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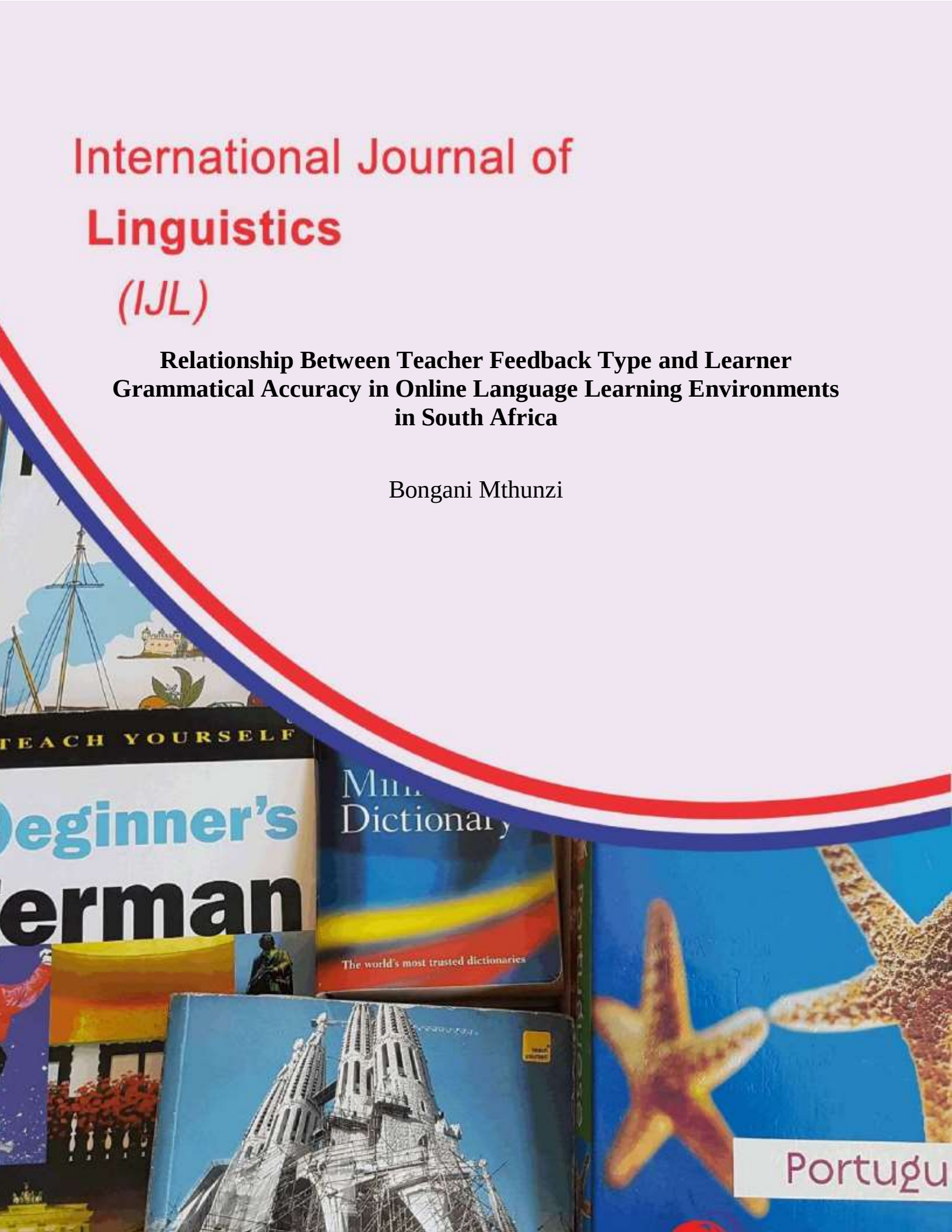

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Relationship Between Teacher Feedback Type and Learner Grammatical Accuracy in Online Language Learning Environments in South Africa

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Abstract

Purpose: To aim of the study was to analyze the relationship between teacher feedback type and learner grammatical accuracy in online language learning environments in South Africa.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Studies on online language learning in South Africa generally show that the type of teacher feedback significantly influences learner grammatical accuracy. Direct corrective feedback (where the teacher supplies the correct form) produces faster short-term improvement, while indirect feedback (highlighting errors without correction) leads to deeper long-term accuracy because learners actively self-edit. Metalinguistic feedback delivered through comments, audio notes, or annotated documents is particularly effective in virtual platforms since it explains rules and reduces repeated errors. Automated platform feedback alone improves surface errors but is less effective than teacher-mediated explanations.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Sociocultural theory, noticing hypothesis & interaction hypothesis may be used to anchor future studies on the relationship between teacher feedback type and learner grammatical accuracy in online language learning environments in South Africa. Language instructors should adopt blended feedback strategies that combine direct correction with explanations and guided self-correction activities. Higher education institutions should establish minimum standards for online language feedback, including response timelines, explanatory comments, and opportunities for revision.

Keywords: *Teacher Feedback, Learner Grammatical Accuracy, Online Language Learning Environments*

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INTRODUCTION

Learner grammatical accuracy refers to a learner's ability to use correct grammar structures (such as tense, agreement, word order, and syntax) when producing written or spoken language. High grammatical accuracy is linked with clear communication and is often measured by the number of error-free clauses or sentences in learner work (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). In the United States, research on second-language writing shows that learners' grammatical accuracy increases when they receive targeted corrective feedback; for example, one study reported that error-free clauses increased by about 15–20% after structured feedback over a semester (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, learners exposed to automated and teacher corrective feedback demonstrated a significant reduction in error rates (e.g., a 30% reduction in article and tense errors over six months) in academic writing courses (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). These trends indicate that systematic feedback and instruction are effective in improving grammatical accuracy among learners in developed higher-education systems.

In developing economies, learner grammatical accuracy often reflects both educational access and instructional support quality. Studies in India indicate that when English as a Second Language (ESL) learners receive regular teacher corrective feedback, their accuracy in tense and agreement improves significantly over time, often showing error reductions of 10–25% in controlled writing tasks (Khan & Azam, 2018). Similarly, research in Brazil has shown that structured classroom feedback combined with peer review can improve learner accuracy, with students demonstrating a 20% gain in error-free sentences after an academic term (Silva & Santos, 2020). These findings suggest that although resource constraints exist, targeted pedagogical strategies can enhance grammatical accuracy in developing contexts.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, grammatical accuracy among learners is shaped by multilingual backgrounds and variable instructional quality. In South Africa, studies in ESL writing contexts show that corrective feedback and language support improve accuracy, with some interventions reducing overall error rates by 15–30% over a semester in undergraduate writing courses (Mokoena, 2019). In Kenya, research on university learners indicates that guided corrective feedback and structured practice lead to measurable increases in correct clause usage, often reflected as a 12–18% rise in error-free structures after sustained instruction (Omondi, 2021). Despite challenges such as large class sizes and limited resources, these trends demonstrate that focused feedback and instructional scaffolding can yield significant gains in grammatical accuracy in Sub-Saharan educational settings.

Type of teacher feedback refers to the different ways instructors respond to learner language production to help improve correctness, clarity, and linguistic development. In language learning, feedback guides learners to notice errors and modify their grammar use, which is essential for improving grammatical accuracy (Ellis, 2009). Four common types include direct corrective feedback, indirect corrective feedback, metalinguistic feedback, and reformulation feedback. Direct corrective feedback involves the teacher providing the correct form, which helps learners immediately recognize accurate structures and improves short-term grammatical accuracy (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). Indirect corrective feedback, where the teacher only indicates the

error, encourages deeper cognitive processing and promotes long-term accuracy because learners must self-correct (Ferris, 2011).

Metalinguistic feedback provides explanations or grammar rules, helping learners understand why an error occurred and strengthening rule-based accuracy over time (Ellis, 2009). Reformulation feedback involves rewriting the learner's sentence correctly while preserving meaning, which exposes learners to natural grammatical patterns and improves fluency-based accuracy (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). Direct and reformulation feedback often produce immediate improvement, while indirect and metalinguistic feedback foster durable learning gains (Ferris, 2011). Therefore, different feedback types influence grammatical accuracy through distinct cognitive pathways such as noticing, understanding, and internalization. Combining feedback strategies is considered most effective because it supports both immediate correction and long-term grammatical development.

Problem Statement

Online language learning has expanded significantly in South Africa due to increased internet access and adoption of digital learning platforms in higher education institutions. Universities are increasingly offering English and multilingual communication courses through virtual learning environments to support flexible and inclusive education. However, despite this expansion, many learners continue to demonstrate low levels of grammatical accuracy in writing and speaking tasks, which affects academic performance and communication competence. Studies indicate that online learners often receive inconsistent or unclear feedback compared to traditional classroom settings, limiting their ability to recognize and correct language errors (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). As a result, learners may complete activities without fully internalizing grammatical rules, leading to persistent language errors and reduced learning outcomes.

Teacher feedback is widely recognized as one of the most influential instructional strategies for improving grammatical accuracy, yet the effectiveness of different feedback types remains unclear in online language environments. Some learners benefit from direct corrective feedback, while others improve more when provided with indirect or explanatory feedback, suggesting that feedback effectiveness depends on how it is delivered (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). In South Africa's multilingual context, where students often learn English as an additional language, inappropriate feedback strategies may hinder learning rather than support it. Furthermore, online platforms reduce face-to-face clarification opportunities, increasing reliance on written feedback and making its type even more critical. Despite the importance of feedback, limited empirical research has examined how specific teacher feedback types influence learner grammatical accuracy in South African online language learning environments. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the relationship between teacher feedback type and learner grammatical accuracy in online language learning environments in South Africa.

Theoretical Review

Sociocultural Theory

Originated by Lev Vygotsky, Sociocultural Theory explains learning as a socially mediated process in which knowledge develops through guided interaction and scaffolding from a more knowledgeable person. In language education, teacher feedback functions as scaffolding that helps

learners move from incorrect grammatical use toward correct forms within the Zone of Proximal Development. Recent research confirms that guided feedback enables learners to internalize language rules and progressively improve accuracy (Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2021). In online language learning environments, feedback replaces much of the face-to-face guidance normally available in classrooms. Therefore, different teacher feedback types act as structured support mechanisms that shape learners' grammatical development and accuracy.

Noticing Hypothesis

Proposed by Richard Schmidt, the Noticing Hypothesis states that learners must consciously notice language errors before acquisition can occur. Corrective feedback highlights the gap between a learner's incorrect output and the correct grammatical structure, enabling cognitive processing. Contemporary second-language research shows that awareness-raising feedback significantly contributes to grammatical accuracy improvement (Leow, 2020). Direct feedback makes errors explicit while indirect feedback encourages learners to discover mistakes independently. Consequently, the effectiveness of teacher feedback types in online learning depends on how well they trigger learner noticing and attention to grammatical forms.

Interaction Hypothesis

Developed by Michael Long, the Interaction Hypothesis proposes that language acquisition occurs through meaningful communication and modification of output after receiving feedback. Learners refine grammar when they respond to corrective interaction and adjust their language use accordingly. Recent studies demonstrate that interaction-based feedback strengthens grammatical accuracy and retention in second-language learning (Loewen & Sato, 2018). In online learning environments, written or recorded teacher feedback becomes the main form of interaction guiding language modification. Thus, the type of feedback provided determines how learners revise their language production and improve grammatical accuracy.

Empirical Review

Ferris, Liu, Sinha and Senna (2019) examined how written corrective feedback influences grammatical accuracy in online second-language writing. The purpose was to determine whether different feedback types improve grammar learning over time. The researchers used a quasi-experimental design involving university ESL learners working in an online writing platform. Students received direct, indirect, and metalinguistic feedback across multiple assignments. Writing samples were analyzed using error-free clause measures. The results showed metalinguistic feedback produced the highest long-term accuracy improvement. Indirect feedback also encouraged self-correction among learners. Direct feedback improved short-term accuracy but showed weaker retention over time. Students exposed to explanation-based feedback demonstrated stronger grammatical awareness. Participants reported understanding grammar rules better when feedback required reflection. The study concluded feedback depth influences learning durability. Learners retained corrections when they actively processed errors. The authors recommended combining feedback strategies in digital classrooms. They suggested instructors prioritize explanatory feedback during revision tasks. Institutions were encouraged to design platforms supporting iterative feedback cycles.

Han and Hyland (2019) investigated teacher written feedback in online English writing courses. The purpose was to identify which feedback type most improves grammatical accuracy. The researchers applied a mixed-methods design combining textual analysis and learner interviews. Students submitted online essays over a semester. Teachers provided both direct and explanatory feedback. The findings showed explicit correction improved immediate grammatical accuracy. Explanatory feedback supported long-term improvement. Learners retained grammar rules better when explanations accompanied corrections. Students reported that comments increased confidence in revision tasks. Interview responses indicated feedback clarity affected learning motivation. Learners preferred detailed comments rather than simple corrections. Error reduction was higher when students revised multiple drafts. The study concluded feedback detail influences accuracy development. The authors recommended explanation-based digital feedback. They advised instructors to include short grammar explanations online. Institutions should support feedback training programs for teachers.

Zhang and Cheng (2020) explored automated versus teacher corrective feedback in virtual language classrooms. The purpose was to compare technological and human feedback effectiveness. An experimental design assigned learners into automated-feedback and teacher-feedback groups. Students completed online writing tasks weekly. Grammar errors were measured before and after intervention. Results showed teacher-guided feedback produced higher accuracy improvement. Automated feedback improved spelling but not complex grammar. Learners understood corrections better when instructors explained them. Students asked clarification questions during teacher feedback sessions. This interaction improved grammatical awareness. Automated systems lacked contextual explanations. Learners in teacher-feedback groups showed higher retention rates. The study concluded human feedback remains essential. Technology should support rather than replace instructors. The authors recommended blended feedback approaches. They suggested combining automated detection with instructor explanation.

Li (2021) studied peer and teacher feedback effects on grammatical accuracy in online collaborative writing. The purpose was to examine feedback effectiveness in group writing environments. A longitudinal design tracked learners across a semester. Students exchanged peer feedback before receiving teacher correction. Writing accuracy was measured after each draft. Teacher feedback produced higher accuracy gains than peer feedback alone. However, combining both produced the strongest improvement. Peer feedback encouraged engagement with language forms. Teacher feedback ensured correctness and clarity. Students reported learning from reviewing peers' errors. Collaboration increased grammatical awareness. Revision quality improved across assignments. The study concluded structured peer review enhances teacher feedback effectiveness. The author recommended guided peer review frameworks. Teachers should moderate peer correction to maintain accuracy.

Barrot and Gabinete (2021) examined corrective feedback in online English learning during remote instruction. The purpose was to determine which feedback type predicts grammatical accuracy improvement. Regression analysis was conducted on student writing scores. Learners received indirect and explanatory feedback. Indirect feedback significantly predicted improved grammatical accuracy. Students corrected more errors independently. Explanatory comments strengthened grammar understanding. Learners showed improved editing skills over time.

Confidence increased in revision activities. The study found learners relied less on teacher correction later. Self-editing ability improved across tasks. Feedback encouraged active cognitive processing. The authors concluded indirect feedback supports independent learning. They recommended explanatory comments alongside correction marks. Institutions should incorporate reflective revision activities. Teachers should emphasize learner self-correction strategies.

Kim and Mostafa (2022) analyzed synchronous teacher feedback during live online classes. The purpose was to determine how real-time feedback affects grammatical accuracy. Researchers observed virtual lessons and evaluated assignments. Teachers provided immediate oral corrections during activities. Students revised tasks after class. Accuracy improved in subsequent submissions. Learners responded quickly to live clarification. Immediate feedback reduced repeated errors. Students reported better comprehension of grammar rules. Interaction increased participation in lessons. Learners felt supported during learning. Confidence improved in speaking and writing. The study concluded synchronous feedback enhances retention. The authors recommended integrating live feedback sessions online. Courses should include real-time teacher interaction opportunities.

Mahlobo and Mthembu (2023) investigated corrective feedback strategies in South African online ESL courses. The purpose was to examine feedback effects on grammatical accuracy in a multilingual context. A survey and writing analysis were conducted among university learners. Students received direct and metalinguistic feedback. Metalinguistic feedback produced higher accuracy gains. Learners understood grammatical rules better. Students reported fewer repeated errors. Multilingual learners benefited from explanations. Direct correction improved immediate tasks only. Long-term improvement required understanding rules. Participation increased when teachers explained mistakes. Learners valued culturally responsive feedback. The study concluded explanation-based feedback suits multilingual settings. The authors recommended teacher training in feedback strategies. Institutions should support grammar-focused online pedagogy development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gap

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that different teacher feedback types improve learner grammatical accuracy, particularly metalinguistic, explanatory, and indirect feedback (Ferris, 2019; Han & Hyland, 2019; Barrot & Gabinete, 2021). However, most of the research focuses on identifying which feedback type produces better accuracy rather than explaining the

mechanism through which feedback influences grammatical development. While some studies mention awareness, motivation, or understanding of rules, these factors are not systematically modeled as mediating variables between feedback and accuracy outcomes. Additionally, feedback effectiveness is often measured using error reduction only, overlooking cognitive and behavioural processes such as learner noticing, engagement, and self-regulation. As a result, the theoretical pathway linking feedback type to sustained grammatical accuracy remains insufficiently conceptualized. Therefore, there is a need for research that integrates feedback types with learner cognitive processing mechanisms to explain how grammatical accuracy improvement occurs rather than only whether it occurs.

Contextual Research Gap

Most prior studies examine feedback effects in general online writing environments or mixed educational settings without isolating specific instructional contexts such as structured language courses in multilingual undergraduate environments (Li, 2021; Kim & Mostafa, 2022). Some involve collaborative writing, automated platforms, or general ESL courses, which differ in learning objectives and instructional design. Few studies explicitly consider the realities of learners studying English as an additional language within academically demanding programs where grammatical accuracy directly affects assessment outcomes. Moreover, synchronous, asynchronous, peer, and automated feedback modes are studied separately, leaving limited understanding of how feedback functions within a single integrated course structure. The role of feedback in fully online courses that rely entirely on written interaction rather than classroom explanation also remains underexplored. Hence, a contextual gap exists in examining feedback effectiveness within a clearly defined online language learning course structure.

Geographical Research Gap

Most empirical studies originate from international or unspecified global contexts and are largely conducted outside African multilingual learning environments (Ferris, 2019; Han & Hyland, 2019; Zhang & Cheng, 2020). Only one study specifically addresses South Africa, and it primarily compares direct and metalinguistic feedback without broader contextual validation (Mahlobo & Mthembu, 2023). Language learning dynamics in multilingual societies differ significantly due to diverse first-language influence, varied educational backgrounds, and differing exposure to English outside class. Consequently, findings from monolingual or highly resourced contexts may not fully apply to South African online learning environments. There remains limited empirical evidence testing feedback effectiveness across diverse linguistic backgrounds within the region. This creates a geographical gap requiring localized research to validate feedback strategies in multilingual online language education contexts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The evidence indicates that teacher feedback type plays a central role in improving learner grammatical accuracy in online language learning environments in South Africa. Feedback that goes beyond simple correction particularly metalinguistic explanations, indirect cues, and interactive clarification supports deeper understanding of grammar rules and reduces repeated

errors. In a multilingual context where learners study English as an additional language, the opportunity to interpret and reflect on feedback is especially important for long-term language development. Direct correction may improve immediate performance, but it does not consistently produce sustained grammatical accuracy without explanation or learner engagement. Therefore, the effectiveness of feedback depends not only on identifying errors but also on promoting cognitive processing and learner participation.

The study concludes that meaningful improvement in grammatical accuracy occurs when feedback encourages noticing, reflection, and self-correction. Online environments heighten the importance of carefully structured feedback because learners cannot easily seek face-to-face clarification. Consequently, instructors must adopt deliberate feedback strategies that combine clarity, explanation, and interaction. Institutions should view feedback as a pedagogical process rather than a grading activity. Overall, improving grammatical accuracy in South African online language courses requires systematic use of explanatory and interactive feedback practices that foster independent language learning.

Recommendations

Theory

The findings suggest that grammatical accuracy in online language learning is best explained through a process-based model rather than a direct instructional effect. Teacher feedback type should be conceptualized as a trigger for cognitive processing mechanisms such as noticing, reflection, and self-regulation rather than merely an error correction tool. Future theoretical models of second-language acquisition should therefore incorporate feedback depth and learner engagement as mediating constructs explaining sustained grammatical improvement. Integrating interaction-based and cognitive learning perspectives can help explain why indirect and metalinguistic feedback produce longer-term gains compared to simple correction. The study contributes to theory by proposing that grammatical accuracy develops through a feedback-processing pathway rather than a correction-performance pathway.

Practice

Language instructors should adopt blended feedback strategies that combine direct correction with explanations and guided self-correction activities. Online courses should include structured revision cycles where learners respond to feedback rather than only receiving grades. Teachers should provide examples, short grammar explanations, and follow-up questions to encourage reflection and internalization of rules. Learning management systems should support annotation tools, audio explanations, and interactive feedback discussions to enhance understanding. Institutions should also train instructors in multilingual-sensitive feedback approaches since learners in South Africa interpret corrections differently depending on language background.

Policy

Higher education institutions should establish minimum standards for online language feedback, including response timelines, explanatory comments, and opportunities for revision. Quality assurance frameworks should evaluate not only assessment frequency but also the pedagogical quality of feedback provided in virtual courses. Universities should require professional

development certification in online language assessment and feedback strategies for instructors teaching online language modules. Funding policies should prioritize academic writing support centers and digital tutoring services that reinforce teacher feedback. National distance education guidelines should recognize feedback quality as a key indicator of language learning effectiveness and student success.

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