Exploring English Language Education Students' Perceptions of Digital Feedback and Peer Assessment in Academic Writing: Evidence from a Nigerian Special Education Institution

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Abstract

This study investigated English Language Education students' perceptions of digital feedback and peer assessment tools in academic writing at the Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, Nigeria. Despite the growing integration of digital technologies in higher education, there is limited research on how students in special education institutions perceive and experience these tools, particularly in developing country contexts. The study employed a qualitative case study design using semi-structured interviews with twelve purposively selected 300-level English Language Education students who had prior exposure to academic writing, digital feedback tools, and peer assessment activities. Data were analysed using content analysis. The findings revealed that students generally valued digital feedback tools, particularly Grammarly and QuillBot, for their ability to provide immediate, specific error correction and enhance writing awareness. Peer assessment through Peergrade was perceived as beneficial for promoting collaborative learning, reflective practice, and morale, especially for students with disabilities who preferred written feedback for accessibility reasons. However, students also reported significant challenges including vague or overly technical feedback, unreliable internet connectivity, lack of personal devices, financial constraints, and concerns about peer feedback credibility and shallow evaluations. Accessibility limitations of digital platforms for students with visual and hearing impairments emerged as a critical concern. The study concludes that while digital feedback and peer assessment tools hold transformative potential for academic writing instruction in special education contexts, their effectiveness is constrained by infrastructural deficiencies, inadequate training, and accessibility gaps. Recommendations include implementing continuous training programmes for students and lecturers, improving digital infrastructure, embedding these tools into academic writing curricula with clear rubrics, and ensuring inclusive platform design. The study contributes to understanding inclusive pedagogical approaches in Nigerian tertiary education and offers insights for policymakers and educators seeking to optimise digital assessment strategies.

Keywords: Digital feedback, peer assessment, academic writing, special education, English Language Education, Nigerian higher education, inclusive pedagogy

Introduction

Writing is an important ability, particularly in contemporary society, where it is necessary to succeed in the majority of human endeavours. Academic writing is a type of writing commonly used in research settings and scholarly publications. It is the primary means of presenting research findings, developing arguments, and explaining complex concepts across various academic fields. In academic settings, academic writing is a crucial ability for disseminating concepts, data, and research to the larger academic community. Academic writing requires accuracy, clarity, organisation, and evidence-based reasoning, unlike informal or creative writing.

According to Hartley (2008), academic writing is a term that refers to a collection of writing styles that are employed in academia to represent intellectual boundaries across disciplines. According to this viewpoint, students can engage with writing practices that adhere to the social, linguistic, and cultural norms of the discipline they have chosen when they possess academic literacy (Maphalal, 2018). Students improve their comprehension of the subject matter and their capacity to effectively convey complicated ideas by developing well-organised arguments and concise explanations. Schalkwyk (2008) offers a clearer definition of academic literacy as the capacity to use language in a scholarly way. One benefit of academic writing is that it helps students develop their critical thinking abilities by pushing them to assess and examine data from many sources.

In typical tertiary institutions, especially FCE Special Oyo, academic writing is a tool for assessing students in their various fields of study. Otherwise known as a project, students are expected to display adept communication skills when stating concepts and presenting findings. Students should be able to critically communicate their ideas, supporting them with reliable sources and arranging them so that those outside of the academic community can discuss, assess, or expand on them. Abdulsalam (2024) claims that project writing is a crucial and difficult part of higher education that requires a great deal of time, effort, and intellectual rigour. In Nigeria, completing an academic project is a crucial part of the curriculum in educational institutions and a prerequisite for obtaining the National Certificate of Education (NCE). The goal of this approach is to help students improve their critical thinking, research, and academic writing

abilities, all of which are vital for their future academic endeavours and professional development. The expectation is that students are expected to write their project effectively with supervision from the lecturers. The role of the supervisor in project writing is to assist the students with adequate guidance and feedback. According to Castello (2022), good supervision gives students the direction, criticism, and encouragement they need to overcome the difficulties of writing theses.

The use of feedback and assessment is a vital tool in project writing. Feedbacks from supervisors play a crucial role in academic writing as well as peer assessment. Learners' literacy skills can be improved through the use of various feedback techniques (Kolawole, 2003). Research has shown that teaching and learning can be enhanced through the use of formative assessment feedback techniques (Boston, 2002). Feedback, according to Tapp (2015), is any conversation, written or spoken, between a student and their teacher or a peer that offers insights that help organise their learning. Feedback can take the shape of a teacher's speech reaction or a peer's or student's answer to a question or puzzle.

Peer evaluation's role and advantages have been extensively studied from a variety of angles, such as how it affects students' writing self-efficacy (Lee and Evans, 2019), autonomous motivation, and (Yousefifard and Fathi, 2021). Peer evaluation has also been recognised as a method for effectively and efficiently providing students with feedback (van Zundert et al., 2010). All these are traditional feedback strategies delivered through lecturers, but modern innovation feedback strategies have been widely used by lecturers, such as digital feedback and peer assessment tools. According to Ezechukwu, Ordua and Otumegwo (2025), conventional assessment has given way to digital assessments that promote 21st-century skills like digital literacy. There has been a shift from face-to-face feedback mechanisms to digital means of assessment and feedback. Based on the results of earlier relevant research on digital peer feedback, it is predicted that digital feedback can result in more positive attitudes and perceptions of peer feedback due to its linguistic, psychological, and logistical advantages that have been noted in the literature (Mohammad, 2017). In modern higher education, integrating digital resources into teaching methods is an innovation that promises improved student engagement, individualised learning directions, and more effective evaluation procedures.

In this study, Grammarly, Qullibot, and Peergrade will be the focus. Grammarly provides automated, real-time suggestions during the writing process. It uses different colour codes to indicate various types of errors. For instance, red highlights spelling mistakes, while blue suggests issues related to clarity of expression. In addition to basic corrections, Grammarly also offers advanced feedback on word choice, sentence variety, tone (including formal tone), and potential plagiarism. QuillBot, on the other hand, is particularly effective for paraphrasing, offering alternative ways to express the same idea. It includes a grammar checker that identifies and corrects language errors. Users can also select from different writing modes, such as Formal, Fluency, or Creative, to suit their specific writing needs. Peergrade is an online peer evaluation platform that allows students to submit assignments, review each other's work, and provide structured feedback based on criteria set by the instructor. The platform supports teachers in designing assignments and creating detailed rubrics to guide the assessment process. Once students submit their work, they are randomly assigned peers' submissions to evaluate. The feedback process is structured and guided, often involving both written comments and scoring. Maintaining anonymity throughout the review process helps ensure that peer evaluations are more objective and honest.

Despite their potential, different educational contexts have different experiences with the use of these digital feedback and assessment tools. The adoption and results of educational technologies are still impacted by structural issues such as a lack of digital infrastructure, poor teacher preparation, and unequal student access to devices and internet connectivity in a number of developing countries, including Nigeria (Majola and Mudau, 2022). In FCE Special Oyo, where students with special needs frequently encounter extra obstacles because of cognitive, sensory, or learning difficulties, the situation becomes much more complicated. To fully benefit from digital resources, these learners might need specialised instructional methodologies and adaptive technologies that is commonly disregarded in mainstream educational research.

Additionally, these discussions frequently lack the perspectives of the students themselves, especially those enrolled in FCE Special Oyo's English Language Education program. Research findings on how these students view, use, and are affected by digital feedback and peer assessment technologies is sparse. In addition to restricting our comprehension of inclusive pedagogical approaches, this under-representation makes it more difficult to create contextually relevant solutions that can improve learning outcomes for every student. Thus, by examining how English Language

Education students in a Nigerian special education institution perceive their experiences using digital feedback and peer assessment tools in academic writing, this study aims to close this crucial gap.

Statement of the problem

Assessment and feedback are essential elements of modern instruction in academic writing, especially when it comes to teaching writing in an academic environment. These resources are crucial for assisting students in developing their critical thinking, coherence, and clarity. Peer assessment and digital feedback have become important methods for improving writing instruction as a result of the growing use of digital tools in education. There are still concerns over the use and acceptance of digital tools such as Grammarly, Quillbot and online peer review systems among students in tertiary especially students of FCE Special, Oyo, despite their increasing availability. While some students may struggle with irregular internet connectivity or doubt the reliability of peer feedback, others may lack the computer skills necessary to utilise these tools properly. Research on students' experiences with peer evaluation and digital feedback for academic writing is currently lacking, particularly in Colleges of Education. Without this understanding, lectures run the risk of using resources and methods that students do not find necessary in reality. By investigating students' viewpoints, difficulties they encounter, and the real effects of these feedback techniques on their academic writing abilities, this study aims to close this gap. Hence, this study is set to investigate students' perception of digital feedback and peer assessment tools in FCE Special Oyo, Oyo State.

Objective of the study

This study proposes to investigate how English Language Education students in FCE, Special Oyo perceive the usage of peer evaluation tools and digital feedback in academic writing. The study specifically seeks to:

1. Examine students' perceptions of their instructors' digital feedback.
2. Examine students' perception of the impact of peer assessment tools in enhancing academic writing
3. Determine the challenges that students encounter when using peer assessment tools and digital feedback platforms
4. Evaluate how digital feedback and peer assessment tools affect students' writing growth and general academic writing abilities.

Research Questions

1. What is the English Language Education students' perspective on digital feedback received from their lecturers in academic writing?
2. What is the English Language Education students' perspective of peer assessment tools for improving their academic writing?
3. What are the challenges of using digital feedback and peer assessment tools?

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative design to investigate English Language Education students' . perceptions of digital feedback and peer assessment tools in academic writing using an in-depth interview with selected English language preservice teachers of the Federal College of Education, Special, Oyo, Oyo State. The population of the study consisted of all 300-level students in the English Language Department. From the thirty-six (36) students, purposive sampling technique was used to select twelve (12) pre-service teachers for the study. The criterion for selection was based on students who had prior exposure to academic writing, had experience using digital feedback tools and participated in peer activities. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather in-depth insights about their experiences and perceptions of digital feedback and peer assessment tools in academic writing. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, allowing for detailed discussions and the ability to identify teachers' perspectives. The interviews were recorded, and the data were analysed using content analysis.

Findings of Result

The study yielded several insightful findings regarding students' experiences with digital feedback and peer assessment tools in academic writing, and responses were analysed using content analysis as follows:

Research question one

What is the English Language Education students' perspective on digital feedback received from their lecturers in academic writing?

Several respondents stated that Grammarly and Quillbot help show and correct **specific errors**. One of the respondents stated:

"*Grammarly and Quillbot help me see my grammar mistakes clearly and fix them".*

(Respondent A, female: 3/6/2025)

However, some students found the feedback too vague or technical. Some students do not understand

much of this feedback as they request **simpler explanations** and **more detailed comments**. According to one of the respondents:
"Sometimes I don't understand the feedback because it is too short or not well explained."
(Respondent C, male: 3/6/2025)

Some students also express barriers such as poor internet, lack of devices, or data limitations. Some students prefer traditional (paper-based) feedback due to inconsistent access to digital platforms.

One of the respondents said:
"I don't always have data or a good phone. I prefer written comments."
(Respondent E, female: 3/6/2025)

Many respondents said digital feedback enhanced their academic writing, allowing them to revise drafts more effectively and become more aware of writing errors.

One of the respondents said:
"It has improved my writing as it allows me to see my strengths and weaknesses online, I know exactly what to work on."
(Respondent B, female: 3/6/2025)

Students expressed interest in audio (voice note) feedback or simpler language, especially those with different learning preferences.

One of the respondents said:
"Voice notes would help since I learn better when I hear the explanation."
(Respondent H, female: 2/6/2025)

Some students especially special students perceive digital feedback as inclusive for students with special needs, particularly those with hearing impairments, as it allows them to receive input without relying on spoken language.

One of the respondents said:
"For me, digital feedback is inclusive. I have a hearing challenge, so written comments help me understand what my lecturer expects without needing interpretation."
(Respondent G, male: 12/6/2025)

Research question two

What is the English Language Education students' perspective of peer assessment tools for improving their academic writing?

Students perceive peer-grade as a tool for improved writing. It affords students the avenue of realising their mistakes through feedback from their peers.

One of the respondents said that:
"Peer assessment helps me notice mistakes I didn't realise before. When another student reads my work, they point out unclear ideas or grammar I missed. It makes my writing better."
(Respondent D, female: 12/6/2025)

Another similar response was:
"They point out unclear ideas or grammar I missed."
(Respondent F, male: 12/6/2025)

Students perceive Peer-grade as helpful as it helps students learn by reviewing peers, work and reflecting on their own task.

One of the respondents said that:
"Peer assessment is useful because we learn from each other. When I assess someone else's work, I also reflect on my own mistakes. It improves both our skills".
(Respondent I, male: 12/6/2025)

Some students are skeptical of the seriousness or accuracy of peer feedback from their peers hence they prefer structured rubrics by the lecturers.

From the respondents, one of the students said:
"I think peer assessment can work, but it depends on the guidance. If the teacher gives us a clear rubric, we know what to focus on. Without that, students just write random comments."
(Respondent B female: 12/6/2025)

Another respondent said:
"Peer assessment tools are helpful, but some students copy each other's work and give shallow feedback. The teacher needs to supervise it closely."
(Respondent A, female: 12/6/2025)

Students perceive peer-grade as a tool for boosting morale and engagement for students with disability.
From the respondents, one of the students said:
"Because I have a visual impairment, it's easier when peer feedback is typed. I can zoom in or use screen readers to read the comments. It's better than oral feedback."
(Respondent J, female: 12/6/2025)

Students think that students should be trained on peer-grading, as many students give shallow or vague comments.

One of the respondents said:
"Not all students take peer assessment seriously. Some just say 'good job' and don't give real corrections. I think peer assessment is good, but we need training on how to do it properly."
(Respondent L, female: 12/6/2025)

Research question three
Several students cited a lack of devices, shared phone use, and unreliable internet as key barriers. This theme reflects a common challenge in many Nigerian institutions, especially among low-income and special needs students.

One of the respondents has this to say:
"The biggest challenge is poor internet connection. Sometimes I can't open the documents or access the feedback when I need it."

(Respondent J, male: 12/6/2025)
Similarly, another respondent said
"I do not have data most time because of financial challenges and the internet in the ICT complex is poor"
(Respondent K, male: 12/6/2025)

It is realized that the need for inclusive digital platforms. Students with visual impairments or physical challenges found it difficult to fully participate.

A students responded that:
"Some platforms are not friendly to us the blind students."
(Respondent K, male: 12/6/2025)

Another response was:
"Reading long feedback on a phone screen is stressful."
(Respondent D, female: 12/6/2025)

Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with existing literature emphasizing the transformative potential of technology in education. Digital feedback mechanisms, particularly automated grammar tools and collaborative platforms, were found to align with learner preferences for timely, accessible, and detailed responses. This is supported by Onuka and Akinyemi (2020), who noted that digital platforms promote individualized learning and reflection.

Nevertheless, peer assessment was recognized as a beneficial practice, offering dual learning opportunities: both in giving and receiving feedback. This finding resonates with the views of Nwosu and Ojo (2019), who assert that peer collaboration fosters responsibility and autonomy among learners.
As a result, infrastructural and pedagogical constraints continue to hinder the full adoption of these tools. As Okonkwo and Okoye (2021) observed, many Nigerian institutions still struggle with digital integration due to limited infrastructure and inadequate training. The skepticism surrounding peer feedback reliability also echoes calls for standardizing peer review processes and improving students' evaluative competence.

Conclusion

At this juncture, this study has revealed that English Language Education students at FCE (Special), Oyo, generally value the contributions of digital feedback and peer assessment tools to their academic writing. These tools have the potential to enhance the learning process by promoting independent writing development, reflective learning, and collaboration. However, their effectiveness is often curtailed by issues of digital literacy, technological access, and varying perceptions of peer credibility.

Now that education in Nigeria continues to evolve towards digital integration, this study reinforces the need for inclusive and supportive policies that address both technical and pedagogical barriers. Proper training and institutional support are essential for optimizing the benefits of digital feedback and peer assessment in academic writing instruction.

Recommendations
The following recommendations are proposed in line with the findings:

i. Tertiary institutions should implement continuous training programs for both students and lecturers on how to use digital feedback platforms and conduct effective peer reviews.
ii. Government and institutional stakeholders must invest in improving internet accessibility, electricity supply, and availability of digital devices to facilitate effective learning.
iii. Digital feedback and peer assessment strategies should be formally embedded into academic writing syllabi, accompanied by rubrics and feedback guidelines to ensure consistency and quality.
iv. Students should be guided on the ethics of constructive criticism and be taught how to deliver and receive peer feedback objectively, to improve trust and learning

outcomes.

v. Instructors should play an active role in moderating and evaluating peer assessments to ensure that feedback is constructive, balanced, and educational.

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