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EFL Learners' Perspectives on AI-Produced and Instructor Feedback in Improving Second Language Writing

Abdulaziz Alshahrani[1], Fatima Abdullah Yahya Al-Inbari[2]

Abstract

Students learning English as a foreign language frequently encounter difficulties with organization, content quality, linguistic precision, and objectivity. Teacher feedback has traditionally served as a means to address these challenges. Nevertheless, instructors managing large classes face constraints related to workload and available time for reviewing student compositions. These limitations hinder the provision of effective feedback. Feedback systems powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI) offer potential solutions to some of these complex challenges, providing benefits such as scalability, rapid response times, and objectivity. However, AI-based feedback systems may struggle to comprehend individual learner requirements and occasionally deliver inaccurate or problematic guidance. Consequently, both teacher-provided and AI-generated feedback present distinct advantages and limitations. The purpose of this study was to examine and compare Saudi EFL students' perceptions regarding teacher feedback and AI feedback in the context of improving L2 writing competence. A mixed-methods research design was utilized to investigate how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students perceive AI-generated feedback in comparison with teacher feedback concerning their L2 writing development. The research integrated quantitative survey data with qualitative interview responses to develop a comprehensive understanding of student preferences and perspectives toward various feedback sources. The survey component recruited 50 undergraduate students enrolled in English language courses at a large public university in Saudi Arabia. From this group, 15 students were selected for in-depth interviews. Statistical methods were applied to analyze quantitative data, while thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data. The findings and discussion sections of this study support the conclusion that AI feedback and teacher feedback offer distinct advantages for enhancing EFL students' L2 writing competence. A complementary relationship exists between these two feedback approaches in addressing students' concerns regarding their L2 writing development. Accordingly, an integrated hybrid methodology that thoughtfully combines both feedback types can prove beneficial for addressing the majority of student concerns related to L2 writing proficiency.

Keywords: *EFL students, L2 writing, AI feedback, Teacher feedback.*

Introduction

Within L2 writing pedagogy, teacher feedback has historically been considered fundamental, appreciated for its contextual awareness, dialogic characteristics, and capacity to address both linguistic precision and communicative purpose. Ferris (2010) proposed that corrective feedback should promote the acquisition of specific linguistic features in L2 and enhance the overall quality of written texts. In contrast, Truscott (1996) contended that grammar correction in L2 contexts should be discontinued, arguing it provides no benefit, proves ineffective, and can have detrimental effects.

[1,2] College of Languages & Translation Najran University, Najran, KSA, Corresponding Author Email: amalshahrany@nu.edu.sa
[1,2] Sharia, Educational & Humanitarian Research Center, Najran University, Najran, KSA, Email: faalnbari@nu.edu.sa

Nevertheless, teacher feedback frequently faces limitations due to heavy workload demands, time restrictions, and inconsistencies in application (Lee, 2017). By comparison, AI-generated feedback provides scalability, speed, and objectivity, though it may be deficient in nuanced comprehension of individual learner needs, cultural backgrounds, and the affective aspects of learning. Fleckenstein, Liebenow, and Meyer (2023) documented a medium effect for automated writing tools, whereas Escalante, Pack, and Barrett (2023) found no difference between AI and teacher feedback. Mekheimer (2025) reported that Generative AI-assisted feedback enhanced writing skills and facilitated the writing process.

These distinctions prompt important questions regarding the comparative effectiveness and learner acceptance of AI versus teacher feedback in L2 writing development.

Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have progressively transformed educational practices, especially within language learning and assessment domains. AI-driven feedback systems, including automated writing evaluation (AWE) tools, now deliver learners immediate, individualized, and data-driven responses to their writing. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, who frequently face persistent difficulties in mastering second language (L2) writing, these technological tools offer enhanced opportunities for practice and skill development beyond the classroom environment. Despite their increasing prevalence, the pedagogical implications of AI feedback remain debated, particularly when compared with the well-established role of teacher feedback.

Student perceptions of feedback hold particular importance, as they affect not only the acceptance of corrective input but also broader perspectives toward writing and technology-enhanced learning. While previous research has investigated the effectiveness of AWE tools in improving writing accuracy and fluency, fewer studies have systematically examined how EFL students perceive AI-generated feedback relative to teacher feedback. Yu and Xie (2025) found that AI-assisted feedback outperformed teacher feedback both quantitatively and qualitatively in terms of comprehensiveness and accuracy. Makwana (2025) determined that AI-powered feedback was comparable to teacher-led feedback across several writing dimensions. The author recommended that additional research is needed on matters such as accuracy and ethical transparency. In a separate comparison, Henderson, et al. (2025) discovered that students appreciated GenAI feedback for its accessibility, timeliness, volume, clarity, and because it was perceived as less intimidating than requesting feedback from teachers. However, students expressed concerns about GenAI's reliability and its contextual and disciplinary knowledge. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for assessing the pedagogical feasibility of AI integration in language classrooms and for developing feedback practices that are both effective and learner-focused.

Consequently, this study investigates EFL students' perceptions of AI-generated feedback in comparison with teacher feedback within the context of L2 writing. Through examining learners' assessments of trustworthiness, usefulness, and applicability, the research aims to illuminate the strengths and limitations of both feedback sources. In so doing, it adds to ongoing discussions about AI's role in language education and provides insights for balancing technological innovation with human-centered pedagogy.

Literature Review

The utilization of an AI tool (Grammarly) resulted in reduced grammatical and lexical errors, though it did not affect word counts and vocabulary diversity, in comparison to not using the AI tool among EFL college students. Students expressed favorable attitudes toward AI-assisted feedback in EFL writing, while also voicing concerns about reliability and potential over-dependence on the tool (Mun, 2024).

No significant difference between AI-feedback and teacher-feedback was identified in research by Alnemrat, Aldamen, Almashour, Al-Deaibes, and AlSharefeen (2025) involving 60 undergraduate students in Jordan. This quasi-experimental pretest-post-test study stratified participants into two ACTFL proficiency levels (Intermediate-Low and Advanced-Low) and assigned them to either an AI feedback group or a teacher feedback group. All students completed an argumentative writing task, received feedback according to their group assignment, and revised their essays accordingly. Writing performance was evaluated using an analytic rubric, with inter-rater reliability established on a stratified 30% subsample to ensure the validity of the scoring process. Pre- and post-test scores were then analysed to assess gains in performance.

In research by Zeevy-Solovey (2024) comparing AI, teacher and peer feedback, students showed preference for receiving teacher WCF and a combination of teacher and ChatGPT WCF (written corrective feedback) and compared the relative proportion of specific writing components for each feedback type. In a comparison of Generative AI feedback with hybrid feedback (AI and instructor) (Zhang, Aubrey, Huang, & Chiu, 2025), Chinese EFL students' writing skills improved with AI feedback on grammar and sentence variety, but with limited contribution to their critical thinking and organisation. The hybrid approach significantly improved organisation, critical thinking, and sentence variety. Participants in the hybrid feedback group also reported higher motivation and more favourable perceptions of feedback. Collectively, these findings suggest that while GenAI feedback supports the development of foundational writing skills, hybrid feedback proves more effective for cultivating advanced academic competencies. The findings obtained by Zou, Guo, Wang, and Liu (2024) revealed greater student engagement and higher accuracy in their revisions in the case of teacher feedback. Although teacher feedback was very effective in helping students address language and content-related issues, students showed a strong tendency to integrate organisational feedback more successfully when it was provided by ChatGPT. Along with a general preference for teacher feedback, students acknowledged the distinctive strengths of ChatGPT for organisational improvements. These results suggest that ChatGPT feedback holds promise as a complementary resource to traditional teacher feedback. The results obtained by Perdana, Bungai, and Ilham (2025) showed the superiority of AI for unity, content development, grammar, mechanics and response speed. Both AI and teachers were equally effective in coherence, personalisation ability, and aligning with learning goals. Both types of feedback were equally effective in vocabulary and feedback reception. Thus, a balanced approach of technology and human elements is best to provide adequate writing skills to EFL students.

A randomised controlled trial was conducted by Khojasteh, Soori, and Javed (2025) with 88 intermediate-level EFL students. They were assigned to one of three feedback groups: (1) teacher e-feedback, (2) AI-generated feedback using tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly, and (3) a

hybrid approach combining both feedback types. Writing proficiency was measured using IELTS writing tasks and the Oxford Placement Test administered before and after the intervention. Significant differences emerged across the groups, with the hybrid feedback group demonstrating the greatest improvements, particularly in task achievement, coherence, and grammatical accuracy. AI-generated feedback was most effective in enhancing lexical resources. Qualitative reflections reinforced these findings, as participants in the hybrid group reported increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and appreciation for the balanced, dual-source feedback. Overall, the results highlight the pedagogical value of integrating human and AI feedback to strengthen EFL writing instruction.

In a quasi-experimental study by Navío-Inglés, Mora, O'Connor-Jiménez, and González (2025), the control group received teacher feedback exclusively, while the experimental group received a combination of teacher and AI-generated feedback. Following the intervention, participants' views on the feedback and their preparedness to assess writing were examined. Findings indicated that the experimental group reported more positive perceptions and greater confidence in their ability to teach and evaluate writing. While both groups recognised the need to strengthen their linguistic knowledge and assessment strategies and emphasised the central role of teacher-led feedback, participants in the experimental group also advocated for the inclusion of AI tools. These results underscore the importance of enhancing linguistic and assessment training in teacher education, while highlighting the openness of pre-service teachers to generative AI as a complementary resource in feedback provision.

Through a qualitative study consisting of semi-structured interviews with 13 students and 10 teachers, Cai and Yu (2025) found that students valued Gen AI for reducing writing difficulty and enhancing efficiency, although it could also produce logical flaws and misinformation. Expressing similar views, teachers emphasized that its effectiveness depended on students' language proficiency levels. Some teachers suggested traditional writing methods to build foundational writing skills. Students found AI easy to interact with, but some dialogical challenges were also noted. The necessity for clear prompts was stressed by both students and teachers. For this, instruction in AI-interaction literacy is needed. Over-reliance was identified as a possible outcome given the ease of using AI. Thus, regarding AI's role, students valued efficiency, while teachers valued the AI's capabilities.

Conversely, in a Saudi study by Aljasser (2025), students perceived instructor feedback as more useful, although ChatGPT feedback was immediate and accessible. In another study by Abdi Tabari, Kushki, and Wang (2025), although both groups improved in accuracy, teacher feedback was more effective in error reduction and greater lexical variations. AI feedback was better at reducing syntax complexity. Thus, the roles of the two feedback types are complementary.

In a scoping review of 51 papers, Crosthwaite and Sun (2025) found that most studies examined improvements in writing quality resulting from GenAI-generated feedback, as well as students' and teachers' perceptions of such feedback. Researchers employed diverse methods, including revision analysis, pre- and post-tests of writing quality, and quantitative surveys. Findings highlight gains in writing quality and skills, alongside mixed perceptions and varied patterns of feedback uptake and revision behaviour, particularly when comparing AI with human feedback.

Therefore, for L2 writing, although AI feedback possesses certain advantages, it cannot completely substitute for human feedback. Consequently, many researchers advocate for a hybrid approach that appropriately combines both AI and human feedback. This study has also identified differential effects of AI and teacher feedback on L2 writing.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perception of AI-generated feedback compared to teacher feedback on their L2 writing. The research combined quantitative survey data with qualitative responses to provide a comprehensive understanding of student preferences and attitudes toward different feedback sources.

Participants

The study recruited 50 undergraduate students from a large public university in Saudi Arabia. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1 *Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 50)*

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	26	52.0
	Female	24	48.0
English Proficiency Level	Intermediate	18	36.0
	Upper-Intermediate	32	64.0
Academic Year	Second Year	15	30.0
	Third Year	22	44.0
	Fourth Year	13	26.0

All participants were enrolled in English language courses as part of their degree requirements and had prior experience receiving feedback from both their instructors and AI-powered writing tools during their coursework. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across different academic disciplines and English proficiency levels.

Instruments

Data collection involved two primary instruments. First, a structured questionnaire was developed to measure students' perceptions of feedback quality across four dimensions: content, organisation, grammar, and mechanics. The questionnaire utilised a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) and included 24 items specifically designed to compare

AI-generated feedback with teacher feedback (12 items per feedback type). The instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.87 for AI feedback items and 0.84 for teacher feedback items.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 12 participants to gather in-depth qualitative data regarding their experiences and preferences. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about the perceived strengths and limitations of each feedback type.

Procedures

The study was conducted over one academic semester. Participants submitted identical writing assignments through both an AI-powered feedback platform and to their course instructors. After receiving feedback from both sources on 2 assignments, participants completed the perception questionnaire. Subsequently, 15 participants were randomly selected for follow-up interviews lasting approximately 20-30 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to determine statistically significant differences between perceptions of AI and teacher feedback across different writing dimensions. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d. Qualitative data from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board before data collection. All participants provided informed consent, and their responses remained anonymous and confidential. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect their academic standing.

Results

Descriptive Statistics for Feedback Perceptions

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for students' perceptions of AI-generated and teacher feedback across the four writing dimensions examined in this study.

Table 2 *Descriptive Statistics for Perceptions of AI and Teacher Feedback by Writing Dimension (N = 50)*

Writing Dimension	Feedback Type	M	SD	Min	Max
Content	AI	4.32	0.68	2.67	5.00
	Teacher	3.54	0.81	1.67	5.00
Organisation	AI	4.18	0.72	2.33	5.00
	Teacher	3.48	0.79	2.00	5.00
Grammar	AI	3.21	0.85	1.33	4.67
	Teacher	4.26	0.64	2.67	5.00
Mechanics	AI	3.08	0.91	1.00	4.33
	Teacher	4.14	0.71	2.33	5.00

Note. Scores range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate more positive perceptions.

Comparative Analysis of Feedback Preferences

Paired sample t-tests were conducted to examine whether significant differences existed between students' perceptions of AI and teacher feedback across the four writing dimensions. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 *Paired Sample t-Test Results Comparing AI and Teacher Feedback Perceptions (N = 50)*

Writing Dimension	Mean Difference	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Content	0.78	0.74	7.45	49	<.001*	1.05
Organisation	0.70	0.69	7.17	49	<.001*	1.01
Grammar	-1.05	0.82	-9.05	49	<.001*	1.28
Mechanics	-1.06	0.88	-8.52	49	<.001*	1.20

Note. Positive mean differences indicate a preference for AI feedback; negative mean differences indicate a preference for teacher feedback. *p < .05

The results revealed statistically significant differences between AI and teacher feedback perceptions across all four dimensions. Students demonstrated significantly higher preferences for AI feedback on content ($t(49) = 7.45$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.05$) and organisation ($t(49) = 7.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.01$), with large effect sizes. Conversely, teacher feedback was rated significantly higher for grammar ($t(49) = -9.05$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.28$) and mechanics ($t(49) = -8.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.20$), also with large effect sizes.

Distribution of Feedback Preferences

Table 4 displays the distribution of students' overall preferences when asked to indicate which feedback source they found more helpful for each writing dimension.

Table 4 *Distribution of Students' Feedback Source Preferences by Writing Dimension (N = 50)*

Writing Dimension	Prefer AI Feedback	Prefer Teacher Feedback	No Preference
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Content	38 (76.0)	8 (16.0)	4 (8.0)
Organisation	35 (70.0)	10 (20.0)	5 (10.0)
Grammar	7 (14.0)	39 (78.0)	4 (8.0)
Mechanics	9 (18.0)	36 (72.0)	5 (10.0)

The distribution of preferences aligned with the statistical findings. A substantial majority of students (76.0%) preferred AI feedback for content-related issues, while 78.0% preferred teacher feedback for grammar instruction.

Qualitative Findings: Reasons for Preferring AI Feedback on Content and Organisation

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed three primary themes explaining students' preference for AI feedback on content and organisation. Table 5 summarises these themes and their frequencies.

Table 5 *Themes Identified for Preference of AI Feedback on Content and Organisation (n = 15)*

Theme	Description	Frequency	% of Participants
Example-rich explanations	AI provided concrete examples demonstrating improvements	14	93.3
Comprehensive detail	AI offered thorough, in-depth feedback on ideas and structure	12	80.0
Immediacy and iterative revision	Instant feedback enabled multiple revision cycles	11	73.3

The most prevalent theme was the appreciation for example-rich explanations provided by AI tools. Participants consistently reported that AI feedback included concrete illustrations of how to implement suggested changes. One participant noted: "The AI doesn't just tell me my paragraph lacks coherence, it shows me exactly how to fix it with different options." Another student explained that receiving multiple examples helped them understand abstract concepts in practical terms, stating that they could see "before and after versions" of their sentences, which made the feedback actionable.

Students also valued the comprehensive detail in AI feedback on higher-order concerns. Participants described how AI tools would address thesis development, argument structure, and logical flow with explanations that teachers often did not have time to provide in written feedback. The immediacy of AI feedback was another significant factor, enabling students to revise and resubmit multiple times without waiting for instructor availability.

Qualitative Findings: Reasons for Preferring Teacher Feedback on Grammar and Mechanics

Three themes emerged from the analysis of students' preferences for teacher feedback on grammatical and mechanical aspects of writing, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6 *Themes Identified for Preference of Teacher Feedback on Grammar and Mechanics (n = 15)*

Theme	Description	Frequency	% of Participants
Interactive negotiation	Face-to-face dialogue allowed clarification and follow-up questions	15	100.0
L1-informed explanations	Teachers addressed Arabic-English interference patterns	13	86.7
Affective support	Personal encouragement enhanced motivation and confidence	10	66.7

All interviewed participants (100%) emphasised the value of interactive negotiation during face-to-face feedback sessions. Students described how classroom discussions allowed them to ask follow-up questions, seek clarification, and verify their understanding in real time. One participant explained: "When I don't understand why my grammar is wrong, I can ask my teacher to explain again in a different way until I get it."

The second major theme concerned teachers' ability to provide L1-informed explanations. Participants appreciated that teachers familiar with Arabic could anticipate common interference errors and address their root causes. One student noted: "My teacher knows why we make certain mistakes because of Arabic, so she explains the difference between how Arabic and English work."

Finally, students valued the affective support embedded in teacher feedback interactions. The motivational dimension of face-to-face feedback, including encouragement and personalised attention, enhanced students' confidence in addressing their grammatical weaknesses.

Summary of Results

Table 7 provides an integrated summary of the key findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Table 7: *Summary of Key Findings*

Feedback Aspect	**Preferred Source**	**Key Reasons**
Content	AI Feedback	Detailed explanations with concrete examples; comprehensive coverage of ideas
Organisation	AI Feedback	Example-rich guidance on structure; immediate availability for iterative revision
Grammar	Teacher Feedback	Interactive negotiation and clarification; L1-informed explanations
Mechanics	Teacher Feedback	Face-to-face dialogue, affective support and encouragement

The findings demonstrate that EFL students in this context perceive AI and teacher feedback as complementary resources, with each offering distinct advantages for different aspects of the writing process.

Discussion & Conclusion

Discussion

This study determined that students favor AI feedback for content and organization dimensions, while preferring teacher feedback for grammar and mechanics in L2 writing contexts. This finding indicates the necessity for a hybrid approach to enhance EFL students' L2 writing competencies. The literature review demonstrated that more researchers endorse the hybrid method than either approach in isolation. Among the 12 papers reviewed, six supported the hybrid approach. These include Zeevey-Solovey (2024), Zhang et al. (2025), Zou et al. (2024), Perdana, Bungai and Ilham (2025), Khojasteh, Soori and Javed (2025), and Navio-Ingles et al. (2025).

According to students, AI delivered comprehensive feedback with concrete examples demonstrating how improvements could be implemented. Immediate feedback facilitated multiple revision cycles. Mun (2024) reported that AI feedback helped reduce grammatical and lexical errors. Conversely, direct interaction with teachers facilitated face-to-face communication for clarifying uncertainties, addressed Arabic-English interference patterns, and enhanced motivation and confidence levels. Within this context, research found that students favored direct feedback over indirect feedback (Alshahrani & Storch, 2014; Alshahrani & Storch, 2025). In Zeevy-Solovey's (2025) studies, preference was either for teacher feedback or hybrid feedback, rather than AI feedback alone.

The hybrid approach becomes necessary due to concerns about reliability and over-dependence on AI feedback (Mun, 2024). Zhang et al. (2025) found that AI feedback enhanced writing skills in grammar and sentence variety, but not in critical thinking or organization. Zou et al. (2024) observed that teacher feedback resulted in greater student engagement and higher revision

accuracy. It was also highly effective in assisting students with language and content-related challenges. However, students demonstrated a stronger tendency to successfully integrate organizational feedback when provided by ChatGPT. Alongside a general preference for teacher feedback, students recognized ChatGPT's distinctive strengths for organizational improvements, thereby supporting hybrid approaches. Perdana, Bungai and Ilham (2025) reported that AI feedback can enhance unity, content development, grammar, mechanics and response speed. However, it matched teacher feedback only regarding coherence, personalization ability, alignment with learning objectives, vocabulary and feedback reception. In Khojasteh, Soori and Javed's (2025) research, while AI feedback proved superior for improving lexical resources, the hybrid approach benefited task achievement, coherence, grammatical accuracy, increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and heightened appreciation for the hybrid approach. The hybrid approach resulted in more positive perceptions and increased confidence in participants' ability to teach and assess writing (Navio-Ingles et al., 2025). While AI feedback may decrease writing difficulty and improve efficiency, it can produce logical flaws and misinformation, with its effectiveness depending on students' language proficiency levels.

Certain findings reported either no distinction between the two feedback types (Alnemrat et al., 2025) or that teacher feedback was superior (Aljasser, 2025). These findings may result from contextual or methodological variations in their studies. While the former employed undergraduate students with varying English proficiency levels, the latter used students from the highly traditional Saudi society.

Conclusion

The findings and discussion presented above lead to the conclusion that AI feedback and teacher feedback offer distinct benefits for enhancing EFL students' L2 writing abilities. A mutual compensatory effect exists between these two feedback types concerning their limitations in addressing students' concerns about L2 writing abilities. Therefore, a hybrid approach that judiciously integrates both feedback types can prove advantageous for addressing the majority of student concerns regarding their L2 writing capabilities.

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