

A Contrastive Study on the Effectiveness of Peer Feedback and Teacher Feedback in College English Writing Instruction

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Abstract: Amid the challenges of time-consuming and low-efficiency writing instruction in college English, optimizing feedback strategies is critical. This study aims to clarify the roles and effectiveness of peer feedback and teacher feedback, and provide empirical support for college English writing teaching. Sixty first-year vocational college students were divided into two groups: Group A (30 students, peer feedback) and Group B (30 students, teacher feedback). After pre-experiment training for Group A, both groups wrote essays, with feedback processes recorded and analyzed. Results show peer feedback boosts student participation and better improves essay content and structure (92.3% structure adoption rate, 61.4% content correct revision rate), while teacher feedback is more effective in enhancing linguistic quality (93% language adoption rate, 65.1% language correct revision rate). The study concludes that both feedback methods are indispensable, and teachers should combine them with proper training and grouping to optimize writing instruction.

Keywords: Writing Instruction in College English; Peer Feedback; Teacher Feedback

1. Introduction

Evaluation functions as a crucial tool for regulating and optimizing the teaching process. An appropriate evaluation method helps identify problems in teaching, makes possible for teaching improvement, and motivate and supervise both students and teachers—two key subjects in the teaching process—thereby realizing the continuous promotion of teaching quality. In college English teaching, writing, among the five core skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating), is generally complained as the most time-consuming and least efficient skill to practice[1]. For one thing,

writing ability is comprehensive and even abstract; for another, teacher feedback is "labor-intensive," which involves substantial implicit costs. A college English teacher regularly teaches several classes simultaneously; assigning a single writing task means providing feedback on hundreds of essays. As Hyland pointed out, teachers often face overwhelming workloads when providing detailed feedback on students' writing, leading to delayed or superficial comments that limit the feedback's effectiveness[2]. From the perspective of cognitive load theory, teacher feedback, as a one-way knowledge transmission, may impose excessive cognitive burden on students—they passively receive corrections without deep processing of writing problems, which weakens the long-term effect of feedback. Therefore, optimizing feedback strategies for writing skill development has long been a crucial topic in English teaching research and practice.

"Learning by doing" is the core concept of experiential teaching, which aligns with the theoretical logic of social constructivism. Vygotsky emphasized that learning is a social interactive process, and knowledge is co-constructed through communication among learners[3]. Students engage themselves in specific experiences, reflect on the process of these experiences, gain insights from such reflection, and apply these insights to their subsequent practice[4]. Both "reflection" and "improvement" require external feedback. When we practiced experiential teaching in College English teaching, we have found peer feedback enhances students' interactivity and deepens their reflective thinking. Peer feedback, as a typical embodiment of this theory, refers to an interactive process where learners act as information providers, simultaneously taking on roles of teachers, mentors, and revisers. They offer comments on their peers' draft essays (in written or oral form) during the writing process. In this interaction, students not only provide

feedback but also reflect on their own writing by analyzing peers' works—a process called "metacognitive transfer"[5], which helps deepen their understanding of writing norms. Professor Cai Jigang argues that peer feedback is highly effective in multiple aspects, including strengthening students' awareness of audience, boosting their motivation, and improving the overall quality, content, and linguistic accuracy of their essays[6].

However, peer feedback also has theoretical limitations: due to the homogeneous language proficiency of peers, their feedback may lack professional accuracy, which is consistent with the "zone of proximal development" theory—peers often cannot provide guidance beyond each other's cognitive range, making it difficult to solve complex linguistic problems[3]. In contrast, teacher feedback is rooted in the theory of authoritative guidance. Teachers, as professionals with systematic linguistic knowledge and teaching experience, can provide targeted feedback that matches students' cognitive levels. Teacher feedback has irreplaceable advantages in correcting grammatical errors, optimizing sentence structures, and improving linguistic fluency, as teachers can quickly identify the root causes of students' writing problems and provide feasible revision strategies. Also, many teachers intuitively value peer feedback highly in teaching English writing, and not a few even use research findings on peer feedback as an excuse to evade their responsibilities in providing feedback on students' essays. Consequently, peer feedback is widely adopted in practical writing instruction.

While peer feedback has gained popularity in L2 writing classrooms, its improper implementation—such as lack of clear evaluation dimensions and targeted training—often fails to achieve expected outcomes. Xu Jinfen and Long Zaibo observe that the external behavioral performance might be fake engagement, and, in addition to attending to students behaviors after they have received feedback, teachers should simultaneously attend to students' internal cognition and affect[7]. Consequently, peer feedback is widely adopted in practical writing instruction but faces challenges in ensuring quality, while teacher feedback, though professional, is limited by workload and one-way interaction.

We contend that the application of experiential

teaching requires active participation from students as the main body, but it also demands that teachers fulfill their guiding responsibilities effectively (in line with authoritative guidance theory). Peer feedback can only serve as an important supplement to teachers' consultative guidance and cannot fully replace teacher feedback. In the teaching process of writing, both peer feedback and teacher feedback are necessary. However, what is the relationship between the two in terms of theoretical applicability? In current college English writing instruction, which one should take the leading role to balance interactivity and professionalism? By examining and comparing the interactive processes and effectiveness of these two feedback methods based on their theoretical foundations, this study aims to provide empirical evidence for college English writing instruction.

2. Experimental Design

2.1 Research Questions

This study addresses two core research questions: the role of teachers in the guidance of students to peer-review essays, and how to maximize the effectiveness of peer feedback. Specifically, we focus on the following three inquiries:

First, what are the similarities and differences in the interaction patterns between the two feedback methods?

Second, what differences exist in the adoption rate of feedback suggestions during the essay revision process for the two methods?

Third, how do the two feedback methods differ in their impact on the overall quality of students' essays?

2.2 Participants

The participants of this experiment were 60 first-year students from a higher vocational college in Yunnan Province. To ensure no significant difference in English proficiency between the two groups, students were selected from the same major who had been enrolled based on their performances in the national college entrance examination (the college also admits "three-school students"—graduates from technical secondary schools, vocational high schools, and technical schools). Based on the 60 students' English scores in the national college entrance examination, the college entrance

English proficiency test, and three English writing model tests, they were divided into two groups (Group A and Group B) with 30 students each. Peer feedback was carried out among Group A, while Group B received teacher feedback. Group A (peer feedback group) was further divided into 6 sub-groups, with 5 students per sub-group. According to Campbell's view, "a group of 4 or 5 students is generally ideal, as it ensures sufficient collaboration and input among members." [8]

2.3 Experimental Process

The experimental process includes two stages, pre-experiment training stage and task stage.

2.3.1 Pre-experiment Training

In the former stage, students in Group A were trained before the experiment. The training consisted of 3 sessions, each lasting 40 minutes. The first session aimed to establish students' sense of responsibility for peer review, ensuring they could provide honest feedback. This training focused on building an honest peer feedback relationship. During the session, the teacher explained the value of peer feedback with practical examples, conducted one-on-one conversations with selected students to emphasize the importance of honesty in peer review feedback, and addressed students' questions and concerns about peer feedback.

The second session focused on equipping students with effective peer feedback methods. The teacher first needed to provide clear instructions. These instructions included: the feedback time, feedback requirements for the introduction, and evaluation criteria for arguments, structure, conclusion, title, and language. The clearer the teacher's instructions, the easier it was for students to proofread an essay, and the better the peer feedback. "The success of student peer feedback [...] requires teachers to provide models and demonstrate excellent examples of peer feedback." [9] During this session, the teacher used examples to illustrate key peer feedback techniques.

The third session was a practical practice of peer feedback. All 6 sub-groups were asked to review the same essay, with a 15-minute time limit. The teacher participated in one sub-group and recorded the entire review process with a DV camera. Later, the recorded process was shown to all students when the teacher explained to clarify correct peer feedback methods. The other 5 sub-groups then

conducted another round of peer feedback based on the teacher's guidance. Through these three training sessions, students basically mastered peer feedback skills.

2.3.2 Experimental Task

Both Group A and Group B were required to write an essay (120-180 words) on the topic "My Views on Driverless Cars". The writing requirements were as follows:

First, clear arguments and a three-part structure; Second, two or three reasons to support the main argument;

Third, complete content and structure, with correct and fluent language.

This topic was chosen for four reasons:

First, it aligns with a discussion task in Unit 5 of *New Era Vocational English: General English 1*—the textbook used for the "College English I" course in the college—allowing close integration with textbook teaching.

Second, as a current hot topic, it stimulates students' interest in cutting-edge technology and broadens their horizons.

Third, it encourages multi-dimensional thinking and strengthens students' critical thinking abilities.

Four, it is a common argumentative writing topic in the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), which matches the current writing training requirements for the participants.

After completing their first drafts, Group A conducted peer feedback in their sub-groups. Each sub-group was required to record the entire process of their review. Group B submitted their first drafts to the teacher for feedback. The one-on-one consultative guidance sessions between Group B students and the teacher were also recorded.

Subsequently, the video recordings from both groups were transcribed into text for later statistical analysis.

2.4 Research Methods

To address the three specific research questions, we conducted statistical analysis from the following perspectives:

First, when comparing the interaction patterns of peer feedback (Group A) and teacher feedback (Group B), the total number of words produced by the feedback recipients and providers was counted to analyze who controlled the main discourse power. The number of words produced by feedback recipients after receiving revision suggestions

was also counted. Since the ratio of feedback recipients to providers was 1:4 in the peer feedback group (Group A) and 1:1 in the teacher feedback group (Group B), the average number of words produced by feedback providers was calculated for Group A.

Second, to analyze the adoption rate of feedback suggestions, feedback information was categorized into three dimensions: ideological content, structure, and language. The adoption results of suggestions in these three dimensions were then classified into four types: "errors not corrected," "errors corrected correctly," "errors corrected incorrectly," and "correctness changed to error," and counted

accordingly.

Third, to analyze the impact of the two feedback methods on essay quality improvement, three other teachers were invited to score students' first drafts and score respectively on the following four aspects: theme, structure, linguistic accuracy, and linguistic fluency. Each aspect was scored out of 15 points, and the average score from the three teachers was used as the final score for that aspect.

3. Analysis of Research Results

Statistical results addressing the three research questions are presented in the following tables.

Table 1. Comparison of Interaction Patterns between Peer Feedback and Teacher Feedback

	Average Vocabulary Output per Reviewee	Average Vocabulary Output per Reviewer	Total Volume	Ratio of Reviewee's Vocabulary Output to Total Volume
Group A: Peer Feedback	275	654	929	29.6%
Group B: Teacher Feedback	203	955	1158	17.5%

As shown in Table 1, the discourse power was controlled by feedback providers in both cases. And, the proportion of words produced by reviewees accounted for 29.6% of the total in the peer feedback group (Group A), while it was only 17.5% in the teacher feedback group

(Group B)—a difference of more than 10 percentage points. This indicates that students in the teacher feedback group tended to adopt a more passive listening attitude, whereas feedback recipients in the peer feedback group demonstrated higher participation.

Table 2. Comparison of Feedback Suggestion Adoption Rates between Peer Feedback and Teacher Feedback

	Group A: Peer Feedback			Group B: Teacher Feedback		
	Content	Structure	Language	Content	Structure	Language
Adoption Number	44	12	71	32	19	146
Total	57	13	90	51	21	157
Adoption Rate	77.2%	92.3%	78.9%	62.7%	90.5%	93%

According to the statistical results in Table 2, reviewees in both groups accepted most of the suggestions from reviewers. And in both groups, suggestions about the structure were accepted most widely. Peer feedback suggestions were

more likely to be accepted in terms of content, while students were more inclined to accept teacher feedback suggestions regarding language.

Table 3. Micro-Comparison of Quality between Peer Feedback and Teacher Feedback

	Group A: Peer Feedback			Group B: Teacher Feedback		
	Content	Structure	Language	Content	Structure	Language
Errors Not Corrected	2	1	12	4	0	21
Errors Corrected Correctly	27	11	22	19	16	95
Errors Corrected Incorrectly	11	0	27	9	3	30
Correctness Changed to Error	4	0	10	0	0	0
Total Number	44	12	71	32	19	146
Ratio of Error Corrected Correctly to Total Number	61.4%	91.7%	31%	59.4%	84.2%	65.1%

Two key results can be derived from Table 3: For one thing, regarding the "errors corrected correctly" rate for the content and structure, both groups are nearly 60% or over 60%. It

indicates that both feedback methods generally met the quality standards for revising essay content and structure. However, peer feedback was more effective than teacher feedback in

improving content and structural organization. This result can be interpreted as follows: in the peer feedback process, each essay was reviewed by 4 students, who collaborated effectively and engaged in brainstorming. Post-experiment video analysis also revealed that some sub-groups even divided tasks and conducted online research. As a result, peer feedback could more effectively make meaningful revisions to the content and structure of essays within a limited time. In contrast, teacher feedback relied solely on the teacher's individual efforts, leading to relatively weaker performance in revising content and structure. This aligns with Zhou Ying's observation: "The advantages of peer feedback are mainly reflected in the structure and content of the essays." [10]

For another, teacher feedback was more effective than peer feedback in revising language. This is because the participants had relatively homogeneous English proficiency levels, resulting in little variation in their linguistic accuracy, complexity, and fluency. In peer feedback, only 31% were "errors corrected correctly"—a rate significantly lower than the 65.1% "errors corrected correctly" rate in teacher feedback. This result is different from what Zhou Xiao and Wang Qi found from their test[11]. What's more, the ratio of 65.1% concerning language tells a big obstacle in the improvement of students' writing ability. Thus, we are reminded of the importance of the language teaching task among all the other tasks endowed to English teaching.

4. Conclusion

Feedback is essential for achieving good results in English writing instruction; without it, students' writing abilities stagnate for a long time. The teacher should adopt appropriate and effective feedback methods. This experiment shows that peer feedback can indeed increase students' participation in the feedback process and play a positive role in improving their essays, particularly in enhancing the content and structural organization. To ensure the effectiveness of peer feedback, the teacher should provide pre-feedback training to students—strengthening their sense of responsibility for peer feedback, improving their feedback skills, and offering clear and detailed instructions. Additionally, reasonable grouping of students is necessary.

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