



## **Iranian students' academic writing development through engagement with instructor feedback**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the improvement of Iranian undergraduate students' academic writing skills through drafting and responding to instructor corrective feedback over a semester. Focusing on two students in an English academic writing module in the Department of English Studies over a five-month term, this research analyzes six writing assignments, and the progress demonstrated through iterative drafting. A qualitative approach was used to explore the students' revisions, examining areas of improvement as well as persisting challenges in response to the feedback. To increase the credibility of findings, the study also quantifies key revision patterns and error types to support the qualitative analysis. Findings reveal that while both students improved, the stronger writer displayed a more consistent development across drafts, whereas the weaker writer showed more fluctuated improvement throughout the course. The study underscores the role of structured feedback in enhancing academic writing skills and highlights factors, such as student engagement with feedback, that may influence writing progress. Although the sample is limited to two students, the paper discusses the implications for academic writing instruction across varied EAP contexts. These results suggest that targeted feedback, combined with iterative practice, can effectively support the academic writing development of English learners in higher education.

### **Keywords**

academic writing, corrective feedback, engagement, improvement, Iranian university students, drafting, revision, EAP

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## **Introduction**

Learning a second or foreign language (L2) is a multifaceted process influenced by both cognitive and linguistic complexities (Housen et al., 2012). Cognitive factors involve elements such as prior knowledge, the relationship between a learner's first language (L1) and second language (L2), working memory capacity, motivation, and overall aptitude. Linguistic complexities, on the other hand, pertain to the structural and functional aspects of the target language, encompassing grammar, vocabulary, and discourse conventions. Given these intricacies, acquiring proficiency in a new language extends beyond grammar and vocabulary mastery requires an understanding of pragmatic and communicative aspects through meaningful engagement with the language. Scholars today view L2 learning as the development of a broad linguistic repertoire rather than a linear accumulation of rules and structures.

English has solidified its role as a lingua franca (ELF) in global communication, facilitating interactions among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2005). The fluidity of English use across different contexts has sparked discussions on the concept of “standard English” (Jenkins, 2006), highlighting that communicative effectiveness often outweighs rigid adherence to native-speaker norms (Canagarajah, 2007). However, in academic settings, a specialized form of English is required. Academic English is characterized by formal conventions emphasizing clarity, precision, and discipline-specific norms (Hyland, 2006, 2019). Unlike ELF, which prioritizes mutual intelligibility, academic writing necessitates structured argumentation, careful lexical selection, and adherence to field-specific expectations (Swales, 1990).

For university students, mastering academic English is a crucial step toward engaging in scholarly discourse. Beyond general language proficiency, academic writing requires critical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to construct well-organized arguments (Brown, 2000; Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Cumming, 1998). Non-native speakers, in particular, often struggle with these demands due to differences in writing conventions between their first language and English.

Several challenges complicate the process of developing strong academic writing skills. While grammar and mechanics are frequently emphasized, research indicates that intelligibility relies on more than syntactic accuracy - it requires clear organization, logical flow, and adherence to academic conventions (Ur, 2012). Academic writing also demands a high degree of explicitness, as the reader and writer are often distanced in both time and space. Mastering different genres within academic writing entails understanding discipline-specific expectations, structuring ideas coherently, and employing appropriate linguistic markers to signal relationships between concepts.

A structured approach to academic writing is necessary to address these challenges, with written corrective feedback (WCF) playing a key role in helping students refine their work. WCF enables learners to recognize both strengths and weaknesses in their writing, facilitating iterative improvement (Ellis, 2009). However, students engage with feedback in different ways; some actively revise their work, while others struggle to incorporate suggestions effectively (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Research suggests that the effectiveness of WCF depends on multiple factors, including the type and quality of feedback, students’ attitudes, and psychological variables (Hyland, 2019).

Recent studies on WCF have shifted focus from simple error correction to how feedback fosters deeper engagement and long-term development (Ferris, 2004). Scholars argue that students’ responses to feedback - rather than the feedback itself - play a pivotal role in shaping writing proficiency (Hyland & Hyland, 2006a, 2006b). While several studies have examined teacher feedback strategies, fewer have focused on students’ longitudinal engagement with WCF and their revision behaviors over multiple tasks.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on how students at different proficiency levels engage with feedback and revise their writing over time. Unlike previous research that evaluates feedback types or teacher practices, this study adopts a learner-centered perspective. By tracing how two students respond to instructor feedback across six writing assignments, the study offers a qualitative view of both immediate and sustained revision behavior.

This study explores how students interact with instructor feedback and tracks their writing progress, examining key aspects such as content development, source integration, organization, coherence, lexical precision, and grammatical accuracy. In doing so, it offers a closer look at how different students interpret and apply similar feedback under comparable instructional conditions. Unlike previous research that evaluates the quality of teacher feedback, this study investigates how students engage with and apply feedback to enhance their writing. Variables such as gender and age are beyond the scope of this research.

### Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- Analyze the development of students' academic writing skills by comparing initial and final drafts across multiple assignments.
- Examine how students incorporate teacher-provided corrective feedback into their writing.
- Identify recurring writing challenges that persist despite feedback.
- Investigate patterns in student engagement with feedback and their impact on writing improvement.

### Literature Review

#### Evolution of Error Correction and Feedback in Second Language Writing

For decades, feedback and error correction have been central yet controversial topics in SLA. Earlier views, rooted in habit-formation theory, treated errors as failures in methodology, suggesting that uncorrected errors would fossilize and persist in interlanguage. During this period, approaches like contrastive analysis (CA) and error analysis (EA) emerged to understand and address errors systematically (Corder, 1982). Studies grounded in these frameworks identified recurring grammatical difficulties, including verb tense errors, subject-verb agreement, and article misuse, as significant barriers to proficiency (Akbar et al., 2019; Al-Shujairi & Tan, 2017; Jabeen et al., 2015; Khansir & Pakdel, 2020; Pouladian et al., 2017; Puspita, 2019; Rostami Abusaeedi & Boroomand, 2015; Saputra et al., 2020; Yousefi, 2018).

Later research, however, questioned the utility of grammar-focused corrections. Truscott (1996) argued that explicit grammar correction is ineffective and potentially detrimental, suggesting that linguistic accuracy develops through extensive practice rather than direct intervention. Current views emphasize addressing higher-order writing skills, such as content, clarity, and cohesion, over minor grammatical errors, unless they impede comprehension (Hyland, 2022; Wingate, 2022). Ferris (1999) maintained that feedback on major aspects is pedagogically beneficial, as it provides input and raises students' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.

#### Approaches to Written Corrective Feedback (WCF)

WCF refers to comments, advice, or suggestions aimed at improving the quality of writing (Crosthwaite et al., 2022). Historically, research on WCF focused on error correction and grammar accuracy, but recent studies explore its efficacy in promoting revisions and long-term

improvements (Ellis, 2009). A bibliometric review by Crosthwaite et al. (2022) indicates that scholars have gradually moved away from an exclusive focus on linguistic errors, shifting toward examining the impact of different feedback types, evaluating student engagement, and assessing long-term improvements in writing quality.

Ellis (2009) categorizes WCF into direct, indirect, metalinguistic, electronic, and reformulation strategies. Direct feedback, which explicitly identifies errors and corrections, is beneficial for immediate accuracy, especially for low-proficiency students. Conversely, indirect feedback requires learners to infer corrections, fostering self-discovery and long-term retention (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Van Beuningen et al., 2012). Both strategies have advantages, but their effectiveness depends on factors such as learner proficiency and cognitive load. Studies suggest that while direct feedback is less cognitively demanding, indirect feedback can better promote independent learning (Jamalinesari et al., 2015).

By addressing structural, lexical, and organizational aspects of writing, WCF raises students' awareness of their problem areas and encourages them to refine their work (Sermsook et al., 2017; Zohrabi & Ehsani, 2014). Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Schmidt (1995) supports this approach, asserting that learners must first consciously recognize language features before internalizing them. Additionally, sociocultural theories emphasize feedback as a collaborative learning process, where teachers act as facilitators guiding students through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective highlights the importance of interactive feedback, where students and instructors engage in meaningful dialogue about writing improvement.

### Social and Psychological Dimensions of Feedback Engagement

Modern research also underscores the social and psychological dimensions of feedback. Unlike earlier approaches that viewed writing as an isolated skill, recent studies recognize students and teachers as active participants in a socially constructed learning process. This reconceptualization has prompted a closer examination of how students' engagement with feedback shapes their long-term development as writers.

In academic settings, writing demands clarity, coherence, and adherence to genre-specific conventions, such as structure, evidence integration, and precision (Fitriana, 2017; Gulcat & Ozagac, 2004). EAP instructors equip students with these skills, guiding them in constructing cohesive arguments and integrating external sources effectively. They are also tasked with balancing attention to higher-order concerns like content and organization with lower-order issues such as grammar and mechanics (Han & Hyland, 2015).

Recent approaches emphasize self-revision and student agency in academic writing. Zhang and Hyland (2018) argue that feedback should focus on enabling students to revise independently, shifting attention from feedback effectiveness to student engagement. This reflects a broader shift toward genre-based and meaning-focused writing instruction. This shift reflects the influence of genre-based writing pedagogy, which emphasizes contextualized, discipline-specific instruction over generic skill training (Hyland, 2006). Bitchener (2008) emphasizes the importance of contextualizing feedback, as understanding its purpose and application can enhance students' ability to revise and improve their writing. This dual role - as both guide and evaluator - enables EAP teachers to help students navigate the complexities of

academic writing. Consequently, scholars have increasingly examined how sustained student engagement with feedback influences writing development over time, emphasizing the interplay between cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions.

### Models of Student Engagement with Feedback

Student engagement with WCF is crucial for its effectiveness. According to Zhang and Hyland (2018), engagement encompasses three dimensions:

- Behavioral: Physical actions such as revising drafts.
- Affective: Emotional responses to feedback.
- Cognitive: Thought processes involved in analyzing and responding to feedback.

Recent research underscores the importance of active student participation in the feedback process. Zhang and Hyland (2022) argue that engagement is more critical than the feedback itself, shifting attention from teacher comments to students' responses. This aligns with sociocultural theories that see learning as a collaborative process, where students and teachers co-construct knowledge. Active engagement with feedback fosters autonomy and helps students identify and address their weaknesses. A supportive environment encourages students to see feedback as an opportunity for growth rather than mere critique.

While existing studies have explored the effects of WCF on student performance, few have traced the longitudinal engagement patterns of individual learners through iterative drafts. This study builds on prior work by focusing on how learners at different proficiency levels respond behaviorally and cognitively to instructor feedback over time. Based on the reviewed literature and the identified gaps, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Which aspects of academic writing have shown improvement as students engaged in multiple drafting and revision cycles throughout the semester?
- 2) Which areas of writing have demonstrated minimal progress despite revisions?
- 3) How did the stronger and weaker writers differ in their responses to the instructor's corrective feedback?

## Methodology

### Participants, Data Collection and Tools

This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine the development of academic writing skills over the course of a semester, enabling an in-depth analysis of individual progress and engagement with instructor feedback. It focused on how students' responses to corrective feedback across drafts reflected advancements in academic writing.

The study involved two Iranian students who were doing their BA in the English Language Studies Department. Admission to this major required at least CEFR B2 proficiency, ensuring both students could function well in the language. The two participants were purposefully selected to allow a comparative case study design. One represented a stronger writer and the other a weaker writer, based on their first assignment scores. This contrast enabled an exploration of how students at different proficiency levels engage with feedback

over time. This purposeful sampling was designed to highlight the differing trajectories of engagement and improvement between contrasting proficiency levels. Such focused sampling is suitable in qualitative case studies where the goal is depth and pattern identification rather than generalization (Stake, 1995). While the sample size was small, the aim was to allow depth of insight rather than broad generalization.

Data were gathered from the students' writing assignments and instructor feedback done in a writing course in 2021. Each student submitted two drafts per assignment: an initial draft with detailed corrective feedback and a final revised draft. The dataset comprised 24 drafts from six assignments, enabling a thorough analysis of their progress and feedback engagement.

To reduce selection bias, only students who completed both drafts for all assignments were considered, and the choice of highest and lowest initial performers was used to ensure variability in engagement responses. The researcher was not the instructor but independently analyzed the drafts and feedback. This separation minimized any instructional bias in data collection and allowed for a more objective examination of engagement patterns.

Although feedback was provided by a single experienced instructor, steps were taken to ensure consistency. A coding framework was developed based on common error types and feedback categories. To enhance reliability, feedback comments and coded categories were reviewed across assignments to ensure internal consistency. While inter-rater coding was not applied in this study, future research could benefit from a second coder or external validation to strengthen objectivity.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an inductive approach, whereby themes emerged from the detailed examination of feedback and subsequent student revisions. Each draft was reviewed for evidence of progress in the following aspects. A comparison was made between the stronger and weaker writers to identify patterns in their engagement with feedback and areas requiring further support. This detailed analysis helped highlight both improvements and persistent challenges in their academic writing skills.

- **presentation and clarity of arguments:** the extent to which ideas were clearly and effectively conveyed.
- **concision and precision:** elimination of verbosity and the use of precise language.
- **task achievement and topic addressing:** adherence to assignment requirements and focus on the assigned topic.
- **citations and source use:** proper integration of in-text citations, use of external sources, and accurate reference lists.
- **cohesion and coherence:** effective use of cohesive devices and logical organization of ideas.
- **lexical choice and word form:** selection of appropriate vocabulary, word forms, and hedging language.
- **register and formatting:** appropriateness of tone and adherence to formatting conventions.



- **grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics:** mastery of fundamental language conventions.

## Results

This section presents an analysis of how two students' academic writing evolved throughout a semester. The findings are based on an examination of their drafts, emphasizing how they incorporated the instructor's corrective feedback and the adjustments reflected in their final versions. The analysis highlights specific areas where improvements were evident, as well as aspects where progress was more gradual. Additionally, the section provides an overview of their overall performance across multiple writing assignments during the course. To support the qualitative interpretation of each student's writing development, frequencies of error types and revision uptake were coded and quantified across assignments. This hybrid approach allowed for clearer tracking of progress and comparison between participants.

### General Trends in Students' Academic Writing Performance

The students produced written reports based on instructor-assigned topics, incorporating visual data such as graphs, when required. Assignment length varied depending on the topic, which influenced the volume of feedback received. Typically, longer drafts attracted more instructor comments. In general, the weaker writer received a higher number of corrective comments in the initial drafts compared to the stronger writer, who demonstrated greater proficiency in constructing academic texts from the outset. A comparison of instructor feedback revealed a notable reduction in comments on the second drafts of the stronger writer. However, in one instance, the number of comments increased for the stronger writer, while the weaker writer experienced such increases in two assignments.

Quantitative coding of the instructor comments revealed that grammar-related feedback was the most frequent category (42%), followed by lexical choice and clarity (29%), formatting issues (17%), and cohesion or structure (12%). These categories were identified during inductive analysis of instructor comments and aligned with prior studies (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), ensuring consistency in how issues were coded across drafts. This pattern was consistent across both students, though the weaker writer received more comments in all categories.

### Performance of the Stronger Writer

The stronger writer consistently produced strong pieces of writing, meeting the task requirements and receiving fewer corrections in final drafts. Across the six assignments, this student revised approximately 76% of the items addressed in the first drafts. Most revisions were successful, especially in lexical accuracy and organization. However, minor grammar issues such as article usage and preposition choice recurred in 3 of 6 assignments.

Table 1. Summary of the Stronger Writer's Engagement with Feedback

Assignment Number	Draft 1: Issues	Draft 2: Revisions/Progress	Key Challenges/Feedback
<b>Assignment 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive feedback on organization, advanced structures, and lexis.</li> <li>- Needed to clarify some ideas.</li> <li>- Grammar, word choice, and format adjustments needed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good revision, all required parts improved.</li> <li>- Positive comment on the idea.</li> <li>- Few minor grammar issues, but the instructor ignored them due to their minimal impact.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Minimal issues with grammar and format.</li> <li>- Successful revision with few comments in Draft 2.</li> </ul>
<b>Assignment 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good topic development, but unclear expression of some ideas.</li> <li>- Needed to remove excess expressions and clarify some words.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Excellent engagement with feedback.</li> <li>- Clarified ideas and improved word choice.</li> <li>- Positive feedback from the instructor.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clarity of ideas and word choice were key focus points.</li> <li>- Grammar/spelling minor corrections.</li> </ul>
<b>Assignment 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Well-organized report with clear ideas.</li> <li>- Needed to delete one unnecessary word and fix source citations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Responded to comments well, correcting mistakes.</li> <li>- Grammar and mechanics mistakes remained.</li> <li>- More comments on grammar and mechanics in Draft 2.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grammar and citation issues persisted despite feedback.</li> <li>- Issues with identifying and correcting mistakes independently.</li> </ul>
<b>Assignment 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Well-developed ideas with some expected revisions needed.</li> <li>- Formatting issues and minor grammar errors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improved organization and discussion.</li> <li>- Reduced feedback on grammar and lexis.</li> <li>- Font issue fixed, but minor grammar/lexis problems persisted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on organization and clarity.</li> <li>- Minor persistent grammar issues (prepositions, auxiliary verbs).</li> </ul>
<b>Assignment 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Well-organized, but needed changes in lexis and idea clarification.</li> <li>- Frequent grammar issues, particularly agreement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Revised based on feedback.</li> <li>- Corrected citations and reference list format.</li> <li>- Title added despite no feedback on it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lexical and grammatical issues (agreement) were persistent.</li> <li>- In-text citation and reference list format needed improvement.</li> </ul>
<b>Assignment 6</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overuse of information, unclear ideas, inconsistent format.</li> <li>- Missed reference page and in-text citations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grammar improved but preposition mistakes remained.</li> <li>- Reference list added, but formatting issues persisted.</li> <li>- Improvements in format, but errors remained in sections.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Repetitive grammar issues (prepositions) and format problems (headings, citations).</li> <li>- Failure to independently resolve these issues despite feedback.</li> </ul>

Data analysis shown in Table 1 indicates that this student was proficient in academic writing, demonstrating cohesive structure, appropriate hedging, and a clear authorial voice. The



first drafts were well-organized, on-topic, and praised by the instructor for their clarity. However, lexical issues were the most frequent problem in the drafts, including incorrect word choices and unnecessary expressions, which sometimes hindered comprehension. Another main issue was the presentation of ideas and arguments, followed by minor grammar mistakes. Despite these challenges, the student's work remained well-organized, and they consistently performed well across assignments. This pattern is in line with findings from Ferris (1999) and Hyland (2019), which show that higher-proficiency students can internalize feedback on global issues more effectively than lower-proficiency peers.

#### Key strengths:

- Strong organization and task adherence
- Effective use of hedging and authorial voice
- Well-structured and cohesive writing

#### Key Challenges:

- Lexical issues (incorrect word choices, redundant expressions)
- Elaboration and clarity of ideas
- Minor grammar mistakes

#### Performance of the Weaker Writer

In contrast, the weaker writer consistently struggled with producing strong drafts and received more negative feedback throughout the module. The student revised approximately 62% of the feedback items; however, many corrections were partial or incorrect. Lexical and structural feedback remained unaddressed in multiple assignments, and grammar errors - especially in verb forms and sentence boundaries - persisted.

*Table 2. Comparison of Engagement with Feedback for the Weaker Writer*

Assignment Number	Draft 1: Issues	Draft 2: Revisions/Progress	Key Challenges/Feedback
<b>Assignment 1</b>	- Limited feedback on task achievement and topic development. - Formatting issues pointed out.	- Improved introduction. - Some issues with clarity and organization. - Spelling/grammar mistakes persisted.	- Task achievement, organization, and grammar. - Teacher's feedback indicated leniency in grading.
<b>Assignment 2</b>	- Mistakes in idea development, lexical choice, verbosity, and organization. - Margins still incorrect.	- Some improvement in clarity, but some parts remained vague. - Margins still incorrect despite added help (screenshot).	- Failure to engage with feedback on formatting. - Grammar issues, particularly in register, spelling, and sentence structure.
<b>Assignment 3</b>	- Problems with meeting task requirements, developing arguments, vague ideas, citations, and insufficient use of sources.	- Significant improvement in using sources and citations. - Continued issues with lexical choice, clarity, and grammar.	- Grammatical errors persisted (voice, agreement, fragments). - No improvement in clarity and lexical choice despite feedback.
<b>Assignment 4</b>	- Lexical choice and clarity issues.	- Lexical choice improved; some vague ideas clarified.	- Major focus on improving lexical choice and clarity.

	- Incorrect contractions in academic writing.	- Format issues with references persisted.	- Margins resolved, but still struggled with cohesive devices and reference formatting.
<b>Assignment 5</b>	- Vague connections to the topic. - Incorrect citation usage and missing works cited list.	- Improvement in developing ideas and applying correct format. - Formatting issues persisted with works cited list.	- Failure to engage fully with citations and grammar feedback. - Continued use of contractions.
<b>Assignment 6</b>	- Improved topic development. - Some vague ideas and issues with citation.	- Continued improvement in clarity and idea development. - Persistent grammar and punctuation issues.	- Focus on task achievement, idea clarity, and correct use of sources. - Ongoing grammar issues (agreement, fragments, punctuation).

According to Table 2, the student faced significant challenges in expressing ideas both conceptually and linguistically. This resulted in frequent comments on lexical choices and clarity. Moreover, when the task requirements were not met, the instructor's feedback primarily focused on improving the expression of ideas, with fewer comments on other areas. This student often had to redo assignments and had difficulty staying on-topic, which contributed to a higher frequency of comments. Organization, grammar, formatting, and mechanics were also recurring issues, but they were less impactful compared to the primary problems of clarity and vocabulary choice. Despite making some progress in citation use and paragraph structure, the weaker writer had difficulty applying feedback across drafts consistently. These findings support previous observations that student engagement is highly variable and shaped by affective and cognitive dimensions (Storch, 2021; Zhang & Hyland, 2018).

#### Key challenges:

- Difficulty expressing ideas clearly and staying on-topic
- Frequent issues with vocabulary choice and word selection
- Recurring grammar mistakes that affected readability

#### Engagement with Feedback and Revisions

Both students responded to instructor feedback in various ways, with a focus on improving their writing through multiple drafts. The stronger writer demonstrated consistent improvement, particularly in task achievement and idea expression. Feedback was successfully integrated into revisions, leading to clearer, more cohesive writing.

The weaker student showed more fluctuating progress. While this student exhibited improvement in some areas over time, particularly in addressing feedback regarding vocabulary and clarity, the challenges in staying on topic and properly expressing ideas remained persistent throughout the module.

#### Student 1 (Stronger Writer):

- Showed consistent improvement and successful integration of feedback
- Demonstrated proficiency in academic writing, with occasional lexical and grammatical issues
- Received fewer corrections in final drafts, indicating progress in key writing aspects

**Student 2 (Weaker Writer):**

- Showed more fluctuating progress with persistent challenges in clarity and idea expression
- Received more frequent comments across all areas of writing, particularly vocabulary and grammar
- Needed more revisions to meet task requirements, especially in staying on-topic

In sum, the results reveal two distinct engagement trajectories: one marked by consistent uptake and gradual refinement of academic writing, and the other by fluctuating improvement and persistent difficulties in clarity and grammar. These findings set the stage for a deeper interpretation in the following discussion section.

### Discussion

This section interprets the findings from the study, examining how two Iranian undergraduate students improved their academic writing over a semester through a process-oriented approach involving multiple drafts and instructor feedback. The discussion focuses on areas where the students demonstrated notable progress, persistent challenges they faced, and the broader implications of these findings for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction. Additionally, the discussion highlights how engagement with feedback influenced students' writing development and the factors that shaped their revision strategies.

#### Areas of Improvement in Academic Writing

Both students demonstrated progress in key aspects of academic writing, particularly in structuring their texts, organizing ideas logically, refining vocabulary usage, and improving overall coherence. As they moved through successive drafts, their ability to integrate instructor feedback became evident in the reduced number of comments received on final versions. The stronger writer showed a steady trajectory of improvement, effectively refining organization, word choice, and clarity, while the weaker writer exhibited more fluctuating progress but still achieved noticeable improvement in task alignment and coherence.

However, while both students advanced in higher-order writing skills such as organization and coherence, the weaker writer faced ongoing struggles with lexical precision and grammatical accuracy. Persistent difficulties in grammar and mechanics, despite repeated revisions, suggest that additional scaffolding or explicit instruction might be necessary to address these challenges. This supports the argument made by Ferris (1999), who emphasized that feedback on major aspects (e.g., organization, argumentation) is more effective than a narrow focus on surface-level errors. These findings reinforce the idea that academic writing improvement is a gradual process requiring sustained feedback and practice. As noted by Hyland (2022), long-term writing development is deeply influenced by how students perceive, process, and act on feedback over time.

#### Areas Where Progress Was Limited

Although both students exhibited development, certain aspects of academic writing remained challenging. Grammar and mechanics continued to be problematic, particularly for the weaker

writer, whose texts contained recurring issues related to sentence structure, punctuation, and article usage. Even when these errors were marked in initial drafts, they often persisted in final versions, suggesting that indirect feedback alone may not be sufficient for addressing these difficulties. This echoes Truscott's (1996) position that grammar-focused corrections may not lead to long-term gains, especially if learners struggle with cognitive overload.

Additionally, lexical choice remained an area of concern. The weaker writer, in particular, struggled with selecting precise academic vocabulary, occasionally using informal or redundant expressions. This issue highlights the importance of targeted feedback on word choice and the need for students to develop a better understanding of the academic register. As Bitchener (2008) observed, contextualizing feedback and making its purpose transparent can enhance students' uptake and application. Even the stronger writer, despite overall proficiency, occasionally required guidance on refining vocabulary for clarity and conciseness.

### Variations in Engagement with Feedback

The study revealed distinct differences in how the two students engaged with instructor feedback. The stronger writer exhibited a proactive approach to revisions, effectively addressing feedback and demonstrating steady improvements in clarity, structure, and cohesion. This student's ability to refine their work with minimal intervention suggests a higher level of autonomy and self-regulation in academic writing development. This aligns with Zhang and Hyland's (2018) engagement model, which identifies cognitive and behavioral engagement as key drivers of successful feedback use.

In contrast, the weaker writer showed more inconsistent engagement with feedback. While they made revisions in response to comments, some errors persisted across drafts, indicating challenges in fully understanding or implementing suggested changes. This finding suggests that some students may require more explicit guidance or additional support mechanisms to enhance their ability to process and apply feedback effectively. As noted by Storch (2021), student beliefs, emotional responses, and prior experiences can all impact how feedback is received and acted upon.

### Implications of the Findings

The findings suggest that engagement with instructor feedback can lead to substantial improvements in academic writing, particularly for students who are more responsive to revision suggestions. The stronger writer demonstrated both behavioral and cognitive engagement, evidenced by accurate revisions and sustained improvements in organization, clarity, and lexical precision. The weaker writer, although occasionally responsive, displayed limited consistency, especially in self-editing grammar and cohesion.

These outcomes echo the work of Bitchener and Ferris (2012), who argue that students' ability to apply WCF is mediated by prior learning experiences, language awareness, and motivation. Moreover, Zhang and Hyland's (2022) engagement framework helps explain the different revision paths between the two students. From a pedagogical standpoint, these results indicate that instructors should complement written feedback with in-class conferencing or metalinguistic explanations to support lower-proficiency learners. Teachers might also use revision checklists or peer feedback protocols to scaffold engagement with feedback.

Additionally, training students to categorize and prioritize feedback (e.g., global vs. local issues) may increase their capacity to act on teacher input more effectively. These strategies align with sociocultural views of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasize the role of guided support and collaboration in student development. The sustained lexical and grammar errors observed in both cases highlight the need for recursive feedback and targeted grammar workshops, especially in contexts where students revise the same text multiple times. Structured revision diaries or reflection logs could further help learners track their progress and better internalize instructor comments.

### Implications of the Findings

The results of this study have important implications for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing instruction. EAP courses are designed to equip students with the ability to comprehend assigned topics and produce well-structured, clear, and cohesive academic texts. At a broader level, students should demonstrate proficiency in organizing their ideas, utilizing cohesive devices, and maintaining logical flow to fulfill task requirements. On a more detailed level, they need to master complex sentence structures and advanced vocabulary to convey their ideas with precision. While minor linguistic and mechanical errors may occur, the study suggests that as long as the overall clarity of the writing is maintained, such issues do not significantly hinder comprehension.

### Academic writing and proficiency

The findings indicate that even students with high language proficiency may struggle to clearly express their ideas or align them with the given topic. This reinforces the idea that language proficiency alone does not guarantee success in academic writing. The data from this study showed that both students faced difficulties with maintaining topic focus and clarity, despite their general English proficiency. Therefore, EAP instructors should recognize that academic writing requires explicit instruction beyond general language skills. As observed in this study, academic writing skills develop gradually, requiring specific training rather than relying solely on linguistic competence. This supports Hyland (2006), who argued that academic writing is a specialized literacy that must be taught deliberately, not assumed to emerge naturally from general proficiency.

### Focus on major aspects of academic writing

This study found that difficulties in academic writing were more often linked to issues of cohesion, coherence, and idea organization rather than grammar or mechanics. The weaker writer, in particular, struggled with structuring her ideas and integrating sources, which impacted the overall clarity of her writing. These findings suggest that EAP instructors should prioritize higher-order concerns such as text structure and logical flow over minor grammatical errors. As demonstrated in this study, when students focused too much on grammar, they sometimes neglected the organization of their writing. Therefore, instructors should guide students toward understanding that content and structure play a more critical role in effective academic writing. As Ferris (2004) pointed out, feedback is most beneficial when it targets issues that affect meaning, rather than isolated surface-level mistakes.

### Encouraging student autonomy and reflection

The results highlight the effectiveness of indirect corrective feedback in fostering student autonomy. In this study, both students benefited from feedback that required them to reflect on their own mistakes and engage in self-correction. The weaker writer, in particular, showed improvement over time by learning to identify and address her own issues. These findings suggest that promoting self-discovery and critical thinking helps students take an active role in their writing development. By encouraging autonomy, instructors can help students become more confident in their ability to improve their writing independently. This aligns with Schmidt's (1995) Noticing Hypothesis, which posits that learners must first consciously recognize their errors before they can internalize corrections.

### The gradual nature of writing skill development

The study underscores that academic writing development is a gradual process requiring time and persistence. The weaker writer in this study initially struggled with off-topic responses and organizational weaknesses, but with continued feedback and revisions, she demonstrated progress. This finding reinforces the importance of patience and sustained support from instructors. The data suggest that teachers should view initial struggles not as signs of failure but as natural steps in the learning process. Encouraging students - especially those who struggle early on - can help them build resilience and maintain motivation throughout the course. As Wingate (2022) emphasizes, writing support should be embedded throughout the curriculum, not limited to early stages.

### Balancing encouragement and constructive criticism

The instructor's approach in this study - combining constructive feedback with positive reinforcement - proved beneficial in creating a supportive learning environment. The weaker writer's progress was facilitated by a balance of direct guidance and encouragement, helping her stay motivated despite early difficulties. These findings suggest that academic writing instructors should adopt a similar approach, offering clear feedback while also recognizing students' efforts and improvements. Şakrak-Ekin and Balçıkanlı (2019) similarly found that students respond more positively when feedback includes acknowledgment of strengths alongside areas for improvement. By fostering a positive yet structured learning environment, instructors can help students stay engaged and committed to improving their writing over time.

## Conclusions and Future Studies

This study explored the academic writing development of two Iranian undergraduate students enrolled in a writing module that adopted a process-based approach, emphasizing drafting and revising in response to instructor feedback. The research examined their progress by analyzing changes in their final drafts after receiving corrective feedback on initial submissions.

By evaluating instructor feedback across multiple writing aspects - including text structure, clarity of ideas, vocabulary use, organization, formatting, coherence, and citation practices - the study tracked the students' writing development over five months. The primary objective was to assess their overall improvement in English academic writing.

The findings suggest that both students successfully engaged with the instructor's feedback and demonstrated progress in several key areas. The stronger writer consistently



improved across drafts, refining text structure, organization, formatting, and source integration. The weaker writer also made advancements, though at a slower and less consistent pace.

However, neither student showed substantial improvement in grammar and mechanics, aligning with previous research suggesting these elements are secondary in academic writing. Since grammar and mechanics were less emphasized in grading, both students prioritized higher-order writing skills. This tendency may have been influenced by cognitive load and affective factors such as stress, anxiety, or inattention. This supports the claim by Wingate (2022) and Ferris (2004) that focusing on meaning-level issues - like coherence and organization - leads to more noticeable gains in student performance.

Another key observation was that, despite having a solid grasp of vocabulary, both students struggled with lexical precision, often using words in inappropriate contexts. This issue, potentially stemming from language transfer or cultural influences, underscores the gap between general language proficiency and the ability to meet academic writing conventions. This finding is consistent with Hyland (2006), who emphasized the importance of discipline-specific writing instruction and the difficulty of acquiring genre-based lexical control.

The study further indicates that students' initial language proficiency influenced their engagement with feedback. While both had strong general English skills, their challenges in academic writing were more closely related to structuring and articulating ideas effectively than to linguistic competence. This reinforces the sociocultural view (Vygotsky, 1978) that development is supported by scaffolding and engagement within a meaningful context, such as task-based academic writing.

This research reinforces the distinction between general language proficiency and academic writing skills. It highlights the need for focused instruction on text construction and genre-specific writing conventions. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of well-structured feedback that supports students in gradually refining their academic writing abilities, addressing both linguistic and genre-related challenges.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This study explored how two Iranian undergraduate students developed academic writing skills through engagement with instructor feedback across six assignments. The longitudinal analysis revealed that both students demonstrated improvement, but at varying levels and trajectories. The stronger writer exhibited more consistent revisions and higher levels of engagement with feedback, particularly in addressing lexical precision, organization, and coherence. The weaker writer, on the other hand, struggled with integrating feedback consistently, with recurring issues in grammar and clarity persisting despite multiple drafting opportunities. These findings underscore the central role of WCF in developing academic writing and suggest that learner engagement is shaped by factors such as feedback type, learner attitudes, and prior academic experience. The contrast between the two participants highlights the importance of differentiated support mechanisms to enhance feedback responsiveness.

Based on the findings, EAP instructors are encouraged to:

- Incorporate structured feedback cycles using tools like revision checklists and written reflections.

- Hold brief writing conferences to clarify feedback expectations and support lower-proficiency learners.
- Design targeted interventions for persistent issues, such as grammar workshops or vocabulary-building exercises.
- Encourage students to engage in peer feedback and maintain revision diaries to build metacognitive awareness.

While the study offers useful insights, its limited participant pool constrains generalizability. However, its qualitative depth provides transferable implications for classroom practice, particularly in EAP courses with diverse proficiency levels. Future research should consider involving a larger and more diverse sample of students to validate patterns observed here. Incorporating student reflections - through interviews, logs, or surveys - would deepen our understanding of the emotional and cognitive processes underlying feedback engagement. Further research might also compare different types of WCF delivery (e.g., electronic, peer-based, or automated systems) to determine which formats promote the strongest engagement and revision quality. This could inform more tailored pedagogical interventions for different learner profiles and writing contexts.

### Challenges and Limitations of the Study

This study was carried out under certain constraints, including time limitations, which restricted the analysis to only two participants. Additionally, the research relied exclusively on written data, without incorporating interviews to gain further insights from the participants.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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