

The Influence of Technology-Enhanced Feedback on Saudi Female EFL Learners' Writing Gains

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Abstract—The current study examined the influence of online peer feedback on the writing ability and self-efficacy of female learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia. The participants were 78 learners divided into two experimental groups and one control group. The experimental groups used Google Docs to complete their writing assignments and exchange comments, whereas the control group received traditional teacher feedback. Pre-test and post-test self-efficacy ratings were collected on a scale of 1 to 5. The results yielded that the experimental groups improved significantly in self-efficacy compared to their counterparts in the control group. Based on these findings, using Google Docs for peer feedback is likely to assist in improving writing skills and substantially boost writing confidence. The present study thus contributes to the existing body of literature and to the field of EFL education by emphasizing the potential benefits of peer feedback through digital tools and platforms.

Index Terms—EFL writing, Google Docs, online writing, peer feedback, self-efficacy

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing skills are a vital part of every stage of formal education, giving students the opportunity to express themselves creatively while gaining confidence and sharpening their ability to engage in critical thinking (Lee, 2017). However, compared to native speakers of the language, students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) often find it difficult to acquire strong writing skills in English without more help and overt correction. For this reason, correcting errors is essential to the learning process, as learners will always make mistakes while using new language, and correcting these mistakes is one of the critical duties of teachers (Pawlak, 2014).

The method used for error correction can greatly affect how students perceive and learn from their errors. Recent studies have focused on the value of peer feedback in language learning, particularly when it comes to writing (e.g., Fan & Xu, 2020; López-Pellisa et al., 2021; Tian & Zhou, 2020). Peer feedback entails students evaluating each other's drafts and providing comments on them (Storch, 2019), which can promote deeper comprehension and improve critical thinking skills (Afify, 2019). Brookhart (2008) noted that peer feedback could facilitate learning and increase learner motivation. In contrast to more traditional teacher-centric feedback, this strategy encourages students to work together. Nevertheless, teachers still play a vital role in the classroom, as students can be more easily motivated in various ways when they have the opportunity to engage in pleasant interaction with their teachers (Wood, 2017). For these reasons, and as universities tend to emphasize the significance of student-centered education, the teacher is viewed as a learning facilitator who encourages learners' participation.

Given the lack of research in this area in Saudi Arabia and the growing importance of EFL writing in that context, the present study investigated how online peer feedback could be utilized to enhance Saudi female EFL students' writing skills and self-efficacy. This study adds to the growing area of research examining how educators can use new digital platforms and applications, by focusing on Saudi female EFL students, who tend to learn English using a more traditional teacher-centric approach (Almohaimed & Alnasser, 2022). The study provides valuable insights into how platforms such as Google Docs can effectively integrate peer feedback into EFL writing courses, potentially influencing future curriculum design and teaching methods.

By investigating the impact of peer feedback on self-efficacy, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how students' confidence and motivation in language learning is influenced by instructional methods. Such research is especially important for understanding EFL students, as their self-confidence can have a significant effect on their learning (Rubio, 2021). Furthermore, the results could be used as a foundation for further studies on the longer-term effects of using peer feedback through digital platforms on this and other demographic groups.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Background

Sociocultural theory has had a substantial influence on second language (L2) education. Despite the multifaceted views on current sociocultural theory, they all draw on Vygotsky's (1978) idea that the development of cognition is socially situated and that learning is a process of internalizing social and cultural patterns in a particular society. From that perspective, learners' interaction in L2 classrooms is viewed as a social practice within the academic context

(Storch, 2013). In particular, L2 writing is considered a type of “social act that involves a complex dialogic and distributed process of intervention and knowledge transformation, mediated by cultural and historical artefacts” (Slavkov, 2015, p. 81).

Sociocultural theory has been recognized as providing an important theoretical lens on peer feedback of L2 writing (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Zhao, 2018). In peer feedback activities, social interaction plays an essential role in cognitive development via the zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1978), the novice’s interactions with an expert or with slightly more experienced peers is likely to contribute to the novice’s cognitive development. In these interactions, the expert’s role extends to providing opportunities for the novice to carry out progressively more difficult tasks, an approach known as scaffolding. Wood et al. (1976) defined scaffolding as instructional support provided by experts to help the novice perform increasingly complex tasks without assistance.

In peer feedback, learners with equal or slightly more capabilities can scaffold other students’ learning within the ZPD by offering comments and suggestions. De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) showed that even students with the same proficiency level facilitated each other’s learning through peer feedback activities. Consequently, feedback can also be constructive and lead to L2 improvement when performed by peers (Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017).

B. EFL Writing and Online Peer Feedback

Ferris (2003) highlighted the fact that EFL learners need feedback on their writing to acquire the language efficiently. Several researchers have investigated how different types of feedback impact EFL writing skills. Traditional teacher feedback consists of teachers’ corrective information on the learners’ written tasks (Cheng et al., 2021). However, peer feedback has introduced new vitality into this process, owing to its collaborative approach (Alshuraidah & Storch, 2019).

The idea that students may serve as valuable resources for another student’s education forms the basis of this learning dynamic. Sackstein (2017) noted that peer feedback in the classroom empowers students as learners and does more than merely help them become better writers. Since they are active participants in the learning process rather than simply passive receivers of information, peer feedback promotes students’ autonomy and encourages them to be more active learners. However, such practices need to be implemented in an engaging environment to maximize learning motivation. Digital applications and online platforms (e.g., Google Docs) can be used for this purpose (Alharbi, 2019; Lee & Hassell, 2021).

Online tools have increasingly been used for learning due to the emergence of learner-centric education and because they offer more options for creating and delivering material (Roberts, 2006). These tools can engage learners and help tailor the learning experience more to the individual student (Tathahira, 2020). This can be seen in terms of peer feedback on EFL writing. Such technology provides new opportunities for L2 learners to collaborate and co-construct knowledge through interaction. For example, Ebadi and Rahimi (2017) demonstrated that Google Docs can facilitate new forms of peer interaction through its user-friendly editing tools.

A number of studies have emphasized the potential of Google Docs for facilitating peer feedback (e.g., Alharbi, 2019; Bradley & Thouëсны, 2017; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Farahian & Noori, 2023; Hoang & Hoang, 2022). For instance, Ebadi and Rahimi (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine its impact on EFL university students’ academic writing skills in Iran. The study revealed significant improvements, particularly in long-term grammatical accuracy. Furthermore, learners had a positive attitude toward using Google Docs in peer feedback activities and found it quite helpful. According to learner responses, Bradley and Thouëсны (2017) reported that peer feedback using Google Docs generally focused on global areas (i.e., content and organization) and local areas (i.e., structure and language problems). They also found that “resolved” was the most frequent response in writing tasks, indicating students’ acceptance of their peers’ comments. In a qualitative study, Alharbi (2019) explored the potential of Google Docs to facilitate collaborative revisions and peer feedback on EFL writing in a Saudi university. Google Docs was perceived as useful as it allowed learners to edit each other’s drafts and provide constructive feedback. Furthermore, students expressed positive views about Google Docs and its ability to enhance their writing and collaborative work.

Vengadasalam (2021) found that online peer feedback not only changed how people wrote but also how they thought. For example, online discussions can allow students to engage in more critical thinking (Afify, 2019). Tathahira (2020) reported that when L2 learners interacted in online activities, in addition to promoting critical thinking, it also increased their self-efficacy to make judgements while writing. In the same vein, learners participating in online peer feedback tend to apply higher-order thinking, including analysis, evaluation, and problem solving (Kaya & Yaprak, 2020). For EFL learners, Google Docs can create a more participatory and engaging environment than traditional feedback methods, as they actively participate in the learning process in addition to receiving feedback. Such interaction is vital to language learning because it pushes students to consider their work in the light of criticism and forces them to go through different cognitive processes. In addition, this type of feedback tends to be faster and more detailed. As a result, Alharbi and Alqefari (2021) claimed that more and more people were using such tools to give feedback on written material.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The sample consisted of 78 first-year university students. All participants were women of around the same age attending an EFL writing course at the same Saudi public university. The author randomly assigned the participants to one of the two experimental groups or to the control group, with 26 assigned to each group. The sample was thus homogenous in terms of age, gender, nationality, and academic level.

B. Data Collection

All participants were given a pre-test before the experiment began and then a post-test 10 weeks later to determine if their writing skills or self-efficacy had changed. These tests mimicked the format and content of normal writing tests given to EFL students. The scoring rubric used was a modified version of the ESL Composition Profile from Jacobs et al. (1981) to assess students' pre- and post-tests. The profile covers different aspects of writing, namely content, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. Two raters who volunteered to assess the pre- and post-tests received intensive training on how to employ the rating scale. Alongside the writing tests, self-efficacy surveys were utilized to measure students' confidence in their writing abilities. These surveys were administered both before and after the intervention.

In the experimental groups, Google Docs was used as the primary platform for collaborative writing, editing, and exchanging feedback in real time. These participants were first trained for three hours to ensure they would be able to use Google Docs during their peer feedback activities. Afterward, they were paired in groups of two, ensuring that each student had the opportunity to give and receive feedback. This process was conducted once every week for 10 weeks. Throughout the study, the participants in the experimental groups swapped roles (giving vs. receiving feedback) and peers (who they were paired with). Figure 1 shows a screenshot of a chat screen in which students exchanged feedback. During the same 10-week period, the students assigned to the control group did not engage in peer feedback or use Google Docs or similar tools. Instead, they were given traditional, teacher-centric feedback on their writing.

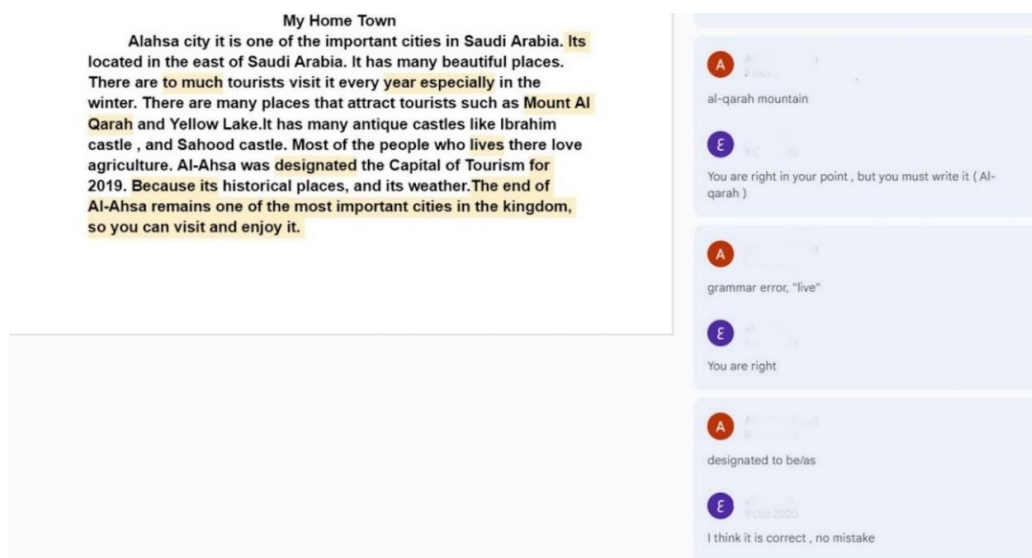


Figure 1. Example of Peer Feedback Exchange on Google Docs

C. Data Analysis

The data analysis involved comparing the pre-test and post-test scores in terms of writing skill and self-efficacy. To assess the importance of the observed variations between the groups, statistical methods were used and the mean scores of the two experimental groups were calculated and compared with those of the control group. The purpose of the analysis was to determine whether peer feedback through Google Docs was more effective than traditional instructor feedback at improving students' writing and self-efficacy.

IV. FINDINGS

This section presents a detailed analysis of the data collected from the pre-tests and post-tests administered to the experimental groups and control group. The analysis includes comparisons of writing ability across a range of characteristics and student attitudes about writing.

As shown in Table 1, the experimental groups' mean proficiency score before the experiment was 60, and the control group's mean score was 58. Since these scores were similar, the author could reasonably expect that post-experiment differences between groups were likely caused by the intervention. All groups showed a notable increase in their post-test scores compared to their pre-test scores. However, both experimental groups had a larger mean increase of 15 points compared to the 10-point increase of the control group. This 5-point rise over the control group suggested that peer feedback may be a more useful teaching strategy for writing skills than traditional instructor feedback.

TABLE 1
OVERALL WRITING PROFICIENCY SCORES

Group	Pre-Test Average (out of 100)	Post-Test Average (out of 100)	Change in Score
Experimental (Peer Feedback)	60	75	+15
Control (Teacher Feedback)	58	68	+10

There are a few possible reasons for the experimental groups' greater improvement. Students may have found peer critique more relatable or considered it to be more relevant, thereby increasing their engagement and driving them to do better. Additionally, it could promote a more cooperative learning atmosphere where students gain knowledge from both giving and receiving comments on each other's work. These results suggested that peer feedback could be an effective way to improve EFL writing skills by helping students see their writing from different perspectives.

A. Improvement in Writing Ability

Compared to the control group, which showed an 11% improvement in content, the experimental groups demonstrated greater improvement (18%). Peer interactions appeared particularly beneficial for this component of writing, which deals with the writer's knowledge of the topic. This difference could have been due to students gaining a deeper understanding of the topic from exchanging feedback in Google Docs, where they encouraged each other to write relevant content.

In terms of the organization of their writing, the experimental groups showed a mean improvement rate of 17%, well above the 9% of the control group. Thus, peer feedback appeared to have a significant positive effect on the participants' ability to organize their ideas clearly. This could have been due to the experimental groups getting immediate feedback regarding this issue in Google Docs. While more significant progress was made by the experimental groups in terms of coherence and organization, they demonstrated improvement in all areas.

The experimental groups showed approximately 15% gain in vocabulary, whereas the control group showed a 10% gain. This result suggested that students were motivated to focus more on word choice and usage through peer criticism. The collaborative nature of Google Docs could have created an atmosphere where students felt more at ease trying out new words and receiving constructive criticism on their word selection.

As shown in Table 2, the experimental groups' grammar improved by 12%, while the control group improved by 8%. This difference may also be explained by the peer feedback process, in which students checked each other's work for grammatical mistakes and thus might have paid greater attention to them. The tools in Google Docs that encourage interaction might have simplified the process of finding, understanding, and addressing these errors.

The mean point increases for specific areas (content, organization, vocabulary, grammar) are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2
SCORES FOR SPECIFIC WRITING SKILLS

Skill Area	Experimental Improvement	Control Improvement
Content	+18%	+11%
Organization	+17%	+9%
Vocabulary	+15%	+10%
Grammar	+12%	+8%

B. Improvement in Self-Efficacy

In addition, this study examined how peer feedback affected the self-efficacy of participating EFL students. These results are presented in Table 3, with ratings on a scale of 1 to 5.

TABLE 3
STUDENT SELF-EFFICACY RATINGS

Group	Pre-Test Self-Efficacy	Post-Test Self-Efficacy	Change in Rating
Experimental (Peer Feedback)	2.5	3.8	+1.3
Control (Teacher Feedback)	2.4	3.1	+0.7

On the pre-tests, all three groups had similar scores for self-efficacy (approximately 2.4–2.5). Those scores made it possible to compare how the different forms of feedback would affect different groups. Ten weeks later, all groups showed higher self-efficacy scores on the post-test, but the experimental groups had a larger increase (2.5–3.8) than the control group (2.4–3.1). This indicated that peer feedback via Google Docs was more effective at building participants' confidence in their ability to write in English.

C. Perceived Usefulness of Feedback

This study also examined to what extent participants perceived the feedback they received to be useful, as detailed in Table 4.

TABLE 4
PERCEIVED USEFULNESS OF FEEDBACK

Feedback Type	Very Useful	Somewhat Useful
Peer (Experimental)	67%	33%
Teacher (Control)	47%	53%

Two-thirds of students in the experimental groups considered the feedback to be “very useful” while the rest considered it “somewhat useful.” Such a high usefulness rating could be due to several aspects of Google Docs and the peer feedback students engaged in. Perhaps the most obvious factor was the sense of cooperation facilitated by that platform, which enabled participants to quickly and easily show what they had written to their peer, get feedback, and engage in a dialogue about it. In turn, that interaction likely caused the participants to view the feedback activities as more engaging. Another factor to consider is that the participants might have been able to give more pertinent advice to each other in the peer feedback by connecting it to their shared experiences and to the problems they had as EFL writers. In this way, the peer feedback might have been seen as more targeted to their personal learning needs.

The participants in the control group rated the teacher feedback less highly, with slightly over half reporting that it was “somewhat useful” (53%) and the rest saying it was “very useful” (47%), as shown in Table 4. The lower rating could be partly due to this type of feedback being less instantaneous than peer feedback via Google Docs. Another factor could have been participants viewing feedback from teachers as more distant than feedback from their peers. This could have affected how students took in and valued the feedback given. This result may also be the consequence of a lack of peer engagement, as the feedback process may not have included relevant and collaborative aspects that could improve learning.

D. Incorporating Feedback Into Revisions

Table 5 presents data on how often students incorporated the feedback they received into their subsequent revisions. A much larger proportion of the experimental groups (70%) than the control group (55%) reported that they “often” incorporated the feedback they received into subsequent drafts when revising their writing.

TABLE 5
FREQUENCY OF INCORPORATING FEEDBACK INTO REVISIONS

Feedback Type	Often	Sometimes
Peer (Experimental)	70%	25%
Teacher (Control)	55%	35%

This finding indicated that peer feedback was perceived as better, more engaging, or easier to incorporate than teacher feedback. Another potential factor is that participants may have seen peer feedback as more applicable to them because it was given by other EFL writers facing similar difficulties.

V. DISCUSSION

Peer review through Google Docs appeared to improve the perceived writing skills and self-efficacy of Saudi female EFL students. In terms of writing skills, this result was consistent with Ebadi and Rahimi’s (2017) study, which found that the writing abilities of students’ who utilized Google Docs for peer feedback improved significantly compared to those who engaged in face-to-face peer feedback. A potential reason behind this result is the real-time collaboration that Google Docs facilitates, in addition to enabling users to exchange ideas with more people (Alharbi, 2019). Similarly, Tathahira (2020) found that such tools could improve the language learning experience and encourage critical thinking, while Afify (2019) noted that they could help students better understand the material. In this study, the participants’ engagement in such feedback activities provided ample opportunities for exposure to various perspectives and styles of writing. This, in turn, could have had a positive impact on their writing skills and thinking. The participants’ progress in specific writing domains, such as content, organization, vocabulary, and grammar may be attributed to the collaborative nature of the feedback process.

This study advances the literature by applying theory to actual EFL writing classes. According to previous research, peer feedback offers a special kind of instruction where students may gain knowledge on different aspects of writing by receiving comments on their writing and giving comments on others’ writing (Bradley & Thoušny, 2017). Similarly, the findings of the present study suggested that feedback activities in Google Docs helped the participants improve their writing skills. In this way, the findings support using similar tools in EFL classes, in agreement with previous calls for using such tools in a student-centered context (Alharbi, 2019).

Consistent with previous studies, this study reported higher self-efficacy by the experimental groups, noting that peer feedback could boost students’ confidence and their writing skills (Sackstein, 2017). This indicated that peer feedback allowed students to be active learners, resulting in greater self-esteem and a stronger motivation to learn. It is likely that Google Docs provided opportunities for more relevant feedback, and this contributed to the increase in the self-efficacy scores in the experimental groups compared to the control group. This finding corroborates previous studies which reported that when performed in certain ways, peer feedback on writing may be more helpful than teacher feedback (Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017). This is especially the case when peer feedback is aided by digital technology. A key

component of the study was the peer feedback process using Google Docs. The results suggested that the use of this tool enhanced the effectiveness and efficiency of the feedback process (cf. Alharbi & Alqefari, 2021). This agreed with Vengadasalam's (2021) and Tathahira's (2020) suggestion that digital tools could encourage more critical thinking on the part of students while facilitating a more learner-centered approach to education. As such, the findings support the literature claiming that this and similar tools could offer more satisfactory feedback on EFL writing.

VI. CONCLUSION

The current study investigated how peer feedback through Google Docs could influence Saudi female EFL learners' perceived writing skills and self-efficacy. The results demonstrated that the experimental groups outperformed the control group in terms of perceived content, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. Far more participants in the experimental groups found the feedback they received to be "very useful" than the control group, suggesting they perceived that type of feedback to be highly relevant and engaging. These same participants also showed a much higher rise in self-efficacy scores after the experiment compared to the control group, a result suggesting the value of this strategy when it comes to boosting EFL writers' self-confidence.

The results also indicated that providing EFL learners with the opportunity to utilize Google Docs (or similar tools) for peer feedback activities is likely to make them accept and incorporate peer comments, which can eventually lead to greater writing proficiency and confidence. While the limitations of the study made it impossible to generalize the findings beyond the sample, the results still demonstrated that incorporating collaborative platforms like Google Docs could offer considerable benefits to EFL learners. This study also expands the current literature on learner self-efficacy and peer feedback in language learning. Furthermore, the empirical data that the study collected could be used to improve language learning and teaching and for further research, as outlined below.

VII. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, educational institutions and teachers could leverage digital tools like Google Docs to make EFL writing classes more learner-centric, interactive, engaging, and effective. The study also recommends using peer review to complement traditional teacher-based reviews of students' work. In addition, the results of the present study could encourage curriculum designers and policymakers to consider these tools in the formation of education policy and the curriculum.

The current study could serve as a foundation for future research on technology-enhanced L2 writing. For example, future research could explore the long-term effects of online peer feedback on EFL learners' writing skills and self-efficacy. Since the participants in this study were largely homogenous in terms of proficiency level, age, gender, and nationality, future research could incorporate a more diverse sample to increase the generalizability of the findings. For instance, studies could seek to replicate the results of this study in other countries or contexts. Future studies could also use different data collection methods, such as interviews, to collect qualitative data that would complement the quantitative results of this study. While the current findings are promising, more experimental studies are needed to identify and assess the most effective aspects of peer feedback and thereby inform teaching and curriculum development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all the people who facilitated this project including administrators, teachers and the research participants for their cooperation in this project.

FUNDING

This work was funded and supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia [Grant No. KFU242262].

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