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Key Constructs in Language Teaching

AI Feedback to L2 Writers

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Abstract
This paper explores the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in feedback on second language (L2) writing, focusing on both Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) and emerging Generative AI (GenAI) tools. It examines AI-generated feedback across five dimensions: accuracy, relevance, empathy, learner engagement, and educational impact. The analysis shows that AI is effective in supporting surface-level features such as grammar, vocabulary, and clarity, and offers advantages in terms of immediacy and accessibility. However, it is less reliable in addressing deeper aspects of writing, including argumentation, disciplinary conventions, and audience awareness. Student perspectives suggest that AI feedback is valued for revision support but does not replace the depth and interaction of teacher feedback. The paper argues that AI is most effective when used in combination with teacher guidance, supporting both efficient feedback practices and meaningful learning.

Keywords
Artificial intelligence, L2 writing, feedback, automated writing evaluation, generative AI, educational technology

1 Introduction: Understanding AI Feedback in L2 Writing

This paper explores the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI) in providing feedback on student writing, focusing on both Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) and more recent developments in Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). These technologies are rapidly becoming part of the landscape of language teaching, raising important questions about how feedback is given, received, and used in L2 writing classrooms (Hyland 2025; Shi & Aryadoust, 2024).

Tools based on large language models, such as *ChatGPT*, are now able to generate written feedback on student texts almost instantly. At the same time, more established systems, such as *Grammarly* and *Pigai,* continue to develop new AI-driven features that extend beyond grammar correction to broader aspects of writing (e.g. Mekheimer, 2025). As a result, what we mean by "feedback" is beginning to change, both in terms of how it is produced and how learners engage with it. These developments come at a time when expectations around feedback are already high. Teachers are often required to provide

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responses that are timely, detailed, personalised, and pedagogically effective (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Carless 2026). While AI is sometimes presented as a way of addressing these demands, it is important not to assume that more, or faster, feedback necessarily leads to better learning.

Rather than treating AI as a solution to existing problems, I think we need to approach it as a development that needs to be carefully understood. In particular, we should ask what kind of feedback AI is able to provide, how this differs from teacher feedback, and what this might mean for students' development as writers (Hyland, 2025). To explore these issues, the paper addresses five key questions about AI feedback:

1. Is it accurate? Does AI provide reliable and useful information for student writers?
2. Is it relevant? Can it address the specific needs of learners in different contexts and disciplines?
3. Is it empathetic? Can it respond to student writing in a supportive and motivating way?
4. Is it valued? Do students trust and engage with AI-generated feedback?
5. Is it educational? Does it help students become better writers, or simply produce better texts?

Before turning to these questions, it is important to consider the role of feedback in L2 writing and why it has become such a central—and often demanding—part of teaching.

2 Why Feedback Matters in L2 Writing

It is now widely recognised that feedback is central to the teaching of writing and is valued across different pedagogical approaches. This is because it can:

- give writers a clearer sense of audience and reader expectations
- support learning by highlighting strengths and weaknesses
- provide guidance from a more experienced reader
- connect current writing to future tasks
- reinforce and extend classroom instruction

Feedback then, is a key component of whichever writing pedagogy you subscribe to. In process-oriented approaches, feedback is key to drafting and redrafting, helping students develop ideas and refine meaning over time. In genre-based approaches, it supports learners as they move through stages of increasing control, with teachers providing scaffolded guidance and gradually reducing support as students gain independence.

At the same time, expectations around feedback have expanded significantly. Teachers are often expected to provide responses that are not only accurate, but also:

- timely and frequent
- highly personalised
- clear and specific
- focused on improvement rather than evaluation
- supportive and motivating

In practice, this means responding to student writing in ways that are simultaneously informative, pedagogically meaningful, and sensitive to the learner as a writer. Advice to teachers typically emphasises prioritising key issues, explaining corrections, giving examples, and offering suggestions which students can act on when revising (e.g. Carless, 2026; Ferris & Kurzer, 2019).

While such principles are widely accepted, they are not always easy to implement. Teachers work in a context of ever-increasing class sizes, heavier administrative demands, and growing student numbers, all of which place significant pressure on teachers' time. In many classrooms, providing detailed and individualised feedback on every student text is difficult to sustain. As a result, feedback is not simply

a technical process of identifying and correcting errors. It is a complex pedagogical practice, requiring judgement about what to focus on, how much to say, and how to say it in ways that support learning. It also involves managing the tension between addressing immediate problems in a text and fostering longer-term development as a writer. As a result, fatigue and burn out are now common. In the US, for example, Female teachers reported an exhaustion rate of 63% in 2024, compared to 56% in 2022 and the highest among all occupations (Jacobs-Pinson, 2025).

It is within this context that AI-generated feedback has begun to attract attention. Its ability to produce large amounts of feedback quickly raises important questions - not only about efficiency, but about the nature and quality of feedback itself, and what role it should play in supporting student writing.

3 What Is AI Writing Feedback?

Before considering what AI can and cannot do, it is useful to clarify what we mean by *AI writing feedback*. This is not a single, uniform technology, but a broad set of tools that differ in how they analyse texts and the kinds of feedback they provide. A useful distinction can be made here between two main types of systems: *Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE)* and *Generative AI (GenAI)*.

AWE systems have been around in language learning for over a decade. Tools such as *Grammarly*, *ProWritingAid*, *Pigai* and similar platforms are designed to analyse student writing and provide feedback, primarily on language accuracy and form. Typically, these systems:

- identify grammatical and lexical errors
- highlight problems in sentence structure
- suggest corrections or alternative wording
- sometimes provide scores or ratings

A key feature of many AWE tools is that they often focus on local issues in a text, such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation, rather than on meaning or argument. In some cases, they highlight errors without correcting them, encouraging learners to engage with the problem and revise their writing themselves. While earlier versions relied on rule-based systems, more recent AWE tools incorporate machine learning and natural language processing, allowing them to provide more sophisticated suggestions about style, tone, and clarity.

In the last couple of years it has been impossible to ignore more dramatic developments. Systems based on large language models, such as ChatGPT, do not simply identify errors but can generate language. This means they can:

- rewrite sentences or create entire texts
- provide explanations of errors
- offer suggestions for improving organisation or argument
- respond to prompts requesting specific types of feedback

Unlike AWE systems, which tend to work by analysing and annotating a text, GenAI systems are more *interactive*. Users can ask follow-up questions, request clarification, or specify the kind of feedback they want (for example, focusing on coherence, argumentation, or vocabulary). This flexibility gives the impression that GenAI can operate at both surface and deeper levels of writing, offering not only correction but also guidance on meaning and structure.

The development of these technologies is beginning to reshape what counts as feedback in writing classrooms. Traditionally, feedback has been understood as **a** response from a teacher (or peer) to a student text, shaped by pedagogical goals and knowledge of the learner. With AI, feedback can now be:

- instant and continuous, available at any stage of writing
- generated in large quantities, often exceeding what a teacher can provide

• customisable, depending on how the user frames their request

At the same time, this raises important questions. If feedback is generated automatically, what assumptions is it based on? How well does it reflect the expectations of specific learning contexts? And how do students interpret and use it?

Although AWE and GenAI tools are often grouped together, it is important to recognise that they operate in different ways and have different strengths. AWE systems tend to be more focused and consistent, particularly for identifying language errors, while GenAI systems are more flexible and wide-ranging, but also more variable in their responses. For teachers, this means that AI writing feedback is not a single solution, but a set of tools with different affordances and limitations. Understanding these differences is an important first step in deciding how they should be used in supporting student writing.

In the next section I consider what these systems actually do well - and where their limitations become apparent.

4 What Can We Expect from AI Feedback?

AI tools are often presented as powerful solutions to the growing demands of writing feedback. But for teachers, the key question is not whether AI *can* give feedback, but what kind of feedback it gives well - and where it falls short.

Clearly, current AI tools such as *Copilot* and *ChatGPT* are generally very effective at identifying and responding to local language issues. In particular, they can support students in the following areas:

Grammar and accuracy. AI is highly effective at detecting grammatical errors, including problems with verb forms, articles, agreement, and punctuation. It can also suggest corrections quickly and consistently, often providing multiple options.

Clarity and conciseness. Many tools can identify awkward or overly complex sentences and suggest clearer alternatives. This can help students produce writing that is easier to follow and more concise.

Lexical choice and phrasing. AI can suggest alternative vocabulary and more natural-sounding expressions. This is particularly useful for L2 writers who may struggle with collocation or idiomatic usage.

Consistency and formatting. AI tools can help maintain a consistent tone, style, and formatting across a text. This is especially helpful in longer assignments.

Basic text structure. Some systems can recognise organisational elements such as introductions, conclusions, and paragraphing, and can prompt students to include missing components.

Taken together, these strengths mean that AI can provide fast, accessible, and relatively reliable feedback on surface features of writing. For teachers dealing with large classes, this has clear practical value. AI can take over much of the repetitive work involved in identifying and correcting sentence-level errors, freeing up time for other aspects of teaching (e.g. Zhang & Hyland, 2018).

Despite these strengths, there are important limitations. These become more visible when we move beyond the sentence-level to consider writing as communication.

Inconsistent accuracy. Although AI often produces correct feedback, it is not always reliable. Studies have shown that it can miss certain types of errors or provide different feedback on the same text when prompted multiple times. This variability makes it difficult to rely on AI for consistent assessment, particularly across large groups of students (Curry et al, 2024).

Limited understanding of context. AI does not truly "understand" a student's text in the way a teacher does. It works by predicting likely language patterns rather than interpreting meaning

in context. As a result, it may misread a student's intention or offer feedback that is not fully appropriate to the task.

Weakness in disciplinary and genre awareness. Writing in different disciplines involves specific expectations about argument, evidence, and organisation. While AI can generate plausible academic text, it does not always reflect the conventions of particular fields or genres. This limits its ability to give precise, context-sensitive advice to students working within specific academic disciplines.

Limited awareness of audience and voice. One of the most important aspects of writing is how writers position themselves in relation to their readers. This includes expressing opinions, showing caution, engaging the reader, and building a persuasive argument (Jiang & Hyland, 2025).

Research suggests that AI-generated texts tend to be more impersonal and less interactive than student writing. They use fewer features such as hedging (e.g. *might*, *perhaps*), self-mention (e.g. *I argue*), and reader engagement (e.g. questions, directives). As a result, AI may struggle to give useful feedback on how students develop an authorial voice or engage their audience.

Tendency toward generic or formulaic feedback. AI feedback can sometimes sound helpful but remain vague. Comments such as "this could be clearer" or "consider improving your argument" may not give students enough guidance on what to do next. Even when feedback is positive and supportive, it may lack the specificity needed to promote learning (Hyland, 2025).

So, for classroom purposes, it may be helpful to think of AI feedback as having clear strengths at the surface level of language, but more limited effectiveness at deeper levels of writing such as argument, audience awareness, and disciplinary conventions where teachers remain essential. This distinction helps clarify how AI can be used effectively. Rather than replacing teacher feedback, AI is better seen as handling the lower-level, high-volume aspects of feedback, allowing teachers to focus on the more complex and meaningful dimensions of student writing.

For teachers, the key takeaway from all this is not that AI is unreliable, but that it is selectively reliable.

Used appropriately, it can:

- Save time on routine correction
- Provide immediate support to students
- Encourage multiple drafts and revision

But it cannot:

- Fully interpret student meaning
- Replace disciplinary knowledge
- Guide students in developing a personal, persuasive voice

This suggests that the most effective use of AI is not as a substitute for teacher feedback, but as a complement to it, with each addressing different aspects of the writing process.

5 AI and the Human Side of Feedback: Can It Be Empathetic?

Feedback is often treated as a purely informational process - a way of identifying problems and offering solutions. But teachers know that it is also a highly interpersonal activity. How feedback is expressed can be just as important as what it says and research suggests that students do not respond to feedback simply in terms of its content. Even when comments are accurate and constructive, learners often react to how they *feel* about the feedback (Haden, 2025). Critical comments, if poorly phrased, can discourage students, reduce motivation, and limit engagement with revision. Effective feedback, therefore, needs

to do more than convey information: it needs to acknowledge the writer and support their development. Experienced teachers are usually sensitive to the impact of their comments. Rather than responding only to the text, they respond to the student behind the text, shaping their feedback to encourage revision and maintain confidence.

Some years ago we identified four common strategies teachers use to achieve this (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). These include:

• **Balancing praise and criticism**

Combining positive comments with suggestions for improvement

*"This is a clear introduction, **but** the argument could be developed further with more examples."*

• **Hedging criticism**

Softening comments through cautious or tentative language

*"This section **might** be a **little** unclear—**perhaps** you **could** explain this point in more detail?"*

• **Personalising responses**

Framing comments as the teacher's own reaction as a reader

"I found it difficult to follow the main point here—could you make this clearer?"

• **Using questions**

Inviting reflection rather than imposing judgement

"Could these two paragraphs be combined?"

These strategies help create feedback that is not only corrective, but also supportive and dialogic, encouraging students to engage with their writing.

In principle, AI systems such as ChatGPT can be instructed to produce supportive and encouraging feedback of this kind. They can:

• adopt a positive tone ("Great start!")
• combine praise with suggestions
• use conversational language
• avoid overtly negative phrasing

At first glance, this appears to mirror the strategies used by teachers. AI-generated feedback often sounds polite, encouraging, and non-threatening, but it can also be overly general or formulaic. Comments such as:

• "Good job—this is clear and well written"
• "You could improve this by adding more detail"

may sound supportive, but they often lack the specificity needed to usefully guide revision and learning. For example, explanations such as:

• "We usually use the -ing form here"
• "You could say this more clearly"

May highlight reader difficulties, but do not necessarily help students understand the underlying problem or develop their writing skills. So, without clear explanations or concrete examples, students may struggle to understand what to change or why. Similarly, praise can sometimes feel excessive or insincere, particularly when it is not clearly linked to specific features of the text. Students are often sensitive to this and just ignore positive comments if they appear routine or unfounded.

Perhaps the most important difference between AI and teacher feedback is that AI feedback is not embedded in a teacher–student relationship. Human feedback is shaped by knowledge of the learner - their level, their previous writing, their efforts, their weaknesses and their progress over time. AI, by

contrast, treats each text in isolation. It does not remember previous drafts unless these are explicitly provided, nor does it build an ongoing dialogue with the student or adjust feedback based on long-term development, so even when AI feedback is polite and encouraging, it can still feel impersonal. As a result, students may engage with it differently from teacher feedback, particularly when they value interaction, clarification, and the opportunity to ask questions.

For teachers, then, the key issue is not whether AI *can* produce polite feedback as it clearly can, but whether it can provide feedback that is:

- specific enough to guide revision
- meaningful enough to support learning
- situated enough to respond to the individual learner

This suggests that the interpersonal dimension of feedback remains an area where teachers play a crucial role. While AI can model supportive language, it does not fully capture the relational and contextual aspects of feedback that influence how students interpret and use it. If AI feedback feels impersonal or generic, an important question is how students actually respond to it in practice.

6 Is AI Feedback Valued by Learners?

A key question for teachers is not only what AI feedback *can* do, but how students respond to it. Even the most detailed feedback has little impact if learners do not trust it, understand it, or choose to act on it. Research into student perceptions of AI feedback presents a mixed but generally positive picture (e.g. Li *et al*, 2024). Many learners report that they find AI-generated feedback useful, particularly for its immediacy, clarity, and accessibility. At the same time, they continue to value teacher feedback in important ways, suggesting that the two are not seen as interchangeable.

Students often highlight several advantages of AI-generated feedback:

> *Immediacy and availability.* AI can provide feedback instantly and at any time. This allows students to revise their writing without waiting for teacher comments and to work at their own pace.
>
> *Quantity and detail.* AI is able to generate large amounts of feedback, often covering multiple aspects of a text, including grammar, vocabulary, organisation, and sometimes argumentation. Students may feel they are receiving more comprehensive input than is typically possible from a teacher.
>
> *Clarity and explicitness.* Some students report that AI feedback is easier to understand than teacher comments, particularly when it focuses on concrete language issues or provides direct suggestions for revision.
>
> *Independence and control.* AI allows students to seek feedback when they want it and to decide how to use it. This can support a sense of autonomy, particularly for learners who are comfortable working independently.

Despite these advantages, students do not simply replace teacher feedback with AI. Many continue to value teachers for reasons that go beyond the provision of information.

Depth and relevance. Teacher feedback is often seen as more meaningful in terms of content, argument, and organisation. Teachers are better able to interpret what students are trying to say and to respond to the overall purpose of the text.

Opportunity for interaction. Students frequently emphasise the importance of being able to ask questions, seek clarification, and discuss feedback. Face-to-face or dialogic interaction allows them to develop both their writing and their understanding.

Trust and credibility. Teachers are generally seen as more reliable, particularly when feedback involves evaluation or grading. AI feedback, while useful, may sometimes be treated with caution, especially when it appears inconsistent or overly general.

The "human touch". As discussed in the previous section, students often respond to the interpersonal dimension of teacher feedback. Encouragement, tone, and a sense of being understood can influence how seriously feedback is taken and how willing students are to revise.

An important, and often neglected, factor shaping students' responses to AI feedback, however, is their level of digital literacy. Using AI tools effectively is not always straightforward as students need to know:

- how to ask for useful feedback (e.g. through effective prompts)
- how to evaluate the quality and relevance of AI responses
- how to decide which suggestions to accept or reject

Research suggests that students who are more familiar with digital tools, and more willing to experiment with them, are better able to engage productively with AI feedback. In contrast, less confident users may either ignore useful suggestions or accept them uncritically. This means that the effectiveness of AI feedback is not only a property of the tool itself, but also of the learner's ability to use it strategically (Zhang and Hyland, 2022).

Overall, the evidence suggests that students tend to adopt a pragmatic approach. They recognise the strengths of AI feedback, particularly for language accuracy and immediate support, but do not see it as a complete substitute for teacher input. Instead, many learners appear to value a combination of both AI for quick, accessible feedback and revision support and on teachers for deeper guidance, interaction, and evaluation.

For teachers, this has two important implications. First, the question is not whether students *prefer* AI or teacher feedback, but how they use each type of feedback for different purposes. AI may be particularly useful for supporting drafting and revision, while teacher feedback remains central to developing ideas, argument, and disciplinary awareness. Second, students may need explicit guidance in how to work with AI feedback. Without this, there is a risk that they either rely on it uncritically or fail to use it effectively. Helping students develop this awareness is therefore an increasingly important part of writing instruction. If students value AI feedback but use it in different ways from teacher feedback, the final question is whether this actually leads to learning.

7 Is AI Feedback Educational?

While students may value AI feedback, the critical question for teachers is whether it actually promotes learning. In other words, does AI feedback help learners develop writing skills over time, or does it just support immediate improvements in individual texts?

Feedback has potentially two types of effects:

Immediate text improvement. AI feedback is often highly effective at helping learners make quick corrections to grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. These improvements are noticeable within a single draft and can increase learner confidence. For example, a student might revise a paragraph for clarity based on AI suggestions and produce a more polished text.

Long-term skill development. The evidence for deeper, transferable learning is more mixed. Some studies suggest that AI feedback can help students internalize grammar rules or develop revision strategies when accompanied by guided reflection. However, without scaffolding from a teacher, learners may focus on surface-level changes and miss opportunities to develop higher-order skills, such as argumentation, coherence, or rhetorical awareness.

A key principle in writing pedagogy is that feedback is most educational when it encourages active engagement, so while AI can highlight issues, learners must interpret them. Equally, **e**ffective learning occurs when students evaluate feedback, decide which suggestions to adopt, and justify their choices. In other words, feedback is most beneficial when it supports learners in thinking about their texts, writing processes and strategies. Without these processes, AI feedback risks becoming a form of passive correction, where students accept changes without understanding why, limiting long-term growth.

Several factors determine whether AI feedback supports learning:

Prompt design. The quality of AI feedback depends on how students interact with it. Carefully designed prompts can elicit explanations, examples, and step-by-step guidance, which are more likely to foster understanding than simple corrections.

Integration with classroom practice. AI feedback is most educational when combined with teacher guidance. For instance, teachers can help students interpret AI suggestions, set revision goals, or discuss patterns of errors across drafts.

Learner expertise and motivation. More experienced or motivated learners are better able to use AI feedback strategically, integrating it into their writing development. Novices may need more structured support to turn feedback into learning.

Studies in TESOL classrooms suggest that AI feedback can enhance language accuracy, especially in grammar and vocabulary, but its effect on writing development is more variable. Learners show gains in revision skills – learning to gradually improve a text – and error recognition – becoming more aware of recurring mistakes. However, gains in rhetorical competence, coherence, and argumentative skill are less consistently observed without explicit teacher mediation. The key for teachers is to use AI feedback to complement, rather than replace, their own instructional guidance, and helping students develop the skills to use it effectively.

8 AI in the Classroom

The integration of AI feedback into TESOL classrooms offers both opportunities and challenges. The discussion above suggests some practical strategies for using AI effectively while maintaining pedagogical integrity.

8.1 Enhancing personalized feedback

AI-powered tools can analyze student writing and speaking in real time, identifying patterns in errors and providing tailored recommendations. For example, adaptive writing assistants can highlight recurring grammatical mistakes and suggest context-sensitive corrections. Teachers should view these tools as additional rather than replacement resources, using AI feedback to inform their own interventions. This suggests using AI feedback as a diagnostic tool to identify individual learner needs, then designing follow-up exercises to reinforce understanding.

8.2 Supporting formative assessment

AI can generate immediate feedback on basic issues which is useful for formative assessment. Automated quizzes, pronunciation checkers, and interactive language exercises can provide students with instant guidance, fostering autonomous learning. However, teachers must confirm AI suggestions to prevent the reinforcement of errors or misinterpretations. Here teachers use AI to supplement formative assessment, ensuring human oversight to contextualize feedback and maintain the quality of their teaching.

8.3 Encouraging metacognitive development

AI feedback can prompt students to reflect on their own learning processes. By offering explanations and highlighting patterns of errors, AI encourages learners to engage in metacognitive strategies—evaluating why mistakes occur and how to correct them. Teachers can boost this effect by prompting reflective questions based on the reports from AI, pairing AI-generated feedback with structured reflection activities to help students internalize learning and self-monitor their progress.

8.4 Ethical and practical considerations

While AI tools can enhance feedback, teachers must stay aware of potential biases, data privacy concerns, and over-reliance on automated suggestions. Additionally, TESOL classrooms are often diverse cultural and linguistic places and may require human interpretation to ensure feedback is appropriate and sensitive. This means that teachers need to establish clear guidelines for AI use in the classroom, emphasizing transparency, student consent, and the role of human judgment.

8.5 Integrating AI into teacher workflow

To maximize effectiveness, AI should be embedded into existing pedagogical practices rather than treated as an add-on. This includes integrating AI feedback into lesson planning, progress tracking, and individualized learning plans. Professional development for teachers is critical here to ensure they can interpret AI outputs and translate them into actionable instructional strategies.

9 Conclusion

AI is no longer a distant possibility in TESOL classrooms but a practical tool that can transform how feedback is delivered and acted upon. AI feedback has clear educational potential, particularly for supporting drafting and revision, encouraging self-directed learning, and providing immediate, detailed guidance. But it also has obvious limitations. There is a risk of over-focusing on surface features with a limited impact on higher-order writing skills and a reliance on learner digital literacy and engagement. But by combining the precision and adaptability of AI with the insight and empathy of human teachers, classrooms can become places where feedback is immediate, personalized, and empowering. It is beginning to become clear that the future of language learning lies in this collaboration where AI amplifies and complements human expertise. When we work together with AI, feedback stops being just correction and becomes a launchpad for learning and growth.

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