

The Importance of Written Feedback and Grading in English Composition: A Comparative Study of U.S. and Nepali ESL Practices

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of written feedback and grading in English composition by comparing U.S. and Nepali ESL practices. In U.S. classrooms, feedback is process-oriented, emphasizing rhetorical awareness, revision, and formative assessment, while grading often incorporates alternatives like contract systems. Nepali ESL instruction, however, remains largely product-oriented, emphasizing grammar, structure, and examination results. Using survey data from 30 students and 10 instructors, the study reveals that Nepali learners value structural guidance, grammatical accuracy, and model essays more than idea-centered feedback, highlighting a gap between global pedagogical ideals and local learner needs. Results also show that grades are seen as strong motivators when paired with constructive commentary. The findings recommend culturally responsive adaptations, such as integrating annotated models, balancing formative and summative assessment, and gradually introducing process-oriented strategies, to enhance ESL writing instruction in Nepal.



Keywords: ESL Composition; Written feedback; Grading practice; Culturally responsive teaching; Process-oriented pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Feedback and grading have long played a central role in English composition pedagogy, shaping not only how students develop their writing skills but also how they perceive progress and achievement. In English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, these practices carry even greater weight because they address both rhetorical effectiveness and language proficiency within specific cultural expectations. In the U.S. tradition, written feedback is widely understood as a means of fostering revision, rhetorical awareness, and critical thinking, particularly within process-oriented pedagogy that emphasizes multiple drafts and peer review (Ferris, 2014; Sommers, 1982). Grading, however, has been more contentious; scholars increasingly question its fairness and motivational value, proposing alternatives such as contract grading to redirect focus from the final product to the writing process itself (Inman & Powell, 2018). By contrast, ESL composition instruction in Nepal continues to reflect a largely product-oriented tradition shaped by grammar-translation pedagogy and examination-driven curricula. Banstola's (2024) observations show that peer feedback remains minimal and heavily

teacher-directed, further reinforcing this product-centered model. In such contexts, grades serve as the dominant measure of achievement, while feedback, when offered, is often narrow in scope and confined to surface-level corrections. These conditions raise important questions about whether current practices in Nepal adequately respond to the needs of contemporary ESL learners, particularly as they encounter growing exposure to global academic standards and communicative demands.

A comparative perspective is important for understanding these differences. In the U.S., composition courses frequently incorporate formative feedback strategies that encourage self-assessment, genre awareness, and revision as part of an ongoing writing process (Keating, 2019; Horner et al., 2011). In contrast, many Nepali classrooms emphasize final product assessment, leaving students with limited opportunities for iterative improvement or dialogic engagement. This pattern resonates with Miao, Chang, and Ma's (2023) bibliometric analysis, which documents the global growth of research on written corrective feedback and underscores the need to adapt such insights to local contexts like Nepal. The divergence between U.S. and Nepali practices

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reflects not only contrasting pedagogical traditions but also structural barriers, including institutional constraints, resource shortages, and cultural attitudes that reinforce teacher authority over student autonomy. As Shahi and Chaudhary (2024) note, governance structures within Nepalese higher education further restrict the development of feedback systems, limiting the potential for a transition toward more process-oriented models.

This study addresses a critical research gap by examining the absence of empirical data on how Nepali ESL students and teachers perceive written feedback and grading, and by comparing these perceptions with established U.S. practices. While U.S. scholarship often prioritizes feedback on ideas, argumentation, and rhetorical strategies, preliminary observations suggest that Nepali students tend to view such feedback as less actionable than direct structural guidance and model-based instruction. This difference shows the importance of contextualizing pedagogical imports to fit specific learner needs rather than adopting foreign models wholesale. To study these issues, the research draws on survey data from 30 Nepali ESL undergraduate students and 10 Nepali ESL teachers, exploring their attitudes toward written feedback and grading. The inquiry is guided by three questions: How do Nepali ESL students and teachers perceive the usefulness of feedback on ideas versus structural guidance in English composition? How do U.S. college practices in feedback and grading compare to those in Nepal? And what pedagogical adaptations can bridge the gap between global composition practices and local learner expectations in Nepal? By situating these findings within broader discussions in composition and second language writing studies, this paper aims to contribute to the development of feedback and grading practices that are pedagogically sound, culturally responsive, and attuned to the needs of Nepali ESL learners.

Scholars have long acknowledged written feedback as both one of the most time-consuming and pedagogically significant aspects of writing instruction. Sommers (1982) characterized written commentary as a way of dramatizing the reader's presence, encouraging students to become more self-aware as writers. She argued that effective feedback should prompt revision by raising questions and highlighting gaps in meaning rather than merely correcting surface errors. Building on this, Ferris (2014) synthesized decades of research

into "best practices," advocating for feedback that is clear, text-specific, and balanced between praise and constructive criticism. She emphasized that instructors should address global concerns—such as content, organization, and rhetorical clarity—early in the writing process, reserving grammar and mechanics for later stages. Recent findings reinforce these principles: Almohawes (2025) demonstrated that EFL undergraduates strongly preferred direct and explicit corrective feedback, underscoring the value of clarity over abstract commentary. In U.S. college composition classrooms, such feedback is typically embedded within a process-oriented approach, where multiple drafts and revisions are supported through instructor and peer comments (Keating, 2019). Peer review, in particular, is framed as a collaborative tool that enables students to claim greater authority over their texts and to recognize writing as a social process, though Keating's longitudinal study revealed that students' valuation of peer feedback varies, some find it essential, while others view it as secondary to teacher commentary.

Grading has been a persistent area of debate in composition studies. While traditional grading systems are entrenched in most institutions, their fairness, consistency, and motivational value have been questioned (Inman & Powell, 2018). Inman and Powell's study on contract grading highlighted its potential to reorient classrooms toward the labor of writing rather than solely the quality of the final product. Although their findings showed that contract grading could foster a more democratic learning environment, they also revealed that students and instructors often have strong emotional attachments to traditional grades, viewing them as symbols of achievement and belonging. In the U.S., alternative grading systems are often paired with intensive formative feedback, aiming to reduce students' anxiety and encourage risk-taking in writing (Danielewicz & Elbow, as cited in Inman & Powell, 2018). By contrast, in many ESL contexts—including Nepal—grading remains predominantly summative, tied to end-of-term examinations. This high-stakes environment can limit the role of feedback, as students focus on earning marks rather than engaging in revision.

In second language writing research, feedback is understood to serve a dual role: enhancing rhetorical quality while also addressing linguistic accuracy. Horner et al. (2011) advanced a

translingual perspective that treats language difference as a resource rather than a deficiency, urging instructors to approach non-standard forms with patience and openness. This view challenges traditional corrective practices that prioritize conformity to a singular notion of “correct” English. For ESL learners, however, the perceived effectiveness of feedback often depends on its focus. While feedback on global issues such as ideas, organization, and argumentation can foster long-term development, many students, particularly in exam-oriented systems, prefer explicit guidance on structure and models of “ideal” writing (Ferris, 2014). This tendency is evident in Nepali classrooms, where students frequently request sample essays and detailed structural outlines in place of abstract commentary on ideas. Shen and Chong (2023) reinforce this point, showing that learner engagement increases when feedback is concrete and perception-based, a pattern that closely mirrors the preferences of Nepali students.

The divergence between U.S. and Nepali feedback and grading practices can be traced to broader historical and institutional factors. In the U.S., writing instruction underwent a shift from current-traditional rhetoric toward process pedagogy in the mid-20th century, influenced by cognitive and social theories of writing (Gold & Hammond, n.d.). The adoption of peer review, workshop models, and alternative grading emerged from this shift. In Nepal, English composition instruction developed within a colonial and postcolonial framework that prioritized grammar-translation methods and examination performance. As a result, while U.S. instructors often view feedback as part of an ongoing dialogue that shapes rhetorical awareness, Nepali classrooms tend to treat feedback as a corrective mechanism applied to a completed product. Grading in the U.S. can be flexible and formative, whereas in Nepal it is largely summative, determining progression and certification. These systemic differences stress the importance of contextualizing pedagogical practices when transferring models from one educational culture to another.

This research applied a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey analysis with qualitative thematic interpretation to compare perceptions of written feedback and grading between Nepali ESL students and instructors, framed within U.S. composition pedagogy. The

descriptive-comparative approach documented current practices in Nepal and juxtaposed them with U.S. models discussed in existing literature (Ferris, 2014; Inman & Powell, 2018; Keating, 2019), enabling the identification of similarities and differences in how feedback and grading are applied. Further, two groups participated in the study: thirty undergraduate ESL students from three Nepali universities and ten instructors teaching undergraduate writing courses. All students had at least eight years of English study, produced written work in English, and represented diverse disciplines such as education, business, and science (16 female, 14 male). Instructors had a minimum of three years of teaching experience, and four had U.S.-based training, offering both local and international perspectives. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality. In addition, two structured surveys (one for students and another one for instructors) were designed with three sections: demographics, perceptions of written feedback, and perceptions of grading. Demographic questions gathered background data, while Likert-scale and open-ended items measured attitudes toward feedback on ideas, structure, grammar, rhetorical strategies, and model-based instruction. Grading-related items addressed motivation, formative versus summative assessment, and fairness. Both surveys shared core items for direct comparison, with instructors additionally asked about workload and institutional assessment policies.

Data were collected over three weeks in Spring 2025 using both Google Forms and printed surveys to ensure accessibility. All responses were anonymous to minimize social desirability bias. Open-ended survey items provided qualitative data on participants’ preferences and attitudes, offering narrative insights despite the absence of follow-up interviews. Similarly, about the data analysis, the quantitative data from the Likert-scale items were analyzed using descriptive statistics, comparing results between student and instructor groups to identify convergences and divergences. The qualitative data were coded thematically using an inductive approach. Predefined categories included preferred feedback types (idea-focused, structure-focused, grammar-focused, model-based) and grading roles (motivational, evaluative, detrimental), with additional themes, such as time constraints and

the need for concrete examples, emerging during coding. Cross-referencing between groups highlighted areas of alignment and misalignment.

The survey data revealed notable patterns in how Nepali ESL students and instructors perceive written feedback and grading. The data were analyzed using SPSS version XX. Frequency

distributions were generated, and bar charts were designed based on these outputs to illustrate key findings.

Table 1 presents the mean scores for key survey items rated on a 1–5 Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Feedback and Grading Preferences by Students and Teachers

Survey Item	Students (n=30)	Teachers (n=10)
1 Written feedback on ideas is helpful for improving my writing	3.2	3.6
2 Written feedback on structure/organization is helpful	4.6	4.7
3 Written feedback on grammar/mechanics is helpful	4.4	4.5
4 Receiving sample essays or models improves my writing	4.8	4.9
5 Grades motivate me/my students to work harder	4.5	4.3
6 Grades should be combined with written feedback	4.7	4.8

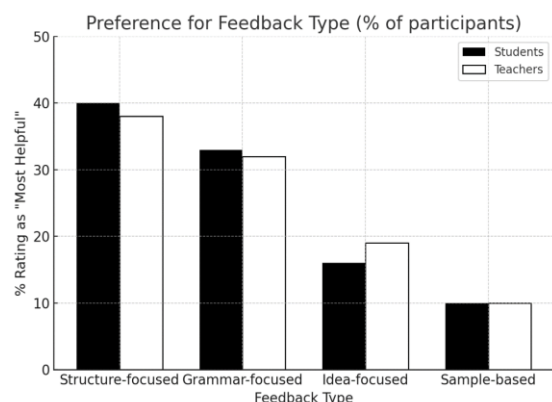


Figure 1: Preferences for Types of Written Feedback

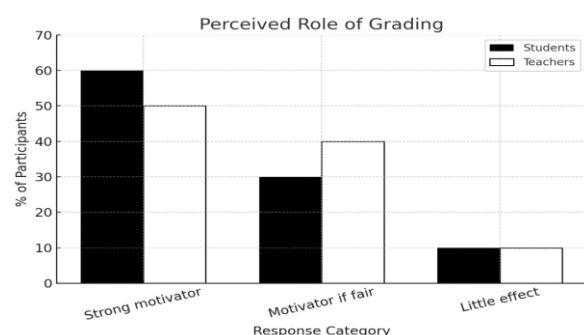


Figure 2: Role of Grading in Motivation

Qualitative findings demonstrated that students often viewed feedback on ideas as less helpful unless accompanied by concrete examples, clear templates, or sample essays to guide future assignments. Teachers recognized the theoretical value of idea-focused feedback but noted that students tended to overlook it when it was abstract, with large class sizes and limited marking time further constraining the delivery of individualized comments. Both groups agreed that

grades paired with targeted feedback were more motivating than grades alone; students felt “lost” when given a grade without guidance, while teachers valued grades as a means of communicating expectations to administrators and parents. Overall, structural and grammar-focused feedback emerged as the most preferred, sample essays were in high demand, grading was widely seen as a motivator when fair and accompanied by feedback, and a gap persisted between the theoretical emphasis on idea-focused feedback and the practical preference for tangible, model-based guidance.

The findings of this study show a persistent gap between global composition pedagogy ideals and local learner needs in Nepal’s ESL context. While U.S. composition scholarship often emphasizes process-oriented, idea-centered feedback (Ferris, 2014; Horner et al., 2011), the majority of surveyed Nepali students and teachers in this study expressed a stronger preference for tangible supports, such as model essays and explicit structural guidance. This suggests that while abstract idea-focused feedback dovetails with broader theoretical trends in writing pedagogy, it does not resonate as strongly with students who are still building foundational proficiency in English composition.

U.S. writing instruction, as described by Inman and Powell (2018) and Keating (2019), prioritizes formative assessment, peer review, and iterative drafting cycles. Grades are often deemphasized in favor of narrative feedback, and students are encouraged to develop rhetorical awareness over

time. By contrast, the results of this study reveal that Nepali ESL students are less likely to benefit from purely formative, idea-driven feedback unless it is paired with concrete examples and clear structure. This divergence may be rooted in the different educational cultures: Nepal's schooling system historically emphasizes rote learning, exam performance, and teacher-centered instruction, which shapes student expectations for explicit guidance and model-based learning. The high preference for structural and grammar-focused feedback among Nepali students aligns with Ferris's (2014) argument that second language writers often require explicit linguistic scaffolding before they can effectively engage with higher-order concerns like argument development. Many students in this study explicitly stated that feedback on ideas felt "too vague" or "hard to apply" without clear direction on organization or language form. Teachers corroborated this, noting that even when they attempted to provide idea-focused commentary, students tended to focus on surface-level corrections and tangible revisions they could directly implement. Moreover, this finding stresses Horner et al.'s (2011) advocacy for a translingual approach that acknowledges linguistic diversity and builds from students' existing literacy practices. In the Nepali context, this may mean integrating culturally familiar instructional tools, such as worked examples, with process-oriented techniques.

Contrary to trends in some U.S. institutions that experiment with ungraded writing or portfolio-based assessment (Inman & Powell, 2018), both Nepali students and teachers in this study viewed grades as a strong motivator. However, participants emphasized that grades alone were insufficient; their motivational effect was amplified when paired with constructive written feedback. This aligns with research by Summer (2011), which found that grades in isolation risk being perceived as punitive rather than developmental. In the Nepali setting, grading also plays an institutional role, as it communicates achievement to parents, administrators, and external stakeholders. This social dimension of grading suggests that reducing emphasis on grades without offering alternative forms of accountability may not be culturally or institutionally feasible.

The findings point to several practical recommendations for improving ESL writing instruction in Nepal. Integrating model-based

learning by providing annotated sample essays can help students recognize and apply structural, grammatical, and rhetorical features. Pairing feedback on ideas with concrete supports such as examples, templates, or sentence starters can make higher-order comments more actionable. Balancing formative and summative assessment by retaining grades but ensuring they are accompanied by targeted commentary can both motivate students and guide skill development. A gradual shift toward process-oriented practices, including iterative drafting and peer review, can ease the transition from teacher-centered learning to more autonomous, self-assessing approaches. However, the study's small sample size (30 students and 10 teachers) and focus on a single national context limit the generalizability of the findings, and reliance on self-reported perceptions means classroom practices may not fully align with stated preferences. Future research should explore longitudinal designs to assess how feedback strategies impact measurable writing improvement over time, and comparative studies across multilingual South Asian contexts to examine how cultural and educational factors shape feedback and grading preferences.

This study examined the perceptions of written feedback and grading among Nepali ESL undergraduate students and instructors, situating these findings within the broader discourse of U.S. composition pedagogy. The results demonstrate that while U.S. writing instruction often privileges formative, idea-centered feedback, Nepali learners and teachers place higher value on structural guidance, grammatical accuracy, and model-based learning resources. This preference reflects the broader educational culture in Nepal, where explicit instruction and tangible examples are seen as essential to mastering English composition. The findings also reveal that grading retains a strong motivational and evaluative role in the Nepali context. While contemporary U.S. scholarship sometimes advocates for deemphasizing grades in favor of portfolio assessments or narrative feedback, Nepali participants expressed a clear desire for grades, provided they are accompanied by actionable commentary. This indicates that any pedagogical reform in Nepal must balance the formative and summative functions of assessment, rather than replacing one with the other. By relating instructional strategies with local learner needs,

educators in Nepal can bridge the gap between global best practices and local classroom realities. Recommendations include integrating annotated model essays into writing instruction, pairing higher-order feedback with concrete supports, maintaining grades alongside feedback, and gradually introducing process-oriented methods. These adjustments not only respond to the preferences expressed in this study but also provide a guiding way toward improving English composition instruction in ways that are culturally responsive and pedagogically sound.

Future research should investigate how these preferred strategies impact measurable writing improvement over time, potentially through longitudinal designs or classroom-based interventions. Such studies could help refine a hybrid model of writing instruction that draws on the strengths of both Nepali and U.S. pedagogical traditions.

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