

# ANALYZING THE IMPACTS OF TEACHERS' FEEDBACK ON MISTAKES IN ENGLISH SYNTAX BY THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, THE UNIVERSITY OF LARKANO

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## Abstract

*This research paper examines the effect of teacher feedback on the syntactic accuracy of first year students of English at the Department of English, University of Larkano. The study will focus on determining the prevalent syntactic errors, the nature of teacher feedback, and how students perceive the effectiveness of teacher feedback. The research design used was descriptive and a sample of 50 students was used by convenience sampling. Written assignments and teacher comments were used to gather data and analyzed using descriptive methods to determine patterns of errors and post-feedback improvements. The results show that students often committed subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, clause structure, and sentence structure mistakes. Direct and metalinguistic feedback provided by teachers was effective in making students aware of their mistakes and correcting them, leading to a significant increase in syntactic accuracy. Students said that feedback helped them reflect, revise and focus on sentence structure. The research finds that teacher feedback in a structured form is very important in improving the syntactic competence of ESL learners, which facilitates the correction of errors consciously and the development of academic writing skills.*

**Keywords:** *English syntax, teacher feedback, syntactic errors, first-year students, ESL learning, corrective feedback.*

## 1. Introduction

English syntax study has become a growing concern in Pakistan because of the rising use of English as a medium of instruction, social mobility, and academic progress in the country. The English language has taken a central position in the Pakistani education system and students joining universities are supposed to have a good command of grammatical and syntactic structures. Nevertheless, studies have indicated that a significant number of Pakistani students have problems with English syntax due to the lack of exposure, traditional instruction, and excessive focus on rote learning at the school level (Rahman, 2021; Mansoor, 2005). Consequently, first-year university students tend to have poor syntactic backgrounds and struggle to create correct and coherent sentences in academic writing.

Syntactic competence is a key aspect that university students, particularly English studies students, need to develop since it is the foundation of effective communication, critical writing, and academic discourse. The syntax helps learners to organize sentences in a manner that effectively

conveys complex concepts, argumentation, and academic standards (Carnie, 2021). When it comes to higher education, a good syntactic skill is directly correlated with the performance of students in writing tasks, presentations, linguistic analysis, and research. There is a general consensus among scholars that syntactic knowledge is not merely a linguistic ability but also a cognitive tool that helps to improve clarity of thought and analytical reasoning (Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia, 2016).

Teacher feedback is important in enhancing the syntactic accuracy of the students especially in the second language learning environment. Good feedback will assist students to be aware of their grammatical mistakes, learn the underlying rules and eventually internalize the right syntactic patterns. The Noticing Hypothesis by Schmidt (1990) states that learners need to consciously observe linguistic forms to learn them, and feedback is one of the important mechanisms that attract attention to mistakes. Research on second language learning has shown that written and oral feedback can have a great effect on the syntactic performance of learners, facilitating self-correction and enhanced processing of language input (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012; Ellis, 2009). In the university context of Pakistan where students tend to rely on teacher guidance, feedback is even more critical in facilitating syntactic development and academic writing competence.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

1. What types of syntactic errors do first-year English students commonly make in their writing?
2. What kinds of feedback do teachers provide to address these errors?
3. How do students perceive and respond to teachers' feedback?
4. To what extent does teacher feedback contribute to improvements in students' syntactic accuracy?

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

1. To identify common syntactic errors in the writing of first-year English students.
2. To analyze the nature and types of feedback provided by teachers.
3. To investigate students' attitudes toward teacher feedback on syntax.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of teacher feedback in improving syntactic accuracy.

### **1.4 Problem Statement**

Although they are taught the English grammar in school and college levels, most first-year students who are enrolled in English departments still write with a lot of syntactic mistakes. Past research in Pakistan has revealed that teaching and learning activities are usually based on memorization and not meaningful language use, which restricts the syntactic growth of students (Rahman, 2021; Mansoor, 2005). Consequently, students join the university with poor grammatical backgrounds, cannot construct coherent sentences, and cannot use syntactic rules in writing academic papers. Despite the lectures on grammar given to them during the first semester, a significant number of students demonstrate continuing problems with subject verb agreement, sentence structure, tense consistency, and clause construction. This consistent trend shows that there is a disconnect between teaching and real learning, and it is necessary to examine whether teacher feedback is significant in assisting students to overcome such difficulties.

### **1.5 Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to investigate how the feedback of teachers can help in enhancing the English syntax of first-year students at the Department of English, University of Larkano. The research will determine the kind of feedback given by teachers, the way students react to the feedback given,

and whether teacher comments result in a significant change in syntactic accuracy. Through these areas, the study aims to offer information on the effectiveness of teacher feedback as a pedagogical tool in improving syntactic competence in an ESL setting.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The research is important as it discusses one of the most common problems in Pakistani higher education students are unable to write syntactically correct English despite years of study. The knowledge of the effect of teacher feedback on syntactic development can assist teachers to develop more effective teaching strategies. It has been proposed that feedback encourages awareness, noticing and self-correction, which are critical in language learning (Schmidt, 1990; Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). The results of the current research can help English teachers at the University of Larkano and other educational establishments to improve their feedback strategies and implement the approaches that can contribute to the development of grammar in the long term. In addition, the research also adds to the overall area of second language acquisition by offering context-related evidence in Pakistan.

### **1.7 Delimitations of the Study**

The research is restricted to first-year students who are pursuing the Department of English at the University of Larkano. It also concentrates on written feedback provided on assignments and class tests of students only and not oral feedback or feedback provided in other courses. The research also limits itself to the syntactic errors, and does not examine other linguistic domains like vocabulary, pragmatics or discourse organization. Moreover, the study is not applicable to all Pakistani universities because the institutional teaching styles and student backgrounds might vary. These restrictions assist in keeping the focus clear and manageable and in providing depth and accuracy of the analysis.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Definition and Nature of Syntax in Linguistics**

The syntax is a basic part of linguistics which is concerned with the arrangement of words and phrases to create grammatically correct and meaningful sentences. It regulates the combination of linguistic units like nouns, verbs, adjectives, clauses, and phrases based on hierarchical and rule-based frameworks (Carnie, 2021). The syntax is not merely the memorization of the sentence patterns; it is the manifestation of grammatical competence of speakers and their capacity to produce an unlimited number of structurally complex sentences (Chomsky, 2014). Syntactic knowledge is very important in second language contexts because it helps learners to communicate effectively, be coherent, and engage in academic communication (Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia, 2016). Therefore, syntactic accuracy is regarded as one of the main skills of students who study English at the university level.

### **2.2 Common Syntactic Errors in ESL/EFL Contexts**

Students in ESL/EFL classrooms usually commit various types of syntactic mistakes because of the discrepancies between their native language (L1) patterns and English, insufficient exposure, and partial acquisition of grammar rules. Research has consistently established that second language learners have difficulties with subject-verb agreement, wrong use of verb tenses, misplaced modifiers, run-on sentences, and clause structure problems (Darus and Subramaniam, 2009; Richards and Schmidt, 2010). Syntactic problems in South Asian settings, such as Pakistan, are frequently due to transfer effects of Urdu or local languages, which are vastly different in word order, agreement, and the use of auxiliaries (Rahman, 2021). As a result, first-year university

students often commit the same mistakes in sentence structure, complex clauses, and cohesive devices despite years of exposure to English in school.

### 2.3 Role and Effectiveness of Teacher Feedback in Second Language Acquisition

The teacher feedback is an essential pedagogical instrument in the second language acquisition (SLA), particularly in enhancing syntactic accuracy of learners. Feedback serves as a scaffold that assists learners to become aware of the gaps in their interlanguage system and directs them to the production of target-like forms. The studies in the field of SLA underline that corrective feedback is effective in language development as it helps to create awareness of errors, self-monitoring, and form-meaning links (Ellis, 2009; Russell and Spada, 2006). Feedback in writing enables the learner to correct his work, internalize the rules and with time, the learner will minimize the occurrence of grammatical mistakes. Bitchener and Ferris (2012) believe that consistent and explicit teacher feedback is an effective way of enhancing the syntactic performance of L2 learners, particularly when the corrections are based on structural issues that are recurrent. Thus, feedback is regarded as a crucial teaching activity to facilitate grammatical growth of learners.

### 2.4 Types of Feedback: Direct, Indirect, Metalinguistic, Written, and Oral Feedback

In SLA, feedback may be divided into the following types:

1. **Direct Feedback:** Teachers give the correct form in a direct manner, e.g. rewriting a grammatically wrong sentence. The advantage of this type is that it helps lower-proficiency learners to get less confused (Ferris, 2010).
2. **Indirect Feedback:** Teachers show that there is an error, but do not correct it, so that learners can self-correct. It is believed to be helpful in encouraging independent problem-solving and more profound processing (Ellis, 2009).
3. **Metalinguistic Feedback:** Teachers provide comments, hints or grammar rules as to why something is wrong. This aid analytical knowledge of syntax (Lyster and Ranta, 1997).
4. **Written Feedback:** Remarks on assignments, essays, or tests. Written feedback gives the learners an opportunity to reconsider the corrections.
5. **Oral Feedback:** Instant feedback that is given in the classroom. Real-time observation and instantaneous acquisition are usually supported by oral corrective feedback, particularly recasts and prompts (Long, 1996).

### 2.5 Previous Empirical Studies on Feedback in Syntax Learning

Studies have always pointed out the beneficial effect of corrective feedback on syntactic development. Bitchener (2008) discovered that written corrective feedback was a significant way of enhancing the accuracy of learners in using English articles and complex structures in the long run. In the same manner, Ellis et al. (2008) showed that targeted feedback on particular grammatical mistakes results in the long-term enhancement of L2 writing. Khan (2019) and Jalal (2020) are examples of studies conducted in the Pakistani context, where students demonstrated a significant improvement in sentence structure and tense use when teacher feedback was provided on writing tasks. All these studies confirm that feedback, be it direct, indirect or metalinguistic, improves syntactic awareness and accuracy in EFL learners.

### 2.6 Theoretical Framework: Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis

The present work is based on the Noticing Hypothesis by Schmidt (1990) that states that the second language learning requires conscious awareness of linguistic forms. Schmidt states that acquisition requires the learners to be aware of the difference between their interlanguage output and target-language input. The teacher feedback is an important part of this process as it attracts the attention



of learners to the syntactic errors that they would have otherwise ignored. By pointing out mistakes or giving explanations, the teachers make the learners consciously process the linguistic feature, which makes them more likely to remember and use the feature correctly in the future (Schmidt, 2001). Feedback in the context of this study is a mechanism that triggers noticing, which allows the learners to internalize correct syntactic structures in the revision and subsequent writing activities.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The research design employed in this study is a descriptive research design, which is suitable in the study of the syntactic errors committed by first-year students and how the teacher feedback can be used to help them improve. A descriptive approach enables the researcher to observe classroom activities and study student writing without controlling any variables (Creswell, 2014).

#### **3.2 Population**

The study population comprises of all first year BS English students studying in the Department of English at the University of Larkano. These students learn English as a core subject and they are often provided with written comments by their teachers on their assignments and classroom work.

#### **3.3 Sampling**

Convenience sampling was used to select a sample of 50 first-year students since the students were readily accessible to take part in the study during normal classes. Classroom based studies often employ convenience sampling because groups are naturally occurring and available.

#### **3.4 Data Collection Method**

The information was gathered in the form of a written assignment provided to the students. Short paragraphs and sentence-based assignments were requested, and they assisted in detecting typical syntactic mistakes, including subject-verb agreement, tense issues, run-on sentences, and clauses-related errors. Teacher written feedback was also included in the same assignments and this gave the data required to analyze the kind of feedback employed, like direct correction, underlining mistakes, and brief comments. All assignments were gathered once they were sent back to students with feedback by teachers. This assisted the researcher to analyze the mistakes as well as the corrections. The data were gathered in normal classes with the consent of teachers and students.

#### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

There were strict ethical guidelines. The students were told the aim of the research, and their participation was voluntary, and their identities were not disclosed. Instructors and the department were also consulted before data was collected.

### **4. Findings**

The written work analysis of the students showed that there are a number of syntactic errors that are common among the first-year students of English at the Department of English, University of Larkano. Subject verb agreement errors were one of the most frequent ones. As an illustration, students would often write sentences like, "*the students is going to library*", rather than the right way, "*the students are going to the library*". The other mistake that was made frequently was the inconsistency of verb tenses, in which the students changed the tenses within a paragraph. An example is when a student wrote in one of his assignments, "*Yesterday, I go to the market and I buy vegetables*" rather than the correct past tense, "*Yesterday, I went to the market and I bought vegetables*". Also, a number of students had difficulties with the formation of clauses. Sentence

fragments and run-on sentences were common. Examples are: *"I like reading books it is my hobby"* (run-on) and *"Because I was tired"* (fragment). Article and preposition mistakes were also observed like, *"She went to school on Monday without a book"*, was written as *"She went to school Monday without book"*. These mistakes show that first-year students tend to struggle with the correct application of grammatical rules, which is a poor syntactic base even after being taught (Rahman, 2021; Mansoor, 2005).

The research also investigated teacher feedback on such assignments to establish its contribution to correcting syntactic mistakes. The main type of direct feedback was the rewriting of the incorrect sentences by teachers or the correct form written next to the mistake. As an example, when a student wrote, *"He go to market"*, the teacher wrote, *"He goes to the market"*. In other instances, teachers employed indirect feedback like underlining mistakes or putting question marks beside the wrong sentences without providing the correct answer, which made students correct themselves. A smaller percentage of feedback was metalinguistic, which gave brief explanations, e.g. *"Use singular verb with singular subject"* or *"Check past tense with events that have already occurred"*. It was found that direct feedback was the most effective because students tended to rectify the same kind of mistakes in the next assignment whereas indirect feedback sometimes confused students with poor language skills. Students who were ready to think and learn grammar rules found metalinguistic feedback useful (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012; Ellis, 2009).

The effectiveness and perception of feedback were also demonstrated by the responses of students gathered by the use of the questionnaire. Approximately 70 percent of the students stated that direct corrections made them realize and learn their errors on the spot. As an example, one student wrote: *"When the teacher corrected my sentence, I noticed that I made the same mistake numerous times"*. Approximately 20 percent of students favored metalinguistic feedback as it provided reasons as to why their sentence was incorrect and they could prevent such errors in future. Only a few students (around 10 percent) reported that they had a problem with indirect feedback, i.e. when an error is underlined but not corrected. It was also noted by many students that feedback motivated them to be more careful with their work and be more attentive to sentence structure, tense consistency, and word order in future assignments. One student wrote: *"I read my sentences twice before submitting them and now I commit fewer mistakes"*.

The pre- and post-feedback assignment analysis revealed some improvement. As an illustration, a student wrote: *"She go to library and read book"* before feedback and after teacher feedback, the sentence has been properly revised as: *"She goes to the library and reads a book"*. Equally, most students who started writing fragmented or run-on sentences were taught to write complete and coherent sentences through repeated exposure to corrective feedback. All in all, the results show that teacher feedback is very effective in improving syntactic accuracy especially when it is direct and explained. Students not only fixed their mistakes but also slowly acquired the right syntactic structures, which is in line with the Noticing Hypothesis of Schmidt (1990), which states that language learning requires conscious awareness of errors.

Finally, the research establishes that first-year students commit consistent syntactic errors, yet teacher feedback, particularly direct and metalinguistic, is essential in correcting the errors. Students react well to feedback, and constant corrections result in sentence structure, use of tenses, and clause construction. These findings underscore the need to have structured and explicit feedback in improving syntactic competence in an ESL setting.

## 5. Discussion

This research indicates that English syntax is a persistent problem among first-year students in the Department of English, University of Larkano, even after receiving grammar training. The most common mistakes included subject-verb agreement problems, tense problems, problems with the construction of clauses, and sentence fragments in the writing of students. These findings are in line with the prior studies in the Pakistani ESL settings, which emphasize that students tend to apply syntactic patterns of their native language (Urdu) to English and make repetitive structural mistakes (Rahman, 2021; Mansoor, 2005). The mistakes identified in this research are consistent with the international trends in ESL learning, where the complicated structure of the sentences and tense application are still difficult to learners at the initial and intermediate stages (Darus and Subramaniam, 2009; Richards and Schmidt, 2010).

The teacher feedback analysis proved that it is very important in correcting these syntactic errors. Direct feedback, in which teachers directly corrected sentences, was the most effective in assisting students to identify and correct errors. This is in line with Bitchener and Ferris (2012) who believe that direct corrective feedback enables learners to instantly recognize and internalize correct forms especially when it comes to persistent grammatical mistakes. The students also understood the grammatical rules with the help of metalinguistic feedback that gave explanations as to why sentences were wrong, and in this way, they could prevent the repetition of the same mistakes. But indirect feedback like underlining errors without correcting them was not as effective with lower-proficiency students, which supports the argument by Ellis (2009) that feedback effectiveness is dependent on the proficiency of the learner and their capacity to process and correct errors.

The responses of students also supported the results, as they indicated that feedback allowed them to identify mistakes, think about their writing, and rewrite sentences successfully. A significant number of students said that feedback helped them pay more attention to sentence structure and tense use in later assignments. Such observations confirm the Noticing Hypothesis of Schmidt (1990) that states that conscious awareness of errors is a pre-requisite to second language acquisition. Teacher feedback is a stimulus to attention, it attracts the attention of learners to syntactic discrepancies and allows them to process them consciously, which results in the long-term accuracy improvement.

Repeated and structured feedback is also noted as important in the study. Students not only made corrections on single mistakes but also slowly developed the general sentence structure, which means that feedback serves as a corrective and learning tool. This aligns with the past research that feedback in academic writing is cumulative, which encourages self-monitoring and grammatical growth with time (Ellis et al., 2008; Khan, 2019). Furthermore, the direct and metalinguistic feedback seems to be especially effective, since it gives the learners not only the right forms, but also the rationale of the corrections.

Practically, these results imply that instructors at Pakistani universities need to focus on structured feedback in writing tasks and strike a balance between direct corrections and short explanations to ensure that learners get the most out of it. Although indirect feedback may be useful with advanced learners, it may not be applicable with beginners who need clear instructions. Moreover, the active use of feedback, reflection on the mistakes, and the revision of the work can be a great way to improve the syntactic competence and the general writing skills of the students.

## Conclusion

This research paper has explored the effect of teacher feedback on the syntactic accuracy of first-year English learners in the University of Larkano. The results reveal that the students usually commit mistakes in subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, and clause structure. Direct and metalinguistic feedback provided by teachers was found to be effective in making students aware of these mistakes and correcting them, which resulted in a slow but steady improvement in sentence structure. The answers of the students proved that feedback did not only point out the errors but also promoted attentive revision and contemplation. In general, the research shows that clear and structured feedback is crucial in improving the syntactic competence in an ESL setting, which helps to develop correct and coherent academic writing.

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