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Student Engagement with Peer Feedback in High School English Writing: A Study among Students of Different English Proficiency Levels

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Abstract
While peer feedback is widely recognized as a beneficial practice in second language writing, how high school students of different English proficiency levels engage with it remains underexplored. This study investigates the differential patterns of behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement in peer feedback among three Chinese high school students representing high, intermediate, and low proficiency levels. Adopting a multiple-case study design, data were collected over one semester, including students' writing drafts, peer feedback texts, stimulated recall interviews, and semi-structured interviews. The analysis, framed within a three-dimensional engagement model, revealed distinct profiles: the high-proficiency student demonstrated self-regulated engagement, driven by metacognitive challenge; the intermediate-proficiency student exhibited pragmatic engagement, strategically filtering feedback for utility; and the low-proficiency student displayed a dependent yet active profile, characterized by high behavioral initiative and positive affect that were often undermined by limited cognitive resources. A key finding challenges the common assumption that lower proficiency equates to lower engagement; instead, it highlights a disconnect between students' willingness to engage and their capacity to process feedback effectively. The study concludes by advocating for differentiated instructional support in peer feedback activities to cater to the distinct engagement needs of learners across proficiency levels.

Keywords: Peer feedback, Student engagement, English proficiency, High school English writing

1. Introduction
Research on student engagement has progressively expanded from its origins in educational psychology to encompass specific learning contexts, including feedback processes (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) [5]. Within feedback-oriented engagement, Ellis (2010) [3] pioneered the application of this construct to corrective feedback, defining it as learners' multidimensional responses including affective, cognitive, and behavioral to input received. Subsequent studies have examined engagement with teacher feedback, which, though beneficial for cognitive and affective development, is often constrained by practical limitations such as large class sizes (Tian & Zhou, 2020; Cheng & Liu, 2022) [11, 2]. Similarly, automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems have been shown to enhance behavioral engagement through immediate error correction, though their limitations in addressing content and fostering adaptability are well-documented (Zhang, 2016; Koltovskaia, 2020) [14, 9]. While integrated feedback models combining teacher, AWE, and peer feedback have been proposed to maximize learning outcomes (Zhang, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2024) [15, 18], student engagement with peer feedback particularly among high school students of varying English proficiency levels remains underexplored. Most existing studies focus on tertiary learners, leaving a significant gap regarding high school students, who are at a critical stage of cognitive and linguistic development. In addition, few studies offer a nuanced analysis of how students with different language proficiencies engage with peer feedback across behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by investigating the differentiated patterns of engagement among high school students in English writing peer feedback contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Proficiency and Engagement with Peer Feedback

Language proficiency is a key determinant shaping how students engage with feedback (Zhou, Yu, Liu & Jiang, 2022; Yan & Tang, 2023; Linuwih, Setiawan, & Munir, 2024; Jiang & Sukying, 2024) [19, 12, 10, 8]. In peer feedback, behaviorally, higher-proficiency students demonstrate more substantive revisions, actively incorporating feedback and initiating self-revisions, while their lower-proficiency peers tend to make more superficial changes and rely heavily on external resources (Zhang & Hyland, 2023) [17]. This disparity is more pronounced in cognitive engagement. Advanced learners frequently engage in deep processing, critically evaluating the quality and applicability of feedback through metacognitive strategies. In contrast, less proficient students, constrained by their linguistic knowledge, often process feedback only at a surface level and rarely employ such high-order strategies (Yu, Zhang, Zheng, Yuan, & Zhang, 2019) [13]. Affectively, while students may generally value peer feedback, their emotional experiences are volatile. Lower-proficiency students are particularly susceptible to confusion and frustration when feedback is indirect or inaccurate, which can severely inhibit subsequent cognitive and behavioral engagement (Qian & Li, 2023; Fan & Xu, 2020) [4]. Consequently, proficiency is not merely a background variable but a core factor that mediates the depth and nature of a student's engagement across all three dimensions. However, some studies tend to broadly conclude that lower-proficiency students demonstrate reduced engagement due to their limited language skills, without conducting detailed analyses of the potential complexity and proactive attitudes these students may display across different dimensions such as behavior, cognition, and affect.

2.2 A Three-Dimensional Framework of Student Engagement with Feedback

Student engagement with feedback is widely conceptualized as a multifaceted construct encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions (Ellis, 2010; Fredricks *et al*., 2004) [3, 5]. Behavioral engagement refers to the observable actions students take in response to feedback, evidenced in their revision operations (e.g., correction, deletion) and use of learning strategies (Ellis, 2010; Fan & Xu, 2020) [3, 4]. Cognitive engagement involves the mental processes employed to handle feedback, including the depth of processing (from noticing to understanding), and the use of cognitive (e.g., analyzing, comparing) and metacognitive strategies (e.g., evaluating, monitoring) (Han & Hyland, 2015) [6]. Affective engagement captures students' emotional reactions and attitudes towards the feedback (Ellis, 2010) [3]. Critically, these dimensions are interdependent, forming a dynamic system where emotions influence cognition, which in turn drives behavioral outcomes (Chen & Hu, 2025; He, Xia, Zhang & Liu, 2025) [1, 7]. Based on this, the study will explore how high school students with different English proficiency levels engage in peer feedback according to the three-dimensional model, as well as the differences in their engagement patterns.

3. Research Design

3.1 Participants: This multiple-case study was conducted in a high-achieving Grade 10 class at a high school in Central China. Three focal students were purposively selected to represent distinct proficiency levels, determined by their scores on two consecutive school-wide examinations and teacher evaluation. Table 1 presents their demographic information. All participants provided assent, and pseudonyms are used throughout.

Table 1: Students' Demographic Information

Name	Alphabetic pseudonyms	Gender	Age (Years)	Monthly Exam Score (%)		Language Proficiency
				September	October	
Peng	Student A	Female	15	93.33%	92.33%	High
Wu	Student B	Male	15	86.3%	85.66%	Intermediate
Zhao	Student C	Male	15	76.66%	72%	Low

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected over one semester following a systematic, multi-phase procedure that employed a triangulated approach, focusing on two practical writing tasks. The process commenced with a training phase to equip all students with the fundamental skills for providing effective peer feedback. Subsequently, students engaged in two independent writing tasks, each adhering to an identical cycle. First, students produced a first draft, which was followed by a peer feedback activity that yielded written peer feedback texts. Students then revised their drafts based on the received feedback, resulting in a revised draft. To delve into learners' immediate processing, stimulated recall interviews were conducted individually with the three focal students within 24 hours of each revision, using their drafts and the received feedback as prompts to explore their moment-by-moment cognitive and affective engagement. Finally, upon completion of the second writing cycle, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each focal student to gather their broader reflections on attitudes and overall experiences with the peer feedback process. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis was systematically guided by the three-dimensional framework of learner engagement, encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions. The analysis proceeded in two integrated strands corresponding to the different data types. The quantitative analysis of the written artifacts involved a detailed examination of the peer feedback texts and the subsequent revisions. The feedback was first categorized for its focus, distinguishing between content-related aspects (e.g., ideas, organization) and form-related aspects (e.g., grammar, vocabulary), drawing on established taxonomies. Furthermore, the feedback was analyzed for its type, such as direct or indirect corrective feedback. To assess behavioral engagement, students' revision operations in their revised drafts were meticulously compared against their first drafts and the specific feedback received. Each revision was classified into predefined categories (e.g., correct/incorrect

revision, deletion, substitution) to determine the extent and nature of their uptake. Qualitatively, the transcribed data from the stimulated recall and semi-structured interviews underwent a multi-cycle coding process. The initial cycle involved open coding to identify emergent themes relevant to engagement across the entire dataset. In a subsequent cycle, these codes were systematically mapped onto the pre-established engagement dimensions (behavioral, cognitive, and affective) and their sub-categories, in a hybrid deductive-inductive approach. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of the underlying cognitive strategies, metacognitive monitoring, and emotional responses that characterized the students' experiences. Ultimately, a cross-case analysis was conducted, juxtaposing the quantitative patterns of feedback and revision with the rich qualitative insights from the interviews to identify salient and contrasting patterns of engagement across the three focal students representing different proficiency levels.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Behavioral Engagement

Data analysis revealed that all three students demonstrated active behavioral engagement, as evidenced by a significant decrease in error rates in their revised drafts. However, notable differences were observed in their revision strategies and modification preferences.

The high-proficiency student, Student A, not only accurately corrected most issues identified by peers but also consistently produced high-quality self-initiated revisions that went beyond the given feedback. For instance, where no peer comments were provided, she independently refined the originally abrupt sentence "Last but not least, you could have a taste of yugao, which enjoys great popularity." into "Last but not least, short as your visit may be, having a taste of yugao, a traditional food that enjoys great reputation among people from all walks of life is a must." During the interview, she explained this revision was intended to improve logical flow and explain unfamiliar food to foreign friends, demonstrating strong self-monitoring skills, audience awareness, and motivation for achieving linguistic appropriateness and complexity. Student B, the intermediate-level learner, exhibited behavioral engagement characterized by a distinctly pragmatic approach. He explicitly stated that he only incorporated feedback he considered “better and potentially useful for future writing”. For example, he ignored an uncommon vocabulary suggestion because he felt he “might never use it”. His independent revisions followed the same principle, primarily involving additions or modifications of expressions he was confident would enhance text quality and remained within his linguistic repertoire. Student C, the low-proficiency student, displayed a behavioral pattern marked by high compliance and active participation. He incorporated almost all direct and explicit corrective feedback. More notably, despite limited language proficiency, he showed strong behavioral initiative by proactively seeking clarification from the feedback provider and attempting revisions even in the absence of specific suggestions, such as replacing “tall” with “towering”. However, due to underdeveloped metacognitive monitoring, some self-initiated revisions were unsuccessful, as seen when he incorrectly changed “Jingzhou Ancient City Wall” to “Great Wall”. This indicates that lower proficiency does not equate to lower engagement; rather, his behavioral efforts deserve recognition while requiring more precise instructional support.

4.2 Cognitive Engagement

Three students demonstrate a clear gradient in the depth and nature of their cognitive strategies when processing feedback.

Student A exhibits the deepest level of cognitive engagement, showing a distinct desire for metacognitive challenges. She explicitly expressed a dislike for direct corrections, stating that “when they (peers) figure everything out and make the changes for you, you might lose the opportunity to think independently." She showed a clear preference for indirect feedback because it “pushes you to think about where the problem lies and how to revise it”. This cognitive preference drove her to engage in diagnostic thinking and deep processing that went beyond superficial corrections, reflecting advanced metacognitive regulation skills.

Student B’s cognitive process functions like an efficient filter. When incorporating feedback into his revisions, his core cognitive strategy involved evaluating the long-term applicability of the information. During the interview, he mentioned that he “selectively records the useful (feedback)” while filtering out impractical portions. This approach enabled him to manage cognitive resources efficiently and focus on building a personalized linguistic repertoire, though it may also cause him to miss opportunities to expand his language boundaries.

Student C’s cognitive engagement heavily depends on the clarity and specificity of the feedback. He could effectively implement feedback that provided direct corrections, but he became confused by indirect feedback that only identified problems without offering solutions, such as merely underlining “Our class got the second price” with a wavy line. In these cases, he retained the original error, which was confirmed in his interview statement: “He (the reviewer) didn't tell me how to correct it, so I stuck with my original version”. This indicates that the cognitive engagement of lower-proficiency students requires substantial support through external scaffolding.

4.3 Affective Engagement

The differences in affective engagement reveal students’ fundamentally different perspectives on the value of feedback.

Student A maintained a calm and critical attitude toward peer feedback. While acknowledging its general usefulness, she valued it primarily as a source of “intellectual stimulation”. Receiving feedback did not evoke strong emotional reactions in her, though she showed a distinct preference for indirect feedback that triggers deeper thinking. This emotional response stems from the satisfaction of having cognitive challenges met, representing a higher-level form of affective engagement.

Student B demonstrated a relatively neutral emotional response to peer feedback. He recognized its practical value, noting that “their suggestions are indeed well-written” and could help identify overlooked issues. He viewed feedback as a useful learning tool without showing strong emotional attachment or significant fluctuations in his response.

Student C displayed the most positive and dependent emotional attitude toward peer feedback. He genuinely believes feedback “is truly helpful” and openly admits that

"if I wrote entirely according to my own thinking, it would become Chinglish. after peers revise it, the word order becomes much better.". He accepted all feedback with complete openness, whether it contained encouragement or criticism, viewing critical comments as "what I deserve, since my English isn't very good to begin with.". This strong emotional acceptance serves as crucial internal motivation that sustains his high behavioral engagement, despite the cognitive difficulties he encounters in processing feedback.

4.4 Summary

This case study demonstrates distinct profiles of behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement with peer feedback among high school EFL learners of different proficiency levels. The high-proficiency student exhibited integrated, self-regulated engagement, driven by metacognitive challenge and a critical appreciation for feedback that stimulated deep thinking. The intermediate-proficiency student demonstrated pragmatic and strategic engagement, efficiently filtering feedback based on its perceived utility for his existing linguistic repertoire. In contrast, the low-proficiency student displayed a dependent yet active profile, characterized by high behavioral compliance and positive affective reliance on feedback, which was, however, undermined by insufficient cognitive and linguistic resources to process it effectively. Crucially, the findings indicate that behavioral activeness does not equate to learning effectiveness, and that lower proficiency does not imply lower motivation to engage. The study underscores the necessity for differentiated instructional support in peer feedback activities, moving beyond a uniform approach to cater to the distinct engagement needs and strategic capabilities of students at varying levels of language proficiency.

This study both corroborates and nuances existing findings. While it affirms, in line with Yu *et al*. (2019), that high-proficiency learners effectively utilize feedback with strong self-regulation, it challenges the notion that low-proficiency learners lack initiative. The case of Student C demonstrates substantial behavioral agency, as he actively employed multiple strategies to improve his writing despite incomplete comprehension. Similarly, whereas this research concurs with Zhang and Gao (2024) that intermediate learners can evaluate feedback with limited comprehension, it complicates their conclusion regarding lower-proficiency engagement. Contrary to the view that such engagement is hindered by a lack of confidence or emotional issues, the present findings reveal that affective factors were not the primary barrier; instead, these learners exhibited robust behavioral initiative, actively deploying various strategies to enhance their texts.

5. Conclusion

This study employs a three-dimensional framework to meticulously delineate the complex engagement patterns of high school students with varying English proficiency levels in peer feedback activities. The main findings reveal that language proficiency does not directly determine behavioral engagement, as even students with lower proficiency can demonstrate high levels of initiative and effort. Furthermore, significant differences exist in students' cognitive needs: high-proficiency students require thinking space while their lower-proficiency counterparts need structured and explicit guidance. Additionally, affective engagement shows a tendency to correlate negatively with language proficiency, suggesting that students with lower proficiency may require greater emotional support regarding feedback.

Building on these findings, several implications for high school English writing instruction can be drawn. Differentiated feedback guidance should be implemented, where teachers train high-proficiency students to use indirect feedback strategies such as questioning and prompting with their peers. Intermediate learners should be guided to accumulate and transfer useful feedback to build personal language repertoires, while lower-proficiency students need more templates, examples, and direct error correction to strengthen their foundational skills. Feedback training should be strengthened by incorporating practice in providing differentiated feedback tailored to varying proficiency levels, thereby enhancing all students' feedback literacy. Emotional support must be prioritized, with particular attention given to the emotional experiences of lower-proficiency students during feedback processes. Teachers should provide ample encouragement and foster a collaborative learning environment based on mutual trust and support to protect these students' valuable learning motivation. Since this study only investigated student engagement across two writing tasks, future research is suggested to employ mixed methods with larger sample sizes and longitudinal designs to track the dynamic evolution of learner engagement over time.

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