# Students' Feedback to Task-Based online English Writing

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Abstract: Feedback in second language writing has been of perpetual interest in second language education (Lee, 2017) <sup>[1]</sup>. Meanwhile, the development of new technologies presents new challenges to what and how feedback should be given. This study investigated college students' feedback on task-based English writing tasks on an online platform, the Pigai network, which is a nationwide English writing website that provides free English review and modification for university students in China. Sixty-three first-year and second-year undergraduates from a university in western Guangdong Province of China participated in this study. Under the guidance of literature and theories of task-based language instruction, methods such as interviews and online surveys were conducted to analyze undergraduates' feedback on online English writing tasks. A study on students' feedback toward online English writing tasks will help shed light on how online English writing can complement offline English learning.

#### 1. Introduction

This study investigates college students' feedback on task-based English writing using an online platform called Pigai Network (https://www.pigai.org). Pigai is a software tailored for domestic English teaching and learning. Teachers can assign writing tasks through the network, and students can complete them at any time and place using internet-connected devices. A task, in particular, is a meaning-based language activity with some kind of 'gap' (e.g, reasoning gap) and learners use their language resources to achieve the communicative purpose and produce an outcome [2]. This study aims to shed light on the unique features of task-based online English writing, students' feedback on such tasks, and the role of Pigai Network in fostering independent learning.

## 2. Literature Review

Corrective feedback (CF) in second language (L2) writing has been a topic of extensive research and debate over the past few decades. This literature review synthesizes key findings to explore the effectiveness of different feedback approaches, the impact of feedback explicitness, and the role of student engagement in L2 writing development.

## 2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Corrective Feedback

Research on CF in L2 writing is rooted in two primary theoretical paradigms: cognitive-interactionism and sociocultural theory (SCT). The cognitive-interactionist perspective, as articulated by Lyster and Ranta (1997) [3], categorizes CF into explicit and implicit strategies. Explicit correction involves directly providing the correct form, while implicit strategies like recasts reformulate the learner's utterance without overtly highlighting the error. This paradigm emphasizes the role of input and interaction in promoting noticing and uptake, which are considered crucial for language acquisition [4].

In contrast, SCT, as applied by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) <sup>[5]</sup>, conceptualizes CF as a mediated process within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). From this perspective, effective CF is graduated, adjusting to the learner's level to facilitate self-correction. The focus is on scaffolding that gradually reduces assistance, enabling learners to internalize linguistic forms <sup>[6]</sup>. These theoretical differences have shaped research designs and interpretations of CF effectiveness.

## 2.2 Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback: Key Empirical Findings

A central question in CF research is whether explicit or implicit feedback is more effective. Ferris and Roberts (2001) compared three feedback conditions: error coding, underlining without coding, and no feedback [7].

Ellis et al. (2006) investigated the effects of implicit (recasts) and explicit (metalinguistic feedback) CF on L2 grammar acquisition <sup>[4]</sup>. They found that explicit feedback led to greater immediate gains, while implicit feedback had more sustained effects. This highlights a trade-off between short-term accuracy and long-term retention.

Research influenced by SCT has focused on graduated feedback, which aims to elicit self-correction through scaffolding. Erlam et al. (2013) compared graduated feedback with explicit correction in writing conferences <sup>[6]</sup>.

Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) documented how tutors adjusted feedback to gradually reduce assistance, demonstrating that learners required less explicit feedback over time <sup>[5]</sup>. However, this finding was not replicated in Erlam et al.'s (2013) study, possibly due to differences in methodology or learner characteristics <sup>[6]</sup>.

With the rise of technology, research has compared automated writing evaluation (AWE) with teacher feedback. Zhang and Hyland (2018) conducted a case study of students engaging with both types of feedback [8]. They found that while AWE was efficient and timely, teacher feedback fostered deeper cognitive engagement. Students preferred the specificity of teacher feedback but appreciated the immediacy of AWE.

Longitudinal studies have explored the lasting impact of CF. Ferris et al. (2000) found that students who received consistent error feedback showed gradual improvements in accuracy, though the effects were modest <sup>[9]</sup>. Student engagement emerged as a critical mediator: highly engaged learners made greater gains, regardless of feedback type <sup>[8]</sup>.

Learner proficiency and beliefs significantly influence feedback effectiveness. Low-proficiency learners often require more explicit feedback, while advanced learners benefit from implicit strategies <sup>[10]</sup>. Student beliefs about feedback also matter: those who value error correction are more likely to engage with feedback and improve <sup>[11]</sup>.

Not all errors respond equally to feedback. Treatable errors (e.g., verb tense) are more amenable to correction than untreatable errors (e.g., word choice). Focused feedback on specific error categories is more effective than comprehensive correction <sup>[1]</sup>. For example, targeting verb tense and articles has been shown to yield significant gains <sup>[6]</sup>.

The instructional context also plays a role. In exam-driven environments, teachers may prioritize

grades over feedback, reducing its effectiveness <sup>[12]</sup>. Feedback modality (written vs. oral, individual vs. group) affects uptake. Oral conferences allow for negotiation and clarification, enhancing engagement <sup>[6]</sup>, while written feedback provides a permanent record for reference.

Explicit feedback is efficient for treatable errors, while graduated feedback promotes deeper processing for complex structures. Teachers should match feedback explicitness to learner needs and error type <sup>[6,7]</sup>. AWE systems like Pigai offer timely feedback on form, freeing teachers to focus on content and higher-order writing issues <sup>[8]</sup>. However, human feedback remains crucial for addressing nuanced errors and fostering learner engagement.

To maximize feedback effectiveness, teachers should cultivate student engagement by explaining the purpose of feedback, modeling revision strategies, and creating a supportive classroom environment. Engaged learners are more likely to process feedback deeply and apply it to future writing [8]. Many studies highlight inconsistencies in teacher feedback practices [9,10].

## 3. Research Aim and Research Questions

Given the aforementioned discussion on the special features of task-based online English writing in such studies, this study investigates students' feedback towards task-based online English Writing in China. The research aims to answer three questions (RQs):

- RQ1. What are the special features of Task-Based online English Writing?
- RQ2. What is students' feedback towards both non-targeted and targeted (e.g., CET-oriented) online writing tasks?
- RQ3. How do students develop independent learning through task-based online writing compared with senior high school?

### 4. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed in the research, with quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain an insight into students' feedback to task-based online English writing. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered for this study. The main instruments for collecting quantitative data involved four writing tasks. The qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews. A questionnaire (Appendix 1) and an interview (Appendix 2) are methods to conduct this research.

### **4.1 Participants**

Table 1 Demographic information of the interviewees

					Prefer Pigai than	Improving CET writing
Participant	Age	Sex	Major	Proficiency	traditional correction	under teacher's guidance
A	20	F	Primary education yr2	High	Y	Y
В	19	F	Financial Management yr2	Intermediate	Y	Y
С	20	F	Geography info. yr2	High	N	Y
D	20	M	Primary education yr2	Low	Y	N

Note: Y=Yes, N= No, M=Male, F=Female

The Participants were 63 second-year undergraduates (25 males and 38 females) from a university in western Guangdong Province of China. Their ages range from 18--20. They were all from the researcher's classes. The participants were interviewed since they have used Pigai network soon after they entered the university. They were assigned four articles, among which one was free writing and three were related to CET in Pigai network since they would take CET 4 or CET6 at the end of this term (June, 2023). These 8 questions are closely related to the research aims. Four among the 63

participants took part in the interview section (See Table 1).

#### 4.2 Research Procedure

This research plan focused on the structure of students' writings, and made more deep and detailed analysis of CET writing samples to help students have better master of CET writing. 16-week research plan was prepared by the researcher since the teaching time last 16 weeks for a term in this university.

# 4.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' feedback on task-based online English writing tasks facilitated by the Pigai Network.

#### 5. Results

### 5.1 Analysis of Questionnaire

The data from the questionnaire (See Appendix1) provides insights into students' perceptions of the effectiveness of teacher guidance, the utility of the Pigai (PG) network's automated scoring and feedback system, and the overall impact of online writing tasks on their English writing performance. Below is a more structured and logical analysis of the data, organized by key themes.

Theme 1. Effectiveness of Teacher Guidance

Question 1: Teachers' guidance is useful to students before finishing CET-4/6 writing tasks. 23.81% strongly agree, 26.98% are unsure, and 28.57% strongly disagree. It can be seen that there is a significant divide among students regarding the usefulness of teacher guidance. The findings highlight a need for differentiated guidance strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs.

Theme 2. Student Engagement with PG Network Feedback

Question 2: After finishing the composition, I will carefully read the writing revision suggestions by Pigai network and then revise it. 19.05% strongly agree, 23.81% are unsure, and 23.81% disagree. Question 3: I will revise my article according to sample essays of CET for comparison and modification as well as suggestions by PG network. 19.05% strongly agree, 23.81% are unsure, and 23.81% disagree. In both questions, only about 19% of students strongly agree that they actively engage with PG network feedback or use it for revision. A significant portion (23.81%) are unsure or disagree, indicating a lack of confidence in using the feedback provided by the system.

Theme 3. Perceived Impact of PG Network on Writing Performance

Question 4: I can improve my writing scores by making revisions based on the suggestions by the automatic grading system of PG network. 14.29% strongly agree, 30.16% are unsure, and 22.22% strongly disagree. Question 5: I can improve writing skills according to suggestions by PG network through CET writing tasks this term. 19.05% strongly agree, 30.16% are unsure, and 25.4% disagree. Question 8: Writing scores in CET can be improved through finishing online writing tasks and revising them according to PG network. 20.63% strongly agree, 33.33% are unsure, and 19.05% disagree. Across these questions, only a small percentage of students (14.29% to 20.63%) strongly believe that the PG network helps improve their writing scores or skills. A large proportion (30.16% to 33.33%) are unsure, and a significant minority (19.05% to 25.4%) disagree. This could indicate that the feedback provided by the system is not sufficiently tailored or actionable to meet students' needs.

Theme 4. Role of Teacher Guidance in Conjunction with PG Network

Question 6: On the basis of the writing feedback of the automatic scoring system of PG network,

it is necessary for teachers to guide and comment on compositions. 20.63% strongly agree, 31.75% are unsure, and 15.87% disagree. While 20.63% of students strongly agree that teacher guidance is necessary even with PG network feedback, a larger proportion (31.75%) are unsure, and a smaller but significant group (15.87%) disagree. There is a mixed response regarding the necessity of teacher guidance alongside PG network feedback. Some students see value in combining automated feedback with human input, but many are uncertain about the added benefit of teacher guidance.

Theme 5. PG Network and Independent Learning

Question 7: On the basis of task-based writing, it is helpful to cultivate students' ability of independent learning according to the automatic correction system of PG network. 20.63% strongly agree, 31.75% are unsure, and 20.63% disagree. Only 20.63% of students strongly agree that the PG network fosters independent learning, while a significant portion (31.75%) are unsure, and an equal percentage (20.63%) disagree.

To conclude, the data reveals a gap between the potential of the PG network as a tool for improving English writing and its actual impact on students. While some students see value in the system, many are uncertain or skeptical about its effectiveness. To bridge this gap, improvements in the system's feedback mechanisms, better integration with teacher guidance, and more targeted training for students on how to use the system effectively are recommended. Additionally, fostering a clearer understanding of how automated feedback can complement traditional teaching methods may help increase student engagement and confidence in Pigai network.

#### 5.2 Analysis of Interview Data

Four students from different majors participated in the interview. Before interviewing, we had a small chat about the overall impression on Pigai network In-depth interviews (See Appendix 2) were conducted. Four themes behind the interview data were unveiled:

Theme 1: Impact of Targeted vs. Non-Targeted Writing

From interviewing students from different majors, the researcher got important results from comparison between no-clear-aim writing and targeted CET writing assigned on Pigai.

There are two typical examples. Student C (She was not the researcher's student last term) stated, "The former teacher arranged the compositions without clear purposes and did not analyze writings for us last term, so I did not know how to write English articles. This term, the new teacher often explained and analyzed the tasks of Pigai and immediately gave suggestions on revising the grammar of the words, which greatly has improved my writing ability, and helped me know how to write an English composition." Student B (she was the researcher's student last term) said, "My writing skills has been strengthened a lot this term. The teacher assigned the third writing task according to CET 6 prediction composition, whose topic was about writing a proverb. Luckily, the writing topic of CET 6 (2023, June) happened to be about a proverb. Because I have practiced the same type of composition, I quickly wrote out the composition in CET 6 this June and felt my writing ability had been improved."

Theme 2: Students' feedback to advantage and disadvantage of Pigai network

Students generally praised Pigai for its instantaneous, detailed feedback, which addressed vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure more efficiently than traditional teacher feedback.

Student A agreed, "Compared with the teacher's manual correction, Pigai gives scores and feedback comments in real time after students submit their compositions, so that students can actively revise and submit them repeatedly according to the revision suggestions of Pigai network. In addition to providing feedback, Pigai network also provides many suggestions on vocabulary and sentence patterns."

Student B supposed, "I believe that using the online writing website of Pigai has aroused my enthusiasm for independent learning, stimulated my interest and enthusiasm in writing, and enhanced

my writing confidence."

Student C pointed out, "I correct my writings according to feedback from Pigai as well as sample writings of CET. I need to know how to write a good CET composition because CET is standard and important to me. I have downloaded some sample writing of CET and analyze them."

However, limitations were also identified. For example, inaccurate error detection appears sometimes. Some students may encounter persistent grammatical error prompts despite correcting their sentences, leading them to cross-check with external resources like Baidu. The network overemphasizes on quantity over quality. The platform's scoring system sometimes prioritized word count over content depth, potentially misrepresenting students' actual writing abilities.

Theme 3: Cultivating Independent Learning Through Pigai

Three-quarters of participants highlighted Pigai's role in fostering autonomous learning skills, particularly among students with intermediate English proficiency.

Student A suggested, "as far as I am concerned, stimulating students' interest in learning is the premise of cultivating self-learning ability. Interest is the best teacher. I feel excited when I get feedback immediately from Pigai network after submitting compositions. I am curious about the results of my compositions. The real-time feedback really stimulates my interest and thirst for knowledge".

Student C mentioned, "As a college student, first of all, I have a determination to pass CET 6. After establishing such a goal of study, I consciously cultivate my independent learning ability by finishing writings on Pigai. I strengthen my independent leaning ability through exploring CET samples writing online and make an analysis of suggestions from Pigai. I improve my CET writings step by step. In the process, my independent learning abilities have been improved".

#### 6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the role of task-based online English writing, particularly through the use of the Pigai Network, in enhancing students' writing skills and fostering independent learning.

In terms of corrective feedback and task-based language teaching, the study's findings align with previous research on the efficacy of corrective feedback in L2 writing. According to Ellis (2003), feedback plays a crucial role in language learning by helping learners notice gaps in their interlanguage and make necessary adjustments <sup>[2]</sup>. The Pigai Network's automated feedback system, which provides real-time corrections on grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, aligns with explicit corrective feedback as defined by Ferris and Roberts (2001) <sup>[7]</sup>. Explicit feedback, which directly identifies errors and provides corrections, has been shown to be more effective in certain contexts, particularly when learners are aware of the feedback and actively engage with it. However, the study also revealed that not all students fully utilized Pigai's feedback, with many expressing uncertainties about its value. This finding resonates with Lyster and Ranta's (1997) observation that explicit feedback may not always prompt learners to actively respond, a phenomenon known as "uptake" <sup>[3]</sup>.

The task-based language teaching (TBLT) framework, as proposed by Ellis (2003), emphasizes the importance of meaning-focused tasks that require learners to use language resources to achieve communicative goals. The Pigai Network's task-based approach, which includes both non-targeted and CET-oriented writing tasks, aligns with this framework. The study found that students who engaged with CET-oriented tasks reported greater satisfaction and perceived improvement in their writing skills. This finding supports Long's (1996) argument that tasks aligned with learners' specific goals (e.g., exam preparation) are more likely to enhance language learning outcomes [13]. The integration of Pigai's feedback with CET-specific tasks also reflects Skehan's (1998) emphasis on the

importance of task design in promoting language development [14].

From perspective of sociocultural theory and independent learning, the study's findings also resonate with sociocultural theory (SCT), particularly Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [15]. The Pigai Network's feedback system can be seen as a form of graduated feedback, as described by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994), where the level of assistance decreases as learners become more proficient [5]. However, the study revealed that some students, particularly those with lower English proficiency, struggled to fully utilize Pigai's feedback, suggesting that the system may not always provide the appropriate level of scaffolding for all learners. This finding highlights the need for more differentiated feedback strategies, as proposed by Bitchener (2008), to accommodate learners at different proficiency levels [16].

The study also explored the role of Pigai in fostering independent learning, a key component of SCT. The findings suggest that Pigai's real-time feedback and gamified scoring system encouraged students to take ownership of their learning process, particularly those with intermediate to high English proficiency. However, the study also revealed that students with lower proficiency levels struggled to engage with the platform independently, suggesting that institutional support and teacher guidance are still necessary to help these learners develop the skills needed for autonomous learning.

The current study builds on the existing literature on corrective feedback in L2 writing, particularly the work of Ferris and Roberts (2001), Ellis et al. (2006), and Bitchener (2008), who have explored the efficacy of different feedback types (e.g., explicit vs. implicit) in promoting language learning. The study contributes to this body of research by examining how automated feedback systems like Pigai can be integrated into task-based language teaching to enhance writing skills. The study also extends the work of Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) on graduated feedback by exploring how automated feedback systems can provide scaffolding for L2 learners. The findings suggest that while Pigai's feedback system can serve as a form of scaffolding, it may not always be sufficient for learners at lower proficiency levels. This highlights the need for more adaptive feedback systems that can adjust the level of assistance based on learners' individual needs.

The findings suggest that while platforms like Pigai offer significant advantages in terms of immediacy and accessibility, their effectiveness depends on how well they are integrated with traditional teaching methods. This aligns with Chapelle's (2001) argument that technology should be used to complement, rather than replace, traditional language teaching practices [17].

These results align with sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), wherein PG's feedback serves as a scaffold within learners' ZPD. However, its efficacy is contingent on task alignment and learner proficiency. The findings also extend Bitchener's (2008) framework by demonstrating that automated feedback systems like PG require integration with human instruction to address complex writing competencies. Future research should explore adaptive feedback mechanisms that dynamically adjust to learner proficiency, ensuring equitable scaffolding across diverse skill levels.

#### 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the role of task-based online English writing in enhancing students' writing skills and fostering independent learning. The findings suggest that while platforms like Pigai offer significant advantages in terms of immediacy and accessibility, their effectiveness depends on how well they are integrated with teacher guidance and task design. By addressing these issues, educators can harness the potential of technology to enhance language learning outcomes and support the development of independent learning skills in L2 learners.

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### **Appendix 1: Detailed information of the questionnaire**

1. Teachers' guidance is useful to students before finishing CET-4 /6 writing tasks.

Scale	Student Number(Total in 63)	Proportion
1	15	23.81%
2	0	0%
3	17	26.98%
4	13	20.63%
5	18	28.57%

2. After finishing the composition, I will carefully read the writing revision suggestions by Pigai network, and then revise it.

Scale	Student Number(Total in 63)	Proportion
1	12	19.05%
2	6	9.52%
3	15	23.81%
4	15	23.81%
5	15	23.81%

3. I will revise my article according to sample essays of CET for comparison and modification as well as suggestions by PG network.

Scale	Student Number(Total in 63)	Proportion
1	12	19.05%
2	6	9.52%
3	15	23.81%
4	15	23.81%
5	15	23.81%

4. I can improve my writing scores by making revision based on the suggestions by the automatic grading system of PG network.

Scale	Student Number(Total in 63)	Proportion
1	9	14.29%
2	9	14.29%
3	19	30.16%
4	12	29.05%
5	14	22.22%

5. I can improve writing skills according to suggestions by PGW through CET writing tasks this term.

Scale	Student Number(Total in 63)	Proportion
1	12	19.05%
2	5	7.94%
3	19	30.16%
4	11	25.4%
5	13	17.46%

6. On the basis of the writing feedback of the automatic scoring system of PG, it is necessary for teachers to guide and comment on compositions.

Scale	Student Number(Total in 63)	Proportion
1	13	20.63%
2	5	7.94%
3	20	31.75%
4	15	23.81%
5	10	15.87%

7. On the basis of task-based writing, it is helpful to cultivate students' ability of independent learning according to the automatic correction system of PG.

Scale	Student Number(Total in 63)	Proportion
1	13	20.63%
2	4	6.35%
3	20	31.75%
4	13	20.63%
5	13	20.63%

8. Writing scores in CET can be improved through finishing online writing tasks and revise them according to PG network.

Scale	Student Number(Total in 63)	Proportion
1	13	20.63%
2	7	11.11%
3	21	33.33%
4	10	15.87%
5	12	19.05%

# **Appendix 2 Qualitative questions of the interview**

- 1. What are your opinions on Pigai network? What are the advantages of this kind of online task writing and what needs to be improved?
- 2. How long do you usually take to complete a writing task, and how many times do you usually revise it according to the suggestions by PGW before finally submitting it? How many scores can you usually improve after revision?
- 3. Since only CET writing have been assigned this term, is it necessary to have teachers' guidance before writing and analysis after submitting?
- 4. PG can give real-time feedback to your composition and give suggestions for revision. Compared with traditional writing homework, which do you like? Why?
- 5. In addition to revising according to the suggestions of Pigai network, will you also look for CET model essays online for comparison modification? Do you think that's effective?
- 6. Have you memorized CET sample essays? How much is it to improve compositions by reciting model essays and revising them according to revision suggestions of Pigai network?
- 7. How much can you improve independent learning ability by finishing and revising articles in Pigai network?
- 8. Have you mastered the writing skills of CET, standard tests, by completing the writing task of CET in one term and constantly revising compositions according to feedback of Pigai network?
- 9. Do you think you have mastered skills of CET writing and improved scores of CET writing at the end of this term through writing and revision on Pigai network combining with studying sample writings of CET?
- 10. How to combine online writing tasks with offline management such teachers' guidance and taking as part of students' grades to make online writing tasks more effective?