

Academic writing in multilingual EHL classrooms: Learners and teachers' perspectives on feedback, strategies, and challenges in a South African IEB context

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how multilingual English home language (EHL) learners and their teachers at an Independent Examinations Board (IEB) school use strategies and feedback to address challenges in developing academic writing. It aims to reflect on learners' perspectives on teachers' strategies and techniques for enhancing their academic writing skills, and on whether they felt the assessment and feedback methods were effective in helping them meet the expectations set out in the IEB subject assessment guidelines. The study used a qualitative design to collect detailed insights into classroom writing practices and the challenges encountered, thereby contributing to pedagogy in multilingual English classrooms. Data were collected through analysis of curricular documents and learners' written work, as well as through focus group discussions with learners and semi-structured interviews with teachers. The findings, which were supported by the autonomous and ideological models as well as the pedagogy of multiliteracies, revealed that learners value both structured support for developing technical writing skills and interactive, socially engaged learning environments. Teachers employed a mix of systematic skill-building techniques and contextual, multimodal approaches to enhance academic writing. However, challenges arose when aligning learner writing proficiency with curriculum expectations, particularly in mastering academic language and critical analysis. The study contributes to applied linguistics by demonstrating how feedback can be reconceptualised as a dialogic, identity-affirming practice rather than mere correction. It provides transferable pedagogical strategies for teachers in postcolonial language hierarchies and argues for assessment frameworks that recognise multilingual repertoires as cognitive resources and support equitable academic literacy development in the Global South.

Keywords: Academic writing development; feedback; IEB school; learners' perspectives; multilingual English home language learners; teachers' strategies

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INTRODUCTION

English home language (EHL) is widely taught in South African schools and attracts learners who see it as key to advancement, as its global prominence in science and economics enhances its educational value (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2020; Zano, 2020). Consequently, English medium education is considered beneficial for academic success (Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022; Warnby, 2025). However,

EHL classrooms include multilingual learners with varying levels of English proficiency. This creates challenges which complicate comprehension and critical literacy (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2020; Phan, 2024; Taye & Mengesha, 2025; Zano, 2020) as the curriculum assumes prior English knowledge (Department of Basic Education, 2012).

EHL promotes language proficiency that reflects both mastery of basic interpersonal

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communication skills needed for social interaction and the cognitive academic language skills required for learning across the curriculum (Department of Basic Education, 2012). For multilingual learners, these English conventions are not instinctive. Therefore, teachers are required to support the mastery of the more abstract aspects of academic English (Matiso, 2024; Mpofu & Maphalala, 2020; Phan, 2024). Deliberate scaffolding is required to develop academic language proficiency as learners negotiate the transition from everyday communicative competence to the abstract, decontextualised demands of academic writing, a challenge heightened in multilingual classrooms where learners draw on diverse linguistic repertoires. This encompasses writing, reading, listening, and speaking, which are vital for educational success (Cummins, 1981; Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022; Warnby, 2025). Academic writing involves cognitive processes requiring careful lexical, grammatical, and structural choices (Meyers et al., 2023; Walla, 2024; Warnby, 2025). Even fluent multilingual learners often struggle with its technical aspects, which necessitate explicit instruction. Schleppegrell (2020) emphasises that learners develop language skills more effectively when teachers promote an awareness of language structures, as academic writing requires conscious effort in composing and analysing ideas. Moreover, the IEB EHL Subject Assessment Guidelines (SAGs) emphasise writing as a process and encourage learners to reflect on teacher feedback and revise their work accordingly (IEB SAGs, 2021, p. 6).

Despite growing recognition of multilingual pedagogies in applied linguistics, from South Asian critiques of English-medium instruction (Sah, 2026), to Brazilian analyses of translanguaging and social closure (Windle & Possas, 2023), to pan-Global South calls for decolonial reform (Fang & Dovchin, 2024), to South African writing centre innovations (Namakula et al., 2025), a critical gap persists in the South African mainstream classroom. There is limited research which examines how everyday EHL teachers, distinct from writing centre specialists, can design feedback that simultaneously utilises learners' multilingual repertoires as cognitive resources while preparing them for high-stakes assessments rooted in monolingual norms. While Namakula et al. (2025) demonstrate translanguaging's potential in South African writing centres, and Windle and Possas (2023) caution that translanguaging can reinforce social closure where English signals elite distinction in Brazil, neither addresses how everyday EHL teachers in South Africa experience this dissonance within curriculum-mandated, rubric-driven classrooms. In South Africa, this gap is acute, as policies (Department of Basic Education, 2012; IEB SAGs, 2021) presuppose monolingual proficiency, yet

classrooms are inhabited by learners who experience postcolonial language hierarchies in which English functions as gatekeeping capital (Sah, 2026). Consequently, teachers lack empirically grounded, context-responsive strategies to bridge this structural gap through dialogic, asset-based feedback.

This study, therefore, examines how teachers and learners in a multilingual IEB school negotiate academic writing development through feedback that validates linguistic diversity while scaffolding disciplinary conventions. Its contribution to applied linguistics lies in advancing a geopolitically attuned pedagogy that reconceptualises feedback not as deficit correction, but as a transformative practice for equitable academic literacy development in Global South classrooms. For this reason, we pose the following research questions:

1. What are EHL Learners' perspectives on teacher support and feedback for their academic language and writing development?
2. What strategies and techniques do teachers use to support learners' academic writing skills in English, and how do they perceive the effectiveness of their feedback in the multilingual classroom context?
3. What challenges arise when aligning learners' writing proficiency with SAGS expectations through assessment practices and feedback mechanisms?

Multilingualism in Academic Writing

With the growing presence of multilingual learners in countries such as Australia, Germany, Norway, Nepal, and the United States, classrooms are increasingly linguistically diverse, yet teacher preparation for addressing their specific language demands remains limited (Lorenz et al., 2025; Schleppegrell et al., 2024; Turner & Tour, 2024; Walla, 2024). South Africa's multilingual context provides a critical context to examine this challenge, as many learners possess functional interpersonal English but struggle with the cognitive academic language required for formal schooling (Taye & Mengesha, 2025; Warnby, 2025). This divide between social fluency and academic proficiency highlights that writing instruction must move beyond surface-level correctness to address the sociocultural and linguistic dimensions of academic literacy. Consequently, research must shift from treating academic writing as a neutral, transferable skill to examining how multilingual EHL classrooms can strategically scaffold disciplinary discourse.

Effective pedagogy for multilingual EHL learners must explicitly target linguistic features such as grammar, semantics, and academic vocabulary (Mncwango & Makhatini, 2021; Phan,

2024). Beyond isolated skill drills, writing development requires structured classroom strategies that encourage both cognitive and metacognitive self-regulation (Traga Philippakos, 2021; Walla, 2024). Peer collaboration, modelling, and iterative scaffolding are particularly vital, as they transform writing from a solitary exercise into a socially mediated process that builds learner motivation and disciplinary awareness. These approaches are consistent with the multiliteracies principles, which position academic writing as a dynamic practice which is influenced by interaction, context, and learner agency rather than a fixed set of technical conventions.

Despite its proven impact, teacher feedback in multilingual writing classrooms remains underexplored. International studies highlight a persistent need to examine how feedback operates across diverse linguistic contexts (Hidayat et al., 2024; Razmi & Ghane, 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). For feedback to drive meaningful revision, it must be situated within a supportive learning ecology where learners actively engage with, interpret, and apply corrective guidance (Hossain et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). Managing feedback actively is of “great importance to enhancing students’ writing proficiency” (Zhu et al., 2024). Treating learners as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients enhances feedback uptake. However, practical constraints, such as large class sizes, workload pressures, and learners’ perceptions of feedback as unclear or insufficient, often hinder its effectiveness. This gap points to the need for feedback models that balance technical precision with dialogic, learner-centred practices.

In South African EHL classrooms, these pedagogical and feedback challenges are compounded by curricular expectations that frequently assume monolingual proficiency. A persistent disconnect exists between policy-driven academic standards and the lived linguistic realities of multilingual learners, which makes sustained engagement with academic writing particularly demanding (Ngobeni et al., 2023). Although continuous teacher reflection and adaptive pedagogy are essential, the current literature offers limited guidance on how teachers can explicitly bridge this gap through feedback that simultaneously develops cognitive awareness of language choices and encourages meaningful learner application. This misalignment requires theoretically informed strategies that honour linguistic diversity while also providing structured, context-sensitive direction to academic register mastery.

This study is framed by Street’s (1984, 2006) autonomous and ideological models of literacy, which provide complementary lenses to examine how academic writing is taught, assessed, and experienced in multilingual EHL classrooms. The autonomous model conceptualises literacy as a

neutral, decontextualised set of technical skills such as grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and genre conventions that can be explicitly taught and uniformly measured (Liebel, 2021; Street, 2006). This study illuminates the curriculum-driven emphasis on structural accuracy, rubric-aligned assessment, and targeted corrective feedback. Conversely, the ideological model positions literacy as socially and culturally embedded, shaped by power dynamics, identity, and context (Street, 1984, 2006). This lens foregrounds how learners negotiate academic register within multilingual realities, how classroom dialogue validates linguistic diversity, and how feedback functions not merely as error correction but as a dialogic negotiation of meaning. Together, these models enable a critical analysis of the discord between standardised academic expectations and the sociolinguistic realities of multilingual writers.

The pedagogy of multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996) complements Street’s (2006) framework and addresses how writing instruction can adapt to increase cultural and linguistic diversity by treating literacy as a multimodal, socially situated practice. Rather than relying on traditional drill-based instruction, this approach emphasises overt instruction, situated practice, critical framing, and transformed practice (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). In the context of this study, it directly informs the analysis of teacher strategies such as mentor-text modelling, culturally responsive scaffolding, and collaborative peer review, which position academic writing as a meaning-making process rather than a solitary technical exercise. The framework also clarifies how feedback can be designed as an interactive, iterative cycle that moves learners from situated understanding to independent, context-aware authorship. The pedagogy of multiliteracies provides a theoretical basis for examining how teachers balance explicit language instruction with dialogic, identity-affirming classroom practices.

These frameworks operate not as abstract paradigms but as active analytical tools that guide data collection, coding, and interpretation. Street’s (1984, 2006) dual models structure the examination of how teachers and learners understand the pull between technical proficiency (autonomous) and sociocultural meaning-making (ideological), particularly in feedback uptake and assessment alignment. The pedagogy of multiliteracies influences the analysis of classroom interactions, scaffolding techniques, and peer collaboration, which emphasises how multilingual learners draw on diverse linguistic repertoires to construct academic texts. Together, they reveal why learners simultaneously demand precise, rule-based feedback and collaborative, dialogic learning contexts, and how teachers adapt their strategies to bridge curriculum mandates with multilingual realities. This integrated theoretical lens ensures that findings

are interpreted not as deficits, but as negotiations of academic literacy in diverse classrooms.

METHOD

Research Context

Research situated in the Global South demands methodological approaches that centre linguistic diversity, postcolonial language hierarchies, and contextually grounded pedagogies rather than importing frameworks designed for monolingual, high-resource contexts (Fang & Dovchin, 2024; Sah, 2026). This study adopts such a stance as it examines academic writing development in a South African multilingual EHL classroom, not as an isolated case, but as a site where broader Global South tensions, between English-medium policy and multilingual realities, and between standardised assessment and contextualised learning, are actively negotiated by teachers and learners (Namakula et al., 2025; Windle & Possas, 2023).

The study centred on a multilingual High School in Limpopo Province, South Africa, primarily because of its affiliation with the IEB, its track record, which demonstrates a consistent pass rate above 80% for degree entry (High School P Statistics, 2023), and its implementation of innovative teaching methods aimed at ensuring academic success. An IEB school refers to a private or independent South African educational institution that uses the IEB assessment body for its Grade 12 matriculation exams. The school was chosen for its diverse community of multilingual learners. The school offers EHL alongside a choice between Afrikaans First Additional Language (FAL) or Sepedi FAL. The FAL level assumes that learners do not necessarily have any language knowledge when they arrive at school. However, by the time they enter Grade 10, it is expected that they have achieved a satisfactory level of proficiency in their FAL to support both academic and social success. Mother-tongue English refers to English as the first language or dialect a person has been exposed to since birth (Department of Basic Education, 2012). With only 15% of the school's 335 learners being mother-tongue English speakers (High School P Statistics, 2023), most learners speak Sepedi, TshiVenda and XiTsonga as home languages, which reflects the broader linguistic diversity of the Limpopo Province (Statista Research Department, 2023). The school has 31 teachers, of whom only 12 are EHL speakers (High School P Statistics, 2023), underscoring the school's multilingual nature.

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative approach was appropriate in this situation, as this study explores the teaching and feedback strategies used by teachers and multilingual learners in an EHL classroom engaged in academic writing practices. As this research was

classroom-based, with its participants being teachers and learners, the nature of qualitative research was particularly relevant, as the classroom context focuses on describing complex behaviour and experiences to gain an understanding (Mezmir, 2020; Mohajan, 2018). This study is an exploratory case study as it investigated and gained insights on a phenomenon in a particular context. The primary goal was to explore perspectives on the experience of learners in a multilingual EHL classroom with regard to the support provided by teachers through different strategies to align learners' proficiencies with IEB SAGs expectations.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study was Grades 10–12 (FET phase) EHL high school learners and teachers at High School P. At the time of the study, the school had 335 learners. The Grades 10, 11, and 12 groups who make up the FET phase generally have between 50 and 60 learners, all of whom are enrolled in EHL (High School P Statistics, 2023). Convenience sampling was used, with participants selected based on their accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Thirty-nine learners from Grades 10 to 12, representing the school's multilingual diversity, were included, along with four teachers. However, within this group, a purposive sample was selected using specific criteria, namely learners from multilingual rather than English backgrounds who volunteered, to ensure that all relevant variations among the subjects under observation were represented in the study (Busetto et al., 2020).

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Three research instruments, designed to explore the varied experiences and perspectives of the learners and teachers as they engaged with academic writing proficiency in the multilingual EHL classroom, were used. Focus group discussions involved facilitating a structured discussion during which the group of 39 learner participants shared their perceptions of the support teachers provided for their English skills and academic writing development. These focus group discussions were conducted with learners from Grades 10, 11, and 12, organised into several groups: one Grade 12 group comprising 15 participants, two Grade 11 groups of 5–7 participants each, and two Grade 10 groups of 5–7 participants each. Learners were assigned codes to ensure confidentiality. Grade 12 learners were coded A1–An, Grade 11 learners B1–Bn, and Grade 10 learners C1–Cn, with the number indicating the individual participant within each grade. Pre-planned open-ended questions guided the discussion. Semi-structured interviews were held with four EHL teachers (Coded A–D) and focused on feedback strategies and techniques used to enhance academic writing in a multilingual classroom. The semi-structured interviews and focus

group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and summarised using Otter.ai. Documents such as policies and learners' written work were readily accessible and provided additional pertinent data to enrich the understanding of academic writing practices. These documents encompassed the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education, 2012), the IEB SAGs for English (2021), and the participant learners' tests, exams, and class tasks tied to lessons on academic writing. The intention was to gain insights into how learners applied their writing skills and to understand how teachers' guidance contributed to enhancing their academic writing proficiency.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, operationalised through an interpretative lens that prioritised participants' subjective experiences and linguistic contexts (Armstrong, 2021; Mezmir, 2020). The process began with data familiarisation, which involved repeated reading of transcribed focus group and interview recordings alongside learner writing samples and curricular documents to identify initial patterns related to feedback, scaffolding, and writing challenges. Initial coding was conducted inductively and iteratively, line by line, to capture explicit references to classroom strategies, feedback preferences, perceived barriers, and linguistic practices. Codes were both data-driven and theoretically informed, to allow emergent perspectives to interact with Street's (1984, 2006) autonomous/ideological models and the pedagogy of multiliteracies. During the theme development phase, related codes were collated into candidate themes based on shared meanings across participant groups. For instance, codes referencing "one-on-one conferencing," "generic comments," and "peer review" were grouped under broader patterns concerning feedback uptake and classroom interaction. These candidate themes were then reviewed and refined against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence, distinctiveness, and adequate data support; overlapping or weakly substantiated themes were merged or discarded. Final themes were identified and defined through iterative comparison with the research questions, which resulted in three core thematic clusters that directly structure the findings: (1) learners' dual preference for dialogic learning and precise feedback, (2) teachers' blended use of explicit scaffolding and culturally responsive strategies, and (3) assessment challenges which arose from policy-practice misalignment. Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness of how linguistic diversity and classroom power dynamics influenced both data generation and interpretation,

and ensured that themes reflected participants' lived realities rather than predetermined categories.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the UNISA Ethics committee: NHREC Registration: (Rec-240816-052) Ref # 3263. Written permission for this research was obtained from the school. Written assent from learner participants under 18 and the consent of their parents were also obtained, as were written consents from participating teachers and learners over 18. Participation in the research was voluntary, with individuals free to choose whether to participate. All data collection activities were conducted in a manner that minimised any interference with the school's daily routines and educational activities.

FINDINGS

Learner Perspectives on Teacher Support and Feedback for Academic Language and Writing Development

Learners perceived that academic language development was most effectively supported in EHL classrooms that prioritise open, dialogic environments and flexible pedagogical approaches over rigid, teacher-centred, silent instruction. The 39 learners in the focus group discussions across Grades 10–12 consistently highlighted a preference for interactive, relaxed classroom climates that validate learners' voices. Learners expressed discomfort with overly quiet settings, with one Grade 11 learner who noted, "If class is too quiet, I find it hard to focus and like I'd rather learn in a group where we can discuss it, and instead of being alone and quiet" (Gr 11 Learner A2).

This sentiment was reinforced by a Grade 10 learner who emphasised the cognitive value of teacher-learner dialogue: "...you need able to engage with the teacher and then like talk to understand, and also that helped me understanding the work we are to do" (Gr 10 Learner C1).

In addition, Grade 12 participants stressed the importance of having the freedom to express opinions and engage in activities within a more relaxed atmosphere. These perspectives highlighted how communicative interaction and peer dialogue function as essential scaffolds for academic language acquisition. This reflects the multiliteracies emphasis on situated practice and dialogic meaning-making (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; The New London Group, 1996). The aversion to prolonged silence suggests that learners associate quiet classrooms with passive reception rather than active linguistic processing, whereas structured discussions create spaces that encourage risk-taking and verbal negotiation of meaning. The Grade 10 learner's reflection aligns with sociocultural principles of language learning, which posit that

conceptual understanding and academic discourse are co-constructed through facilitated social interaction. This challenges Street's (1984) autonomous model, which frames literacy as a decontextualised, solitary skill. Instead, it affirms an ideological view of literacy as collaborative and identity-shaping (Street, 2006). When teachers adopt diverse, communicative methods and create an atmosphere that values flexibility and personal expression, they effectively lower barriers and create the discursive conditions necessary for sustained engagement with complex academic writing tasks.

For writing development to progress beyond superficial correction, learners require highly specific, individualised feedback that explicitly identifies rhetorical and linguistic weaknesses rather than relying on a generalised, class-wide commentary. Across all grades, participants consistently distinguished between actionable, targeted feedback and broad evaluative statements, with a strong preference for the former. Grade 11 learners advocated for one-on-one conferencing alongside written guidance, and stated, *"I prefer one-on-one feedback because then I can actually understand what I'm doing wrong and remember it"* (Gr 11 Learner B1).

This personalised approach may be seen as instrumental in recognising individual gaps, as another Grade 11 participant explained, *"The corrections help because then you can see where your weaknesses are"* (Gr 11 Learner B3).

Conversely, some learners found generic post-exam feedback limiting, with one learner noting that *"Specific feedback for question types would be more useful"* (Gr 11 Learner B1).

The recurring demand for precision in teacher feedback revealed that learners are developing metacognitive awareness of their own writing processes. This capacity is central to the multiliteracies principle of critical framing (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Learners demonstrated an understanding that formative assessment must be diagnostic rather than merely summative if it is to encourage meaningful revision. Generalised comments fail to address the specific syntactic, lexical, or structural issues that hinder academic writing proficiency. This reflects the limitations of an autonomous literacy model that assumes uniform uptake and mechanical transfer of skills (Street, 2006). The emphasis on task-specific guidance further indicates that learners seek clear, transferable strategies to address genre and question-type demands. This suggests that they view feedback and their engagement with it as a tool for mastering disciplinary conventions, rather than simply correcting isolated mistakes. When teachers tailor their critiques to individual writing and provide explicit, actionable guidance, they enable learners to internalise academic language norms and engage in

self-regulated revision cycles that systematically improve their writing quality, positioning feedback not as correction but as ideologically aware, transformed practice (The New London Group, 1996).

Teachers' Strategies and Techniques for Enhancing Academic Writing in a Multilingual Classroom

Teachers in the study employed a pre-writing scaffolding framework that integrated structural modelling, explicit planning tools, and culturally responsive contextualisation to clarify academic writing conventions for multilingual learners. Teachers consistently used mentor texts and board demonstrations to demonstrate expected discourse features: *"I feel it is a good idea for learners to see examples to the style, voice and register they should be using for particular writing pieces"* (Teacher C).

To support cognitive organisation, learners were guided to create mind maps and follow structural guidelines, with some teachers providing mnemonic "equations" such as *"emotion + evidence = answer"* (Teacher B). Instruction also explicitly targeted sociolinguistic awareness and addressed learners' tendency to blur conversational and academic registers, as illustrated in the following comment, *"They tend to write the way they speak and that's why they make silly mistakes"* (Teacher A).

Teachers worked to counter this by designing varied exercises focused on audience, purpose, and context-appropriate language to lower barriers. To increase motivational engagement, teachers deliberately selected culturally relevant topics for learners to find connections:

"I Try to include things that are culturally relevant to them as well. Because they are not going to be interested in having a comprehension about World War Two. They're going to be interested in having a comprehension on P Diddy in the scandal that he just had... so try and use things that appeal to them to teach the skills" (Teacher B).

Teacher D reinforced this and emphasised that understanding learners' backgrounds is essential: *"It helps, I promise you, it really, really helps"* (Teacher D). These techniques reflect the multiliteracies components of overt instruction and situated practice by making abstract academic conventions visible while anchoring them in learners' lived cultural contexts. From Street's (2006) perspective, this approach actively resists the *autonomous* model's assumption that literacy is a neutral, decontextualised skill. Instead, teachers adopted an ideological view of literacy, treating register variation and cultural knowledge as resources rather than deficits. Explicit structural 'equations' and graphic organisers reduce cognitive load without suppressing linguistic diversity. At the same time, the culturally responsive topic selection

functions as critical framing. This positions academic writing as a socially situated practice where identity, power, and discourse intersect. This scaffolding phase, therefore, focuses on bridging standardised academic expectations with learners' multilingual realities.

The writing process was taken further through iterative drafting and structured collaboration, during which teachers guided learners through recursive cycles of composition, peer review, and self-editing to develop metacognitive awareness and disciplinary writing autonomy. Teachers explicitly broke down complex tasks into manageable stages that emphasised drafting, revision, and editing. Teacher C noted, "*I like process writing which makes learners more aware of their own writing and enables them to consciously edit their writing*" (Teacher C).

This approach was reinforced through collaborative work, with peer feedback integrated during drafting. Teachers deliberately created a supportive classroom ecology to facilitate this collaboration. Teacher D explained,

"I also need to make sure that they relate well to each other... Once I've given information, some are going to get it and some aren't, then it becomes a responsibility of those who get it to help those people. So, I need to make sure the classroom is positive enough for this collaboration." (Teacher D)

Within the multiliteracies framework, this phase embodies transformed practice, a phase during which learners actively redesign meaning through dialogic negotiation and peer-mediated critique. Process writing and collaborative drafting shift literacy development from individual, product-focused performance to socially co-constructed meaning-making. This challenges the *autonomous* model's depiction of writing as a solitary, standardised skill. Instead, the teachers' strategies reflect Street's (2006) ideological stance by recognising that literacy acquisition is deeply embedded in classroom power relations, peer dynamics, and affective safety. Teacher D's emphasis on positive connections highlights that collaborative literacy practices cannot be mechanically imposed. When peer feedback is scaffolded effectively, it functions as a pedagogical tool for multiliteracies that exposes learners to multiple perspectives on academic discourse. However, the success of this collaborative phase remains dependent on the teacher's ability to foster a classroom culture that collectively supports linguistic risk-taking.

Teachers implemented a differentiated feedback cycle that combined whole-class conceptual reinforcement with individualised diagnostic commentary. However, its success is facilitated by learner receptivity, time constraints, and developmental readiness for peer assessment. Feedback was deployed through a two-pronged

approach: general class sessions to address common errors and reinforce key concepts, and specific written comments to target individual strengths and weaknesses. Teacher D emphasised that personalised feedback, focused on learners' distinct needs and styles, increases receptivity and promotes growth. However, implementation challenges persisted. Teacher B noted that learners frequently disregarded feedback, either forgetting it or failing to take it seriously, and observed that "*some learners are reluctant to seek extra help, even when they have a good relationship with the teacher*" (Teacher B).

Regarding peer feedback, perspectives differ. While some teachers value it for providing diverse perspectives and encouraging critical thinking, others expressed reservations about developmental readiness. Teacher B stated, "*Yes, I've never done that, yeah, because I don't think that mine are mature enough*" (Teacher B). This tiered feedback structure aligns with the multiliteracies principle of *critical framing*, where learners are guided to reflect on audience, purpose, and disciplinary conventions through targeted, context-aware commentary. The tension between generalised correction and personalised feedback mirrors the broader pedagogical negotiation between Street's (2006) *autonomous* and *ideological* literacy models. A wholly autonomous approach would treat feedback simply as a mechanical transfer of 'correct' forms and assume uniform uptake amongst learners. Instead, the teachers' emphasis on personalisation reflects the ideological understanding that feedback uptake is socially shaped and influenced by a learner's identity, motivation, and classroom dynamics. The observed disconnect between feedback provision and learner application reveals that literacy development cannot be reduced to mere technical correction. Instead, it requires structured opportunities for iterative revision within a supportive classroom context. Similarly, the debate surrounding peer feedback highlights a complexity. While it can make assessment accessible and develop a learner's evaluative judgment, its effectiveness depends on learners' maturity and a teacher's capacity to scaffold critical discussion. It is clear that feedback is not simply an evaluative endpoint, but a design process that must be adapted to learners' multilingual realities, confidence, and academic maturity to drive meaningful writing growth.

Challenges in Assessing Writing Proficiency

The assessment of academic writing proficiency in South African FET EHL classrooms reveals a fundamental tension between standardised, decontextualised rubrics and learners' multilingual realities, and exposes how policy-driven expectations often overlook the sociolinguistic complexity of emerging academic writers. Data

collected through document analysis included curricular documents and learner-written work. Department of Basic Education (2012, p. 30) states that writing combines three elements: “1) using the writing process; 2) learning and applying knowledge of the structure and features of different text types; 3) learning and applying knowledge of paragraph and sentence structure and punctuation.”

The IEB SAGs (2021, p.8) further specify that a commendable extended abstract essay is: “sophisticated, well-structured, and demonstrates a perceptive and insightful understanding of the text,”

with a “strong command of language, register, and punctuation.”

Furthermore, Department of Basic Education (2012, p. 30) emphasises that, “The learner should establish an identifiable voice and style by adapting language and tone to suit the audience and purpose for writing.” Despite these expectations, the data reveal persistent challenges. The writing samples presented in Figures 1–4 exemplify the specific challenges learners face in transitioning from oral fluency to academic written expression, particularly in relation to syntactic control and vocabulary selection.

Figure 1

Grade 12 response to a transactional writing question

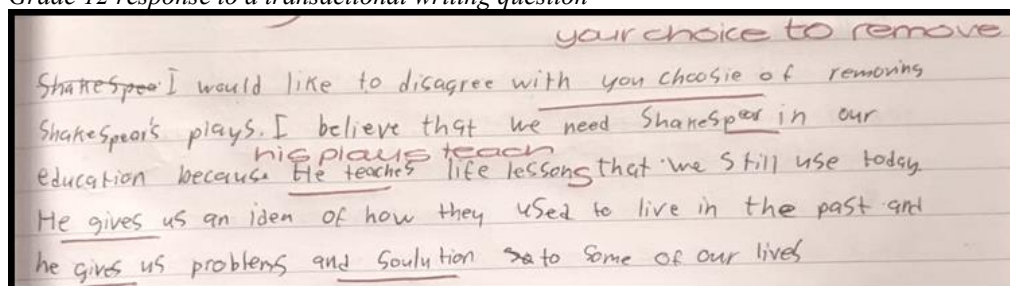


Figure 2

Grade 12 example from an argumentative essay

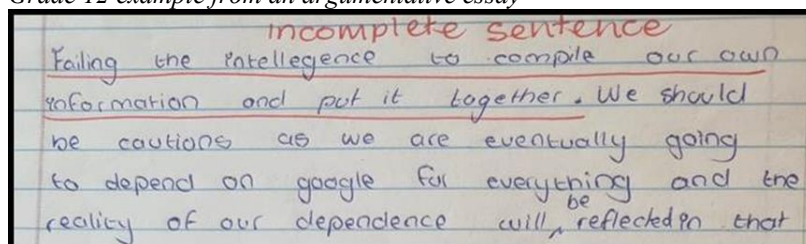


Figure 3

Grade 12 response to a transactional writing question

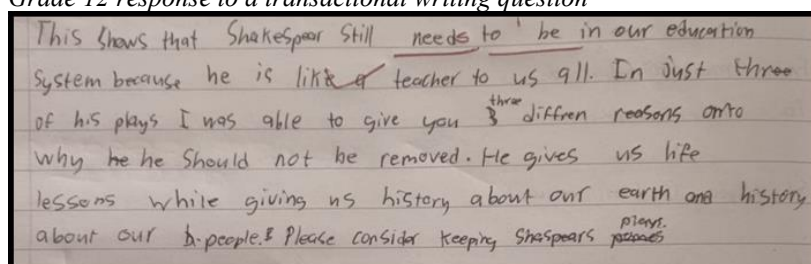
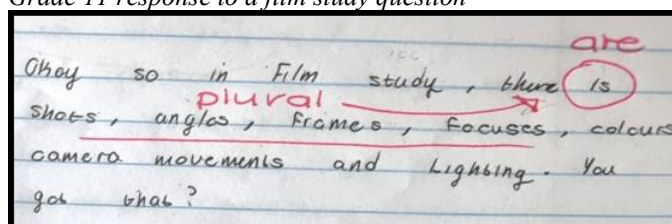


Figure 4

Grade 11 response to a film study question

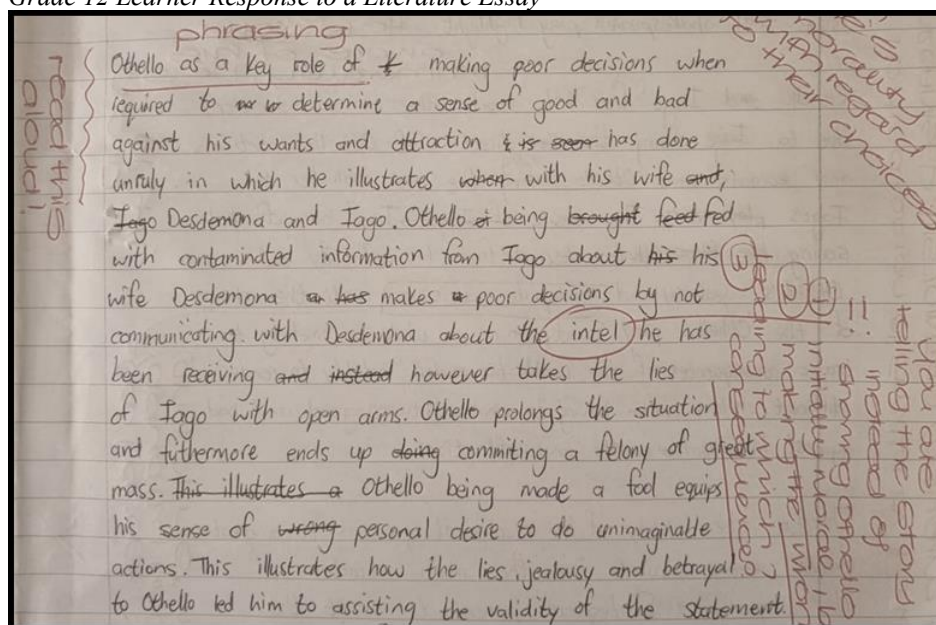


Despite fluency in spoken English, learners in the study struggled with sophisticated written expression, coherent sentence construction, and academic vocabulary. Figure 1 (Grade 12 transactional response) lacks verbal ease. Instead, there is evidence of using awkward phrasing ('*you choosie*'), conversational repetition ('*He gives us.... He gives*'), errors, omitted apostrophes, and vague statements. Figures 2–4 illustrate grammatical transfer patterns: tense misuse and fragmentary clauses ('*Failing the intelligence to compile our own information...*'), concord errors ('*need*' vs '*needs*'; '*is*' vs '*are*'), colloquial substitutions ('*He gives us life lessons...*' rather than '*provides us with*'), and casual register markers ('*Okay*'). Notably, learners demonstrate emerging metacognition through self-correction (*changing '3' to 'three'*) and responsiveness to prior guidance. These assessment challenges directly expose the limitations of an autonomous literacy model (Street, 1984), which treats academic writing as a neutral, context-free skill set measured against uniform benchmarks. The policy's expectations of "sophistication" and "strong command" assume a monolingual linguistic background. It ignores how multilingual learners manage different language practices. From an ideological perspective (Street, 2006), register inconsistency, concord mismatches, and conversational phrasing are not deficiencies but evidence of cross-linguistic transfer and identity

negotiation in high-stakes academic spaces. The pedagogy of multiliteracies reframes these phenomena through overt instruction and situated practice (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; The New London Group, 1996). This indicates that learners require explicit, scaffolded exposure to academic register rather than correction, which simply penalises. The learner's self-editing and responsiveness to feedback indicate a capacity for transformed practice when scaffolding is sustained (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). It must be considered that when assessment rubrics prioritise mechanical accuracy over developmental progression, they risk sidelining multilingual learners, as they may not necessarily recognise their evolving discursive competencies.

Beyond surface-level linguistic features, learners' difficulties with critical analysis and textual integration reveal deeper gaps that standardised assessment frameworks often fail to address. These require teaching methods that emphasise critical framing rather than simply an assessment based on the final product. Many learners struggle with reading between the lines, explaining ideas in writing, and integrating textual evidence logically. Figure 5 highlights several common issues. Phrasing is often awkward or incorrect ('*Othello as a key role of making poor decisions when required to determine a sense of good and bad against his wants and attraction & is seen has done unruly in which he illustrates when with his wife and, Iago Desdemona and Iago. Othello is being brought feed fed with contaminated information from Iago about his his wife Desdemona & has makes a poor decisions by not communicating with Desdemona about the intel he has been receiving and instead however takes the lies of Iago with open arms. Othello prolongs the situation and furthermore ends up doing committing a felony of great mass. This illustrates a Othello being made a fool equips his sense of wrong personal desire to do unimaginable actions. This illustrates how the lies, jealousy and betrayal to Othello led him to assisting the validity of the statement*

Figure 5
Grade 12 Learner Response to a Literature Essay



Vocabulary tends toward the conversational ('*intel*' instead of '*misinformation*'), and responses remain superficial and depend on vague, unsubstantiated statements rather than specific, text-grounded explanation ("...takes the lies of Iago with open arms"). Teacher feedback attempts to alert the

learner to poor phrasing through a suggestion to read the writing aloud, and it provides targeted content recommendations (guidelines to the learner to show Othello as initially "moral, comment on his decisions and finally discuss the consequences").

Collectively, the examples highlight that, despite fluency in spoken English, learners often struggle with written expression in academic contexts. They face challenges with critical analysis and frequently provide vague responses rather than detailed, evidence-based explanations. Common errors include incomplete sentences, comma splices, concord issues, and colloquial expressions. The persistence of superficial analysis and register inconsistency highlights the gap between surface comprehension and the critical framing required for advanced academic literacy (The New London Group, 1996). When learners default to a conversational summary or vague assertions, they are often trying to manage the unfamiliar conventions of academic discussion, which demand clear argument and explicit textual evidence. The autonomous model (Street, 1984) interprets this as an analytical failure, whereas the ideological framework (Street, 2006) recognises it as a mismatch between learners' own knowledge and practices, and the disciplinary expectations of a curriculum. Multiliteracies pedagogy addresses this through transformed practice, which involves explicitly scaffolding learners to interrogate how arguments are constructed, why textual evidence carries authoritative weight, and how multilingual perspectives can be strategically applied within formal analytical frameworks (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Feedback strategies such as "reading aloud" can serve as explicit instruction, helping connect oral fluency and written precision. It must, however, be paired with sustained modelling to move learners beyond compliance toward real immersion in the subject's expectations (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). The assessment of writing proficiency in such multilingual contexts requires rubrics and feedback cycles that value learners' development and their growing rhetorical awareness. Structured guidance and supportive feedback which is sensitive to learners' varying linguistic backgrounds can do much to encourage this growth.

DISCUSSION

EHL Learners' Perspectives on Teacher Support and Feedback for Their Academic Language and Writing Development

The focus group data reveal that learners demonstrated an explicit, metacognitive awareness when they articulated a deliberate dual preference for individualised, technical feedback alongside collaborative, dialogic learning environments. This finding indicates that learners have a sophisticated, integrated understanding that organically mirrors contemporary literacy theory: that academic writing is not merely a set of distinct skills to be corrected, but a socially situated practice shaped by interaction, identity, and cultural expression. The desire for precise, one-on-one guidance and targeted

error correction aligns with Street's (1984) autonomous model of literacy, which frames writing proficiency as the acquisition of measurable, decontextualised conventions. Simultaneously, learners' strong preference for open discussions, peer collaboration, and pedagogical flexibility reflects an ideological understanding of literacy, in which meaning is co-constructed through dialogue (Street, 2006). This duality is further clarified by the pedagogy of multiliteracies, which suggests dynamic, multimodal instruction that moves beyond traditional, text-based communication to engage learners in a variety of meaning-making processes (The New London Group, 1996).

These findings extend the existing literature by demonstrating that learners are not simply passive recipients of instruction but active agents who strategically seek both technical precision and social validation. While prior research has acknowledged the value of feedback (Hidayat et al., 2024; Mncwango & Makhatini, 2021; Razmi & Ghane, 2024; Zhu et al., 2024), this study reveals a learner-driven demand for structured, personalised correction that specifically targets mechanical accuracy, alongside a clear expectation for collaborative, learner-centred and inclusive classrooms. This intentional, self-aware approach to writing development aligns with recent scholarship on feedback efficacy and learner metacognition (Hossain et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). Pedagogically, this challenges rigid, product-oriented educational models and reinforces the need for integrated frameworks that balance autonomous skill-building with the collaborative, ideologically grounded processes central to writing in multiliteracies classrooms. Teachers should therefore design feedback cycles that are both diagnostically precise and socially responsive, and they should recognise that technical accuracy and verbal confidence develop side by side.

Teachers' Strategies and Techniques to Support Learners' Academic Writing Skills in English

The data indicate that EHL teachers strategically synthesise explicit, technical scaffolding with socially and culturally responsive pedagogies, revealing a flexible approach to literacy frameworks. The use of mentor texts, structural guidelines, genre formulas, and process-writing cycles reflects a commitment to the autonomous model's emphasis on measurable skill acquisition, particularly in organisation, syntax, and genre conventions (Meyers et al., 2023; Mpofu & Maphalala, 2020; Schleppegrell, 2020; Walla, 2024; Warnby, 2025). At the same time, teachers' deliberate integration of culturally relevant topics, sociolinguistic awareness tasks, peer feedback, and audience-purpose instruction embodies the ideological model and the core tenets of the pedagogy of multiliteracies. The teachers aim to

create classrooms that are “milieus where students enthusiastically exercise autonomous values, recognise their human rights, and take ownership of their actions as members of society and as individuals” (Matiso, 2024, p. 394). Teachers, hence, position literacy as a multimodal, social practice rather than just as a solitary technical exercise (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Matiso, 2024).

This blended pedagogical stance suggests that teachers are not rigidly aligned with a single theoretical model but instead engage in adaptive, responsive practices that honour linguistic diversity while meeting curriculum demands. Their strategies resonate with research which endorses culturally responsive pedagogy and dialogic assessment (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Matiso, 2024). It reflects a shift toward multiliteracies where meaning-making is fluid, context-dependent, and critically framed. However, a notable gap persists in the literature. Few studies examine how teachers consciously conceptualise, negotiate, or sustain this theoretical hybridity in everyday practice, particularly in under-resourced, multilingual contexts (Hendricks & Xeketwana, 2024; Taye & Mengesha, 2025). Future research should investigate how institutional support, professional development, and assessment policies either enable or constrain teachers’ pedagogical flexibility. Understanding how teachers reconcile technical instruction with culturally responsive practice is essential for expanding successful writing strategies across varied EHL classrooms in multilingual South African contexts.

Challenges in Aligning Learners’ Writing Proficiency with SAGS Expectations through Assessment Practices and Feedback Mechanisms

Document analysis and learner writing samples reveal a persistent misalignment between standardised assessment expectations and the writing progression of multilingual writers. Learners’ struggles with academic register, grammatical accuracy, syntactic complexity, and the integration of logical evidence highlight gaps in technical proficiency, which is a core emphasis of the autonomous model (Ngobeni et al., 2023; Windle & Possas, 2023). The consistent reliance on conversational phrasing, inconsistent register, and superficial analysis reflect a sociocultural challenge. Learners manage their participation in an academic environment, influenced by identity and context (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Namakula et al., 2025; Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022; Warnby, 2025) and it is often assumed that multilingual learners are “English proficient when they have acquired relatively fluent and peer appropriate face-to-face communication skills” (Cummins, 1981, p.19). However, the SAGS and CAPS mandate that learners must “establish an identifiable voice and style by adapting language and tone to suit the audience and purpose”. This implicitly requires

ideological literacy competence, yet assessments often prioritise surface-level accuracy over developmental progression and rhetorical awareness. From a multiliteracies perspective, this misalignment emphasises the necessity of critical framing and situated practice, as learners require explicit, scaffolded exposure to disciplinary conventions rather than correction against monolingual benchmarks.

CONCLUSION

Academic writing proficiency development in multilingual EHL classrooms in the Global South remains a critical yet persistently under-addressed challenge. This study reveals that while learners thrive in open, communicative environments that encourage dialogue, personal expression, and personalised feedback, such conditions are frequently compromised by rigid curricular pacing and systemic time constraints. Although teachers employ scaffolding, culturally responsive content, and collaborative tasks, learners continue to struggle with academic register, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary development, and critical analysis. Furthermore, while both teachers and learners highly value feedback, its developmental potential is often limited by inconsistent learner engagement and teachers’ capacity to provide sustained, individualised guidance. These findings highlight a significant gap in current EHL practice, which stresses the need for more dynamic, inclusive pedagogical frameworks that align technical skill-building with socially situated meaning-making.

The challenges highlighted can be addressed by prioritising classroom practice that emphasises structured, process-based writing programmes that systematically integrate drafting, revision, and targeted feedback. Teachers require sustained professional development to refine diagnostic feedback strategies, implement guided peer review with clear protocols, and design interventions that explicitly bridge conversational fluency and academic register. Rather than treating grammar and vocabulary as isolated deficits, instruction should embed these elements within genre-aware, audience-focused tasks that validate learners’ multilingual repertoires as cognitive resources. Collaborative learning must also be intentionally cultivated, moving beyond incidental group work to structured dialogic practices that build learner confidence and enhance metacognitive awareness of writing conventions.

The research-practice gap lies in how curriculum demands for technical proficiency and audience-aware writing are translated into classroom implementation, particularly within multilingual EHL settings. It must be noted that, as the study focused on learners in Grades 10–12 from a specific school and region in one country, it may not reflect

the experiences of younger learners or those in other regions of the Global South. In addition, as learners expressed diverse learning preferences and teachers used different implementation practices, the study does not recommend specific practices. Further research should investigate how feedback can be strategically facilitated to honour the dual demand of writing as both a technical exercise and a socially situated practice while operating within the constraints of EHL teaching. Future studies should explore scalable, pedagogically efficient feedback models that simultaneously address autonomous skill development and ideological meaning-making. Future empirical work must also examine how assessment guidelines are operationalised, how teachers can be supported in designing developmental feedback cycles, and how marking rubrics might be adapted to recognise multilingual writers' diverse linguistic resources rather than penalising transitional register use. Assessment practices should shift from deficit-oriented evaluation to scaffolded, culturally responsive frameworks that value linguistic diversity and guide learners step by step toward confident academic authorship. If we address these pedagogical and research gaps, writing outcomes can be enhanced for the growing population of multilingual learners in EHL classrooms in the Global South.

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