

# Exploring the Effect of Corrective Feedback on the Acquisition of Academic English Literacy Among Undergraduate Students: A Case Study

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Much research has been conducted on the effects of corrective feedback on L2 learning performance. However, sparse research has been done on effect of corrective feedback on the acquisition of Academic English literacy in the academic context. This case study aims to explore the impact of corrective feedback on the acquisition of academic English literacy skills among undergraduate students. The findings reveal that inexperienced learners exhibit an overall positive perception of their teachers' feedback on their research proposals, and teacher feedback plays active roles in nurturing students' academic literacy, contributing to the development of essential skills necessary for success. The paper suggests that teachers offer specific and constructive feedback, facilitating students' academic English literacy development during the transitional phase at the lower undergraduate levels.

*Keywords:* Academic English literacy, corrective feedback, case study

## Introduction

Feedback plays a crucial role in enhancing students' learning performance as a key method of classroom instruction in the educational process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The facilitating impact of feedback on L2 learning has been widely acknowledged through various descriptive and experimental studies (Ellis, 2009). However, there is a notable absence of research on feedback in the context of academic English writing, despite its significance as an essential element of L2 writing. While Zhang and Cheng (2021) examined the effects of corrective feedback on the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of academic English writing among lower-level undergraduate English majors, there remains a paucity of research on corrective feedback for the acquisition and development of academic English literacy skills among undergraduate non-English majors. Academic English literacy, deemed essential for success in academic circles (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002), signifies high-level thinking and learning. It is not only a prerequisite for knowledge production and communication within disciplines, but also holds great significance for individual language and cognitive development (Flowerdew, 2013). This study aims to investigate the development of academic English literacy in lower-level non-English major students through a case study on corrective feedback, aiming to offer valuable insights into academic English instruction during the transitional phase at the lower undergraduate levels.

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## **Literature Review**

### **Academic English Literacy**

The term “academic English literacy” was first used by Widdowson in 1971 who argued that we should shift our focus towards English for specific purposes, particularly academic English in scientific and technological fields. This requires adopting principled approaches to teaching language use and rhetorical rules in new and more precise ways (cited in Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p. 46). Academic literacy, as a set of skills specifically for content learning, is closely linked to the development of individuals’ higher-order thinking and advanced language skills (T. Shanahan & C. Shanahan, 2008).

As the learning of academic English literacy is highly purposeful and contextual, its driving force is the practical need to emphasize the implicit nature of academic conventions (Lillis & Tuck, 2016). This can only be achieved by actively involving students in authentic and purposeful disciplinary learning activities that instill meaning, value, and emotion (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008).

Considering that Chinese universities are still in the shift from general English to academic English curriculum paradigms, even though lower-level undergraduate students are not yet learners within a disciplinary context (de Chazal, 2014), it is crucial to incorporate the cultivation of academic English literacy into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching and research, as it reflects higher-order thinking and learning. Based on previous research findings and the actual teaching environment, the author defines lower-level undergraduate academic English literacy as an awareness of critical thinking, research questions, research purposes, basic research methods, academic language, academic norms, genres, and the fundamental framework of academic writing needed to develop writing skills and achieve academic success. However, the development of academic literacy is not spontaneous and often requires explicit guidance and intervention (Shanahan, 2012), with corrective feedback being a common intervention method. This paper aims to explore the impact of in-class feedback on the acquisition of academic English literacy for lower-level undergraduate students in a classroom setting.

### **Corrective Feedback**

Feedback refers to oral or written comments on potential errors in learners’ output that need to be addressed (Nassaji & Kartchava, 2017). Cognitive psychology has consistently recognized errors as valuable learning tools (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Feedback, especially when it highlights errors as negative evidence, can help learners recognize the disparity between corrected language forms and their own output (including errors), thus fostering the development of their L2 interlanguage knowledge (Schmidt, 1990). Feedback not only raises learners’ awareness of their insufficient L2 knowledge, but also guides them to consciously focus on targeted language forms (Schmidt, 1990). Generally, corrective feedback takes four main forms: self-correction, peer feedback, teacher feedback, and systematic feedback (Falhasiri & Hasiri, 2020).

While self-correction, peer feedback, and systematic feedback offer various benefits, studies have shown that learners often perceive self-correction as a waste of time and believe that only teachers with superior language knowledge and training are qualified to provide feedback (Pawlak, 2014). Similarly, peer feedback also requires training to be effective, as without proper guidance, it can lead to ineffective outcomes (Sheen, 2011). Moreover, peer feedback can sometimes result in students feeling ridiculed by their peers, leading to a negative impact on their confidence (Pawlak, 2014). As a result, teacher feedback remains the most prevalent. Verbal teacher feedback is particularly valued as a feedback strategy for students (Kamberi, 2013). Research indicates

that verbal teacher feedback is more detailed, targeted, and employs multimodal representations such as language, gesture, and space, making it more effective than using only multimodal representations (Zhang & Zhao, 2020). This study attempts to answer the following two questions via a case study.

1. How do the undergraduate students perceive the effect on their academic literacy?
2. What are the effects of corrective feedback on learners' academic literacy?

## **Method**

### **Research Context and Participants**

In China, academic English instruction is typically offered alongside college English courses in recent years, primarily targeting students in their first and second years of undergraduate study. The instructional approach encompasses project-based learning, commencing with the analysis of widely recognized academic papers from diverse fields to familiarize students with the conventions of academic discourse. Subsequently, students are introduced to the fundamentals of selecting research topics and crafting research proposals. Each student is then tasked with choosing a research theme from their daily experiences or areas of personal interest, and subsequently preparing a research proposal, which is presented using PowerPoint. In this context, the teacher provides feedback and commentary on the students' academic language proficiency, specifically addressing the relevance and feasibility of the research topic, the formulation of research questions, the selection of appropriate research methods, and the academic significance articulated in the initial proposals.

This study targets second-year undergraduate students from two parallel classes at a science and technology university in Shanghai, totaling 60 students, the majority of whom have limited exposure to reading academic papers. Participant selection aligns with the research objectives and involves the random selection of one student from each of six groups formed by 30 students within the same class, representing typical case study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Collection**

At the conclusion of the 16-week course, 30-minute interviews were conducted with each of the six research subjects, with their consent, and the interviews were recorded in full. The interviews covered the participants' perceptions of the teacher feedback on their research proposal, as well as the impact of the feedback on their acquisition of academic literacy. Following transcription of the interview content, the researcher encoded and categorized the data.

## **Result**

1. Inexperienced learners exhibit an overall positive perception of their teachers' feedback on their research proposals. This positive perception can be attributed to the personalized and targeted guidance provided by instructors, which helps novice writers navigate the challenges of academic writing. Inexperienced learners tend to view their teachers' feedback as a constructive and supportive tool that aids in the development of their research proposal writing skills, and their academic literacy. The acknowledgement of their efforts, along with clear and specific suggestions for improvement, fosters a sense of encouragement and motivation among inexperienced learners. This positive reception of feedback not only boosts their confidence but also instills a deeper understanding of academic writing conventions. Students gradually recognize that the constructive feedback from their teachers contributes to their progress and growth as adept academic writers. Overall, the positive perception of their teachers' feedback on research proposals is instrumental in nurturing a learning environment where

inexperienced learners feel supported, valued, and encouraged to further develop their academic writing proficiency. This was evidenced in some of their interviews as shown below.

My teacher is the most conscientious I have ever met when it comes to providing feedback on student presentations in class! He is truly meticulous and provide personalized feedback for each student. This has given me a clearer understanding of the content and structure of my research proposal. I have learned a lot from listening to my classmates' presentations and my teacher's feedback on their work. Comparing it with my own presentation, I have been able to deduce common patterns and typical issues. (P. Zhou)

I feel that the feedback is very detailed and comprehensive, covering aspects such as grammar, the structure of the paper, and the content of each section. As this is my first time writing a research proposal, I felt quite apprehensive. However, your feedback was meticulous; you analyzed it page by page and paragraph by paragraph. I felt truly happy and appreciative that my work received your attention. Additionally, I noticed several shortcomings and errors in my research proposal, some of which you had previously covered in class. When you pointed out my errors, you explained them to me patiently, rather than criticizing severely. As a result, I found it easier to accept your advice and implement your suggestions. (P. Yang)

2. Teacher feedback on students' research proposals has a multifaceted and positive impact on their acquisition of academic literacy, contributing to the development of essential skills necessary for success in higher education and beyond.

Firstly, teacher's feedback facilitates students' understanding of academic conventions and expectations. Through targeted feedback, students gain insight into the specific requirements and standards of academic writing, including the structure of research proposals, scholarly language usage, citation and the incorporation of credible sources. As students engage with and respond to feedback, they develop a deeper understanding of the linguistic and rhetorical elements that underpin effective academic communication, essential for the successful acquisition of academic literacy skills.

At first, I didn't understand the purpose of the literature review and how to utilize it to justify my arguments. I was also unfamiliar with how to conduct a literature review related to my research topic. However, after the teacher explained and provided examples of literature reviews, I was able to directly apply this knowledge to my own research proposal. I learned how to search for and use literature reviews in practice. The significance of using a literature review is to summarize the findings of previous research, identify areas for improvement, and gradually enhance research, continuously exploring and improving in problematic areas. (P. Yi)

Secondly, constructive and specific feedback encourages students to engage in critical thinking and analytical reasoning. Teachers' input prompts students to evaluate their research proposals critically, refining their arguments, analysis, and organization of ideas. As students engage in revising their work based on feedback, they develop a deeper understanding of scholarly discourse and the application of evidence-based reasoning—a cornerstone of academic literacy.

Thirdly, teacher feedback contributes to the development of students' metacognitive awareness within the writing process. As students receive input and guidance, they progressively develop the ability to evaluate their own writing, effectively addressing areas for improvement and enhancing their proficiency in academic literacy. This metacognitive development is vital for students to become independent and proficient writers capable of engaging in scholarly conversations and academic writing in diverse contexts.

The teacher pointed out that my research topic was too broad and lacked focus. The literature reviewed was limited, and its relevance was weak. After listening to the teacher's feedback, I have a clearer understanding that the research topic should be feasible, focusing on addressing a single issue. I also realize the need to critically review previous research findings, identifying gaps or deficiencies in past studies to determine the research question for investigation. (P. Wang)

Through the teacher's feedback, I can better understand how to write each specific section, such as the rationale, the research objectives and significance, and research background. If I only listen to theoretical explanations, it's still hard to grasp the specific differences. Through the practical exercises of my classmates and the teacher's feedback, I can gain a better understanding of how each part should be written. Additionally, there are comments on the topic selection and research methods—common issues for beginners like having overly broad research topics or inaccurate research methods. Through feedback, I can recognize these issues and learn from them. (P. An)

## Conclusion

In conclusion, teacher feedback on students' research proposals is instrumental in building their academic literacy skills, critical thinking abilities, metacognitive awareness. By providing personalized and targeted guidance, teacher facilitates students' awareness of academic English literacy and confident writers equipped to navigate the demands of academic communication and succeed in scholarly pursuits.

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