



# Investigating the Role of Feedback in ESL Writing Proficiency: Evidence from Action Research

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## ABSTRACT

This action research investigates the effectiveness of peer feedback and teacher-provided verbal feedback in enhancing paragraph writing proficiency among secondary level English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Writing is a critical yet challenging skill for ESL learners, and effective feedback plays a key role in developing this skill. Over two months, 20 students participated in paragraph writing activities, classroom observations, and interviews to examine the impact of structured peer and teacher feedback on their writing and perceptions. Findings revealed that combining these strategies significantly improved students' writing, as reflected in higher posttest scores. Students also reported increased motivation, confidence, and autonomy. Peer feedback fostered collaboration and critical thinking, while teacher feedback provided clear guidance for improvement. However, challenges such as perceived judgment and lack of trust in peer feedback were noted, with possible mitigation through structured support. These insights contribute to ESL education by offering a foundation for future research and practice in improving writing instructions. Overall, integrating peer and teacher feedback enhances linguistic proficiency, learner independence, and interactive learning in ESL writing classrooms.

**Keywords:** Peer feedback; Teacher-provided verbal feedback; Paragraph Writing proficiency; ESL writing; ESL Education

## INTRODUCTION

Feedback is a crucial tool in ESL education, guiding learners toward self-assessment, reflection, and continuous improvement. Various feedback types such as formative, summative, peer, verbal, written, immediate, and delayed, contribute to learner autonomy, motivation, and communication skills. However, in Sri Lanka, writing remains a significant challenge for ESL students due to limited exposure to English alongside persistent difficulties with grammar, sentence structure, and overall linguistic accuracy (Indrarathne & McCulloch, 2022). These challenges are further compounded by an overreliance on summative assessment practices within the school system, where opportunities for formative feedback are limited, reducing students' ability to receive constructive guidance and improve their writing over time (Samarajeewa & Mohammed, 2025).

This study examines the effectiveness of peer feedback and verbal feedback by teachers in enhancing paragraph writing skills among Grade 9 students in a semi-government school in Sri Lanka. Despite increasing interest in student-centered feedback, teacher-led instruction remains dominant, limiting opportunities for meaningful revision. For instance, a study by Perera (2020) found that 66.7% of respondents reported that student-centered learning is practiced only to some extent, with lectures being the most commonly used method indicating a strong preference for teacher-centered methods. The research thus aims to explore how peer and verbal feedback by teachers can support learners' writing proficiency. There is also growing interest in peer feedback and self-assessment strategies within classrooms, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. By integrating peer and verbal feedback, this study seeks to promote active learning and improve writing outcomes in the ESL classroom.

## Statement of the Problem

Writing is one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners, requiring mastery of planning, drafting, and revision. Despite various teaching strategies in the selected semi-government school, students continue to struggle with paragraph writing, as reflected in their test results and discussions with the teachers. Also, paragraph writing includes different writing skills such as organizing, coherence, and use of correct grammar, punctuation and sentence structures. Thus, this research aims to improve students' paragraph writing skills using the previously mentioned feedback strategies.

Effective feedback is crucial for improving writing proficiency, guiding learners in recognizing gaps and refining their work. While peer and verbal feedback by teachers are known to enhance student engagement and self-regulation, their implementation together remains limited in Sri Lankan classrooms, where teacher-centered instruction dominates. Peer feedback fosters critical thinking and collaborative learning though its effectiveness depends on students' proficiency and the training they receive in providing and utilizing feedback. According to a study by Chen (2023), students with higher proficiency and proper training were more likely to provide constructive feedback and benefit from the peer feedback process. Verbal feedback, when delivered effectively by teachers, provides immediate and personalized guidance. Research by Kerr (2017) indicates that students perceive verbal feedback as more immediate and personal compared to written feedback. This immediacy allows for interactive discussions, enabling students to ask questions and clarify misunderstandings in real-time. Therefore, by integrating these strategies, the study aims to explore how writing proficiency can be enhanced and meaningful engagement can be promoted by the revision process.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this research, the investigator employed peer feedback and teacher provided verbal feedback to evaluate the effect of these strategies on learners' writing, aiming to use them in the teaching learning process based on the resulting data. The exam-oriented educational system in the context of education in Sri Lanka can influence the way how feedback is utilized by both students and teachers. Jayawardena, (2021) notes that feedback given in Sri Lankan classrooms are teacher-centered and focuses on exam preparation which should shift more towards a formative student-centered feedback methodology to improve students' writing proficiency. Thus, peer feedback could be considered as one of the effective learner-centered feedback methods. According to the Teachers' Guide for General English NIE (2017), providing feedback for written skills during the teaching learning process only focuses on providing general feedback comparable with ongoing assessments.

Consequently, Perera, (2010) emphasizes that being exam-oriented only pressures to focus on corrective feedback rather than formative developmental feedback. The success of providing feedback in ESL classes relies on the extent of professional development that teachers have undergone to deliver more precise feedback suited to ESL learners (Wijayadasa, 2013). Topping (1998) also argues that even though peer assessment would be beneficial, its effectiveness varies widely depending on students' ability to provide and receive constructive feedback because the writing improvements may not be seen if students lack skills or practice in providing effective feedback. On the other hand, it is emphasized that the effectiveness of verbal feedback is often inconsistent since the positive impact of verbal feedback on ESL writing proficiency depends on various factors including the clarity of feedback and learner styles, which affect learners' ability to apply feedback effectively (Kang, 2010; Wijesuriya & Dissanayake, 2021).

## Related Studies

Several studies examine feedback in ESL writing. Ferries (2003) synthesized research on feedback types, highlighting that a combination of corrective and formative feedback enhances writing accuracy over time. Bitchener & Knoch (2008) found that explicit corrective feedback significantly improves grammatical accuracy in ESL writing. Regarding peer feedback, Trang & Anh (2022) conducted a quasi-experimental study showing that students using structured peer feedback performed better in writing tasks. Liu & Carless (2006) found that peer feedback fosters critical thinking, though its quality varies depending on students' confidence and experience. Cui et al. (2022) demonstrated that trained peer reviewers provided more meaningful content-based feedback than untrained peers, improving writing structure and clarity. For verbal feedback, Ellis (2009) found that it enhances sentence structure and cohesion. Hyland & Hyland (2006) highlighted that students perceive



verbal feedback as interactive and constructive, allowing immediate clarification. Furthermore, Yang et al. (2006) compared peer and teacher feedback, finding that while teacher feedback provided structured guidance, peer feedback promoted autonomy and self-regulation. Accordingly, existing research underscores the importance of feedback in ESL writing. The integration of peer feedback with teacher guidance fosters a collaborative learning environment. However, feedback effectiveness depends on clarity, timing, and professional teacher training. By adopting a balanced approach, ESL educators can enhance student engagement and writing proficiency.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed an action research methodology to investigate the effects of peer and verbal feedback on the paragraph writing abilities of Grade 9 ESL students. Action research was selected due to its iterative and reflective framework, which facilitates the identification of issues, the planning and implementation of interventions, the evaluation of outcomes, and the refinement of practices. This approach is particularly well-suited to educational environments where educators simultaneously assume the role of researchers to enhance their instructional strategies.

While experimental methods could have been employed to study causal relationships, action research was deemed more appropriate as it allowed for the real-time application and assessment of feedback strategies in a natural classroom setting. Moreover, it enabled the practitioner to engage in reflective practice, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and make informed adjustments.

The action research model proposed by Carr and Kemmis (1986), which builds upon Lewin's (1946) foundational cycle, highlights the significance of critical reflection and collaborative inquiry in educational contexts, empowering practitioners to take an active role in refining their pedagogy. Similarly, McNiff and Whitehead (2002) emphasize the influence of personal values and continuous self-reflection in fostering sustained professional growth. Burns (2010) defines action research as a structured, reflective process that allows educators to address context-specific challenges, implement targeted changes, and assess their impacts. This cyclical process not only supports practical advancements but also bridges theoretical frameworks with classroom practice, positioning action research as a valuable instrument for pedagogical enhancement.

### Role of the Teacher-Researcher

In this study, one researcher was also the teacher, adopting a dual role that allowed direct observation and firsthand insight into classroom interactions and student responses to feedback strategies. This positioning provided the advantage of deep contextual understanding of students' learning processes and the implementation of interventions. However, being both teacher and researcher also posed the risk of potential bias in observing and interpreting student behaviors and reflections. To mitigate this, systematic procedures were followed, including the use of structured reflection journals, semi-structured interview protocols, and thematic analysis of data to ensure that findings were grounded in evidence rather than personal assumptions. The dual role also facilitated iterative adjustments to feedback strategies based on ongoing observations, aligning with the action research methodology that emphasizes cyclical reflection and continuous improvement.

### Methods and Instruments

The research was based on mixed methods, combining quantitative and qualitative data. The study involved 20 female Grade 9 ESL students from a semi-government school in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka. The students, all under 15, were selected through convenience sampling as they were part of the researcher's assigned class. Their writing skills were below standard as per their performance at the mid-term exam, particularly in paragraph writing, prompting the need for feedback-based intervention. All students participated regardless of proficiency level. Ethical clearance was obtained from students, parents, and school authorities, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. This participant group was selected as it was representative of typical secondary level ESL learners in Sri Lanka, making the findings relevant to similar contexts.

### The study incorporated:

- Quantitative data: Student scores across three stages – pretest, intervention, posttest
- Qualitative data: Semi-structured interviews with student participants to explore perceptions of feedback methods, teacher observations throughout the intervention activities

A pretest and posttest were conducted to measure progress, both assessed using IELTS writing criteria, which also guided the teacher’s verbal feedback during the intervention.

A paragraph writing rubric originally designed for a specialized English program in Puerto Rico was used for peer feedback due to its ease of understanding and consistency (Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Department of Education, 2022). Although the rubric was originally developed for a different educational context, it was selected due to its clarity, simplified descriptors, and focus on core paragraph-writing components such as organization, grammar, and mechanics. The rubric was reviewed and slightly adapted to align with the linguistic level and curricular expectations of the Grade 9 ESL learners in this study. It was used primarily as a structured guiding tool to scaffold peer feedback rather than as a culturally validated assessment instrument. Therefore, its application should be interpreted as contextually adapted rather than formally validated for the Sri Lankan ESL context.

**Figure 1 The rubric used to provide peer feedback**

Single Paragraph Rubric					
	1	2	3	4	Points
Topic Sentence	-Topic sentence unclear -Incorrectly placed -Not reworded in closing sentence	-Topic sentence unclear -Incorrectly placed -Reworded in closing sentence	-Topic sentence unclear <b>OR</b> incorrectly placed -Reworded in closing sentence	-Clear topic sentence -Correctly placed -Reworded in closing sentence	
Supporting Sentences (facts)	-No supporting details related to main idea	-One supporting detail related to main idea	-Two supporting details related to main idea	-Three or more supporting details related to main idea	
Organization	-Details are not in logical or expected order	-Some details are not in logical or expected order -Reader is distracted	-Details are in logical order -Order makes reading less interesting	-Details are in logical order -Order keeps the reader interested	
Mechanics and Grammar	-Six or more punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors	-Three to five punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors	-One to two punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors	-No errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors	
Legibility	-Writing is not readable	-Writing is not readable in places	-Marginally readable	-Readable handwriting	
				Total	

The rubric for the pretest, posttest and verbal feedback by the teacher for the intervention tasks were aligned with IELTS (2021) standards to ensure consistency in evaluation and support student understanding. IELTS is a globally recognized test assessing English proficiency in listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Using its validated rubric ensures consistent, objective feedback aligned with international standards, strengthening the reliability of the study’s evaluation and helping students clearly understand their performance.

Although the IELTS Writing Band Descriptors are commonly used to assess extended essay-type responses, the fundamental constructs that they measure such as task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy, are equally applicable in paragraph-level writing. The descriptors were proportionately adopted to this study and were applied to single paragraph responses rather than full essays.

Particular emphasis was placed on paragraph-specific components, including clarity and relevance of the topic sentence, logical development and adequacy of supporting details, coherence between sentences, appropriate vocabulary use, and grammatical control. The rubric was therefore employed as an analytic framework to evaluate foundational writing constructs rather than as a standardized high-stakes assessment tool. This contextual adaptation ensured alignment with the learning objectives of Grade 9 paragraph writing while maintaining structured, consistent scoring across pre-test, intervention, and post-test stages.

**Figure 2 International English Language Testing System writing band criteria public version (2021)**



**WRITING TASK 1: Band Descriptors (public version)**

Band	Task achievement	Coherence and cohesion	Lexical resource	Grammatical range and accuracy
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>fully satisfies all the requirements of the task</li> <li>clearly presents a fully developed response</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention</li> <li>skillfully manages paragraphing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>covers all requirements of the task sufficiently</li> <li>presents, highlights and illustrates key features/ bullet points clearly and appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sequences information and ideas logically</li> <li>manages all aspects of cohesion well</li> <li>uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings</li> <li>skillfully uses uncommon lexical items but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation</li> <li>produces rare errors in spelling and/or word formation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a wide range of structures</li> <li>the majority of sentences are error-free</li> <li>makes only very occasional errors or inappropriacies</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>covers the requirements of the task</li> <li>(A) presents a clear overview of main trends, differences or stages</li> <li>(GT) presents a clear purpose, with the tone consistent and appropriate</li> <li>clearly presents and highlights key features/bullet points but could be more fully extended</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>logically organises information and ideas; there is clear progression throughout</li> <li>uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately although there may be some under-/over-use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision</li> <li>uses less common lexical items with some awareness of style and collocation</li> <li>may produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and/or word formation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a variety of complex structures</li> <li>produces frequent error-free sentences</li> <li>has good control of grammar and punctuation but may make a few errors</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses the requirements of the task</li> <li>(A) presents an overview with information appropriately selected</li> <li>(GT) presents a purpose that is generally clear; there may be inconsistencies in tone</li> <li>presents and adequately highlights key features/ bullet points but details may be irrelevant, inappropriate or inaccurate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>arranges information and ideas coherently and there is a clear overall progression</li> <li>uses cohesive devices effectively, but cohesion within and/or between sentences may be faulty or mechanical</li> <li>may not always use referencing clearly or appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses an adequate range of vocabulary for the task</li> <li>attempts to use less common vocabulary but with some inaccuracy</li> <li>makes some errors in spelling and/or word formation, but they do not impede communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a mix of simple and complex sentence forms</li> <li>makes some errors in grammar and punctuation but they rarely reduce communication</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>generally addresses the task; the format may be inappropriate in places</li> <li>(A) recounts detail mechanically with no clear overview; there may be no data to support the description</li> <li>(GT) may present a purpose for the letter that is unclear at times; the tone may be variable and sometimes inappropriate</li> <li>presents, but inadequately covers, key features/ bullet points; there may be a tendency to focus on details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>presents information with some organisation but there may be a lack of overall progression</li> <li>makes inadequate, inaccurate or over-use of cohesive devices</li> <li>may be repetitive because of lack of referencing and substitution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a limited range of vocabulary, but this is minimally adequate for the task</li> <li>may make noticeable errors in spelling and/or word formation that may cause some difficulty for the reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses only a limited range of structures</li> <li>attempts complex sentences but these tend to be less accurate than simple sentences</li> <li>may make frequent grammatical errors and punctuation may be faulty; errors can cause some difficulty for the reader</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attempts to address the task but does not cover all key features/bullet points; the format may be inappropriate</li> <li>(GT) fails to clearly explain the purpose of the letter; the tone may be inappropriate</li> <li>may confuse key features/bullet points with detail; parts may be unclear, irrelevant, repetitive or inaccurate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>presents information and ideas but these are not arranged coherently and there is no clear progression in the response</li> <li>uses some basic cohesive devices but these may be inaccurate or repetitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses only basic vocabulary which may be used repetitively or which may be inappropriate for the task</li> <li>has limited control of word formation and/or spelling</li> <li>errors may cause strain for the reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses only a very limited range of structures with only rare use of subordinate clauses</li> <li>some structures are accurate but errors predominate, and punctuation is often faulty</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>fails to address the task, which may have been completely misunderstood</li> <li>presents limited ideas which may be largely irrelevant/repetitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>does not organise ideas logically</li> <li>may use a very limited range of cohesive devices, and those used may not indicate a logical relationship between ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses only a very limited range of words and expressions with very limited control of word formation and/or spelling</li> <li>errors may severely distort the message</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attempts sentence forms but errors in grammar and punctuation predominate and distort the meaning</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>answer is barely related to the task</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has very little control of organisational features</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses an extremely limited range of vocabulary, essentially no control of word formation and/or spelling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cannot use sentence forms except in memorised phrases</li> </ul>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>answer is completely unrelated to the task</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>fails to communicate any message</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>can only use a few isolated words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cannot use sentence forms at all</li> </ul>
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>does not attend</li> <li>does not attempt the task in any way</li> <li>writes a totally memorised response</li> </ul>			

(A) Academic | (GT) General Training

IELTS is jointly owned by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and Cambridge English Language Assessment. Page 1 of 1

**Steps of the Action Plan**

The action plan began with a pre-test after a lesson on paragraph writing. Students wrote a paragraph based on the lesson and their prior knowledge. The paragraphs were assessed by the teacher using IELTS writing criteria. The total marks were 20.

Students participated in a structured 40 minutes training session prior to the peer feedback activity to familiarize with the principles and procedures of effective peer evaluation. The same paragraph writing lesson was delivered to another grade 9 class and their written responses were collected and distributed anonymously among the participants of the study. Thus, students were provided with authentic practice without creating discomfort among participants and thus allowed them to practice evaluating real student writing minimizing anxiety, bias, or personal sensitivity.

The teacher modelled the assessments of paragraph systematically using the simplified rubric during the training session. Students were guided on how to identify a clear and relevant topic sentence, evaluate whether supporting details were sufficient and logically connected, interpret rubric descriptors accurately, and provide constructive comments rather than merely assigning marks. Emphasis was placed on offering specific, improvement-oriented suggestions that could guide revision.



To scaffold the evaluation process, students were provided with structured guiding prompts, including: “*Is the topic sentence clear and specific?*”, “*Underline one sentence that does not relate to the main idea.*”, “*Circle one grammar error and explain why it is incorrect.*”, and “*Suggest one way to improve the conclusion.*” The teacher demonstrated how to respond to these prompts using one sample paragraph before students practiced independently with the anonymous scripts. This guided practice helped students understand expectations and increased their confidence in giving feedback.

**Table 1 – Time on Task Details**

Stage	Time
Writing draft	30 minutes
Peer feedback	20 minutes
Teacher verbal feedback	5–7 minutes per student
Revision	15 minutes

For the actual peer-feedback sessions during the intervention, students were paired using a mixed-ability grouping strategy based on their pretest scores. Higher-performing students were paired with lower-performing students to promote scaffolding and collaborative learning. To reduce familiarity bias and ensure exposure to diverse writing styles and feedback approaches, peer partners were rotated after each writing task throughout the intervention period. This structured rotation enhanced fairness and strengthened the developmental impact of the peer-review process.

Thirdly, students were instructed to write another paragraph and received peer feedback using a simplified rubric focusing on paragraph structure, grammar, and mechanics. Each student evaluated a peer's work based on the rubric.

Next, the teacher provided individual verbal feedback, addressing organization, cohesion, grammar, and clarity. Following peer review, the teacher provided immediate, individual face-to-face verbal feedback lasting approximately 3–5 minutes per student. Feedback focused on two macro-level aspects (organization and coherence) and two micro-level aspects (grammar and mechanics). A structured four-step protocol was used: (1) one positive comment, (2) one structural suggestion, (3) one explained grammar correction, and (4) one guiding question to encourage reflection. For example, the teacher stated: “Your topic sentence is clear; however, your supporting details need clearer examples,” or “Notice the tense inconsistency here, can you correct it?” This ensured consistency while promoting active student revision. Revision was also mandatory. After receiving peer and teacher feedback, students corrected their paragraphs and highlighted changes in a different colour. The revised work was reassessed using the same rubric to ensure that feedback had been applied effectively.

These steps were repeated in three writing tasks to help students identify and correct mistakes. A posttest followed to evaluate improvement using IELTS criteria. To support the quantitative results, interviews were conducted to gather students' perceptions of the feedback strategies.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The data analysis process was conducted with the goal of examining the impact of verbal and peer feedback methods on students' writing improvement. Data was collected through a combination of pre-writing, intervention, and post-writing assessments to measure changes in students' proficiency, classroom observations, and semi-structured student interviews at the end. Teacher reflections were documented throughout the intervention to capture insights into the two feedback strategies that were implemented.

Writing assessments were evaluated using rubrics that measured key writing competencies, such as grammar, coherence, vocabulary, legibility, and overall structure. Quantitative data were obtained with the marks allocated by students for their peers using the rubric that was given. It focused mainly on the inclusion of topic sentences and closing sentences in paragraph writing, supporting details, organization, mechanics, grammar and legibility.

Pre and post-test assessments were analyzed quantitatively by calculating the mean scores of the entire class and comparing them to determine the level of improvement. A paired t-test was conducted to evaluate whether the differences in scores were statistically significant.

To support scoring reliability, the same adapted analytic criteria were applied consistently across all assessment stages. A standardized marking guide derived from the IELTS descriptors was used to maintain uniform interpretation of performance levels. While formal inter-rater reliability was not established due to the action research design, scoring consistency was reinforced through repeated rubric referencing and systematic evaluation procedures.

Qualitative data from student interviews and teacher reflections were transcribed and organized thematically to identify common trends and insights. Qualitative data from student interviews and teacher reflections were analyzed using thematic analysis, as it provides a systematic and flexible approach for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is particularly suitable for educational research exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and insights, as it allows themes to emerge naturally from data rather than imposing preconceived categories. In the context of this study, thematic analysis enabled the identification of common trends, divergent viewpoints, and underlying motivations regarding peer feedback and teacher verbal feedback in ESL writing. Its flexibility and data-driven nature also make it compatible with mixed-methods designs, facilitating meaningful integration with the quantitative findings from pre- and post-test assessments.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, several triangulation procedures were employed. Data were triangulated across three sources: student interview responses, teacher reflection journals, and quantitative writing score improvements. Member checking was conducted by presenting a summary of the identified themes to selected students to confirm the accuracy of interpretation. Peer debriefing was also undertaken, whereby a colleague reviewed the coding framework and thematic categorization to ensure analytical consistency. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained, including interview transcripts, coding sheets, reflection notes, and score records, to ensure transparency and dependability of the analysis.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

The study made several assumptions: it was assumed that Grade 9 ESL learners would engage with and understand the peer and verbal feedback strategies, with the teacher's guidance. The researcher assumed that feedback would be consistently applied across all students, that the teacher had the necessary competency to deliver effective feedback, and that learners would understand and apply the feedback to improve their writing. The delimitations of the study include its focus on female Grade 9 ESL learners at a semi-government school in Sri Lanka, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other ESL populations or regions. Furthermore, the study used only two feedback strategies (peer and verbal feedback), and its effectiveness was assessed during the second term of the school year. Limitations beyond the researcher's control include factors such as individual learning styles, motivation, and external support from parents, which could have influenced the results. Additionally, variability in how feedback was given and received, including differences in teacher delivery and learner receptivity, may have affected the consistency of the intervention's impact. Moreover, the peer-feedback rubric was originally developed in a different educational context and, although adapted for classroom use, was not formally validated for the Sri Lankan ESL setting. Further, although IELTS descriptors provided a structured analytic framework aligned with core writing constructs, they were originally developed for extended writing tasks and adult test-takers. In this study, the criteria were adapted for paragraph-level assessment and were not formally validated for Grade 9 learners, which may limit the generalizability of the scoring framework.

Lastly, the tools used to assess writing proficiency may not have fully captured all improvements or changes in students' writing skills.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This research aimed at testing the effectiveness of two feedback strategies which are verbal and peer feedback in improving the writing skills of grade 9 students in a semi-government school. The overall writing performance of students pertaining to test criteria was tested under 5 levels and the effectiveness was tested using both



quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The action plan with five stages of involvement included a pretest and posttest as well. Students were given a considerable gap of a minimum of two days between each test to make sure the results were reliable and accurate. The two feedback strategies, which were verbal and peer feedback, were used since theoretical evidence also emphasizes the fact that the selected methods can have an impact on the overall development of students' performance through reinforcement.

The quantitative and qualitative data obtained through the action plan respectively can be reported as follows.

### Quantitative Results and Analysis

Table 2 shows the marks out of twenty given during the peer feedback stage and marks awarded by the teacher according to IELTS criteria during the pretest, post-test and the three stages of the action plan.

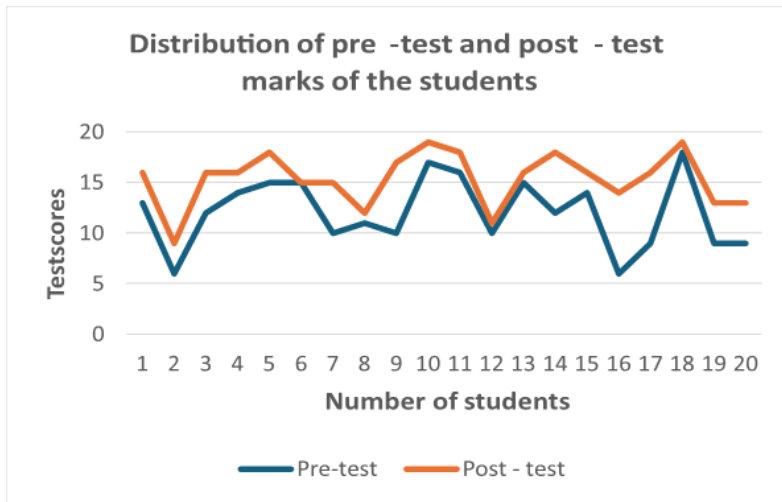
**Table 2 Test scores of the students during the five stages of the action plan**

Student No.	Pre-test	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Post - test
1	13	13	15	14	16
2	6	10	12	8	9
3	12	15	13	16	16
4	14	13	15	13	16
5	15	17	16	16	18
6	15	15	17	18	15
7	10	10	14	12	15
8	11	10	12	12	12
9	10	14	15	16	17
10	17	18	16	17	19
11	16	18	15	15	18
12	10	11	12	10	11
13	15	14	13	14	16
14	12	12	15	17	18
15	14	17	15	16	16
16	6	7	12	9	14
17	9	10	11	13	16
18	18	18	16	19	19
19	9	10	12	15	13
20	9	12	11	12	13

According to Table 2, the test marks of each student can be identified clearly. The colour differences used from red to green show the increase and decrease in marks of the students across the different tests over time.

Consequently, the posttest marks demonstrate that most of the students have developed their writing skills, and they have obtained more marks than the tests prior to the posttest. It is also evident that the colours of the rows are greener when compared with the scores of pretests.

**Figure 1 Distribution of pre-test and post-test marks of students**



The line graph in Figure 3 illustrates the comparison between students' marks in the pretest and posttest, highlighting the effect of the action plan exploring the effectiveness of peer and verbal feedback on paragraph writing. Thus, the two lines clearly show the variation of marks over time in both tests. Accordingly, it is obvious that the posttest scores of the students are mostly higher than the pretest scores. Consequently, the action plan by implementing the two feedback strategies has successfully increased the students' paragraph writing skills. The majority of students experienced an increase in scores, with some individuals showing a significant improvement from 6 to 14 marks. However, one student displayed minimal change, maintaining similar marks between the two tests. The range of scores in the pretest was wider (6 to 18), whereas the posttest scores were more concentrated around 09 to 19 marks, suggesting that the intervention not only improved scores but also reduced variability in performance. It is also clear that even though a student has obtained similar marks for both the pretest and posttest, no student has scored lower in the post-test, dropping any mark below pre-test scores.

The overall upward trend in the graph suggests that the intervention was effective in improving students' writing performance. The consistency of the posttest scores further indicates that the intervention may have helped in stabilizing students' learning outcomes.

Figure 4 is a dual bar graph that shows a comparative analysis of the pretest and posttest marks of each of the students who participated in the research.

**Figure 4 Distribution of test scores during the pre-test and post-test**

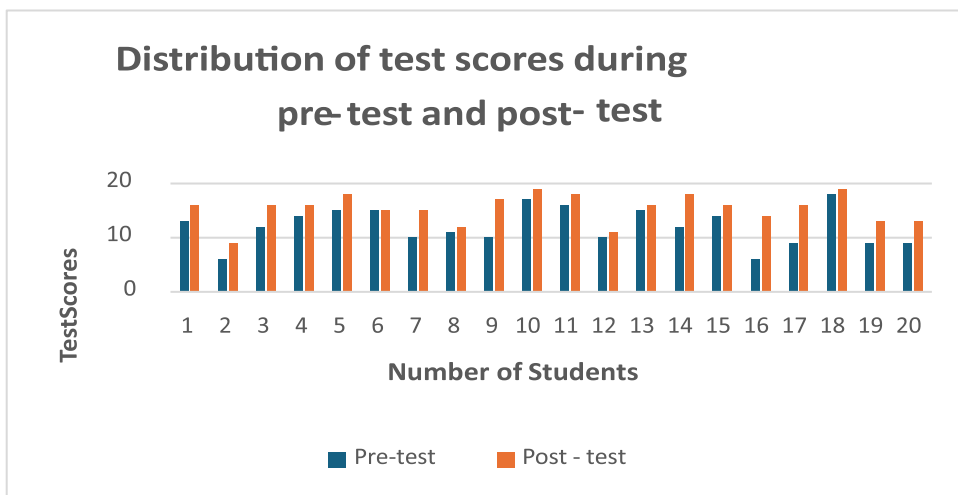


Figure 4 presents a comparison of students' pretest and posttest scores during the intervention that incorporated verbal and peer feedback. The purpose of this comparison is to explore the effectiveness of using these feedback strategies to enhance student paragraph writing performance. The dual bar graph shows a general increase in students' scores from the pretest to the posttest, indicating a positive impact of the intervention. Most students demonstrated noticeable improvements after receiving both verbal and peer feedback. In the majority of cases, the post-test scores were higher than the pretest scores. For example, 70% of the students showed an increase of at least 3 points. One student, however, exhibited no change in performance, suggesting that the intervention may not have been equally effective for all participants. It also suggests that other factors may have influenced her performance or external challenges or difficulties in applying the feedback effectively. The upward trend in posttest scores indicates that the combined use of verbal and peer feedback positively impacted students' learning. The findings suggest that feedback not only helps clarify students' understanding but also promotes self-reflection and improvement. However, individual differences in response to feedback highlight the need for tailored feedback approaches.

In conclusion, the dual bar graph illustrates that the intervention involving verbal and peer feedback was effective in improving students' performance, as indicated by the increase in posttest scores.

A paired t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference in students' scores before and after the intervention. Accordingly, the test results of the pretest and posttest are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 Descriptive statistics for pretest and post –est scores (N = 20)**

Test	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Standard Error (SE)
Pre-test	12.05	3.44	0.77
Post-test	15.35	2.68	0.60
Mean Difference (Post – Pre)	3.30	2.30*	0.51

**Table 4 Paired samples t-Test results**

Statistic	Value
Mean Difference	3.30
SD of Differences	2.30
Standard Error	0.51
t(19)	6.43
p (two-tailed)	< .001
95% CI	[2.23, 4.37]
Cohen's d (paired)	1.44

The mean score before the intervention was 12.05 while the standard deviation (SD) was recorded as 3.44. After the intervention, the mean score increased to 15.35, and the standard deviation was recorded as 2.68. The difference was computed as Post – test minus Pre – test (Post - Pre), resulting in a positive mean gain of 3.30 points. A paired t-test was conducted to examine whether this improvement was statistically significant. The results revealed a statistically significant increase in students' scores,  $t(19) = 6.43, p < .001$  (two-tailed). The 95% confidence interval for the difference (Post-Pre) ranged from 2.23 to 4.37, indicating that the true mean difference lies within this positive interval. Since the entire confidence interval lies above zero, this further confirms that posttest scores were significantly higher than pre-test scores.

The primary assumption for a paired-samples t-test is that the difference scores are approximately normally

distributed. Inspection of the difference values indicated no extreme outliers, and with a sample size of  $N = 20$ , the t-test is considered reasonably robust to minor deviations from normality. Therefore, the use of the paired samples t-test was appropriate.

The effect size was calculated using Cohen's  $d$ , for paired samples, which uses the standard deviation of the different scores ( $SD(D)$ ) rather than the pooled pre- and posttest standard deviations:

*Mean Difference*

$$d = \frac{\text{Mean Difference}}{SD(D)}$$

*SD<sub>D</sub>*

Using a mean difference of 3.30 and  $SD(D) = 2.30$ :

$$d = \frac{3.30}{2.30} = 1.44$$

This indicates a very large effect size, demonstrating that the intervention had substantial practical significance in addition to statistical significance. Individual gains ranged from 0 to 8 marks, with the majority of students demonstrating positive improvement. However, the large effect size indicates that, within this sample, the observed improvement was educationally meaningful. However, given the context-specific nature of action research, these results should be interpreted as situated outcomes rather than universally generalizable effects.

This suggests that the magnitude of the improvement was not only statistically significant but also educationally meaningful. Consequently, in line with the improvements shown in the graphs (Figure 3 and 4), these findings suggest that within this specific Grade 9 ESL classroom context, the structured integration of peer and verbal feedback was associated with measurable improvement in paragraph writing performance. While causality cannot be established beyond this setting, the intervention appears to have contributed positively to student outcomes during the action research cycle.

### Qualitative Results and Analysis

This section presents the major themes identified by the thematic analysis of teacher observations and students' perceptions of peer feedback and verbal feedback strategies.

Teacher reflections were collected throughout the action research process to capture ongoing observations, insights, and professional judgments regarding the implementation and impact of peer and verbal feedback strategies. After each feedback session, the teacher documented her reflections in a structured journal format, noting the students' engagement, responses to feedback, observed improvements in writing, and any challenges encountered during the intervention. These reflections were intended to complement the student interview data by providing a professional perspective on classroom dynamics, effectiveness of feedback methods, and patterns of learning progress. The reflective process was both systematic and iterative, enabling the teacher to adjust strategies in real time and providing rich qualitative data for thematic analysis.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher with the 20 participants involved in the action plan. Accordingly, each student was interviewed as the final step of the action plan. The main aim of conducting the interview was to gather students' perceptions about the intervention of each feedback strategy, any challenges they were facing and their overall opinions and feelings about the effectiveness of feedback strategies. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the classroom. The interview questions were basically open-ended, and semi-structured in format and few were close ended too.

The interview questions used during the study are as follows:

#### Peer feedback

- How did you feel about giving feedback to your peers? Was it easy or difficult?



- How did you feel about receiving feedback from your peers?
- Did you find peer feedback useful? Why or why not?
- Do you think giving feedback to your peers helped you improve your own paragraph writing? How? What specific areas of your writing do you feel have improved because of peer feedback?
- Is there any other type of feedback you think would have helped you more than peer feedback?

### Verbal feedback

- How did you feel about receiving verbal feedback from your teacher?
- Do you think verbal feedback from your teacher helped you improve your writing?
- What specific areas of writing were you able to improve with verbal feedback from your teacher?
- Do you think verbal feedback is more or less effective than peer feedback? Why?

### Overall Feedback Strategies

- Did you use the feedback you received (peer or verbal) to improve your writing? If so, how?
- How would you describe your overall experience with the two feedback strategies used in the classroom?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving the way feedback is provided in the classroom?

The responses obtained from the interview process and teacher reflections were transcribed and categorized into significant and recurring themes. Thus, thematic analysis was conducted to explore participants' experience with peer and verbal feedback strategies during the stages of the action plan and to observe the effectiveness of using them and to understand the perceptions and attitudes of students about the experience of using and incorporating the learnings in their own writing performance. Through a detailed review of the qualitative data, a total of 10 themes emerged as 7 positive and 3 negatives. The positive themes reflect the benefits and strengths of the intervention, while the negative themes highlight the challenges and limitations. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. After coding and grouping similar codes (The progression from initial codes to final themes is presented in Appendix A), themes were identified, refined, and categorized as either positive or negative based on their content (refer to Appendix B to see the set of positive and negative themes).

The positive themes identified from the student interviews highlight significant improvements in students' writing skills due to the combination of peer and verbal feedback. One prominent theme was enhanced confidence and motivation, with students expressing that feedback helped them feel more confident in their abilities. For instance, fourteen out of twenty students reported increased confidence and motivation to write after receiving feedback. Student 1 stated, "Verbal feedback made me feel more personal and constructive," while Student 9 explained, "Now I am not afraid to write paragraphs anymore." A few students expressed moderate improvement; for example, Student 6 mentioned, "I still make mistakes, but I feel more confident than before." These responses indicate that feedback positively influenced students' emotional engagement with writing.

Another key theme was the opportunity to correct common mistakes, particularly in areas like capitalization, punctuation, and the use of transitional words. Students recognized the importance of these technical aspects, with Student 15 mentioning how peer feedback helped them correct capitalization errors, while Student 5 noted learning new transitional words through reviewing peers' work.

The combination of peer and verbal feedback was also considered highly effective, with students appreciating the multiple perspectives offered. Student 18 emphasized how peer feedback helped identify small mistakes which were not pointed out by the teacher, while verbal feedback clarified broader writing issues like paragraph



structure and organization. This combined feedback allowed students to address both macro (structure) and micro (grammar, word choice) elements of writing, fostering a more comprehensive learning experience.

Students also developed self-editing skills, as many students began to recognize and correct repeated errors independently. Student 13 shared how peer feedback helped them identify grammar mistakes, leading them to review their work more critically. For example, thirteen students reported that the feedback process helped them develop self-editing skills. Student 13 shared, "After checking my friend's paragraph, I started checking my own grammar mistakes." Similarly, Student 15 stated, "Now I read my paragraph again before submitting." However, a few students still relied on teacher confirmation, indicating partial development of independent editing skills.

Moreover, improved quality of writing was evident, with students better able to organize their ideas, provide supporting details, and write effective conclusions. For instance, sixteen out of twenty students noted improvements in paragraph organization and structure. Student 10 stated, "Teacher feedback helped me improve my supporting details and conclusion," while Student 3 commented, "Peer feedback helped me see where my ideas were not clear." Some students indicated gradual improvement, with Student 8 noting, "I am still learning, but my paragraphs are better organized now." This suggests measurable perceived progress in writing quality.

Finally, supportive teacher feedback emerged as a crucial factor. While students appreciated peer feedback, many expressed a preference for the detailed and constructive nature of verbal feedback from their teacher. Students felt that teacher feedback provided clearer guidance and emotional support, which helped them feel more confident in making changes to their writing. As Student 7 stated, "With my teacher's feedback, I felt more confident making changes," highlighting the importance of expert, emotionally supportive feedback in fostering students' growth as writers.

These themes collectively suggest that the combination of peer and teacher feedback significantly enhanced students' writing proficiency, confidence, and self-editing skills.

The negative themes that emerged from the interviews reveal several challenges students faced with peer feedback. One common issue was the perceived judgment from peer feedback. Nine out of twenty students expressed anxiety about being judged by peers, which affected their comfort and participation. Student 12 shared, "If I share my work, I was worried that my classmates would think I'm not good at writing." This concern led to a lack of focus during the feedback process, highlighting the need for a more supportive, non-critical atmosphere to encourage full participation in peer feedback.

Another significant issue was the lack of trust in peer abilities which was reported by 8 students. Some students were sceptical about the quality of feedback provided by their peers, as they felt that their classmates might not be able to catch all the errors. Student 7 mentioned, "I felt like I didn't get useful feedback from my peers since there were some unnoticed errors." Additionally, some students admitted to giving vague feedback to avoid hurting others' feelings, with Student 4 saying, "I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so I just gave general feedback." This suggests that students may need more training in how to provide constructive feedback and trust in the peer feedback process.

The lack of confidence to provide peer feedback was also a recurring theme. Many students doubted their ability to give effective feedback, often relying on the teacher for confirmation. Student 18 remarked, "I was not sure about my advice and that's why I asked from teacher." This dependency on teacher's support limited students' engagement in the feedback process, making them hesitant to contribute their opinions.

To address these issues, future research could focus on training students in giving effective feedback. Providing workshops on feedback principles and using structured tools like checklists or rubrics can help build students' confidence. Encouraging a collaborative classroom culture that values development over judgment can alleviate students' fears and promote more active participation. Pairing students with varying skill levels for feedback activities could also enhance peer learning, allowing stronger students to model effective feedback strategies.

Regular teacher check-ins would provide reassurance, ensuring students feel supported in the feedback process.

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## CONCLUSION

Within the context of this Grade 9 ESL classroom, peer feedback appeared to foster collaborative learning, while teacher verbal feedback supported targeted language development. The observed improvements reflect the specific design and structured implementation of the intervention in this setting. Overall, the combined use of both strategies resulted in noticeable progress in learners' writing proficiency.

The findings of this study highlight several key outcomes related to the effectiveness of peer and verbal feedback strategies in improving ESL learners' writing proficiency. First, the quality of learners' writing significantly improved, particularly in paragraph organization, with students demonstrating better use of topic sentences, supporting details, and clear conclusions. Additionally, these feedback methods enhanced learners' confidence and motivation to engage in writing tasks. Importantly, students were able to identify and correct common errors, such as capitalization, punctuation, and the use of transitional words, showcasing a marked development in self-editing skills. The combination of peer and verbal feedback proved especially effective, as the strategies complemented each other by fostering collaborative learning and providing individualized teacher support. Overall, teacher feedback emerged as a critical factor, offering constructive and supportive guidance that further bolstered learners' writing development. These findings emphasize the potential of integrated feedback approaches in enhancing both the technical and attitudinal aspects of ESL writing proficiency.

While the study revealed numerous positive outcomes, several challenges associated with implementing peer feedback strategies were also identified. Some learners expressed a fear of being judged through their writing, which hindered their willingness to fully engage in the process. Additionally, a lack of trust in their peers' abilities to provide meaningful feedback emerged, with some students doubting their peers' qualifications and skills. Many students also lacked confidence in their ability to evaluate others' work effectively, leading to inconsistencies in the quality of feedback provided. This variability often resulted in a reliance on teacher intervention, as students sought guidance to navigate the feedback process. These findings underscore the need for structured training and support to enhance learners' confidence and competence in giving and receiving peer feedback.

In the broader ESL context, the findings of this research contribute to ongoing discussions related to the field as they indicate a possible role of peer and verbal feedback strategies on improving writing proficiency among learners. The use of feedback, whether peer-driven or teacher-driven, is widely acknowledged as an effective strategy for enhancing language development among ESL learners. Peer feedback fosters a collaborative learning environment, encouraging students to engage critically with language and reflect on their writing (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Teacher-provided verbal feedback, on the other hand, offers individualized support that directly addresses learners' linguistic challenges (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). These feedback strategies are applicable in similar ESL settings, as they are associated with improvement in essential writing skills such as coherence, grammar, and organization common areas of difficulty in ESL classrooms (Ferris, 2003). Furthermore, feedback has been shown to enhance learner motivation and self-confidence, addressing issues of writing anxiety that are prevalent among ESL students (Lee, 2017).

In the Sri Lankan context, the findings of this study are particularly pertinent due to the educational setting and the challenges faced by ESL learners in semi-government schools. The increase in motivation and confidence reported in the study is especially relevant in the local context, where students may feel apprehensive about writing in English. Additionally, the positive effect of feedback on self-editing skills is crucial as students might not have extensive access to individualized writing support outside of the classroom.

However, the findings also point to challenges specific to the Sri Lankan context, such as a lack of trust in peers' abilities to provide meaningful feedback and a cultural tendency to rely heavily on teacher-centred approaches. These insights are valuable for educators and policymakers in Sri Lanka, as they highlight the need for structured teacher training and the gradual integration of peer feedback practices in classrooms. By addressing these cultural and pedagogical challenges, Sri Lanka can benefit from implementing peer and verbal feedback strategies more effectively in the ESL classroom.

Finally, as an action research study conducted within a single semi-government school context, the findings are inherently context-bound. The observed improvements should therefore be interpreted as situated outcomes



influenced by the specific classroom environment, teacher facilitation, and structured feedback procedures employed. Transferability to other contexts may depend on comparable levels of student proficiency, teacher guidance, and institutional support for formative assessment practices

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## APPENDIX A

### Thematic Analysis Coding Framework (Codes → Categories → Themes)

Initial Codes	Category	Final Theme
<b>Felt confident</b>	Emotional growth	Improved confidence and motivation
<b>Not afraid to write</b>	Emotional growth	Improved confidence and motivation
<b>Corrected grammar mistakes</b>	Skill development	Development of self-editing skills
<b>Learned transitional words</b>	Skill development	Improved quality of writing
<b>Peer comments were helpful</b>	Feedback effectiveness	Effective combined feedback
<b>Afraid of being judged</b>	Emotional barrier	Perceived judgment from peer feedback
<b>Doubt peer ability</b>	Trust issues	Lack of trust in peer abilities
<b>Not confident to give advice</b>	Self-doubt	Lack of confidence to provide feedback



## APPENDIX B

### Themes Identified by Thematic Analysis

Positive themes	Negative themes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Improved quality of writing</b> (improved paragraph writing skills ex organization, topic sentence supporting details, conclusions etc.).</li><li><b>Improved confidence and motivation</b> to write paragraphs.</li><li><b>Opportunity to correct their common mistakes</b> (Capitalization, punctuation, use of transitional words.)</li><li><b>Effective combined feedback</b> (Combination of the two feedback strategies is helpful.)</li><li><b>Supportive teacher feedback</b> (Teacher feedback is more supportive.)</li><li><b>Development of Self-editing skills</b></li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Perceived judgment from peer feedback.</b> (worrying that they will be judged through their writings)</li><li><b>Lack of trust in peer abilities.</b> (Doubting peers' confidence, some students feel that their peers are not qualified or skilled enough to provide meaningful feedback.)</li><li><b>Lack of confidence to provide feedback</b> The lack of consistency to provide feedback (because of their different levels of understanding and trust in their own abilities they tend to seek the help of the teacher to help them with providing peer feedback.)</li></ol>