Integrating Peer Support and the Use of AI-Based Writing Assistants for Improving Academic Writing in a Higher Education Classroom Setting

Martina Behrens – Language Centre of the Universities in the Land of Bremen (SZHB), DE
Anika Müller-Karabil – Language Centre of the Universities in the Land of Bremen (SZHB), DE

Abstract

Academic writing is a way of learning how to think critically. Recently, (Predictive) writing assistants have become available for students and tutors in language learning and using them involves employing an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based tool that can suggest words, phrases, and even complete sentences. While these tools can be valuable for improving academic writing skills through immediate feedback, they are not teaching students how to think. Still, students are required to edit and curate, forcing them to engage deeper with the language than without the AI-writing assistant. As such, peer support can provide a human element, offering personalised feedback, insights, and encouragement.

While there is ample research on the benefits of peer feedback for the writing process, certain aspects have been under-explored. Namely, how students approach and interact with AI-based feedback and how they perceive the combination of human-based peer feedback and AI-based tool feedback during their academic writing process. These questions form the premise of the teacher-led intervention project. Through an iterative cycle of intervention and research, we sought to explore students' experiences of combining different feedback modes (peer-based and AI-based) in English academic writing courses at C1.2 level. Our main motivation is to better understand and improve teaching practice and establish suitable support programmes, encouraging learners to engage with feedback in a time-pressured curriculum.

The research project took a systematic and collaborative approach, following these steps: (1) a questionnaire to assess students' perceptions before the intervention, (2) an

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intervention integrating AI tools with peer feedback, and (3) conducting focus groups to identify challenges.
Our findings are twofold: First, students perceived peer feedback as meaningful, trustworthy, and memorable, encouraging collaboration and interaction that positively impacted the learning process. Second, AI-based feedback, importantly, students understood the limitations of tool feedback in their learning process.
These findings highlight the need for teaching strategies that explicitly guide students in critically evaluating and combining peer and AI-based feedback.

1. Introduction

Learning languages requires educational spaces that enable learners and teachers to meet new challenges and attain skills in and for a rapidly changing learning and work environment. Such spaces, e.g. a language course in higher education, can be created through individual approaches to learning, which are not restricted by traditional curriculum but manifested in lifelong learning.

The growing emphasis on lifelong learning underpins the need for language curricula to equip learners with the skills to engage with evolving digital tools across personal and academic contexts and foster active self-reflection. (Predictive) Writing assistants represent a relatively recent development in language education, broadening the traditional scope of language curricula by introducing adaptive support mechanisms that influence the writing process and outcomes. While predictive writing assistance supports learners in generating a text, writing assistants support students in improving or correcting texts they have already authored. This emphasis on the utilisation of (predictive) writing assistants in academic writing classes (C1.2 level) in higher education stems from the necessity to determine the extent to which certain parts (e.g. fine-tuning grammar and vocabulary accuracy) of the traditional curriculum need to be rethought. Engaging with others' perspectives may encourage learners to reassess and deepen their own understanding of their work. Through giving and receiving feedback, learners can develop greater awareness of their choices and areas for growth.

In this teacher-led research project, we employ an educational intervention that explores how students engage with peer- and AI-based feedback

or a combination of both, and how these two forms of feedback support learning how to think and write for the academic context from learners' perspectives. Based on the findings, we argue that while (predictive) AI assistants can be valuable tools for improving writing skills through immediate feedback, they are not teaching students how to think independently. Peer support can provide an irreplaceable human element, offering personalised feedback, insights, and encouragement, impelling active self-reflection as students engage with different perspectives on their work while at the same time taking the workload off tutors. With that in mind, we suggest creating space in the curriculum to establish feedback practice in the classroom and through suitable support for learners to engage meaningfully and constructively with AI-based feedback.

2. Theoretical Approach

In the context of higher education, it is widely accepted that while adults are capable of learning, they cannot be directly instructed in a traditional, transmissive sense. The adage suggests, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." Applied to the language learning setting, this paradigm implies that content is not internalised passively, but may serve as a catalyst for highly individual and experience-dependent cognitive processes (Siebert, 2011).

Both internal and external conditions shape learning. Roth (2011) explains that learning success requires confidence in one's abilities, general motivation to learn, specific motivation for the content, ability to concentrate, intelligence, diligence and perseverance. It also requires an appreciation that learning takes time, and trust and understanding between the tutor, the individual student, and peers. Previous experience and knowledge are significant for mutual understanding. Learners, therefore, are more likely to engage with content that resonates with prior knowledge and is perceived as relevant.

On the other hand, learning may be stimulated by the observation of divergence, for instance, when a peer's contribution markedly differs from one's understanding. Resolving such dissonance within structured, dialogic exchanges can facilitate learning. While the recognition of difference may initially cause cognitive disturbance, it also holds the potential to initiate consensual processes that, in the best case, make change and learning possible.

Dweck (2006, 2015) was one of the first to explore the relevance of students' mindsets to their (academic) achievement and motivation. In her work, she distinguished between fixed and growth mindsets. She showed that students who perceived their abilities as something flexible and believed in the possible development of intelligence outperformed those who thought these characteristics to be static or fixed (Dweck, 2015, 2017). As Sousa and Clark (2024) point out in their recent review on academic growth mindsets, a growth mindset in adults also seems to be linked to greater feedback openness and a higher motivation to learn from mistakes (Ng, 2018). Hence, fostering a growth mindset amongst students will likely strengthen their perception of (peer, or any kind of) feedback as a tool/medium for personal and academic growth. As such, self-directed and socially mediated learning are not dichotomous but mutually reinforcing dimensions of a holistic learning process (Roth 2011; Siebert 2011).

Tutors are confronted with these interrelated factors in their daily work when planning lessons/ interventions, having no direct control over what goes on in learners' minds, but with a great opportunity at hand to create a framework which initiates consensual processes which, in the best case, make change and learning possible. Engaging learners in meaningful activities and sustaining the idea that academic writing abilities can improve and grow through effort, learning, practice, and feedback. Students learn not only for but also through interaction in higher education (Evans, 2011).

Social interaction, particularly peer feedback, is central to supporting this process. For this reason, peer feedback is deliberately positioned alongside writing assistants' feedback in this study. Both forms are commonly cited in the literature as the two primary alternatives to tutor feedback (Carless & Bond, 2018), and we argue that while both differ in many aspects, they equally complement each other.

First, peer feedback and feedback from AI writing assistants offer contrasting affordances regarding timing and delivery. More precisely, writing assistant feedback is characterised by its immediacy, offering students real-time input on their writing through automated tools. In contrast, peer feedback tends to be delayed, as it requires time for learners to review and respond to each other's work. Moreover, the two feedback forms differ in their

underlying mechanisms, textual focus, and pedagogical implications. Peer feedback involves a collaborative exchange in which fellow students critically engage with one another's texts, offering constructive comments and suggestions. Research shows that peer feedback often addresses deeper-level writing features, such as the text structure, line of argument or content (Vuogan & Li, 2022). In contrast, feedback from writing assistants relies on algorithmic analysis to deliver targeted recommendations to improve writing, typically focusing on surface-level aspects of writing, including grammar, vocabulary, syntax and mechanical errors (e.g. Luo & Liu, 2017; Fu et al., 2022).

While each form has limitations, both contribute uniquely to the individual learning process. On the one hand, AI-generated feedback can increase efficiency and motivation by providing instant, personalised responses. As Zhang (2020) points out, AI-driven writing evaluation has the potential to enhance learner engagement; Nazari et al. (2021) call AI-powered writing assistants efficient tools to promote learning behaviour. On the other hand, peer feedback supports the development of evaluative judgement and critical thinking (e.g. Vuogan & Li, 2022); Nicol et al (2014) contend that especially the process of producing feedback for peers can foster evaluative judgement and metacognitive awareness. Similarly, Zhang & Hyland (2023) found that peer feedback has potential to enhance student engagement. However, effective peer feedback does not occur automatically. It requires practice and time, and many studies therefore emphasise the importance of the training that students need to become competent and confident in giving and receiving peer feedback (Caspari, 2022, Levi Altstaedter, 2016).

In line with this, feedback is understood in our study following Carless and Bond's (2018) definition as "a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use them to enhance their work or learning strategies." (p.1). This definition highlights learners' active and interpretive role in navigating and integrating different forms of feedback, whether human or machine-generated, into their academic development. It is precisely learners' perception of this interplay between the two different forms of feedback that our study aims to shed further light on in the specific context given. Against the background of the rapidly changing use and performance of AI-based feedback (and writing) tools and their impact on the human writing process and the different forms of feedback that shape this

process, we are particularly interested in gaining exploratory insights into the following three research questions:

1) How do students in an academic writing course at C1.2 level approach and interact with AI-based feedback from writing assistants?
2) What is their perception of peer feedback within the course context?
3) How do students perceive the combination of human-based peer feedback and AI-based tool feedback during their academic writing process?

3. Methodology

In 2023, the SZHB began exploring the implications of artificial intelligence for teaching and learning in academic writing. As part of this initiative, we designed this teacher-led research project to inquire how students perceived interaction with AI-generated and human feedback as part of the learning process. As such, the purpose of the research is twofold: 1) posing a question for exploration which arises from current technological advancement in language learning, and 2) being in a position to evaluate, improve and steer decision making for curriculum design changes. We recognise that locational, managerial, and social context significantly shape the process and outcome, and the need to account for the context in the analysis (Cohen et al, 2017).

This small-scale intervention was implemented in the functioning of two C1.2-level courses: Advanced Academic English: Reading and Writing and Advanced Academic English for Business Studies and Economics: Reading and Writing at the language centre. A total of 12 students participated in the project, including participation in two focus groups. It aimed to support students in learning to access and interpret feedback from multiple sources—AI tools and peers—and use that feedback in forward-looking ways. Areas of focus included assignment planning, grammar and vocabulary, managing stress, and unpacking feedback.

The module's overall aim was to foster a sense of respect for intellectual labour amongst the learners and support their gradual enculturation into academic communities of practice. The intervention took place at the beginning of the module. The participants at C1.2 level already possessed a working proficiency in the target language and could increasingly participate in academic discourses. Their engagement extended beyond acquiring the tech-

nical mechanics of academic writing, such as citation practices and avoiding plagiarism, to writing texts in different genres and expectations; accepting, modifying, or rejecting writing assistants' suggestions based on rhetorical goals, and understanding peer feedback.

3.1 The Structure of the Intervention

The task was to learn how to write a summary of an academic journal article in preparation for a literature review. Learners already had a particular understanding of a descriptive summary of a text from school.
To create a framework which fosters consensual processes, we built the intervention around the following four assumptions:

1) Trust and successful communication between peers, learners and tutors are essential.
2) Learning takes time. Learners require time. A gradual release to accomplish the task is helpful for learning.
3) Learning requires diligence and perseverance.
4) Learning requires confidence in one's abilities.

How was the intervention built?
Ad 1) The Learners and the tutor spent quite some time getting to know each other. Before the task, various unrelated activities allowed learners to develop self-awareness and identify who they feel understood and are understood by in their peer group.
Ad 2) Learners gradually discovered the process of writing a summary, working with their own drafts based on one article throughout this module phase. At the same time, they trained in two types of feedback: (A) An AI-based writing assistant (Grammarly, free version) and (B) peer feedback.

Learners engaged in training on how to use an AI-based writing assistant "upfront" in the writing process. The training included practical instruction on applying the various functions, exercises on accepting or rejecting AI-generated feedback based on texts from previous classes, and discussions about the affordances of their decisions. Following this training, learners could speak to peers or the tutor about their experiences and questions.

The dialogic process in peer feedback is crucial for the intended learning process. Learners bring different approaches to giving feedback, and in the intervention, the training in providing and receiving feedback underwent several stages. Further, the dialogue was private to the learning partners and followed Pendleton's easy-to-learn feedback method (van de Ridder, 2023). The writer opens the dialogue by saying what s/he thinks went well, and for the feedback provider to add positive aspects. In a second step, the feedback receiver states what s/he thinks could be done differently, and the feedback provider adds one or two ideas. The closure of the dialogue summarises the points on how to move forward.

The feedback process was pre-structured to ensure the conversation included relevant aspects (excluding grammar and spelling). Regarding what had been discussed and practised in class, the feedback gradually included more aspects from "big" to "small" (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2025), aiming to encourage learners to give and receive feedback, clarify meaning, and ask or provide specific points.

Ad 3) Learners returning to the text and improving require diligence and perseverance.

Ad 4) Gradual release and the requirement for self-reflection support confidence in one's abilities.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

All students participating in the above-named courses were invited by the research team to participate in focus group interviews. One interview was conducted in each course, with a total of 12 participants (course 1 n=5, course 2 n=7). Both interviews were conducted by the two authors of this paper, following semi-standardised interview guidelines, i.e. guidelines with pre-defined questions to ensure comparability of the leading stimulus, while allowing sufficient flexibility to respond to emerging themes and question impulses. The two interviews are comparable in length (interview 1 = 50 minutes; interview 2 = 43 minutes). Both interviews were transcribed using MaxQDA Transcription; the transcripts were then manually checked for accuracy.

The analysis of the interviews followed Kuckartz's (2018) approach to qualitative content analysis. The coding scheme consisted of categories and codes

that were deductively derived from the research questions and the literature. The coding process was supported by a trained student assistant and double-checked by the two authors. Table 1 provides an overview of our coding scheme.

Table 1 – Overview of Coding scheme

Categories	Codes
AI tools for language learning (general experience)	- Limitations and/or „negative“ use-scenarios - Benefits and/or „positive“ use-scenarios
Feedback from AI Tools (course context)	- Limitations/disadvantages - Benefits/advantages
Feedback from peers (course context)	- Limitations/disadvantages - Benefits/advantages

Given the small sample size and the specific course context, our study's findings cannot be generalised to other contexts; however, as is typical of action research projects, they yield valuable insights for informing teaching and learning processes.

4. Results

We will present our findings alongside our three research questions in the following.

4.1 Perception of Writing Assistants

Participants in our study identified many advantages of using AI-based writing assistants during the writing process. First, they appreciate the constant availability of the tools and perceive their prompt reactions as a valuable form of interim feedback. Writing assistants were described as a potential source of inspiration, e.g. on how to rephrase sentences. Some participants noted that they intentionally tried memorising "good" suggestions for future writing. Additionally, some students attributed a reflection-initiation role to

the feedback from the assistants and described how they engaged in deeper thinking about specific suggestions or flagged passages, including the active decision to reject the system's suggestions, as the following quote shows:

> And then [the writing assistant] somehow makes a suggestion where I should change tenses or some word or something and I looked at it and thought that would somehow change the meaning a bit and I don't mean it that way. That's why I would rather leave it as I have written it. (I1, S5)

Others mentioned how the writings assistants' feedback helped sharpening their awareness for their own writing, e.g. by identifying and thus slowly minimizing frequently occurring errors. These are positive use-scenarios and point towards the use of writing assistants as learning tools.

At the same time, participants openly discuss the opposite effect, namely, a form of overreliance on the assistive systems unrelated to active engagement and reflection. They talk about the danger of "laziness" and stress that under certain circumstances, such as time pressure or low motivation, they are more willing to accept suggestions from AI assistants without critically reflecting whether they are correct or make sense at all for their own text.

Concerning the focus / scope of feedback of writing assistants, participants showed clear awareness of their capabilities and limitations. They recognized that writing assistants primarily address surface-level text features and provide correction on grammar, vocabulary or syntax, while not considering the entire text, its structure or argument.

> Does it make sense, this text? Does it have a logical flow or does it not? And AI, for example, cannot suggest such aspects. (I1, S6)

4.2 Perception of Peer Feedback

Participants in our study discussed various positive aspects of peer feedback. First, they perceived peer-feedback as highly specific to their individual text and needs, with a clear emphasis on comprehensibility of individual passages as well as the overall structure and coherence of the text.

> […] and peer feedback can maintain an overview and see the structure, whether there is a clear thread, whether the logic is coherent. (I2, S7)

This focus on the entirety of the text - the "whole piece" - is considered a major benefit, particularly for fostering broader reflections on one's own writing. Participants also attribute trustworthiness to (human-based) peer feedback, primarily because peers consider structural elements and writing conventions discussed in the course context; as such, this feedback is grounded in a shared understanding of objectives and a commonly established baseline.

> Well, I also find peer feedback much nicer and somehow more meaningful for me. (...) They also know what they are doing. (I2, S9)

Participants emphasized that specific peer feedback often has a lasting impression, extending beyond the moment of feedback reception, resulting in a sense of sustainability and further critical engagement with one's own writing, also due to both the holistic and specific scope of the feedback from peers:

> That sort [of peer feedback] just stays in my head more because I don't just get a rewording, I can still write it in my own words, but I am given a clear point of criticism that I can work on. (I2, S3)

Moreover, the opportunity to read and engage with peers' texts within the same academic context is considered beneficial and an opportunity to foster mutual learning. Overall, the data indicates that participants hold a positive attitude towards peer feedback and its collaborative approach. Rather than focusing on challenges in peer feedback, the participants highlighted its constructive aspects, and their joy in exchanging and collaborating with peers, appreciating the human element.

4.3 Perception of the Combination of Both Types of Feedback

Within our data participants did not explicitly discuss the possible benefits or challenges of directly combining peer and AI-based feedback. Rather, they discussed them as two separate types of feedback, describing their charac-

teristics and analysing their respective benefits and challenges. Implicitly, however, and this also becomes clear in Section 4.1. and 4.2, participants compared the two types of feedback, and showed a clear understanding of the usefulness of them for respective areas in their writing and learning process (e.g. surface vs- deeper level).

5. Discussion

The results of this study show that participants displayed a nuanced understanding of the different functions, strengths, and limitations of AI-generated and peer feedback.

With regard to AI feedback, participants generally perceived it as applicable, particularly for addressing surface-level issues such as grammar, spelling and sentence clarity. However, they also noted its limitations in addressing deeper, more conceptual aspects of writing. This is consistent with previous research highlighting the largely surface-level focus of AI-generated feedback (Fu et al., 2022; Luo & Lui, 2017). Additionally, participants stressed that their engagement with AI-generated feedback varied, depending on factors such as amount of time or level of motivation. This clearly points towards the necessity to openly discuss the (mis)use of writing assistants in class and the importance of fostering AI literacy - in our case especially the introduction of strategies for dealing with feedback from AI writing assistants in an informed way, in order to consequently prevent "blind" acceptance of automated suggestions. Nevertheless, and similar to Zhang's (2021) finding, participants acknowledged that AI feedback could, under certain circumstances, positively influence their engagement with the writing process on a surface level, and stimulate a learning process, e.g. regarding greater awareness of specific types of repetitive errors.

Peer feedback was perceived as a more holistic and sustained form of writing support. Participants welcomed that peer comments often addressed the text's overall coherence, structure and logical progression, rather than just its surface features. This focus on deeper text-level concerns is consistent with previous research on peer feedback practices [e.g., Vuogan & Li, 2022]. Furthermore, peer feedback was noted for its specificity: participants reported receiving concrete, actionable suggestions targeted at specific passages, a

quality that contributed to their perception of peer feedback as trustworthy (and helpful). The reference to course-taught text structure criteria appears to further reinforce the trustworthiness attributed to peer feedback. Another outcome points towards the perceived sustainability of peer feedback. Participants reported reflecting deeper and/or longer on peer comments; this indicates that peer feedback contributed not only to immediate revisions, but also yields potential for long(er)-term learning processes. This kind of reflective engagement represents a crucial step towards the development of independent critical thinking skills, a benefit often attributed to peer feedback in the literature (e.g., Nicol et al., 2014, Vuogan & Li, 2022).

Notably, none of the participants in our study mentioned concerns regarding the potentially low quality of peer feedback as a limitation, a concern which plays a frequent role in the scholarly discourse. This might be attributed to the focus group setting, where participants might not have felt comfortable criticising their present peers for the quality of their feedback. Alternatively, this could also indicate two other considerations: (1) the successful implementation of peer feedback as a technique during the intervention and (2) the tendency of peer reviewers to concentrate primarily on aspects of structure and coherence and thus areas in which they were considered more proficient than the writing assistants. In contrast, the writing assistants were considered more proficient regarding surface-level linguistic aspects. This suggests that students perceive the two feedback sources as complementary, valuing both feedback forms as relevant and helpful for specific areas to develop their academic writing skills.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Our findings underscore the importance of teaching strategies that explicitly guide students in critically evaluating and combining peer and AI-based feedback. While AI-based writing assistants can meaningfully enhance efficiency by offering immediate, targeted surface-level suggestions, peer feedback tends to support the development of higher-order writing skills through engagement with deeper textual and argumentative structures. Both forms of feedback have the potential to foster reflective learning in certain areas, yet peer feedback appears to be especially strong in fostering critical thinking,

self-confidence in one's writing abilities, and collaborative engagement. To adequately prepare students for a future shaped by both human and technological collaboration, curricula must evolve to introduce and support blended feedback practices that empower learners to take ownership of their writing and learning processes (agency). This must go hand in hand with iterative training sessions to implement routines and expertise for giving and receiving peer feedback – a procedure that requires time and dedicated curricular space. At the same time, our findings point towards the importance of AI literacy, particularly with regard to evaluation, selecting and learning from automated suggestions in a meaningful way. Specifically, this topic is being dealt with in a self-learning module which we are currently preparing at our Centre. To further elucidate the optimal balance between AI writing assistant and peer feedback in a language classroom in an intervention study.

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