervention Post
Awareness of feedback types	2.6	2.7	2.6	4.2
Understanding of feed-up	2.5	2.6	2.5	4.1
Understanding of feedback	2.7	2.8	2.6	4.4
Understanding of feed-forward	2.4	2.5	2.4	4.3
Instructor explains writing objectives	2.6	2.7	2.5	4.2
Receives regular feedback	2.8	2.9	2.7	4.1
Feedback helps improve writing	2.7	2.8	2.6	4.3

Feedback before final submission	2.5	2.6	2.5	4.2
Suggestions help future assignments	2.6	2.7	2.6	4.3
Time to revise after feedback	2.5	2.6	2.5	4
Feedback is clear	2.6	2.7	2.6	4.1
Applies feedback	2.7	2.8	2.7	4.3
Confidence in writing	2.8	2.9	2.6	4.2
Motivation to improve	2.6	2.7	2.5	4.4
Understands strengths/weaknesses	2.7	2.8	2.6	4.3
Progress due to feedback	2.8	2.9	2.7	4.4

At the beginning of the semester, both groups showed similar responses (means 2.4-2.8). By the end, the control group showed only slight increases (post means 2.5-2.9), while the intervention group showed markedly higher means (4.0-4.4). This descriptive pattern indicates that structured feedback was associated with more positive changes in feedback perceptions.

Academic writing performance

Table 3

Mean Academic Writing Performance Scores

Assessment Component	**Control Pre**	**Control Post**	**Intervention Pre**	**Intervention Post**
Average Continuous Assessment (%)	63	66	62	81
Average Final Writing Exam (%)	65	68	63	84
Coherence & Cohesion (out of 10)	5.5	5.8	5.4	8.5
Academic Vocabulary (out of 10)	5.7	5.9	5.6	8.6
Organization (out of 10)	5.6	5.9	5.5	8.7
Referencing Skills (out of 10)	5.4	5.7	5.3	8.4
Overall Writing Score (out of 100)	64	67	63	83

Baseline scores were similar across groups. The control group showed modest gains (3-4 percentage points overall; 0.3-0.5 points on sub-skills). The intervention group showed substantially larger gains (18-21 percentage points overall; 3.0-3.2 points on sub-skills). These descriptive differences suggest that structured feedback was associated with stronger writing development across all measures.

Discussion

The findings show clear descriptive differences between students who experienced structured feedback (feed-up, feedback, feed-forward) and those who received conventional end-point feedback. Across both feedback perception measures and academic writing performance indicators, the intervention group showed stronger positive patterns of development than the control group. Because the study relied on aggregated data without inferential statistics, these patterns should not be interpreted as proof of causal relationships. However, they suggest that a more explicit, staged, and development-oriented feedback process was associated with stronger gains and more positive perceptions in this tertiary EFL context.

Contribution to existing knowledge

One important contribution lies in the focus on integrated feedback design rather than isolated feedback techniques. Much L2 writing feedback research has concentrated on written corrective feedback and linguistic accuracy. By contrast, this study examined a broader feedback cycle (feed-up before writing, feedback during drafting, feed-forward for transfer). It adds

classroom-based evidence that a structured sequence of feedback practices may be associated with writing development across multiple dimensions (organization, coherence, vocabulary, referencing) rather than improvement in only one feature.

A second contribution is connecting students' perceptions of feedback with performance development in an authentic classroom setting. The intervention group not only showed stronger writing gains but also reported higher feedback awareness, clearer understanding of feedback processes, greater confidence, and stronger motivation. This supports feedback literacy perspectives (Carless & Boud, 2018) which argue that feedback is most effective when students understand, value, and act on it.

A third contribution is contextual: the study provides rare classroom-based evidence from a Gulf-region tertiary EFL setting. While the findings are not generalizable uncritically, they suggest that structured feedback approaches may be particularly useful where students vary in preparedness and need support across multiple writing dimensions.

Why structured feedback may be more effective

The strong descriptive gains in the intervention group can be explained by several features. First, feed-up clarified expectations before writing, reducing uncertainty and helping students' self-monitor. Second, in-process feedback allowed revision before final submission, making feedback actionable rather than purely evaluative. Third, feed-forward explicitly linked comments to future tasks, promoting transfer. In contrast, conventional feedback provided no feed-up, no in-process guidance, and no feed-forward – it functioned only as retrospective justification of grades. This may explain why the control group showed minimal improvement.

Practical examples for readers

To support transferability, concrete examples from the intervention are provided:

- Feed-up example: Before Assignment 1, the instructor showed a model paragraph, highlighted the topic sentence, supporting details, and concluding sentence, then gave students a one-page rubric with descriptors for each criterion (organization, coherence, vocabulary, referencing). Students practiced identifying these features in another model.
- Feedback example: On a draft, the instructor wrote: "Your argument is clear, but the transition between paragraphs 2 and 3 is abrupt. Try adding a linking phrase such as 'In addition' or 'Furthermore' at the start of paragraph 3."
- Feed-forward example: After grading Assignment 1, the instructor added: "For Assignment 2, pay special attention to in-text citations. You used only one source here; aim for at least three and ensure each is cited correctly using APA."

These examples can be adapted by instructors in other contexts.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis was based on aggregated classroom data without individual student identifiers, as required by the institutional ethics agreement. Consequently, inferential statistical testing was not possible, and standard deviations could not be calculated. The findings are descriptive only and do not establish statistical significance or causality. Second, the researcher was also the course instructor, which may have introduced bias despite efforts to minimize it (double-marking, blind second rater, teaching assistant administering questionnaires). Students in the intervention group may have perceived the instructor's additional effort positively, influencing their questionnaire responses. Third, the study was conducted at a single private institution in Oman, limiting generalizability. The classroom-based nature enhances ecological validity but also means that contextual factors (class size, institutional culture, student demographics) may have shaped the results. Fourth, the study did not collect qualitative data (e.g., student interviews, revision histories, teacher feedback logs). Such data would provide deeper insight into how students interpreted and used structured feedback. Fifth, the study lasted only one semester. Longer-term effects on writing development and transfer to other courses remain unknown.

Future research should address these limitations by: (a) using participant-level data and inferential statistics (t-tests, ANOVAs) to test significance; (b) employing a research assistant or second instructor to deliver the intervention, reducing bias; (c) collecting qualitative data through interviews or think-aloud protocols; (d) extending the study across multiple semesters or institutions; and (e) examining how individual differences (e.g., language proficiency, motivation) moderate the effects of structured feedback.

Pedagogical implications

Despite these limitations, the findings offer practical guidance for tertiary writing instruction. First, feedback should be incorporated into course design as a staged process rather than a post-assessment activity. Clarifying task expectations, assessment criteria, and models before students write (feed-up) may strengthen understanding and readiness. Second, feedback during drafting – not only after final submission – allows students to revise before grading, making feedback actionable. Instructors can implement this by requiring draft submissions and providing brief, targeted comments within 48 hours. Third,

feed-forward comments that explicitly link current performance to future tasks help students transfer learning. A simple strategy is to end each feedback session with two sentences: "For your next assignment, continue to [strength] and focus on improving [specific area]." Fourth, developing students' feedback literacy is essential. Instructors should explain the purpose of each feedback stage and model how to interpret and apply comments. This can be done through in-class activities where students practice responding to sample feedback.

At the institutional level, writing programs should develop clear feedback frameworks and offer professional development for instructors on designing staged feedback processes. Structured feedback should be understood not as an individual technique but as part of a broader instructional approach supporting sustainable academic writing development.

Conclusion

This study examined how structured feedback practices based on feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward were associated with tertiary EFL students' academic writing development in a classroom-based higher education context in Oman. Using a descriptive-comparative approach, the study compared students who experienced conventional end-point feedback with those who received a staged feedback process across one semester. The findings showed consistent descriptive differences in both feedback perceptions and writing performance. Students exposed to structured feedback displayed stronger positive patterns in feedback awareness, confidence, motivation, and performance across holistic and analytic measures.

Although the study does not establish causality or statistical significance, the consistency of the observed patterns suggests that structured feedback may offer a more development-oriented alternative to conventional feedback in tertiary EFL writing classrooms. When feedback is distributed across the writing process and connected to future tasks, students may be better positioned to understand expectations, revise effectively, and transfer learning. Within the limits of descriptive classroom-based research, this study contributes evidence to ongoing discussions of sustainable and dialogic feedback practices in higher education writing instruction.

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