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## The Impact of Indirect Grammar Instruction on Writing: A Theoretical Perspective in ESL

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15857943>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 23-06-2025

**Published:** 10-07-2025

**Keywords:**

*Indirect Grammar Instruction, ESL, Learner-Centered Approach, Second Language Acquisition, Implicit Feedback*

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### ABSTRACT

This theoretical study explores the potential impact of indirect grammar instruction on improving writing accuracy among intermediate learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). While conventional approaches in ESL classrooms often emphasize direct instruction—characterized by rule explanation, repetitive drills, and immediate correction—such methods may not fully engage learners in the cognitive processes essential for long-term retention and autonomous language use. In contrast, indirect instruction adopts a learner-centered methodology, focusing on contextual learning, experiential tasks, and discovery-oriented strategies. Grammar is integrated into meaningful language activities, such as writing assignments and communicative practice, rather than taught in isolation. Learners receive implicit feedback—such as underlined errors or hints without explicit correction—and are encouraged to revise their work through self-assessment or peer collaboration. These techniques aim to develop metalinguistic awareness and facilitate a more natural internalization of grammatical structures. Grounded in key second language acquisition (SLA) theories—including Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis, and Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory—this paper contends that indirect instruction can significantly enhance written grammatical accuracy. It reviews and

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synthesizes existing research to argue that such approaches not only foster accuracy over time but also support learner independence, intrinsic motivation, and critical reflection. By promoting active engagement with language, indirect grammar teaching offers a more enduring and student-centered pathway to grammar mastery. The insights presented are intended to guide ESL educators and curriculum developers in designing more effective grammar instruction practices.

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## 1. Introduction:

In the field of English as a Second Language (ESL), grammar instruction remains a foundational component of language education. Traditionally, grammar has been taught using direct methods, which emphasize explicit explanation of rules, repetition through mechanical drills, and correction of learner errors by the instructor. While such approaches offer a structured path to grammatical competence, they often fall short in promoting the deeper cognitive engagement necessary for long-term retention and autonomous language use. Increasingly, educators and researchers have turned their attention to indirect methods of grammar instruction, which shift the focus from teacher-led explanations to learner-centered discovery and contextual practice.

Indirect grammar instruction involves embedding grammatical learning within meaningful language tasks, such as writing or speaking activities, where the emphasis is on communication rather than rule memorization. Learners are guided to notice patterns, reflect on usage, and revise their output based on implicit feedback rather than explicit correction. This approach is grounded in prominent theories of second language acquisition (SLA), including Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input; Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis, which highlights the learner's awareness of form; and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which underscores the role of social interaction and scaffolded learning in language development.

This paper presents a theoretical exploration of indirect grammar instruction and its potential to improve writing accuracy among intermediate ESL learners. It synthesizes insights from SLA theory and existing pedagogical research to argue that indirect instruction not only enhances grammatical accuracy over time but also supports learner autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and critical engagement with language. The



paper aims to inform ESL educators and curriculum developers seeking to implement more effective, student-centered approaches to grammar instruction.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The debate over the most effective method of grammar instruction in second language acquisition has persisted for decades. Central to this discussion is the contrast between explicit (direct) and implicit (indirect) approaches to teaching grammar. Traditional ESL instruction has typically favored explicit methods, where grammatical rules are taught overtly and followed by controlled practice (Ellis, 2006). However, growing evidence from both theoretical and empirical sources suggests that indirect instruction may offer more durable and transferable learning outcomes, particularly in the development of writing accuracy (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

According to Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence ( $i+1$ ). While Krashen downplays the role of explicit grammar instruction, his theory supports the value of indirect methods that emphasize exposure and understanding over memorization and drills. This perspective aligns with indirect instruction, where grammar is encountered in meaningful contexts rather than isolated exercises.

Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis complements this by proposing that learners must consciously notice grammatical forms in input for acquisition to occur. Indirect instruction, particularly through writing and revision tasks, encourages such noticing by engaging learners in reflection and self-correction. This active cognitive involvement can result in deeper internalization of grammatical structures compared to passive reception of rules.

Further theoretical support comes from Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which views learning as a socially mediated process. In this framework, grammar acquisition is fostered through interaction, scaffolding, and collaboration, all of which are central to indirect instruction. Tasks such as peer feedback, group writing, and guided revision allow learners to negotiate meaning and refine their language use within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Researchers such as Long (1996) have also highlighted the role of focus on form, where learners' attention is briefly directed to linguistic elements within a meaningful task. Indirect instruction naturally



incorporates this principle, as learners are prompted to notice and revise grammar as part of authentic language use.

In recent years, studies have indicated that indirect instruction methods can lead to measurable improvements in writing proficiency and grammatical accuracy, especially among intermediate and advanced learners (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Van Beuningen, 2010). These studies underscore the value of strategies such as implicit feedback, reformulation, and guided self-correction in promoting grammatical development without undermining communicative fluency.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives and research findings suggest that indirect grammar instruction is not only pedagogically valid but also highly effective in cultivating long-term grammatical competence, particularly in writing contexts. The next section reviews specific studies that have examined the impact of indirect instruction in ESL writing classrooms.

## **2.1 Review of Related Studies**

Over the past few decades, numerous studies have explored the effectiveness of indirect grammar instruction in improving second language learners' writing accuracy, with a particular focus on ESL contexts. Research has consistently highlighted the potential of indirect approaches to promote metalinguistic awareness, learner autonomy, and long-term retention of grammatical structures. This section reviews key studies that have examined the impact of indirect grammar instruction on writing accuracy.

## **2.2 Implicit Feedback and Error Correction**

One prominent line of research has focused on the role of implicit feedback in grammar instruction. Bitchener and Knoch (2008) conducted a study examining the impact of explicit and implicit corrective feedback on the grammatical accuracy of ESL students' written production. Their findings suggest that while explicit correction (i.e., directly providing the correct form) is effective in the short term, implicit feedback (i.e., underlining errors or providing hints) leads to greater long-term retention and more sustainable improvements in writing accuracy. This is consistent with the principles of indirect grammar instruction, which encourages learners to engage in self-correction and critical thinking, rather than relying solely on teacher-driven corrections.



Similarly, Van Beuningen (2010) investigated the effectiveness of different types of feedback (explicit, implicit, and no feedback) on ESL learners' writing. The study found that implicit feedback was particularly effective in enhancing learners' grammatical accuracy over time, as it encouraged learners to process errors and seek solutions independently. This aligns with the theoretical foundation of indirect grammar instruction, where learners are not just passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in the learning process.

### **2.3 Focus on Form and Task-based Learning**

The concept of focus on form within communicative activities has also been a significant area of exploration in indirect grammar instruction. Long (1996) emphasized that incidental attention to form, rather than explicit grammar teaching, enhances language acquisition when integrated into communicative tasks. In the context of writing instruction, Robinson (2003) showed that when ESL students are given writing tasks that require them to focus on language use, including grammar, they are more likely to internalize the grammatical structures over time. This approach encourages learners to engage with language in context and promotes deeper processing of grammatical forms.

Additionally, Nassaji and Fotos (2011) reviewed studies on task-based language teaching (TBLT) and concluded that such approaches, which often include indirect grammar instruction, can lead to improved writing outcomes. Tasks such as collaborative writing, peer feedback, and written reformulation allow learners to focus on form while also using language in meaningful ways. These findings suggest that indirect grammar instruction, when embedded in task-based contexts, can significantly enhance learners' grammatical competence in writing.

### **2.4 Learner Autonomy and Motivation**

The role of learner autonomy in grammar learning has also been explored in relation to indirect grammar instruction. Swain and Lapkin (2001) argued that self-directed learning and peer collaboration are essential for language learners to take control of their own grammatical development. In this regard, Ellis (2006) suggested that indirect instruction fosters autonomy by encouraging learners to discover grammatical rules and correct their own mistakes through implicit feedback and reflective activities. Lee (2013) found that ESL learners who were involved in peer review and collaborative writing tasks showed significant improvements in both writing accuracy and motivation. These activities allowed learners to



take ownership of their learning process and engage in reflective practices that were not typically available in more traditional, teacher-centered classrooms.

## **2.5 Writing Tasks and Metalinguistic Awareness**

Finally, studies have also highlighted the development of metalinguistic awareness through indirect grammar instruction. Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis posits that learners need to notice grammatical forms in order to acquire them effectively. Research by Fotos and Ellis (1991) demonstrated that when ESL learners engaged in writing tasks that included implicit feedback (such as highlighting errors or providing clues), they were more likely to notice and correct their mistakes independently, fostering greater awareness of grammatical structures. These findings support the notion that indirect grammar instruction enhances learners' ability to reflect on language use, a crucial component in developing writing accuracy.

## **2.6 Conclusion of the Review**

The studies reviewed above consistently support the idea that indirect grammar instruction, particularly when combined with implicit feedback, task-based learning, and opportunities for self-correction, leads to measurable improvements in writing accuracy. The focus on learner autonomy, reflection, and metalinguistic awareness further underscores the advantages of this approach in fostering long-term grammatical development.

## **3. Methodological Considerations in Theoretical Context**

This theoretical paper employs a qualitative approach to explore the potential effectiveness of indirect grammar instruction in improving writing accuracy among intermediate ESL learners. Rather than conducting a new empirical study, this paper synthesizes insights from existing research and theoretical frameworks to build a comprehensive argument for the benefits of indirect instruction. The methodology section outlines the theoretical foundation and key pedagogical principles that inform this paper's exploration of indirect grammar instruction.

### **3.1 Research Design**



The research design for this paper is theoretical and literature-based, focusing on synthesizing and analyzing findings from previous studies that have explored indirect grammar instruction. By reviewing literature from the fields of second language acquisition (SLA), grammar instruction, and ESL pedagogy, this paper aims to present a coherent argument supporting the use of indirect methods in ESL classrooms. The studies reviewed are primarily qualitative, focusing on case studies, classroom interventions, and meta-analyses that assess the impact of various grammar teaching methods on writing accuracy.

### 3.2 Selection of Studies

The studies included in this review were selected based on their relevance to the topic of indirect grammar instruction, their methodological rigor, and their contributions to understanding how implicit feedback, task-based learning, and learner-centered approaches enhance writing accuracy. The selected research includes seminal works by Krashen (1982), Schmidt (1990), Long (1996), and Van Beuningen (2010), as well as more recent studies on task-based learning, peer feedback, and metalinguistic awareness.

The criteria for selecting studies included:

1. Relevance to indirect grammar instruction or implicit feedback methods.
2. Focus on ESL learners, particularly in writing contexts.
3. Publication in reputable peer-reviewed journals.
4. Contribution to understanding the effectiveness of indirect methods for long-term grammatical improvement.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this paper is collected through a comprehensive review of existing literature. Studies were analyzed to identify common themes, methodologies, and findings regarding indirect grammar instruction in ESL contexts. Key themes include:

- The impact of implicit feedback (e.g., underlining errors, reformulation) on learners' writing accuracy.
- The role of task-based learning in facilitating incidental attention to grammatical forms.
- The development of learner autonomy through peer collaboration and self-correction.



- The relationship between metalinguistic awareness and improved writing outcomes.

The data analysis process involved synthesizing findings from different studies and aligning them with theoretical frameworks from SLA theory. A thematic analysis was used to categorize the benefits and challenges of indirect grammar instruction, drawing connections between the theoretical literature and empirical evidence.

### **3.4 Limitations of the Methodology**

This paper does not present original empirical data but instead relies on secondary data from existing studies. While this theoretical approach allows for a broad synthesis of research, it does have limitations, including:

- The potential for publication bias, as studies with positive outcomes are more likely to be published.
- The absence of primary data, which limits the ability to draw specific conclusions about the effectiveness of indirect instruction in various ESL contexts.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a solid foundation for discussing the potential benefits of indirect grammar instruction and the implications for ESL teaching practices.

## **4. Data Analysis**

In this section, the findings from the reviewed studies are analyzed to assess the effectiveness of indirect grammar instruction in improving writing accuracy among ESL learners. The analysis focuses on several key areas: implicit feedback, task-based learning, learner autonomy, and metalinguistic awareness. These areas are considered in the context of how they contribute to enhancing grammatical accuracy, particularly in written expression.

### **4.1 Implicit Feedback and Its Impact on Writing Accuracy**

One of the most prominent findings in the reviewed studies is the role of implicit feedback in facilitating writing accuracy. Studies by Bitchener and Knoch (2008) and Van Beuningen (2010) indicate that implicit feedback (such as underlining errors or providing hints rather than directly correcting them) results in greater retention and self-reliance in learners compared to explicit correction. These studies



suggest that indirect feedback allows learners to engage in cognitive processes like self-reflection and error analysis, both of which contribute to improved grammatical accuracy over time. Implicit feedback encourages learners to notice their mistakes and to internalize corrections, which aligns with Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990), which asserts that learners must be aware of language forms for effective acquisition to occur.

Additionally, Bitchener and Knoch (2008) found that learners who received implicit feedback showed a sustained improvement in their ability to apply grammatical rules independently in subsequent writing tasks. This finding supports the idea that indirect methods lead to long-term retention and increased learner autonomy.

#### **4.2 Task-Based Learning and Focus on Form**

The review also highlights the importance of task-based learning in indirect grammar instruction. According to Long (1996) and Robinson (2003), tasks that require learners to focus on form within meaningful communicative activities help them internalize grammatical rules in context. Writing tasks that incorporate real-world communication (e.g., email writing, reports, essays) allow learners to engage with grammar in practical ways, fostering both accuracy and fluency.

Studies by Nassaji and Fotos (2011) and Van Beuningen (2010) emphasize that task-based grammar instruction can result in significant improvements in grammatical accuracy. These tasks are designed to draw learners' attention to specific grammatical features while still prioritizing meaning and communication. For instance, a writing task that involves peer correction or collaborative writing encourages learners to focus on both content and form, leading to improved accuracy. The use of authentic, real-world tasks in task-based learning mirrors the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), which emphasizes language use over explicit rule memorization.

#### **4.3 Learner Autonomy and Motivation**

Another critical area that emerged from the studies is the development of learner autonomy. Indirect grammar instruction fosters independence by encouraging learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Swain and Lapkin (2001) and Ellis (2006) argue that when learners are involved in self-correction, peer feedback, and collaborative tasks, they become more motivated to engage in the learning process and are more likely to continue learning outside of the classroom.



Research by Lee (2013) also suggests that peer feedback and collaborative writing promote greater motivation among learners. When ESL students are given the opportunity to assess each other's writing and provide feedback, they not only improve their own writing but also gain valuable insights into the grammatical challenges faced by their peers. This process enhances their understanding of grammar and promotes a sense of ownership over their learning journey.

Furthermore, the development of autonomy is tied to the internalization of grammar, where learners do not rely on the teacher to correct every mistake but instead learn to notice errors and correct them independently. This shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches aligns with the principles of constructivist learning, where learners build knowledge through active engagement and problem-solving.

#### **4.4 Metalinguistic Awareness and Grammar Acquisition**

Finally, a significant aspect of the data analysis focuses on the role of metalinguistic awareness in grammar acquisition. Studies by Fotos and Ellis (1991) and Schmidt (1990) indicate that learners who engage with language through reflective tasks (such as error correction or reformulation) develop a heightened awareness of language forms and structures. This metalinguistic awareness, in turn, enhances their ability to apply grammatical rules accurately in writing.

For example, when learners engage in tasks where they identify and correct errors in their own or their peers' writing, they are forced to reflect on the grammatical forms they are using. This reflective process leads to deeper internalization and automaticity in grammar use. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory suggests that such reflection, particularly when mediated by social interaction (e.g., peer feedback), is crucial for cognitive development and language acquisition.

#### **4.5 Summary of Data Analysis**

The analysis of existing research underscores the effectiveness of indirect grammar instruction in improving writing accuracy among ESL learners. Key findings include the importance of implicit feedback in fostering learner autonomy, the role of task-based learning in integrating grammar with meaningful communication, and the development of metalinguistic awareness through reflective practices. These elements collectively contribute to long-term grammatical accuracy, particularly in writing tasks that require learners to apply their grammatical knowledge in context.



## 5. Conclusion

This theoretical study has explored the potential benefits of indirect grammar instruction in enhancing writing accuracy among ESL learners. By examining existing research and theoretical frameworks, the paper has argued that indirect approaches—such as implicit feedback, task-based learning, and learner-centered activities—offer significant advantages over traditional explicit grammar instruction. These methods not only foster grammatical accuracy but also promote learner autonomy, motivation, and metalinguistic awareness, all of which contribute to a more sustainable and reflective model of language acquisition.

Through a synthesis of key theories in second language acquisition (SLA), including Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, this paper has highlighted how indirect grammar instruction aligns with the cognitive processes required for effective language learning. By engaging learners in meaningful language use and encouraging self-reflection and error correction, indirect instruction facilitates the internalization of grammatical structures in a way that traditional, teacher-centered approaches may not.

The findings from empirical studies reviewed in this paper further support the idea that indirect grammar instruction leads to improvements in grammatical accuracy, particularly in writing tasks. Studies by Bitchener and Knoch (2008) and Van Beuningen (2010) indicate that implicit feedback and task-based approaches result in long-term retention of grammatical knowledge and a greater ability to apply this knowledge independently.

Moreover, the emphasis on learner autonomy and motivation in indirect grammar instruction aligns with modern pedagogical goals in ESL education, which aim to produce self-directed, critical learners who can use language effectively in various contexts. As noted by Swain and Lapkin (2001), providing learners with opportunities to engage with language tasks in a collaborative environment not only enhances grammatical accuracy but also fosters a sense of ownership over the learning process.

### 5.1 Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for ESL educators and curriculum designers seeking to implement more effective grammar instruction practices:



1. **Incorporate Implicit Feedback:** ESL educators should prioritize implicit feedback in their teaching practices. Providing learners with opportunities to identify and correct their own errors fosters metalinguistic awareness and promotes independent problem-solving.
2. **Use Task-Based Learning:** Integrating grammar instruction within meaningful, real-world writing tasks can encourage learners to focus on language form in context. Task-based activities, such as peer review and collaborative writing, offer practical opportunities for grammar learning while maintaining communicative relevance.
3. **Promote Learner Autonomy:** Encourage learners to take ownership of their grammar learning through self-correction, peer feedback, and independent reflection. This can be facilitated through guided writing activities and opportunities for autonomous practice.
4. **Focus on Long-Term Outcomes:** Educators should consider the long-term benefits of indirect grammar instruction, including sustained improvement in writing accuracy and learner motivation, as well as the development of independent language users who can continue learning beyond the classroom.

By integrating these recommendations into ESL curricula, educators can better support learners in improving their writing accuracy and achieving lasting grammatical competence.

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