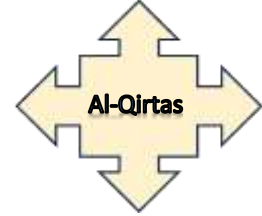


**Finding Theoretical and Non-Theoretical Teachers' Written  
Corrective Feedback Approaches in Higher Education Institutions  
of Sindh**



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**Abstract**

Pakistani students face a writing deficiency problem, for coping with it, Pakistan has started understanding the role of written corrective feedback in writing development, but it is lagging in researching theories of written feedback. Theories are reliable, they save time and provide desired results, the world has started testing theories, while Pakistan has scarcity of data to resolve the problem and is unable to make use of current development in the field. This study aimed at finding atheorcial and non-theoretical WCF approach utilized by teachers, for getting deep insights qualitative methods were used. Public sector universities were included in the study. The results revealed that few Pakistani teachers are familiar with SLA theories of written feedback and their approach is based on indirect feedback while majority of them are unfamiliar with the theories and mainly rely on elements of direct feedback, which is outdated and unsuited for all situations. Policy makers should design a framework to diagnose the issue without it, feedback practices will be vain and directionless.

**Keywords:** Written Corrective Feedback, Direct Written Feedback, Indirect Written Feedback, SLA Theories, Teaching Approaches, Higher Education Institutions, Writing Development.

## **Introduction**

Written feedback development began with publication of Truscott's (1996) work 'A case against grammar.' Later, researchers included theoretical foundations. Truscott (1996) in his work challenged teachers' feedback practices and expressed concern on opposite impact on students' learning. His work received uncommon fame and it has changed the perspective we think today. Along with exploring feedback practices the researchers started looking deep into the theoretical perspective of the written corrective feedback. They began investigating existing second language learning theories and tried to find out a way forward. Theoretical perspective is not new, but it is being observed with modern development in the role of written feedback. Ferris (2011) states that Krashan (1984) and Truscott (1996) did not favour corrective feedback in language development. Krashan relied on his theoretical grounds and had influenced Truscott (1996) and other researchers. Second Language theorists have always opposed written corrective feedback practices until its development into two prominent types: direct and indirect corrective feedback which we will define later. Second Language theorists viewed that written corrective feedback (WCF) was a hindrance in language development. With the passage time researchers have tested and found new ways to apply feedback for writing development. Written corrective feedback (WCF) was divided into two prominent categories one emerged as direct feedback which is a traditional method of providing feedback and the second was indirect feedback which is without name supported by all theorists.

According to (Lee 2008; Young et al. 2005) direct feedback refers to correcting word classes, word forms, structures, spellings and punctuations, teacher corrects the mistakes learners commit while indirect written corrective feedback refers to highlighting where errors are committed. It is simply identifying errors without providing a corrected version. (Bitchener & Storch, 2016) defined indirect feedback as practice of highlighting errors devoid of fixing them. Works of second language acquisition (SLA) theorists were supporting the practice of indirect feedback. Moreover, (Wang & Jiang, 2015) state that the first theoretical argument was given in favour of written CF was noticing hypothesis given by Schmidt (2001) in which the theorist defined that it was only through conscious attention that input can be converted into learners' intake, and he further concluded that noticing is a prerequisite for language learning. Moreover, as Gass (1997) defines that error correction enables learners to deconstruct and restructure the errored parts of language, this brings learners' attention to correction and promotes learning. Second Language theorists have always been in support of positive responses given by teachers. They have always emphasized on maintaining learners' confidence level which is now developed into indirect feedback. Following researchers have played key role in development of written corrective feedback, Ferris, and Roberts (2001), Ferris (2006, 2010 & 2016), and Storch (2016). Theories come up with their preset criterion to work on, a researcher saves itself from getting the same things after applying a lot of effort. Theories are being tested time to time and provide a way forward or in action in a certain field as Van Evera (2015) states theory can consist of a sequence

of hypotheses which are being tested time to time and validated. Using a theoretical foundation for a certain work can be beneficial and time saving.

### **Problem statement**

Writing development in Pakistan at university level is not less than a challenge, the students are highly deficient in writing despite being provided major English subjects. To diagnose the issue Pakistan has started studying written corrective feedback approaches and types but it lacks in researching the role of theories in writing development. Globally second language acquisition (SLA) theories are added and being tested to form a useful framework to face the problem. Relying on theories provides a better and faster solution to diagnose the key problem. Excluding second SLA theories may lead to repeated results the world has already reached. This study aims at studying theoretical and non-theoretical teachers' CF approaches in higher education institutions of Sindh to provide a database for further development in the field particularly helping policy makers to form a framework for written corrective feedback in Pakistani context.

### **Research Gap**

Writing deficiency is a core issue globally, with Pakistani students being particularly affected. Significant study has been done to diagnose the issues including adding second language learning theories (SLA) into teaching writing to address the issues systematically. Unfortunately, Pakistan lacks that data and direction. The dependency on a theoretical foundation for studying written feedback practices as emphasized by Van der Kleij and Lipnevich (2021), leads to the same themes again and again and halts the progress and theoretical study saves researchers from reinventing the wheel over again. Using theories in teaching writing may provide preset Standards of working and save much time and energy and lead to the writing development. Theories provide base for teaching, developing, and monitoring progress throughout the learning process. There is an uncertainty whether Pakistani teachers use second language acquisition (SLA) theories or not while providing written feedback. Therefore, this study aims to explore both theoretical and non-theoretical approaches to written corrective feedback utilized by university teachers in Pakistan.

### **Literature Review**

This section will address a few second language learning (SLA) theories and hypotheses which are actively used in written CF practices by the teachers. Among the list, first is Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT), it is a very influential theory. SCT provides a complete line of action for teaching and learning. The theorist has given the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is a zone where a learner is taught tools by more knowledge one (a teacher) tools are taught to the learners until it does not stick somewhere, by this learner forms habits and learns through doing things by himself. Teachers training in teaching using new tools makes learning faster and better; however, other teaching where learners are all time dependent may not achieve the same pace of learning. This is a positive point of theories when they come up with their own line of action.

### SLA Theories on Written Corrective Feedback

Sociocultural theory (SCT) is based on second language acquisition (SLA) which was given by Russian linguist Lev Vygotsky between late 1920s and early 1930s, it was later published in the 1960s. (Pawlak, 2013, p. 65) says that Vygotsky had believed “learning was a socially oriented and socially mediated process”. (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Thorne & Lantolf, 2007) define that effective learning is determined by the more knowledgeable person. In theory the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is where learning takes place with interaction between the learner and a more knowledgeable one, learner after learning a tool reaches a certain stage and stops, then again, the learner is provided with more skills in his way learning becomes better and faster. Better knower is referred to as a teacher or an expert providing feedback. As (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012) explain that there are two phases of cognitive learning the initial learning begins in the ZPD and the second one comes after it which is high order thinking it is referred as internalization. Moreover, Krashan’s monitor model which is based on few hypotheses is also influential in the research world. Krashan (1984) calls correction ‘a punishment’ he states that correction creates a sense of inferiority in learners’ minds and causes low confidence and uncertainty which is fatal for language development. Krashan (1984) clearly states that a learner should be exposed to quality text from where it will self-assess his own writing performance; there is no need to correct learners. His ideas emphasize the teacher’s role as teacher not as editor. Theoretical foundations may not provide such a preset framework of reference, this makes inclusion of theories essential in teaching writing.

Thus, Krashan is one the most discussed theorists in the second language learning/ acquisition field, his hypotheses have been under debate. We have included his three hypotheses advocating feedback practices particularly for writing skills. Krashen (1981) states that in the way a child learns L1 he undergoes the same process while learning L2, it relies on the interaction in the L2. Speakers focus on the communicative aspect rather than forms and structures. In this way, the model has strong applications for the written corrective feedback (WCF). We will discuss Krashan’s three hypotheses in relation to written CF. The first is Input Hypothesis in which Krashen (1985) believes that if the second language learner receives comprehensible input, he will achieve a slightly higher proficiency level. He has given levels  $i+1$  which is prerecorded level and  $+1$  is achieved after comprehensible input. He considered that there is no need of teaching language structures to the L2 learners, they will master language with a quality input of original text of the L2 and repetitions of the rules were not necessary to be followed in teaching practices. (Krashen, 1985) was not in favor of correcting errors, he believed that such practice interrupts the language acquisition process.

The second hypothesis is Acquisition or Learning Hypothesis, it creates a distinction between ‘acquiring language’ and ‘learning language’ (Krashen, 1985). He explains acquisition is the “subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize in acquiring their first language” and he referred to learning as the “conscious process that results in ‘knowing about’ language”. As Diaz-Rico, (2004) stated that acquiring language is a natural

process while learning language is to learn language rules and structures. Lemke, 1990) cited (Krashan, 1984) and asserted that a L2 learner can acquire writing skills through comprehensible input (quality text), learner does not need feedback in the shape of grammar correction and error treatments. The Third is monitor hypothesis, (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012) stated that Krashan explains in the second language learning process if the learner is exposed to essential understandable input can edit to monitor the language production in the form of spoken or written either before or after they occur because of the L2 acquired system. They further said that Stephen Krashan was more oriented to language acquisition, that is why he kept supporting the natural form of second language acquisition. Somehow, he was right in his views, supporting the practice of feedback but he did not encourage highlighting mistakes in the manuscripts and pointing them out in the classroom. He believed that such practice could lead learners to discouragement and the learning process can be hindered.

Interaction Hypothesis is very influential in nature, it was given by E. Hatch (1978) and Long (1996). They believed that the interaction hypothesis observes that language learning is a social practice. Both researchers opposed Krashan's input model; they did not accept that the input was sufficient to acquire a second language without interaction of a native speaker or an expert. They focused on the interaction with a native speaker or a language expert. They termed 'negotiating meaning' L2 learners imitate similar interactions they receive and understand from native speakers. From time-to-time learners modify L2 structures and meaning in the result of interaction (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Native speakers' input helps in learning language better and faster.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Qualitative Research**

Four universities were selected based on their location including Hyderabad and Sukkur regions. Teachers were selected who were teaching Functional English subject to the undergrad students in the universities. Interviews are prominent data collection tools in qualitative research, semi structured interviews are observed providing detailed information of an area of research being explored. We used qualitative study to reach in depth. Interview booklet was generated and repeatedly piloted and validated by experienced researchers.

#### **Thematic Analysis Gibbs 2007**

For data analysis Gibbs (2007) Thematic Model was used. It is popular among the researchers owing to its preset framework which provides a complete step by step guideline for analyzing qualitative data and taking out themes. Gibbs (2007) has divided this model into six phases. First phase begins with familiarization with data the researchers comprehend its structures, meaning and context they get complete information about the data. Second phase is generating codes, it refers to coding and labelling segments of data and providing key words for better categorization of the provided information. The third phase is searching for themes, after finishing coding researchers look for emerging patterns of themes from the codes and observing them. The fourth phase, reviewing the themes, in this part researchers filter the themes and critically evaluate



themes' coherence and relevance with the data. Then after the fifth phase, naming the themes, in this part the researchers clearly name the themes which meticulously relate the objectives of research. In the last producing the report, researchers present reports in the shape of results and share what is achieved out of the data. Gibbs (2007) has thoroughly studied thematic analysis and suggested these most useful phases of analyzing data. This model eased the data analysis process and helped to reach results timely. It's a very useful model.

### **Population**

The desired population was teachers of four different universities in the province Sindh, Pakistan. They were teaching a functional English course in session 2023. Teachers teaching functional English were interviewed, the study reached a point of saturation and did not opt for more interviews. Functional English subjects include elements of writing and assessment practices. Functional English is a three-credit hour subject. The qualitative data was collected from eight teachers based on their availability.

### **Instrument**

This research investigation is grounded on qualitative methodology. Based on semi-structured interviews were taken from the teachers regarding the content of theories of written corrective feedback. The data was collected through audio recordings and written scripts were generated and in the last interview scripts were thematically analyzed. The quantitative part was to answer two research questions RQ1: Do teachers incorporate any theories while providing WCF to the students? And RQ2: How do teachers base their non-theoretical WCF approach while giving WCF to the students?

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Teachers' Interview**

Semi-structured interview format was used in the study. It combines the benefits of both; controllability and flexibility (Dörnyei, 2007; Bryman, 2016). These are popular in social science research owing to openness in the structure and giving the interviewee freedom to answer and disclose other aspects of the information Edwards and Holland, 2013; Bryman, 2016). Individuals remain comfortable and confident while addressing the questions, they share a unique experience with the interviewer. Such qualities of the semi-structured interviews have made them popular among social scientists.

#### **Validity and reliability of the Interview Booklet**

Validity and Reliability comes as essential tools under the category of Positivist epistemology (Walting as cited in Golafshani, 2000). Validity shows if research truly measures what it is intended to measure (Joppe, 2000 cited in Golafshani, 2000). Face validation tool was used to check and improve interview booklet quality. Booklet was thrice updated keeping in mind the question's purpose, placement, and order.

#### **Ethical Consideration**

In the pursuit of research study for academic excellence, it is essential to follow high ethical standards. In this study the researcher had taken care of ethical guidelines provided by the Mehran University of Engineering & Technology, Jamshoro and set by Higher Education

Commission of Pakistan which include: taking consent of the participants, ensuring safety and privacy, respecting dignity and autonomy, safeguarding personal information, maintaining the confidentiality of the research, taking measures to conceal identity of the population and institute, avoiding deception in the structure of the research and results, declaring conflict of interest and avoiding misleading information (Bryman and Bell 2007).

### **Results and Discussions**

#### **Teachers do not incorporate theories in written feedback practices**

##### **Non-theoretical Approaches.**

The thematic analysis revealed that majority of the teachers do not follow any theoretical framework in their feedback practice, and they primarily focus on correcting language elements particularly grammar elements which is according to the (Lee 2008; Young et al. 2005) direct feedback practice it refers to correcting word classes, word forms, structures, spellings and punctuations, teacher corrects the mistakes learners commit". Teachers strongly believe that language correction is the only way to master writing without constant corrections. Students won't be able to master writing skills. This is against views of (Krashan,1985) he believed that provision of feedback in learning is nor essential, learning takes place when learner is exposed to quality text or original correct language. He did not favour the feedback practices, according to him feedback hinders language acquisition though was not able to provide any empirical evidence for his statement. However, Krashan's suggestion is worth noticing.

##### **Non-theoretical feedback**

Teachers feedback practices were found based on a traditional method which is grammar correction or red pen feedback. Majority of teachers rely on elements of direct feedback in their practice. They believe that without attaining language proficiency learners will not be able to do so. They see grammar correction as a key element. Teachers share mistakes in language that look ugly, and they do not want them in the students' writing work. This shows the difference with Stephen Krashan (1984) he considered language correction 'a mistake' he believed correction halts the learning process so it should not take place while giving feedback. A learner should be self-reliant in terms of correction. Digging further, Truscott (1996) has also shown opposite results, he presented his famous case against grammar in which he opposed grammar correction. Moreover, (Gultekin & Nyström, 2019) cites (Säljö, 2014) and he revealed that giving praise and reward leave significant impact on learners, this approach relates to Skinners' language acquisition theory and 'principle of reinforcement.'

##### **Efficacy of non-theoretical approaches**

Teachers not incorporating theoretical approaches in the feedback consider their traditional preset standard for language correction to be effective and give good results; however, (Mafulah & Basthomi, 2022) found it different they discovered that direct feedback proved to be ineffective in the long term. Students need time to recall their mistakes by themselves; it is not possible in the short run. Grammar correction proved ineffective in the long run and indirect feedback proved to be effective.

### **Challenges in using theories.**

Theoretical feedback approach is easier because it has a predefined standard and proper guideline what and where to do but it has myriad challenges posed to teachers while practicing written feedback. Theories are not part of teaching plans and teachers are unable to do things on their own which makes using theories difficult for them.

Teachers incorporate theories of written feedback

### **Using SLA Theories**

The study has revealed that only a few teachers were familiar with theories of written feedback. They mentioned, they use Stephen Krashan's hypothesis, Vygotsky's socio-culture theory and Swain's output hypothesis. Stephen and Vygotsky are being repeatedly used while giving feedback and Swain is rarely used; his theory is brought into practice when it is necessary. Notably there is a lack of a unified theory, there is no such theory which can fit in all learning situations. Teachers are adopting different theories for different learning contexts; there is dire need of working on this gap in the field.

### **Theory based feedback.**

Teachers' practices of feedback aligned with the theories they mentioned. The theories have features of indirect feedback such as highlighting the error without explanation, indicating the minor mistakes, and asking for self-checking. These theories focus on development of language with quality exposure of native language in any form and guidance of better knowledgeable one means teacher. Bitchener (2006) claims that feedback takes place in ZPD where the learner sticks at a point then he gets feedback and solves the thing by itself. Teachers claim that they use positive mode of feedback to encourage students to write more and adopt the habit of self-correction. They further said that we appreciate students on their generated writing tasks, and we highlight theory positive development, by this they get motivated and pay more effort to attain a writing master. Positive feedback is supported by Krashan (1985), Truscott (1996), Ferris (1999) and Bitchener (2006). In this way, teachers mentioned the sources where from the correction could be done a-or they referred to chapters of grammar by which students can acquire the rules properly and use correct form of language, this resulted into forming students' habit of checking words, correcting before submitting the writing task, and self-reading grammar rules. Theoretical feedback seems impactful as compared to grammar correction. Teachers incorporating theories are teaching tools to the learners, this is an amazing development in Sindh where higher education was considered diminishing.

### **Efficacy of using theories**

Using a theoretical approach is effective and useful; it saves energy and time; theories have their framework of what to do, where to do they provide all guidelines and guide throughout the feedback process. On the other hand, direct feedback has no such feasibility. Theoretical approach is making students habitual of self-relying in terms of grammar correction and developing habit of reading in them without highlighting such things. Learning writing takes time and becomes a hard nut to crack for Pakistani learners. The teacher claimed that learners are slowly improving



and comprehending things well, according to them using theories is an effective and useful way to develop writing. As per teachers claim learners improve in the following way: First they become autonomous and self-reliant in correcting mistakes, second, they start using language, third their language improves with good pace and in the last they formed patterns for working on for further development. (Falhasiri & Hasiri, 2020) support teachers' claim. Moreover, (Ferris & Roberts, 2001) appreciates the indirect feedback by stating that feedback highlighting errors, building habits of self-correction nurture cognitive skills such as problem solving and comprehension. Tudor (1993) supports elements teachers' claims of using the theoretical approach, he states that indirect feedback revolves around the learner and learner has an active role which leads to better writing development.

### **Limitations of theoretical approach**

Theories are effective but due to absence of a single and unified theory there so many limitations of using them such as teachers are teaching plan bound, they must cover all outlines and report the progress, the second, they are time bound they must meet given deadlines by the universities which makes hard for them to follow theoretical approaches on their own. The last, absence of theories in the curriculum makes it challenging for teachers to utilize and get the desired results. Theories of any theoretical framework for writing development is not included on the universities' curriculum in Pakistan. In Europe universities are bound to follow universal standards for English language proficiency through Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Pakistan should develop such a framework to diagnose the issue.

Large classrooms are also prominent blockades in implementing theoretical approaches in the universities. Teachers are not able to apply elements of feedback guided by theories in large-scaled classes, assessing students' work in such classes is hectic and equal to impossible. Teachers are already overloaded with classes and other responsibilities they may not be able to spare time in such situations. Pakistan has no uniform education system, students when they come to universities, they have misconceptions and wrong beliefs regarding learning English. Changing them takes time and it hinders the applied theory guided feedback approach. Large classrooms are limitations, they lessen the teachers' observation capability, and the teacher is not able to note the results. (Chen et al., 2016) asserts that theories of SLA are empirically studied in a short span of time and researchers remain inconclusive in that regard. He highlights the gap and states that the theories should be studied and tested for a long period of time which could bring some useful and novel insights in the field. This may lead to a unified theory or a leading framework for providing proper feedback for writing development.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan was lacking data regarding theoretical use of written corrective feedback, this study has contributed to it and has clearly found that Pakistani university teachers are using second language theories on written corrective feedback. It is a major development in the field of Pakistan especially in Sindh. However, most teachers are doing traditional feedback practices and they are unfamiliar with the theoretical aspect of written feedback. The research study has come up with

the information that it is not made distinct in the policy and guidelines which feedback types should be applied. Teachers are bound to teaching plans and it becomes difficult for them to do something on their own. Usage of theories are effectively working out, they come with a complete criterion, and which guides teachers step by step.

### **Key Findings and Personal Observations**

Majority of the teachers teaching in universities of Sindh are not familiar with theories of written corrective feedback, they are massively relying on grammar correction and on language proficiency. Their feedback approach is traditional and based on elements of direct feedback. They have a preset criterion in their mind; they believe that language perfection lies in the continuous grammar correction. The study has uncovered a few useful insights: Few teachers were familiar with theoretical frameworks, and they practiced them. Teachers used elements of indirect feedback while using theoretical background. They believed that theories build learning patterns, and it becomes easier for students to maintain learning pace and for teachers it becomes feasible to observe the progress. Indirect feedback is reliable and is empirically proved practice.

Theoretically based written feedback practice was teaching tools, recommending better resources of learning, making them independent and users of language. Theories give good results when they are brought into practice. They result in forming learners' habit of self-correction, teaching language tools such Grammarly and MS word and making them independent users of language. Teachers viewed that learners develop writing skills with slow and gradual pace with their theory-based approach of written feedback. Comparatively indirect feedback is sustainable and long lasting. Peers' assessment is also a useful tool to tackle issues in writing. More learned students could help weaker students in developing writing skills. Peers' assessment was preferred in the perceptions by teachers, but it does not exist in the teaching practices in higher education institutions of Sindh.

In this way, there was closer alignment found in teachers' practices and their views regarding theories of written CF. It was seen that teachers who do not incorporate theories are indulged into grammar correction practices. They do not have any other standards to follow rather than grammar correction. Preset standards of grammar correction and language proficiency are conditional to the needs and levels of students. It further revealed that there is no such unified theory on written corrective feedback which could be adopted immediately for better and faster feedback. There are plenty of theories which do not fit into all types of learning situations. Along with this, the curriculum does not include any theoretical framework which makes it difficult for teachers to use any theory on their own. Teachers are already over driven by time and workload.

### **Limitations**

The study has given meaningful insights and strived to cover theoretical and non-theoretical approaches existing in the universities of Sindh. This study has also some limitations: First, teachers who participated in the research have different levels of experience and qualification. Second, all public sector universities in Sindh were not included in the study due to time constraints. Only four of them were included in the study keeping in mind following criterion:

Facilitating larger population, their geographical location covering larger chunks of Sindh's population and feasibility of doing research. Lastly, in the study effectiveness of existing theories was not tested but scope was limited to knowing about what theories are being used the rest was left for the future studies.

#### **Future Recommendations**

The study has revealed noteworthy insights. It has answered the questions and found where the problem lies. The findings have indicated theory-based feedback has elements of indirect feedback and teachers are making them habitual of self-correcting. Likewise, outdated, and directionless feedback practices cause deficient writing skills of students. The existing trend of written feedback is unmatching to the needs of students. Recommendations are: Initially, there should be a unified theory or a framework of written corrective feedback as it could become easier for teachers to adopt and implement it. Subsequently, there is dire need for adoption or building a common framework to get the desired results in developing writing skills. Following that, to tackle time constraints teachers should use peers' assessment to address students' issues in writing. Learners having a good proficiency level can help weaker ones by this teacher can save energy. Then, theories of feedback need to be tested for a longer period as they could pave ways for forming a unified framework for written corrective feedback.

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