

# Exploring the Impact of Peer Review on Argumentative Writing for Chinese ESL Class--A Case Study of Business English Majors in Guangzhou Xinhua University

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**Abstract:** *With the transformation from result-oriented approach to process-oriented approach in Chinese ESL class, peer review is receiving increasing attention. Peer review is student-centered and focuses on the interaction between teacher and students, and between students and students in the writing process. Students no longer passively receive teachers' guidance, but become more active participants in classroom learning. At present, few studies focuses on peer review in argumentative writing training, and in peer review, students need to critically put forward or accept opinions according to the given peer review worksheet. Therefore, the influence of this activity on the development of critical thinking is also worth exploring. To conclude, this paper discusses the influence of peer review on ESL argumentative writing training of Chinese students and the development of students' critical thinking ability. It is hoped that this paper has some practical significance for the teaching of argumentative writing in Chinese ESL class.*

**Keywords:** *peer review, argumentative writing training, critical thinking, English writing teaching and learning*

## 1. Introduction

College English writing, as a major language skill and an important part of college English study, received more and more attention. However, even for English major students, their writing skills still need to be improved. In ESL writing class in China, the traditional evaluation mode of "teacher's evaluation only" is still common. Under this evaluation mechanism, student lack participation in class, which is not conducive to creating an interactive learning environment. Students are used to passively accepting teacher teaching content, without critical thinking. Therefore, this traditional evaluation greatly restricts the development of Chinese ESL students' writing output and the improvement of thinking ability.

Peer review is a general term for concepts such as peer feedback, peer editing or peer assessment. It refers to the oral or written feedback during the learning process<sup>[1]</sup>. With the transformation from result-oriented approach to process-oriented approach in Chinese ESL class, peer review has gained more attention. This evaluation mechanism requires students to objectively present opinions, identify specific problems and score the essay according to the given evaluation criteria; the receivers of the feedback critically rather than passively accept all comments. Therefore, this mechanism also trains students' critical thinking. Additionally, argumentative writing is the most common style in college students' writing. Compared with narrative essay and expository essay, in addition to description and explanation, it also needs to rationally conduct abstract analysis and thinking of a certain truth, so as to enhance the persuasiveness of the article. Therefore, argumentative essays have higher requirements for students' critical thinking ability.

In view of this, this paper focuses on argumentative writing, and studies the influence of peer on Chinese ESL students' argumentative writing training, as well as the development of students' thinking ability, which in turn enhances the development of argument writing skills.

## 2. Research aims and significance

Peer review is student-centered and focuses on the interaction between teacher and students, and

between students and students in the writing process. Students no longer passively receive teachers' guidance, but become more active participants in classroom learning. They examine their peers' essays from the perspective of readers, using critical thinking to review the first draft, make suggestions, and revise their own first draft, and jointly construct a beneficial interactive learning environment. Therefore, a study on the influence of the peer review on English writing is of practical significance in teaching.

Specifically, this topic first discusses whether peer review is conducive to the improvement of Chinese students' argumentative writing skills: its impact on revision work and students' perceptions about it. Argumentative writing is the most common writing style for Chinese college students, and it is the most practical in exams and work. Argumentative writing is both language application training and cognitive thinking training, since it requires students to make independent judgment based on thinking and exploration. Moreover, from the perspective of previous studies, there is still few related studies on the writing of a certain genre. Therefore, this research specifically selects argumentative writing as the research object. Secondly, this study also discusses how peer review affects Chinese students' critical thinking in ESL writing. A large number of studies have shown that English thinking students are relatively inadequate<sup>[2][3]</sup>. More and more English experts have realized that the further development of English education must overcome the problem of "absence of critical thinking". Peer review evaluation mechanism, as it invites students to participate in evaluation, should have positive significance for promoting the improvement of students' critical thinking ability.

In short, the present research chooses to explore the impact of peer review on argumentative writing for Chinese ESL class. It discusses how peer review impacts students' revision work, whether it helps developing students' argumentative writing skills, and whether it promotes the development of critical thinking, which will in turn help students improve argumentative writing skills. The research questions are described as follows:

(1) What is the influence of peer review mechanism on the argumentative writing revision work and how do students perceive this mechanism?

(2) How does peer review affect the development of critical thinking ability of Chinese ESL students?

### 3. Previous Research at Home and Abroad

Dong Zhe, Gao Ying, and Xie Bing summarize the research hot issues and frontiers of peer review in recent years, mainly including feedback comparison, peer review training, peer evaluation and peer review perception<sup>[4]</sup>.

About the comparison of feedback methods, they review the following advantages of peer review: 1) it can give full play to students' initiative in learning and reduce writing anxiety<sup>[5]</sup>, 2) it can promote the development of independent learning and cooperative learning<sup>[6]</sup>, 3) Peer feedback are better understood and easier to adopt. Both peer comments and teacher feedback can improve students' writing performance<sup>[7]</sup>.

About peer review training, Dong, Gao and Xie point out that the current research is mainly concerned with: 1) the training effect and 2) the implementation method<sup>[4]</sup>. In terms of training effect, systematic peer review training can effectively improve its quality<sup>[8]</sup>. At the same time, peer review training can improve learners' reader awareness<sup>[9]</sup>, critical ability<sup>[10]</sup>, etc. In terms of implementation methods, a real-time group discussion<sup>[11]</sup>, teacher demonstration<sup>[10]</sup>, face-to-face discussion<sup>[9]</sup> generate good results.

As for peer feedback, Dong, Gao and Xie review the focus and form of feedback<sup>[4]</sup>. According to them, former peer review mostly focuses on grammar and spelling, neglecting organization and content<sup>[12]</sup>; the largest number of comments are related to completing the task and fewer comments are about article structure and form<sup>[13]</sup>. In the form of feedback, Gao Ying et al. point out that although positive comments stimulate students' learning motivation, the comments of cognitive characteristics have a greater effect on improving the quality of the text<sup>[6]</sup>.

Regarding peer review perception, on the one hand, students welcome peer review, believing that receiving and providing feedback are helpful to improve writing, reduce stress and fear of opposition, and build confidence<sup>[14]</sup>. On the other hand, although students think mutual evaluation is valuable, they also point out that the comments given by peers are too simple, therefore cannot provide specific

suggestions<sup>[14]</sup>, Kaufman and Schunn point out that the ability of peers is insufficient and the results of mutual evaluation are unfair<sup>[15]</sup>. As for teachers' perception of peer evaluation, Zhao concludes that teachers generally recognize the impact of peer review<sup>[16]</sup>.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a lack of research on a specific writing genre; the training mechanism is not perfect; the effectiveness of evaluation is limited to the change of writing performance. In view of this, this topic will focus on argumentative writing, an important writing genre, and discuss the influence of peer review on students' argumentative writing and the cultivation of critical thinking with peer review evaluation mechanism.

#### 4. Research methods and process

The research subjects are a total of 65 sophomore students of Business English majors in Guangzhou Xinhua University. The students learned narrative and explanatory writing in the first year, and have not yet systematically studied argumentative writing. The experiment lasted two semesters, namely one year.

First of all, at the beginning of the first semester, 65 students will be trained on peer review. The training content includes the evaluation criteria and error marking. The teacher refers to the TEM-4 writing scoring standards and makes a table to explain in detail how to evaluate the peers work according to the specific requirements. During peer review, each student is randomly assigned the peer review task, so they will conduct peer review in an anonymous way. Anonymous evaluation reduces students anxiety and highly improves objectivity and fairness. When the feedback is sent back to the students, they will critically make revisions according to the feedback. Finally, the students submit both the first and the final draft to the teacher, and the teacher evaluates the both the feedback from the peers and the final draft.

Four peer review activities are conducted during the two semesters. The teacher keeps the record of peer review. At the end of the school year, questionnaires are sent and interviews are conducted. The teacher analyzes and summarizes the results of the students' peer review records, questionnaires and interviews.

#### 5. Results and discussion

##### *5.1 The influence of peer review mechanism on the argumentative writing revision work and student's perception on this mechanism*

Through comparison and frequency analysis of the first and second writing tasks in two semesters, most of the students have improved the structure, content, language and grammar of the first draft according to the feedback they receive from peer review. Because of the feedback from their peers, students note the micro-level problems such as vocabulary, grammar and spelling, and also pay attention to the macro issues such as the structure of the text, and whether the content is relevant. For example, in the following examples, both students A and Student B carefully review the first draft and make grammatical adjustments.

Student A's first draft with feedback: Overall, people is (plural) just one part of nature, like any other creatures in this planet.

Student A's final draft: Overall, people are just one part of nature, like any other creatures in this planet.

Student B's first draft with feedback: In consequence, we can concluded (use the original form) that nature not only offer what we need but also is (omit it) the source for us to create something is (lack "that") convenient of our life.

Student B's final draft: In consequence, we can conclude that nature not only offer what we need but also the source for us to create something that is convenient of our life.

It can be said that the problems such as grammar and spelling problems result from students' careless writing, but they are also reveals students the weak language ability. With the reminder of their peers, students can check and think about their own language problems, and make adjustments, which can strengthen the English language rules and further standardize their writing.

The following changes in student C and student D show that students make macro modifications based on the peer feedback. Student C receive comments from his peers. "No refutation" means a counterargument should be added, which the student adds later in the final draft so as to consolidate his position. The comments received by student D are about the concluding paragraph, and the partner points out that the concluding paragraph does not restate the thesis statement. So student D accepts the suggestion and make adjustments accordingly.

Student C's first draft with feedback: Last but no least, sending parents to nursing house is not means disobedient. To be a filial child, making you parents feel happy and carefree is the most important thing. (No refutation?)

Student C's final draft: Last but not least, sending parents to nursing house does not mean disobedience. Some people think that to be a filial person you need to keep your parents close to yourself. That's totally wrong. To be a filial child is to make your parents feel happy and carefree.

Student D's first draft with feedback: In general, whether it is ethical for the elderly to live in a nursing home depends on their family's economic situation, family relations and other personal factors. (Point not clear; repeat the thesis statement)

Student D's final draft: In general, it is ethical to send parents to nursing homes. But whether to do so depends on actual situation of each household.

As can be seen above, students are given both micro and macro feedback from their peers, which is a positive reminder for them. They make timely changes according to the comments to improve the writing quality ; in the long run, peers' reminders can help them strengthen the language rules and other requirements of argumentative writing, which is conducive to the long-term development of argumentative writing. At the same time, the students who give the evaluation can also strengthen the specific requirements of argumentative writing and be familiar with the requirements of the macro and micro levels, since they are supposed to objectively review the peers' work according to the evaluation criteria. Therefore, peer review has a positive impact on students revision process during argumentative writing study.

This study also examines students' perception on peer review. At the end of both semesters, questionnaires and interviews are sent out. The first survey finds that about the question "Out of 10 points, how do you rate peer review?", the average score is 7.33, which is not high. Further interviews find that students generally think that peer evaluation feedback is a meaningful and helpful form of writing feedback, but some practical problems affect their perception of peer review. They state that the online evaluation system is too complex. Students need to copy and paste the original text, and then manually draw lines to highlight the errors before they calculate the total score, which constitute a burden for them. In view of this problem, in the second semester, the peer review platform is changed and the "burden" of students is relieved. The second problem points to the unfairness of peer review. They say some students are irresponsible feedback givers, so the score is unfair. Therefore, the author strengthened peer review training, and supervise the evaluation process more closely in the second semester. These adjustments have improved students' acceptance of peer review. The questionnaires at the end of the second semester show that their rating increases to 8.64. In the interview, many students mention that, they relearn the requirements of argumentative writing structure, content, sentence pattern and word richness, coherence, language and grammar; they obtain feedback from students at the micro and macro level before submitting the final draft, and learn to critically choose whether to accept suggestions. Therefore, on the whole, peer review evaluation mechanism is a meaningful writing activity accepted by students, which helps them to improve their argumentative writing ability.

## ***5.2 The influence of peer review on the development of critical thinking ability of Chinese ESL students***

About critical thinking skills, Liu Xuedong and Yuan Jingyu summarize the following five definitions: 1) It is a complex, skilled and responsible way of thinking; it improves the quality of individual thinking through clever analysis, evaluation and reconstruction; it helps to form a good judgment, 2) it is an effective thinking ability, including the attitude of thinking carefully, knowledge of rational exploration and reasoning methods and the skills to applying these methods; it is a kind of logical thinking, 3) it is a good judgment ability, using appropriate evaluation criteria to judge and think about the real value of things, 4) it is an effective problem-solving ability; based on incomplete facts and information, solving problems in rational, purposeful and introspective methods, 5) it is the synthesis of a range of cognitive skills, using some cognitive skills or strategies that can enhance the

likelihood of achieving the expected results. The cultivation of critical thinking ability aims to cultivate students' logical thinking ability, value judgment ability and innovation ability on the basis of understanding.<sup>[17]</sup>

Studies have shown that the critical thinking ability of English major students is relatively inadequate<sup>[2][3]</sup>. More and more English experts have realized that the further development of English education must overcome the "absence of critical thinking" and achieve a breakthrough in the cultivation of this ability. Argumentative writing is not only about language training, but also about cognitive thinking training; argumentative writing requires students to make independent judgments through thinking, so it also trains the critical thinking ability; At the same time, when peer review is added in argumentative essay training, students are invited to participate in judging, raise opinions, explain specific issues, and give a reasonable score, This is in line with the above definition of "complex, skilled and responsible thinking" summarized by Liu Xuedong and Yuan Jingyu<sup>[17]</sup>. Moreover, the students who receive the feedback should think about whether they accept the views given by their peers, before they make reasonable modifications. During this process, critical thinking is also involved.

Therefore, this study also examines the influence of peer review on students' critical thinking in the form of questionnaire survey and interview. Students are asked to choose among "fully agree", "agree", "neutral", "disagree" and "highly disagree", indicating different degrees of approval for the questions given.

Understanding the peer review writing assessment criteria is fundamental in making a reasonable judgement in the peer review. So the first question of the questionnaire is: "Do you understand the content of the peer evaluation criteria?". Regarding this question, 78% of the students say they understand the content of peer evaluation standards. The choice of "fully agree" means that 42% of students feel confident that they understand the criteria correctly. 9% of the students chose to "disagree", indicating that they do not understand the peer review writing assessment criteria, about which further interviews found that most of these students are poor in English themselves so they are not confident with their judgments. The second question is "Do you complete the assigned peer review tasks with a responsible attitude and give objective scores according to each item of the evaluation criteria?". About 84 percent of the students said "yes". Among them, 65.6 percent answered "strongly agree", saying that they are very sure that they are responsible and grade the peer's work in strict accordance with the given criteria. This shows that students try to make reasonable judgments with a critical mind and give a reasonable score, which is the embodiment of developing critical thinking and is consistent with the third definition of critical thinking ability summarized by Liu Xuedong and Yuan Yu<sup>[17]</sup>. Then, the third question of the questionnaire is also directly related to critical thinking: "After you received the feedback from your peers, do you critically read and adopt opinions, and make changes based on the understanding the given assessment criteria?". For this question, almost 92% of the students choose the positive answer. This means that although peer review gives them positive feedback from their peers, they will not accept their opinions casually and passively. Instead, they will ponder on them carefully, judge whether the opinions are worth adopting, and read them critically before making changes. This is the embodiment of a responsible way of thinking, and also the exercise of critical thinking, which is also in line with the first point of critical thinking ability definitions summarized by Liu Xuedong and Yuan Yu<sup>[17]</sup>. Finally, as for the fourth question of the questionnaire, "Do you think peer review helps to improve critical thinking?", about 81 percent of the students answered "yes". Most students believe that peer review contributes to the promotion of critical thinking.

To sum up, on the whole, after two semesters of argumentative writing training with peer review as one of the feedback giving mechanisms, students strengthen their understanding of the writing requirements because of these peer review tasks, and responsibly and critically evaluate their peers work according to the criteria. At the same time, students who receive the feedback can also critically accept their suggestions. Therefore, it can be said that they have been effectively trained their critical thinking abilities through peer review.

## 6. Conclusion

This study focuses on argumentative essay writing and discusses the influence of peer review on students' argumentative writing and the cultivation of critical thinking. Research results show that: 1) peer review feedback mechanism has a positive impact on students' writing revision process. It offers

students both micro and macro feedback given by their peers, which is a positive reminder for them. At the same time, reviewers of the feedback can also strengthen the specific requirements of argumentative writing as stated in the the evaluation criteria. Overall, most students accept and recognize the peer review. Therefore, it can be said peer review is a meaningful activity accepted by students, which also plays a positive role in the promotion of argumentative writing skills by Chinese ESL college students. 2) With peer review, students can strengthen the evaluation criteria and responsibly evaluate their peers work accordingly, the students whose works are reviewed can also critically read their opinions, rather than blindly and passively accept all comments. Therefore, it is safe to say that the students have effectively trained their critical thinking through peer review.

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