

HUFI English-majored Students' Perceptions of Peer Correction in Essay Writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing essays can be a challenging task for many English-major students, and developing writing skills can be a difficult process. To address this issue, several studies have explored ways to enhance students' writing performance. This paper aimed to explore how peer correction was used in classrooms to improve English essay writing skills among English major freshmen at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, in the University of Food Industry, Ho Chi Minh City. This case study collected data through class observations and student interviews using a qualitative approach. The results indicated that most students highly valued peer correction as a motivating tool to improve their essay-writing skills and reduce students' anxiety about being confused by mistakes. Moreover, the study found that peer correction was particularly beneficial in large class sizes, as it addressed the constraints of time limitation. The findings suggest that incorporating peer correction into writing instruction can be an effective strategy to improve student writing in contexts where large class sizes and limited time pose a challenge.

Keywords: Essay writing, Peer correction, Engagement

1 Introduction

The instruction of writing is particularly significant in foreign language classes as it involves mastering various linguistic skills such as grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, as well as planning techniques like organization, style, and rhetoric. Moreover, writing is a solitary task and an interactive process where writers aim to express their thoughts efficiently (Aydın & Yıldız, 2014). Therefore, learning to write in English is considered the most difficult skill for students who lack motivation, and whose writing capacity is not good. Moreover, the variety and frequency of mistakes students made in writing English essays can often be a source of concern for EFL teachers. To improve students' writing skills, numerous methods and activities for correcting these errors have been proposed, including teacher-centered feedback, self-correction, peer feedback, etc. A host of studies have explored using peer correction as a strategy to foster students' English essay-writing skills.

Tandikombong *et.al* (2022) carried out a quantitative survey to examine the level of grammatical and mechanical accuracy in opinion essays and to compare the impact of peer-correction and self-correction techniques in enhancing opinion essay writing among third-semester students at the Christian University of Indonesia (UKI) in Jakarta, Indonesia. The research utilized a written test as the data collection instrument. The findings showed key differences in the outcomes between the peer correction and self-correction techniques, indicating that peer correction was more useful in enhancing students' writing skills. Moreover, the research conducted by Yanti *et.al* (2022) compared the effects of self-correction and peer correction on improving the writing skills of second-semester students at a state Islamic university in Sumatra. The study employed a quantitative approach using an experimental method, and data were collected through pre-tests, post-tests, writing tests, and sheets for guiding self-correction and peer



correction. The findings revealed that there was a remarkable improvement students made in writing skills after both self-correction and peer-correction techniques were utilized. Additionally, a crucial difference was witnessed in writing skills between the students guided to use self-correction and those taught to employ peer correction techniques, with peer correction having a more considerable effect size on scores for writing skills. However, this study did not provide detailed information on the students' perceptions of two techniques as well as the specific procedures and frequency of these techniques used in the classroom setting.

Behin and Hamidi (2011) investigated the impact of peer correction on female learners' development in writing skill. Sixty English students at Islamic Azad University, Iran were grouped into experimental and control groups. Both groups took both a pre-test and a post-test in writing to determine the impact of this strategy. Statistical analysis of the pre-test and post-test results indicated peer correction was effective in enhancing participants' writing skills. However, the study did not identify peer correction from students' viewpoints.

Vo (2022) investigated the perspectives of non-majored English students at Tra Vinh University on error correction in writing, specifically teacher and peer correction, and their perceptions of the cons and pros of both kinds of corrective feedback. The study employed a questionnaire and a two-question interview to collect data. The results revealed that most participants highly valued teacher correction, while some also preferred peer correction. This indicated a significant variation in the participants' attitudes toward teacher and peer correction. However, the study did not include English major students who are expected to spend more time studying writing skills, which represents a research gap.

In conclusion, many studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of peer correction in enhancing writing skills. However, there has been limited attention paid to the application of this technique in real classroom situations and students' perspectives. This case study aimed to offer new insights into the usage of peer correction and its impact on writing improvement of undergraduate students in practical settings. Consequently, this paper aimed to address two research questions:

RQ1: How is peer correction employed in an English essay writing class?

RQ2: What do students think about peer correction in improving their English essay writing?

2 Literature review

Language learners tend to seek beneficial outcomes for themselves and their peers when learning is centered on cooperation (Freeman, 2000). Peer feedback or correction is a kind of collaborative activity where students practice in groups to give feedback on each other's writing, as noted by Liu and Edwards (2018). According to Hyland (2003), utilizing peer correction activities is an effective method for enhancing students' writing skills and promoting their writing development. This technique involves peer feedback, which could be written commentary or verbal communication between readers and writers during the initial and final stages of drafting. Sultana (2009) describes peer correction as a classroom activity where students monitor each other's work to improve their self-monitoring skills. This activity involves providing feedback on one another's written work during the writing process, thereby making students the primary agents of activity and distinguishing it from teacher-centered approaches. This approach has become increasingly popular as it allows for more feedback to be provided to students through peer feedback than they would typically receive through teacher feedback.

Researchers, such as Zeng (2006), Jiao (2007), and Hirose (2008), examined the effect of peer feedback in second-language writing classrooms and concluded that peer feedback can significantly develop writing skills of university students. Peer feedback gives opportunities for students to discuss their weaknesses and

strengths by exchanging opinions, comments, corrections, and suggestions (Jiao, 2007; Zeng, 2006) providing valuable opportunities for students to improve both their reading and writing abilities.

According to Rollinson (2005), peer feedback can have a positive effect if students are properly prepared and trained by their teacher. Moreover, peer feedback could train students to become critical when they read their writing and help build confidence through the potential for high-level responses and interactions with classmates in a safe environment.

Additionally, peer review or correction has been found to help students become more autonomous and take responsibility for their learning (Ohta, 2001). It also provides opportunities for students to practice critical thinking and analysis skills as they evaluate their peers' writing (Topping, 1998), improve students' understanding of the writing process and increase their awareness of the conventions of academic writing (Keh, 1990), and develop students' communication and interpersonal skills as they engage in dialogue with their peers about their writing (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010).

In summary, peer correction has garnered significant attention from researchers, particularly in the realm of EFL writing instruction.

3 Materials and Methods/ Methodology

3.1 Design

The study approached a qualitative research design to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding (Agius, 2013) of how peer correction was carried out to motivate EFL students' essay writing and what students perceived about the role of peer correction in an essay writing class.

3.2 Participants

The study was conducted with a group of 60 participants who were enrolled in an EFL class at University of Food Industry, Ho Chi Minh City. Of these participants, 45 were females and 15 were males, with ages ranging from 19 to 21 years old. All participants were first-year students of English, and they had previously completed a 135-hour Writing 1 course on how to write sentences and paragraphs in the first semester. The Writing 2 course consisted of 45 hours of in-class study and 90 hours of self-study at home in the second semester, with a focus on writing short essays of approximately 250 words that demonstrated task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy. Each class meeting lasted for two hours and included various writing activities in which students worked individually, in pairs, or groups, and engaged in peer correction to improve their writing skills.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

To collect data, the researcher utilized two primary methods: class observations and in-depth student interviews.

The researcher first obtained permission from the teacher who taught the course Writing 2 and observed four class meetings, each corresponding to a unit of course. During these observations, the researcher took detailed notes on how peer correction was implemented in the classroom.

Subsequently, the researcher invited four students from the class to participate in in-depth interviews about their views on the effectiveness of peer correction in enhancing their essay writing. These interviews were conducted on Zoom, recorded, and lasted approximately 30 minutes for four students. The main questions for interviews were asked as followed:

1. What do you think about peer correction?
2. Which benefits did you notice when working with your friends in correcting essay writing mistakes?

The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and conducted a thorough analysis to explore the students' perceptions of peer correction in their English essay writing. By utilizing both class observations and in-depth interviews with students, the study was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the benefits and limitations of peer correction as a strategy for students to enhance writing skills.

The study utilized a thematic analysis method (Finlay, 2021) to analyze the data collected. The analysis focused on how peer correction was implemented in the students' English essay writing learning process and their views on its effectiveness.

To conduct the analysis, the researcher coded the interview transcripts and observation notes, identifying emerging themes related to the factors involved in peer correction. These themes were used to address the two research questions concerning how peer correction was conducted and the participants' perceptions of it.

By using a thematic analysis method, the study was able to identify and examine the key factors involved in peer correction, including the role of the teacher, the importance of scaffolding and guidelines, and the benefits and limitations of peer correction as perceived by the students. The themes that emerged from the analysis provided valuable insights into the implementation and effectiveness of peer correction as a strategy for enhancing students' writing skills.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Results from observations

RQ1: How is peer correction employed in an English essay writing class?

The first research question was addressed through direct class observations conducted over a period of four weeks. During these observations, the researcher noted the implementation and impact of peer correction in the classroom. The analysis of the observations revealed several benefits of using peer correction as writing strategy, including its potential to help teachers manage time effectively, reduce constraints in error correction caused by large class size, and increase students' engagement and participation in the writing process. These findings provide important insights into the practical application of peer correction in real classroom settings.

For a consecutive period of four weeks, the participants studied how to write a descriptive essay using the textbook *Effective Academic Writing 2* (Savage & Mayer, 2006). The results showed that after the students completed the first writing phase, the teacher instructed them to exchange their work with a peer. During this peer correction phase, the teacher provided the students with a checklist to guide them in identifying and correcting errors in their classmates' writing. This activity lasted for approximately 10 minutes, and students were given sufficient time to read and provide feedback on each other's work.

A checklist provided for peer correction allowed the students to identify and correct errors in their writing independently. The teacher's guidelines provided a clear framework for the peer correction process, which helped students to focus on specific areas for improvement in their writing. The duration of this activity was appropriate, providing enough time for students to read and provide feedback on their peers' work without disrupting the flow of the lesson. In short, the peer correction process was found to be effective in improving writing skills, providing them with an opportunity to actively engage in the writing process and learn from each other's mistakes.

The study found that peer correction was carried out in both pairs and groups, depending on the classroom setting. In pairs, two students seated next to each other, sometimes in a row or a line, exchanged their writing for feedback. In a larger class, up to 60 students, the class was divided into 15 groups, each consisting of four students. During group work, students were seated face-to-face at two opposite desks, with one student designated as secretary to take notes of comments provided by group members. The use of pairs

and groups allowed students to receive feedback from multiple sources and perspectives, which helped to enhance the quality of their writing. In pairs, students could receive personalized feedback from a single peer, while in groups, students could benefit from the collective feedback and insights of multiple peers. The use of a secretary in the group work setting ensured that comments were accurately recorded, providing students with a record of the feedback they received and allowing them to refer back to it when revising their work. Overall, the use of both pairs and groups for peer correction was found to be useful in improving the students' writing skills, providing them with an opportunity to receive multiple perspectives and insights on their work.

During the peer correction activity, students provided feedback to each other in the form of corrections, responses, suggestions, opinions, or ideas. The teacher monitored the students' work and provided immediate support or explanations if needed. In addition to a provided checklist and guidelines, students were allowed to use any online materials such as dictionaries or newspapers to enhance their understanding of the writing task. They also had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss different ideas with each other within their group. The classroom atmosphere during the peer correction activity was observed to be active, comfortable, and safe for all students. The students seemed eager to participate seriously in a friendly environment, with some even engaging in debates or discussions to better understand the feedback provided. The peer correction activity created an inclusive and collaborative learning environment where students could learn from each other and develop their writing skills together.

Following the peer correction phase, the teacher provided final comments on some of the students' corrected writing papers. Instead of collecting all the papers at once, the teacher collected them in turns in subsequent class meetings. To provide her comments, the teacher used her mobile phone camera to take pictures of the students' papers, which she then uploaded online and downloaded to her laptop. Using a projector, she displayed some of the groups' work on the screen, along with her comments. The teacher also awarded some groups or individual students with additional scores for formative assessment, which aimed to encourage their engagement in the peer correction activity. It can be seen that this feedback process allowed the students to gain valuable feedback from their instructor and peers, which would help them enhance their writing skills.

The researcher also observed that the practice of peer correction was incorporated into each of the four meetings, occurring two or three times in each lesson depending on the amount of writing work to be completed. From the observation findings, firstly, peer correction allowed the teacher to manage their time more effectively. With a large class size, it can be challenging for teachers to provide individualized feedback on every student's work. However, by incorporating peer correction, the teacher was able to allocate more time to other aspects of the course, while still giving students valuable feedback on their writing.

Secondly, the use of peer correction reduced the constraints in error correction that are often caused by large class sizes. In such settings, it can be difficult for teachers to identify and correct every error in every student's writing. However, by allowing students to review and correct each other's work, errors can be identified and corrected more efficiently. Moreover, the use of peer correction reduced students' anxiety about their writing. Many students feel anxious about their writing ability, and peer correction can provide them with a supportive environment in which to receive feedback and improve their skills.

Finally, the use of peer correction increased students' engagement with the course material. By actively participating in the process of correction, students are more likely to be invested in writing tasks and to take ownership of their learning. In summary, the analysis of class observations revealed several benefits of using peer correction in a large classroom setting, including effective time management, efficient error correction, reduced student anxiety, and increased student engagement.

4.2 Results from interviews

RQ2: What do students think about peer correction in improving their English essay writing?

After the phase of observations, the researcher continued to search for the answer to the second question from students with in-depth interviews. The analysis revealed numerous prominent advantages that the students reported when they worked on peer correction. These benefits are primarily concerned with the following aspect: students' motivation and students' engagement.

When asked about how they felt when taking part in peer correction activity, one of four students showed that peer correction helped increase the chance of correcting students' writing mistakes. She stated that she did not have anyone to evaluate their writing at home except her writing teacher, but there were a lot of students in the class, so the teacher rarely gave comments on her writing. The teacher could not cover every single piece of writing. However, if there were the teacher's guidelines in peer correction, her classmates could help her realize her mistakes, thereby increasing the chance of being corrected.

The second student showed satisfaction with peer correction. She said:

“... I am not scared, worried, um... any more about making mistakes because my friend helped me. The teacher also helped, but she had not much time for all. So, my friend helped me because the teacher gave me plus points. We are happy to exchange writing. I feel satisfied and I am not sleepy in class anymore.”

One student expressed her excitement in reading others' writing. She mentioned that when working in her team to find out mistakes made by other teams, she felt excited to find out mistakes, and then score. She was satisfied when assisting friends and sharing. She also admitted that she learned a lot from her friends in class without anxiety and pressure.

“... I got a lot of fun; I mean it is funny to read and check my friends' writing. Sometimes I catch new and useful words or phrases. Then I took notes in my notebook to use later. It was helpful to me. ...”

This student also mentioned the checklists shown by the teacher. She said that it was helpful for her to follow and check mistakes centered. She also showed that she never paid attention to these checklists before, but after the practice of peer correction, she thought that she would keep these checklists as her key to improving her writing.

Another student shared a similar perspective on the benefits of peer correction, stating that it created a safe environment for learning. He expressed that he was not confident in his writing abilities and felt anxious about making mistakes. He also mentioned that he didn't receive much help with his writing at home, which added to his worries. However, he felt more at ease when his peers checked his work, and he was less anxious about the teacher reviewing his writing. Additionally, he appreciated the lively and engaging classroom environment, where his peers would even make jokes when they noticed errors. He felt more motivated to write English essays thanks to the supportive atmosphere created by peer correction.

“... I am bad at writing and grammar. I am scared of the teacher. Working with friends, I feel easier. I like fun, so this way helps me better. ...”

In conclusion, the findings suggest that peer correction can create a safe and supportive learning environment that enhances students' participation and satisfaction in learning to write English essays. By actively engaging in the correction process, students can develop a sense of ownership over their writing and improve their skills through feedback from their peers. Additionally, the social and collaborative aspects of peer correction can foster positive relationships among classmates and promote a sense of community

in the classroom. The paper highlights the potential advantages of peer correction as a strategy for enhancing students' writing skills and their overall learning experience.

5 Conclusions

The study aimed to investigate how English-major freshmen perceive the use of peer correction when learning to write essays in English in a large classroom setting. The findings indicate that peer correction is an effective strategy for addressing the time limitations and large class sizes that teachers often encounter. One key recommendation from the study is to score peer correction to encourage students' involvement and satisfaction. By providing grades or other forms of recognition for their efforts, students are more likely to take the task of correcting their peers' work seriously.

Furthermore, the study suggests that peer correction should be carried out in groups. This approach can be beneficial in several ways. First, it encourages collaboration and discussion among students, which can lead to a deeper understanding of the material. Second, it allows students to receive feedback from multiple perspectives, which can help them identify areas where they need to improve their writing. However, teachers need to supply students with scaffolding and a checklist to guide them through the correction process. This can help ensure that students are focused on the most important aspects of writing and that they are providing constructive feedback that will help their peers improve.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that a peer correction is a valuable tool for improving writing skills in a large classroom setting. By scoring the activity, carrying it out in groups, and providing scaffolding and checklists, teachers can help students benefit from this strategy and achieve better writing outcomes.

6 Declarations

6.1 Study Limitations

Although this study has made valuable contributions, it is important to note its limitations. For instance, the study did not assess teachers' evaluations of students' actual work on peer correction, nor did it compare the effectiveness of this practice with other writing strategies. Furthermore, the study focused solely on peer correction in a face-to-face learning environment and did not explore how peer correction is conducted in an online setting. Finally, the study did not consider the potential drawbacks of peer correction in developing students' essay writing. To foster the quality of students' writing skills, it would be beneficial to conduct future studies that address these factors. Such studies could show a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of peer correction as a writing strategy, and how it can be adapted to various learning environments.

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