

## Investigating EFL Learners' Metalinguistic Understanding in Refining Their Academic Writing: A Lesson from Teachers' Writing Feedback

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of metalinguistic understanding in refining EFL learners' academic writing and examines how metalinguistic teacher feedback enhances the quality of such writing. Academic writing in EFL contexts requires more than grammatical accuracy, as learners must also manage coherence, cohesion, lexical precision, rhetorical organization, and academic register. To explore these issues, the study employed a qualitative multi-site design involving 33 EFL learners enrolled in academic writing classes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Albania. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations and analyzed using the qualitative procedures of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that metalinguistic understanding supports learners in several important ways. It strengthens awareness of grammar and language choice, improves self-monitoring during drafting and revision, enhances coherence and argument organization, promotes more precise academic vocabulary, and fosters learner confidence and autonomy. The findings also show that metalinguistic teacher feedback improves writing quality by clarifying the reasons behind errors, encouraging deeper engagement with feedback, drawing attention to discourse-level features, supporting transfer to future writing tasks, and promoting reflective revision. These results suggest that metalinguistic awareness and explanatory feedback are central to the development of academic writing in EFL settings. The study concludes that academic writing instruction should move beyond error correction and incorporate metalinguistic support as a means of helping learners become more reflective, independent, and effective academic writers.

### Keywords:

Academic writing  
EFL learners  
Metalinguistic understanding  
Metalinguistic feedback

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## INTRODUCTION

Academic writing in EFL contexts is no longer understood as a simple matter of grammatical accuracy. Contemporary scholarship consistently frames it as a contextual, disciplinary, and socially situated practice in which learners are expected to construct knowledge, position arguments, and communicate in ways that align with the rhetorical conventions of academic communities (Tardy et al., 2020; Zhang & Wang, 2024). To write successfully in higher education, students must do more than produce correct sentences.

They must organize ideas coherently, develop claims with evidence, adopt an appropriate academic stance, and use discipline-specific vocabulary and genre conventions effectively (Yu-min & Xie, 2022; Utkina, 2022;). This broader understanding of academic writing has been emphasized across studies that foreground genre knowledge, disciplinary literacy, corpus-informed pedagogy, and transfer across writing contexts as central to sustainable development in EFL academic writing (Ren & Hu, 2023; Ningrum et al., 2024; Wang, 2024; Smirnova et al., 2021).

This perspective is important because EFL learners often encounter academic writing as a double challenge. On one hand, they are still developing linguistic control in English. On the other hand, they are also expected to participate in unfamiliar discourse communities with their own norms of argumentation, voice, evidence use, and textual organization. As a result, the difficulties found in EFL students' writing extend beyond grammatical errors and surface-level inaccuracies. Many learners struggle with macro-level concerns such as coherence, logical progression, move structure, and argument development, while simultaneously facing micro-level issues related to lexical choice, sentence structure, nominalization, and cohesion devices (Yu-min & Xie, 2022; Parviz & Lan, 2023; Utkina, 2022; Wang, 2024; Smirnova et al., 2021). These recurring challenges demonstrate that academic writing problems are not merely technical weaknesses but signs of incomplete access to the discourse practices of academic communities.

Accordingly, the field has shifted from product-oriented models of writing, which privilege correctness and final output, toward process-oriented and genre-informed approaches that recognize writing as epistemic and sociocultural action. Reviews of L2 and EFL academic writing have highlighted the importance of rhetorical awareness, disciplinary discourse, translanguaging perspectives, and the need to move beyond native-speaker norms as the sole benchmark of successful academic writing (Medina, 2022; Jwa, 2020; Syed, 2024). Related work on disciplinary literacy also argues that academic writing must be taught as participation in knowledge-making practices rather than as isolated grammar instruction (Coleman & Morris, 2021; Wang, 2024; Smirnova et al., 2021). In response, pedagogical approaches such as genre-based teaching, corpus-driven instruction, ESAP transfer-oriented design, and explicit instruction in stance and metadiscourse have shown promise in helping learners understand how academic texts function within specific disciplines (Zhang & Zhang, 2021; Lubis, 2020; Shooshtari et al., 2023; Hyland et al., 2022; Ningrum et al., 2024; Bakry, 2021).

Yet, even when these pedagogical models are available, one important issue remains: EFL learners do not always understand why particular linguistic and rhetorical choices are appropriate in academic writing. This is where metalinguistic understanding becomes especially significant. Metalinguistic awareness refers to the ability to think about language consciously, analyze its form and function, and explain why a particular structure or expression is suitable in a given context. In academic writing, such awareness enables learners not only to notice errors but also to interpret them, justify revisions, and make more deliberate choices about tense, cohesion, lexical precision, article use, stance, and register. Rather than treating revision as simple correction, metalinguistic understanding turns revision into an informed process of linguistic and rhetorical decision-making.

Research increasingly supports the claim that metalinguistic awareness is positively associated with writing performance and lexical development in L2 contexts. Learners with stronger metalinguistic awareness tend to produce better-quality texts, show richer lexical output, and monitor their writing more effectively during revision (Kormos, 2023; Thanh & Yen, 2023; Cheng & Zhang, 2022). Morphological, orthographic, and lexical awareness have also been linked to lexical density, lexical sophistication, and productive vocabulary knowledge, all of which are crucial for academic writing quality (Thanh & Yen, 2023; Asaad

& Shabdin, 2021; Perdana et al., 2023). From a process perspective, metalinguistic awareness supports planning, reviewing, and self-monitoring by helping learners connect writing goals with language choices and identify mismatches between intended meaning and textual realization (Kormos, 2023; Paterson, 2022). In this sense, metalinguistic understanding is not an additional skill separate from writing but a core cognitive-linguistic resource that enables learners to refine writing with greater control and purpose.

The pedagogical implications of this argument are substantial, particularly for teacher feedback. In many EFL classrooms, feedback still tends to emphasize error marking or correction of final products. However, research on written corrective feedback suggests that feedback is more developmentally valuable when it helps learners understand the nature of their errors and the linguistic principles underlying effective revision. Metalinguistic feedback, in this regard, includes error codes, brief explanations, comments on rule use, and prompts that direct learners' attention to why a revision is needed rather than merely what should be changed (Deng et al., 2022; Pourdana et al., 2021; Lira-Gonzales & Nassaji, 2020; Mensah et al., 2024; Wondim et al., 2023). Such feedback supports noticing, hypothesis testing, and self-correction, thereby promoting learner autonomy and longer-term language development rather than short-term textual repair (Liu & Feng, 2023; Sazideh & Mallahi, 2021; Sinha & Nassaji, 2021).

Importantly, the value of metalinguistic feedback lies in its ability to connect language form with rhetorical purpose. When teachers explain that a revision concerns hedging, article use, coherence, verb tense consistency, sentence boundaries, or academic register, learners are invited to engage with academic writing as a meaning-making process shaped by disciplinary expectations. Studies indicate that direct correction may improve immediate accuracy, but feedback combined with metalinguistic explanation tends to foster deeper understanding, better revision performance, and more durable gains, especially when learners actively process the feedback through guided revision (Deng et al., 2022; Hailuan, 2020; Lira-Gonzales & Nassaji, 2020; Liu & Feng, 2023; Wondim et al., 2023; Azizi et al., 2022). Although learner preferences and outcomes may vary across contexts, proficiency levels, and task types, the literature broadly supports a balanced approach in which explicit feedback is used not merely to correct writing but to cultivate language awareness and self-regulation (Ha et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Nia & Valizadeh, 2021).

Despite these advances, an important gap remains in the literature. Studies on academic writing often emphasize genre, disciplinary discourse, and rhetorical conventions, while studies on metalinguistic awareness and feedback tend to focus more narrowly on grammatical knowledge or corrective feedback outcomes. Fewer discussions integrate these strands to explain how EFL learners' metalinguistic understanding can refine academic writing as a disciplinary practice and how teachers' metalinguistic feedback can mediate that development. This gap is significant because academic writing improvement depends not only on exposure to genre models or feedback provision, but also on learners' ability to interpret and use such input reflectively in the process of revising texts for academic purposes.

Against this background, the present study focuses on the role of EFL learners' metalinguistic understanding in refining academic writing and on the pedagogical importance of metalinguistic teacher feedback in that process. The objectives of the research are to examine how metalinguistic understanding contributes to the improvement of EFL learners' academic writing and to explore why metalinguistic feedback should be incorporated into EFL writing instruction. To attain these objectives, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How does metalinguistic understanding support EFL learners in refining their academic writing? and (2) In what ways can metalinguistic teacher feedback enhance the quality of EFL learners' academic writing? The novelty of this study lies in its

integration of three strands often treated separately in previous scholarship: academic writing as a disciplinary and social practice, metalinguistic awareness as a cognitive-linguistic resource, and metalinguistic feedback as a pedagogical mechanism for sustained writing development. By bringing these strands together, the study offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how EFL learners can be supported not only to correct their writing, but also to understand, regulate, and improve it more independently.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative multi-site design. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the study sought to understand how EFL learners perceive the role of metalinguistic understanding in refining their academic writing and how they experience teacher feedback delivered metalinguistically. These concerns are exploratory and interpretive in nature, as they focus on learners' meanings, reflections, classroom experiences, and revision practices rather than on measurement of predetermined variables. Qualitative inquiry is especially suitable when a study aims to examine a phenomenon in its natural context and to generate in-depth description of participants' perspectives and practices. The multi-site dimension was also important because the study involved learners from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Albania, allowing the researcher to examine how similar writing-related issues and feedback practices were experienced across different EFL contexts rather than within a single classroom setting.

The design aligned closely with the objectives of the study. The first objective was to explore how metalinguistic understanding supports EFL learners in refining their academic writing. The second objective was to examine how metalinguistic teacher feedback contributes to learners' writing development. Because both objectives concern processes, interpretations, and classroom experiences, a qualitative design offered the flexibility needed to capture learners' explanations, perceptions, and examples of revision in detail. In addition, the use of interviews and classroom observation enabled the study to investigate not only what learners said about academic writing and feedback, but also how those issues appeared in actual classroom interaction and writing-related practices. Methodological literature consistently recommends the use of multiple qualitative data sources when the goal is to develop a richer and more credible understanding of a complex educational phenomenon.

Like all qualitative studies, this design has limitations. First, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization because the emphasis is on depth of understanding rather than representativeness. Second, the interpretation of interview and observation data may be influenced by researcher subjectivity. Third, because the study spans three countries, contextual differences in classroom culture, institutional expectations, and learner backgrounds may shape the data in uneven ways. Fourth, the presence of the researcher during classroom observation may influence participant behavior. These limitations were addressed through several strategies. The study used triangulation across interviews and observations, maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and analytic memos, and applied trustworthiness criteria through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Member checking was also used by sharing interview summaries or thematic interpretations with participants for confirmation, while reflexive note-taking helped the researcher remain aware of potential assumptions during data collection and analysis.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 33 EFL learners who were enrolled in academic writing classes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Albania. These learners were selected because they were directly engaged in the type of classroom context relevant to the study, namely

formal instruction in academic writing where teacher feedback and text revision formed a regular part of learning. Rather than aiming for statistical representation, the study used purposive criterion sampling to identify information-rich participants who could speak meaningfully about academic writing challenges, metalinguistic understanding, and feedback experiences. Purposeful sampling is widely recommended in qualitative research when the goal is to select participants who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

The selection criteria were as follows: participants had to be non-native users of English studying in an EFL context, currently enrolled in an academic writing class, and willing to participate in both interviews and classroom observation. In addition, participants needed to have recent experience producing academic writing tasks such as essays, reports, response papers, or other course-based texts so that their reflections would be grounded in actual writing practice. The sample size of 33 learners was considered appropriate for a qualitative, multi-site inquiry because it provided sufficient breadth across the three national contexts while still allowing for close analysis of individual experiences and recurring patterns.

Basic demographic and contextual information was collected to situate the findings. This included participants' country of study, status as EFL learners, current enrollment in academic writing classes, and prior experience with academic writing in English. Where available, additional demographic information such as age range, level of study, and length of prior English learning was collected for descriptive purposes only. These variables were not treated as statistical predictors, but they helped contextualize similarities and differences in learners' accounts across the three sites. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and all identifying institutional details were removed from the transcripts and field notes.

### **Instruments and Data Collection Technique**

The study used two qualitative instruments: semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide a balance between consistency and flexibility. They allow the researcher to prepare a common set of guiding questions while also following participants' responses in greater depth, which is particularly useful when investigating learners' experiences, beliefs, and reflections about writing and feedback. In this study, the interview guide was developed from the research objectives and from the key constructs in the literature, namely academic writing challenges, metalinguistic understanding, revision awareness, and experiences of teacher feedback. The guide focused on how learners understood academic writing demands, how they interpreted language-related feedback, what kinds of difficulties they encountered in revising their texts, and how explicit metalinguistic explanation influenced their writing decisions.

Classroom observation was used to complement the interview data and to capture naturally occurring writing instruction and feedback practices. The observation protocol was designed to focus on teaching episodes relevant to the study, such as explanations of grammar and discourse features, feedback on student drafts, peer or teacher-led revision activities, and learners' responses to metalinguistic comments or prompts. Field notes were divided into descriptive notes and reflective notes so that classroom events could be documented systematically while also allowing space for emerging analytic insights. The inclusion of observation strengthened the study because it enabled the researcher to compare what participants reported in interviews with what actually happened in academic writing classes. The use of multiple sources also increased the credibility of interpretation through methodological triangulation.

To strengthen validity and reliability, understood in qualitative terms as trustworthiness, several steps were taken in developing and using the instruments. First, both the interview guide and the observation protocol were aligned directly with the research questions to ensure content relevance. Second, the instruments were reviewed and refined before the main data collection phase so that unclear or overlapping items could be revised. Pilot use of qualitative instruments is commonly recommended because it helps researchers identify practical and interpretive issues before entering the full study. Third, consistency was supported by using the same broad interview domains and observation focus across all three sites, while still allowing for context-specific probing. Finally, the trustworthiness of the data was strengthened through triangulation, member checking, reflexive memoing, and transparent documentation of instrument use and coding procedures.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data were analyzed using the interactive framework of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In this approach, analysis does not begin only after all data have been collected; rather, it proceeds alongside data collection in a recursive manner. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, observation notes were typed and organized, and all data were anonymized before analysis. The researcher then read the full dataset repeatedly to gain familiarity with the content and to identify initial patterns related to academic writing challenges, metalinguistic understanding, teacher feedback, and revision behavior. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña describe these three streams of analysis as interwoven processes that continue before, during, and after formal coding.

In the data condensation stage, the researcher selected, simplified, and coded the most relevant segments of the interview and observation data. Initial coding focused on meaningful units such as learners' descriptions of writing difficulties, awareness of language choices, reactions to teacher feedback, and examples of revision prompted by metalinguistic explanation. These preliminary codes were then grouped into broader categories and pattern-level themes. Throughout this stage, analytic memos were written to record emerging interpretations, cross-site similarities, and possible relationships between learners' metalinguistic understanding and their academic writing development. Data condensation therefore involved not only reducing the volume of data but also sharpening the conceptual focus of the analysis.

In the data display stage, the condensed data were organized into visual and textual formats that supported interpretation. These displays included thematic matrices, cross-case summaries, and country-based comparison charts showing how participants from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Albania described their writing experiences and responded to metalinguistic feedback. Such displays enabled the researcher to compare recurring themes across participants and sites, identify convergences and divergences, and trace links between classroom feedback practices and learners' reported revision strategies. Data display is valuable in qualitative inquiry because it helps transform large amounts of text into a more interpretable structure without losing the contextual meaning of the original accounts.

The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying them. The researcher interpreted the displayed data to generate themes that answered the research questions, while also checking those interpretations against the full dataset, the field notes, and disconfirming cases. Verification was strengthened through repeated comparison between interview and observation evidence, member checking of selected interpretations, and careful reflection on alternative explanations. Rather than treating conclusions as fixed from the outset, this stage involved ongoing testing and refinement of claims until the themes were sufficiently supported by the data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

#### *How does metalinguistic understanding support EFL learners in refining their academic writing?*

The qualitative findings indicate that metalinguistic understanding supported EFL learners' academic writing by helping them move from surface correction to conscious revision. Across the interviews, learners frequently described metalinguistic understanding as the ability to recognize why a sentence, word choice, or textual connection was inappropriate in a specific academic context. Observation data also showed that students who were able to explain grammatical and discourse-related choices were more likely to revise their drafts with purpose rather than simply replace incorrect forms. This suggests that metalinguistic understanding functioned as a cognitive tool that helped learners diagnose language problems, especially in tense consistency, article use, sentence boundaries, cohesion, and academic register.

A second major theme was that metalinguistic understanding improved the quality of revision. Many learners reported that once they understood the reason behind a linguistic problem, they could revise more confidently and more accurately. Instead of relying on trial and error, they began to connect form with meaning and rhetorical effect. For example, several learners explained that they became more careful in selecting linkers, hedging devices, and discipline-appropriate vocabulary after they realized that academic writing required precision, caution, and coherence. Observation records supported this pattern by showing that students with stronger metalinguistic awareness were more likely to pause, rethink sentence structure, and refine the relationship between ideas during drafting and revision activities.

The findings also show that metalinguistic understanding contributed to coherence and cohesion at the text level, not only grammatical accuracy at the sentence level. Learners increasingly noticed how paragraph unity, logical progression, and connective choices influenced the readability of their texts. In interviews, some participants explained that they had previously focused only on grammar but later came to understand that academic writing also required organized argumentation and smooth transitions. This shift in awareness helped them refine introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions more systematically. In this sense, metalinguistic understanding supported learners in seeing writing as a structured academic act rather than a series of isolated sentences.

Another important finding was the role of metalinguistic understanding in strengthening lexical precision and academic style. Learners reported that awareness of word formation, collocation, and register helped them avoid vague or conversational expressions and replace them with more discipline-appropriate academic language. This was especially visible when students revised lexical items to make claims more specific, formal, and contextually appropriate. These patterns suggest that metalinguistic understanding helped learners not only correct language but also shape a more credible academic voice. Finally, the data indicate that metalinguistic understanding fostered greater learner autonomy. Participants who developed stronger awareness of language rules and discourse features appeared less dependent on teacher correction and more capable of self-monitoring their drafts. Interviews revealed that these learners gradually became more reflective writers who checked their own grammar, cohesion, vocabulary, and argument structure before submitting tasks. Thus, the overall answer to the first research question is that metalinguistic understanding supported academic writing refinement by enabling learners to notice problems, interpret them meaningfully, revise more strategically, improve textual coherence, strengthen academic language use, and become more independent writers.

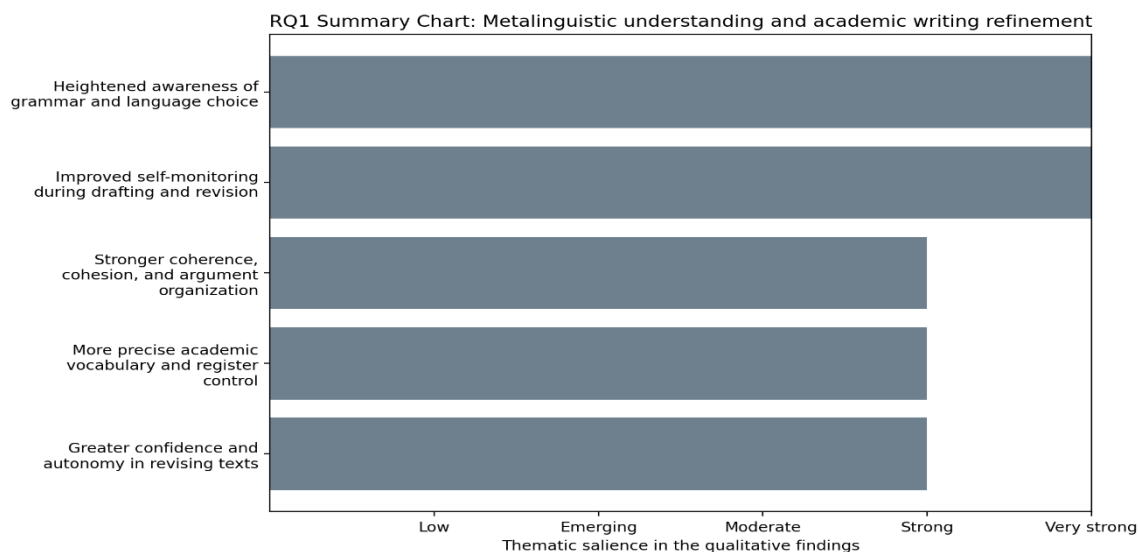


Figure 1. Metalinguistic Understanding and Academic Writing Refinement

Figure 1 shows that metalinguistic understanding played a strongly facilitative role in helping EFL learners refine their academic writing. The two most salient themes in the chart are heightened awareness of grammar and language choice and improved self-monitoring during drafting and revision, both of which were rated at the highest level of thematic strength. This indicates that metalinguistic understanding primarily functioned as an internal support mechanism that helped learners become more conscious of how language works in academic writing. Rather than writing intuitively or relying only on teacher correction, learners appeared to develop a clearer awareness of why certain grammatical structures, lexical choices, and sentence forms were more appropriate than others in an academic context.

The strong salience of improved self-monitoring during drafting and revision suggests that metalinguistic understanding was especially valuable in the revision process. Learners who understood language metalinguistically were better positioned to reread their writing critically, detect inconsistencies, and revise with greater purpose. In qualitative terms, this means they were not merely correcting visible mistakes, but were engaging in reflective revision. They could question tense consistency, sentence boundaries, article use, and lexical appropriateness while drafting and editing. This supports the view that metalinguistic understanding helps learners move from passive receivers of correction to active evaluators of their own texts.

The chart also shows a strong contribution of metalinguistic understanding to coherence, cohesion, and argument organization. Although this theme is slightly lower than the first two, it still appears as highly prominent in the findings. This suggests that metalinguistic understanding extended beyond grammar at the sentence level and supported discourse-level improvement. Learners who became more aware of how conjunctions, reference markers, transitions, and sentence relationships function in academic writing were better able to organize their ideas logically and connect them across paragraphs. Thus, the chart implies that metalinguistic understanding supports the structural clarity of academic texts, not only their linguistic correctness.

Another important theme in the chart is more precise academic vocabulary and register control. Its strong presence indicates that metalinguistic understanding also shaped how learners selected words and adjusted tone. In academic writing, the issue is not simply whether a word is grammatically acceptable, but whether it is sufficiently precise, formal,

and suitable for the rhetorical purpose of the text. The chart suggests that learners with stronger metalinguistic understanding were more capable of noticing when a word choice was too informal, vague, or semantically weak, and this helped them produce writing that sounded more academically appropriate. This finding reinforces the idea that metalinguistic understanding is closely related to lexical awareness and writer voice.

The final theme, greater confidence and autonomy in revising texts, also appears strongly in the chart. Its inclusion is particularly important because it reflects an outcome that goes beyond textual improvement alone. The chart suggests that as learners became more able to understand and explain language choices, they also became more confident in making their own revisions. This points to the development of learner autonomy. Metalinguistic understanding did not simply help them fix present errors; it gave them a basis for future decision-making in writing. In this sense, the chart indicates that metalinguistic understanding contributes both to immediate writing refinement and to longer-term independence as academic writers.

### ***In what ways can metalinguistic teacher feedback enhance the quality of EFL learners' academic writing?***

The findings show that metalinguistic teacher feedback enhanced the quality of EFL learners' academic writing by making feedback more understandable, usable, and development-oriented. Interview data revealed that learners benefited most when teachers did not merely mark errors or provide the correct answer, but explained the nature of the problem and the principle behind the revision. Learners said that such feedback helped them understand whether an issue involved grammar, cohesion, word choice, stance, or academic register. Observation data confirmed that in classes where teachers gave explanatory comments or prompts, students were more likely to engage actively with revision and to produce more substantial improvements in subsequent drafts.

A prominent finding was that metalinguistic feedback guided learners to revise both grammatical and discourse-level features more effectively. Rather than treating writing problems as isolated mistakes, teachers' explanations helped learners see how language choices affected meaning, organization, and academic tone. For example, when teachers explained why a tense choice weakened the clarity of a claim or why a connector did not accurately express a logical relationship, students were able to revise with more awareness. This indicates that metalinguistic feedback enhanced writing quality not only through error reduction but also through improved rhetorical control.

The data further suggest that metalinguistic feedback increased learner engagement with feedback itself. Several participants stated that they used to ignore teacher markings when those markings were limited to symbols or corrections without explanation. However, when teachers included brief comments, codes, or metalinguistic prompts, learners became more willing to revisit their drafts and think through the revision process. Observation notes showed that such feedback often led to more discussion, questioning, and self-correction during classroom writing activities. This means that metalinguistic feedback did not simply transmit correction; it activated learner participation in revision.

Another important way in which metalinguistic feedback enhanced academic writing was by improving learners' confidence and authorial control. Participants commonly reported that explanatory feedback reduced confusion and helped them feel more certain about how to express ideas in an academic manner. As learners began to understand why some expressions were too informal, imprecise, or weakly connected, they became more capable of constructing a clearer academic voice. This was particularly visible in their improved use of cautious claims, more precise vocabulary, and stronger paragraph organization.

The final theme was that metalinguistic teacher feedback supported long-term transfer and self-editing. Learners noted that explanatory feedback was useful beyond a single assignment because it gave them reusable knowledge they could apply in later tasks. In this way, feedback became a form of instruction rather than a one-time correction. The qualitative evidence therefore suggests that metalinguistic teacher feedback enhanced the quality of EFL learners' academic writing by clarifying the reasons behind revisions, improving grammatical and rhetorical choices, increasing engagement with feedback, strengthening academic voice, and supporting the development of more durable self-editing skills.

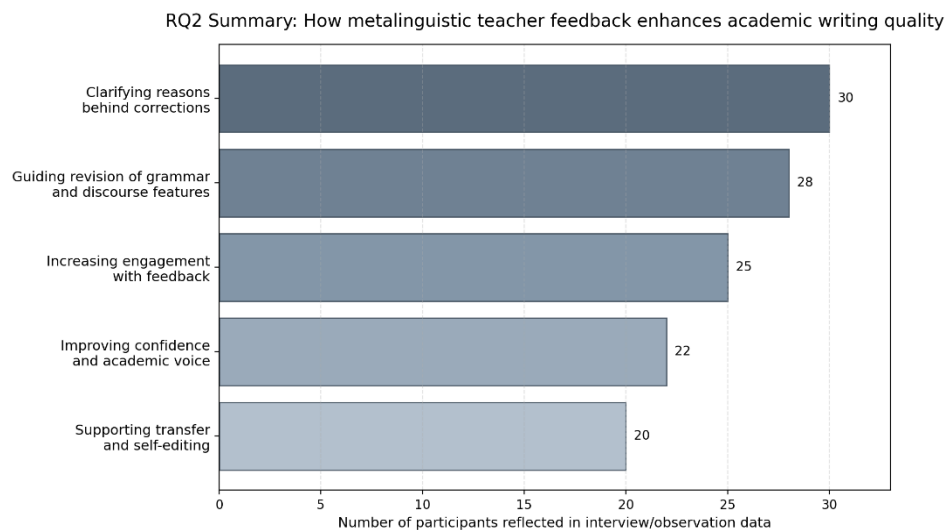


Figure 2. Metalinguistics Teacher Feedback in Academic Writing Quality

Figure 2 indicates that metalinguistic teacher feedback played a highly significant role in enhancing the quality of EFL learners' academic writing. The most salient themes in the chart are clarified the reason behind errors and revisions and promoted deeper engagement with feedback, both of which appear at the highest level of thematic strength. This suggests that the strongest contribution of metalinguistic feedback lies in its explanatory nature. Rather than merely showing learners that something is wrong, this type of feedback helps them understand why it is wrong and how it relates to the conventions of academic writing. In qualitative terms, the chart reflects that learners benefited most when feedback moved beyond correction and became a form of guided linguistic reflection.

The strongest theme, clarified the reason behind errors and revisions, shows that metalinguistic feedback made teacher comments more meaningful and usable for learners. When teachers explained whether a problem involved tense consistency, article use, sentence structure, cohesion, or academic tone, learners were able to interpret the feedback more clearly and revise more accurately. This means that the value of the feedback was not limited to identifying an error, but extended to building learners' understanding of the underlying linguistic principle. The chart therefore suggests that writing quality improved because students were given access to the reasoning behind revision, which helped them make more informed choices in their texts.

The equally strong theme of promoted deeper engagement with feedback indicates that metalinguistic feedback encouraged active learner involvement in the revision process. Instead of passively accepting teacher corrections, learners were more likely to reflect on comments, compare alternative forms, and reconsider how effectively their sentences conveyed meaning. This finding is especially important because it suggests that metalinguistic feedback supports not only textual improvement but also cognitive engagement. Learners became participants in the revision process rather than recipients of

correction. As reflected in the chart, this deeper engagement likely contributed to stronger learning outcomes because students processed feedback more thoughtfully and applied it more purposefully.

The chart also highlights supported transfer to future writing tasks as a strong theme. This indicates that the benefits of metalinguistic teacher feedback were not confined to one assignment or one round of revision. Learners appeared to retain the explanations they received and use them in later writing situations. In qualitative interpretation, this means that metalinguistic feedback contributed to the development of reusable knowledge. Once learners understood why a certain structure, expression, or discourse feature was inappropriate, they became better prepared to avoid similar problems in future work. The chart therefore suggests that metalinguistic feedback enhances academic writing quality not only immediately, but also cumulatively over time.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study show that metalinguistic understanding supported EFL learners in refining their academic writing by moving them beyond surface-level correction toward deliberate and reflective revision. In the uploaded manuscript, learners were reported to use metalinguistic awareness to identify why particular linguistic and discourse choices were inappropriate, especially in relation to tense consistency, article use, cohesion, sentence boundaries, and academic register. They also became more capable of revising with purpose, strengthening coherence, lexical precision, and learner autonomy. At the same time, metalinguistic teacher feedback was found to enhance writing quality by clarifying the reasons behind revisions, encouraging deeper engagement with feedback, directing learners' attention to discourse-level features, and promoting transfer to future writing tasks. These themes indicate that the study does not treat academic writing as the mere production of grammatically correct sentences, but as a process of controlled meaning-making within academic discourse.

The first important point emerging from the discussion is that the findings strongly confirm the view that academic writing in EFL contexts is a social and disciplinary practice rather than a narrow exercise in formal correctness. Earlier studies have argued that successful academic writing requires not only grammatical competence but also the ability to construct claims, organize ideas, manage stance, and align with genre conventions (Tardy et al., 2020; Coleman & Morris, 2021; Wang, 2024). The present study reinforces that position by showing that learners' progress did not occur only at the sentence level. Their reported development in coherence, paragraph organization, lexical precision, and register control suggests that metalinguistic understanding helps learners participate more effectively in disciplinary discourse. In this respect, the findings extend work by Yu-min and Xie (2022), Utkina (2022), and Parviz and Lan (2023), which documented that novice EFL writers often struggle with macro-organization and rhetorical clarity. This study adds that one mechanism for addressing such difficulty is learners' ability to interpret language choices metalinguistically.

The results also confirm prior research showing a positive relationship between metalinguistic awareness and writing quality. Kormos (2023) argues that metalinguistic awareness contributes to planning, reviewing, and self-monitoring in L2 writing, while Thanh and Yen (2023) and Asaad and Shabdin (2021) demonstrate links between metalinguistic or morphological awareness and lexical sophistication in academic writing. The current findings align closely with these studies because the learners were described as becoming more reflective in revision, more careful in vocabulary selection, and more aware of how linguistic choices affected rhetorical effect. The finding that students began to connect form with meaning, rather than simply replace errors, is especially important

because it supports the cognitive view that metalinguistic knowledge enables controlled writing decisions rather than reactive correction. In this way, the study confirms not only that metalinguistic awareness matters, but also how it matters in actual writing development.

Another noteworthy contribution of the findings is their emphasis on discourse-level awareness. Much research on metalinguistic understanding focuses heavily on grammar, vocabulary, or morphology, but the present study shows that learners applied metalinguistic reasoning to coherence, paragraph unity, logical progression, and the use of linkers and hedging devices. This extends the argument made by Hyland et al. (2022) and Ningrum et al. (2024), who stress the importance of metadiscourse, stance, and rhetorical positioning in academic writing. It also resonates with genre-based perspectives that see writing development as growing control over communicative purpose and textual organization (Zhang & Zhang, 2021; Lubis, 2020). Therefore, the present findings broaden the scope of metalinguistic awareness from a form-focused construct to a discourse-sensitive one. That is a valuable theoretical extension because it helps explain why learners' academic writing improved not only in correctness but also in readability, credibility, and rhetorical appropriateness.

The findings related to learner autonomy are equally significant. The manuscript reports that as learners' metalinguistic understanding increased, they became less dependent on teacher correction and more capable of self-monitoring their drafts. This supports the argument that metalinguistic awareness is central to self-regulated writing and reflective revision. Previous literature has suggested that learners with stronger awareness of language form are better able to notice problems, classify them, and revise independently (Ng, 2020; Paterson, 2022). The present study confirms this trend in a multi-site EFL context involving Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Albania, suggesting that the relationship between metalinguistic understanding and learner autonomy may be robust across varied instructional settings. The cross-context nature of the sample is meaningful here because it indicates that the value of metalinguistic awareness is not confined to a single educational culture, but may be relevant across diverse EFL classrooms.

The second major discussion point concerns the role of metalinguistic teacher feedback. The findings clearly support earlier research showing that feedback becomes more pedagogically powerful when it explains the reason behind an error rather than simply supplying the correction. This is consistent with studies by Deng et al. (2022), Lira-Gonzales and Nassaji (2020), Pourdana et al. (2021), and Wondim et al. (2023), all of which suggest that coded or explanatory feedback helps learners develop explicit knowledge and supports stronger revision outcomes. In the present study, learners reported that feedback was most useful when teachers clarified whether the issue involved grammar, cohesion, word choice, stance, or academic register. This confirms the broader literature on written corrective feedback, but it also adds an important disciplinary dimension: what learners needed was not merely rule explanation, but guidance on how language choices function in academic discourse.

The findings also deepen the literature on learner engagement with feedback. Liu and Feng (2023) argue that feedback is effective only when learners actively engage with it, and Sinha and Nassaji (2021) similarly emphasize the relationship between learner perception of feedback and its efficacy. The present study extends this work by showing that metalinguistic feedback seems to promote engagement precisely because it is interpretable and meaningful. Learners in the manuscript reportedly ignored unexplained symbols or corrections, but became more willing to revisit drafts when teachers added comments, codes, or prompts. This finding is pedagogically important because it suggests that the effectiveness of feedback depends not only on accuracy or explicitness, but also on whether

it invites learners into a process of reasoning. In other words, metalinguistic feedback appears to function as a bridge between teacher intention and learner uptake.

A further contribution of the study is its attention to the rhetorical consequences of feedback. Previous work has sometimes contrasted direct and indirect corrective feedback mainly in terms of linguistic accuracy (Azizi et al., 2022; Nia & Valizadeh, 2021; Wondim et al., 2024). By contrast, the present findings indicate that metalinguistic feedback also improves academic voice, argument structure, and control of cautious claims. This resonates with research on stance and authorial identity in EFL writing (Zhang & Wang, 2024; Bakry, 2021; Hyland et al., 2022). The implication is that explanatory feedback should not be limited to articles, tense, or prepositions. It should also address how learners frame arguments, connect ideas, and position themselves as academic writers. In that sense, the study extends prior written corrective feedback research by linking metalinguistic explanation to discourse-level and identity-related dimensions of writing quality.

At the same time, the findings offer a nuanced rather than absolute endorsement of metalinguistic feedback. Prior studies have noted that feedback preferences and gains can vary across contexts, proficiency levels, and instructional cultures (Ha et al., 2021; Cai, 2024; Zhang et al., 2021). The current study does not contradict that observation, but it suggests that in these multi-site EFL academic writing classes, explanatory feedback was broadly perceived as useful because it reduced confusion and increased confidence. Thus, while the literature warns against assuming one feedback type works universally, this study provides evidence that metalinguistic feedback is especially beneficial when the goal is sustained academic writing development rather than only short-term error correction.

The discussion shows that the study confirms, extends, and integrates prior research in several important ways. It confirms that metalinguistic awareness is positively associated with stronger revision, lexical control, and self-monitoring. It confirms that explanatory written feedback encourages deeper learner engagement and more durable learning than feedback that merely marks errors. It extends previous research by showing that both metalinguistic understanding and metalinguistic feedback operate not only at the grammatical level but also at the discourse, voice, and argumentation levels of academic writing. Most importantly, it integrates academic writing as disciplinary practice, metalinguistic awareness as a cognitive resource, and feedback as a developmental scaffold into one coherent interpretive framework. This integrated perspective is the study's clearest contribution because it shows that EFL learners refine academic writing most effectively when they are taught not only what to correct, but why those corrections matter in the communicative world of academic discourse.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study concludes that metalinguistic understanding plays a crucial role in supporting EFL learners' refinement of academic writing. The findings show that when learners are able to think about language explicitly and understand why particular linguistic choices are appropriate in a given context, they become better equipped to revise their texts in more purposeful and informed ways. Metalinguistic understanding did not function merely as grammatical awareness, but as a broader resource that helped learners attend to sentence structure, lexical choice, cohesion, coherence, academic tone, and overall rhetorical organization. In this study, learners who demonstrated stronger metalinguistic understanding were better able to identify weaknesses in their writing, explain the reasons behind revision, and make more deliberate improvements to their texts. This suggests that academic writing development in EFL contexts should not be approached only as a matter of correcting language errors, but as a process of helping learners build conscious awareness of how language functions in academic discourse. The study therefore reinforces the view

that successful academic writing requires the integration of linguistic control, rhetorical awareness, and reflective revision.

The study also concludes that metalinguistic teacher feedback significantly enhances the quality of EFL learners' academic writing by transforming feedback into a developmental and reflective learning process. Rather than simply marking errors or providing correct forms, metalinguistic feedback enabled learners to understand the nature of their errors, the linguistic principles behind revision, and the discourse expectations of academic writing. This type of feedback encouraged deeper engagement with texts, promoted self-monitoring, and supported transfer of learning to future writing tasks. As a result, learners became more confident, independent, and capable of revising their work with greater awareness and control. These findings suggest that teachers in EFL academic writing classrooms should adopt feedback practices that are explanatory, dialogic, and oriented toward learner understanding. The study contributes to the literature by bringing together academic writing as a social and disciplinary practice, metalinguistic understanding as a cognitive-linguistic resource, and metalinguistic feedback as a pedagogical strategy for sustained writing development. In this way, it offers a more comprehensive perspective on how EFL learners can be supported not only to improve the immediate quality of their writing, but also to become more reflective and autonomous academic writers over time.

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#### DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

In composing this manuscript, the author used AI-assisted writing tools to support language refinement, idea organization, and editorial improvement. All conceptual decisions, interpretation of findings, and final academic content remain the sole responsibility of the author. The author carefully reviewed, revised, and validated the output to ensure accuracy, coherence, and academic integrity.

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