# The Efficacy of Peer Review in a Writing Skills Undergraduate Course

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## Abstract

*This study examines the efficacy of peer review as a powerful tool for improving the quality of student teachers' writing through collaboration from their understanding and perspectives. In trying to move away from the traditional product-oriented approach to the process writing approach in the teaching of writing, the study examined whether peer feedback can have a positiveeffect on student teachers' learning of writing skills. The data collection drew on two sources of information which included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Analysis of the data revealed that although participating student teachers preferred lecturer feedback compared to peer feedback, they were mindful and acknowledged that peer feedback can foster writing development. The follow-up interview data also demonstrated the positive aspects of peer review which promotes the concept that working together collaboratively produces better learning results than working alone. A majority of the student teachers had the desire to continue using peer feedback and forwarded some practical suggestions to improve the quality of peer review. An interesting perspective that came into view was the subtle shifts in student teachers' thinking to view assessment for learning and not merely as an assessment of learning.*

**Keywords** *peer review; writing skills; feedback for learning; second language learners*

## INTRODUCTION

In trying to move away from the traditional product-oriented approach to the process writing approach in the teaching of writing, the study examined whether peer feedback can have a positive effect on students' learning of writing skills. Although, peer-reviewing is an established technique that became popular in the writing classroom as a result of a paradigm shift in the teaching of composition, this practice is not commonly practiced in English language classes among the primary and secondary Malaysian schools. In writing classes, students are often required to hand in their first drafts as the final essays, which will then be graded and returned. Another important feature of classroom writing activities is the absence of audience other than the teacher who reads and grades the essays. This does not increase students' audience awareness and deprive learners from learning from their peers. This study aims to explore the feasibility of peer feedback as an option in enhancing student teachers' writing performance.

## DEFINING PEER REVIEW

There are several terms that have been used to describe collaborative, interactive learning in essay writing. Some of the terms that refer to the activity in which students evaluate each others' work include peer review, peer evaluation, peer editing, peer assistance and peer feedback. These terms are found in a variety of contexts ranging from professional, semi-professional or educational settings and are used for different purposes.

For the purpose of this study, the term peer review will be used. It involves activities in which two students exchange first drafts of their essays and evaluate each other's written essay. They then offered commentary outside class sessions. Students were encouraged to ask for further elaboration on comments provided and suggestions on how to improve from their respective peers outside class hours. The students had the option of integrating their peer's comments and suggestions into the final draft. The comments offered by peers were specific in focus. These were the four bases for revising writing as proposed by Lannon (2008), whose book is one of the main references used for the course. The four bases are: (1) unity; (2) support; (3) coherence; and (4) effective sentence skills

## DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES OF PEER REVIEW IN SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

Major developments in writing research have led to new methods of teaching writing being formulated. Writing researchers were concerned that traditional product oriented approaches may not be adequate training for all students writing for different disciplines. One of the most important developments which has impacted on writing instruction is the understanding and teaching of writing as a process. This has resulted in changes in writing instruction which shifted the focus from the product to process-oriented form of writing.

Process writing refers to a broad range of activities, such as planning and writing, as well as drafting and revising. These activities are collectively referred to as process-oriented instruction. What differentiates a process-oriented instruction from a product-centered one is that students are encouraged to mimic a model text, which is usually presented and analyzed at an early stage. Process approaches to writing tend to focus more on the varied classroom activities which promote the development of language use. Studies that have been carried out on writing programs that promoted the process approach writing strategies of planning, revising, editing and audience awareness have reported the effectiveness of the approach in improving the quality of student writing. Fathman and Whalley (1990) and Ferris (1997) argue that this will produce more careful and grammatically accurate work.

Peer feedback has been increasingly used in English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) writing instruction. Di Pardo and Freedman (1988) argue that two main features of writing in stages (pre-writing, writing, and revising) and an emphasis on the rhetorical principle of audience have promoted the use of peer-editing in order to

help students revise their compositions. In addition, the popularity of peer-editing is a growing trend in favor of interactive and cognitive-reflective activities in the classroom and constructivist approaches to language learning, which promote learner autonomy (Van Lier, 2007).

Much research investigated whether and how peer feedback assists ESL/EFL learners in developing their writing proficiency, mainly through the lens of Sociocultural Theory. In this theoretical framework, human intellectual capacities such as language development are suggested to be socially and culturally mediated within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Villamil & Guerrero, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development determined through problem solving in collaboration with more capable peers or seniors." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86) The ZPD therefore suggests that learners could potentially facilitate the development of their peers' proficiency. So, what about peers with equal language proficiencies?

The application of Sociocultural Theory in second language writing is not limited to situations or contexts in which an expert and a novice come together. For Lantolf (2000) and Lundstrom and Baker (2008), learning through ZPDs and scaffolding often occurs through collaborative construction of opportunities. In other words, language development can occur when any two language learners collaborate to complete a task. Min (2005) noted that second language writing can improve through interaction. According to Lundstrom and Baker (2008), as second language learners move through zones of proximal development, they slowly become autonomous and capable of completing the task on their own. Through a process of joint scaffolding, even novice learners can help each other learn. Findings from de Guerrero and Villamil (2000) corroborated the claim that both participants in a peer review session can learn through joint scaffolding.

Peer review is a key element in pedagogy, and is used to improve students' writing at the revision stage (Hauptle, 2006). During peer review, students involvement include reading what others have written, speaking about one's responses to their peers' writing and listening to the responses of others about their own writing. Through these collaborative learning activities during the peer review sessions, students have more significant roles in language learning. The collaborative learning perspective views language learning as a process that concerns both the learning and social aspects. This idea can be further extended and utilized when it comes to language writing classes. Instead of depending fully on the teachers for feedback, students can also seek help from other students who are more proficient in the language. Such activities in language learning will allow for interaction and thus encourage collaborative learning where students learn not only from the teachers but also from each other.

In their study about *peer* review, Lundstrom and Baker (2009) conducted an investigation to find out whether giving *feedback* or receiving *feedback c*an contribute more to improve *writing*skills. Students from an intensive English program were divided into "givers" and "receivers". The overall results showed that the "givers", who looked at other students' *writing*, made a considerable progress in improving their own *writing*during the semester. Students learn a great deal from seeing how their peers approach the same writing assignment. Similarly, Monroe and Troia (2006) found that

collaborative writing and editing helps students develop higher standards for writing and better self-assessment skills. By reading others' writing as critical readers, students could become better critical readers and revisers of their own writing (Rollinson, 2005).

## FEEDBACK FOR LEARNING

Academic literature supports the value of active learning strategies. Active learning engages students in tasks, such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating data, that require higher-order thinking skills. In line with this, writing assignments can increase students' involvement in the learning process and help achieve improvements in their writing abilities and critical thinking skills. Writing activities, in particular, are a tool faculty use to encourage students to become active learners (Gammill 2006, 754). The peer-review process also creates an active learning environment by engaging students in the criteria and standards set forth in the assignment (Falchikov and Goldfinch 2000, 287).

Assessment for learning is a pedagogical context designed to promote learning and student engagement in their learning (Black, & William, 2009). Feedback is a key element. Assessment for learning is designed to provide information about student performance. While early formative assessment discourse focused on the role of teachers in gathering information and using it to inform their teaching, more recently there has been a re-conceptualization. Formative assessment has been reframed as a social, collaborative activity, aligned more with learning. More emphasis has shifted to the students working in partnership (Hawe, Dixon, & Watson, 2008) to enhance their learning. Empirical research has provided support for peer review as an overall activity, showing that it can be just as effective as only having an instructor review (Topping, 2005), and in some cases, it has even been found to be more effective (Cho & Schunn, 2007). One possibility is that the educative value in peer review is not primarily from receiving feedback, but instead, students may learn more about writing from being the evaluator.

To construct new knowledge (the other cognitive aspect of engagement), students need to be affectively and socially engaged (Svalberg, 2009). They need to be ready and willing to work on the task at hand and able to interact with others and to compare their knowledge, to notice differences in their knowledge and the other's use of language, and to restructure their knowledge according to their newly gained understanding.

## CURRENT STUDY

The current study looked into the efficacy of peer review from students' understanding and perspectives. The following three research questions were examined:

1. Which type of feedback do the students prefer, peer feedback or teacher feedback?
2. What are the writing improvements identified based on the peer review sessions?
3. What are the strengths and shortcomings of peer review as perceived by the students?

To answer these questions, two research methods were adopted: (a) questionnaire and (b) interviews with the students to identify perspectives toward the peer review process.

**Participants and Setting**

This study was conducted in a course entitled "Writing Skills". This 3-credit course is compulsory for all student teachers whose major or minor is Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL). A total of 34 students participated in the study. Classes were conducted twice weekly, with one two-hour session and another one-hour session for the duration of one semester, which covers 14 weeks. The course is designed to help students acquire skills in writing paragraphs and essays. Students are introduced to the organization of good paragraphs and essays, specifically, the topic sentence, thesis statement and supporting details. The classes were in the form of lectures, group discussions, in-class and out-of-class writing, and peer-review activities. All participants' consented to be part of the classroom research.

**Procedure**

To answer research question 1, "Which type of feedback do the students prefer, peer feedback or teacher feedback?" and research question 2, "What are the writing improvements identified based on the peer review sessions?", data were obtained from the questionnaire completed at the end of the course duration. To answer the third research question, "What are the strengths and shortcomings of peer review as perceived by the students?", semi-structured interviews were used to gain insight into the students' thoughts and perspectives about the effectiveness of peer review. This study made use of semi-structured interviews as the questions acted as guidelines to elicit responses to the research questions. Figure 1 outlines the stages involved during the research.
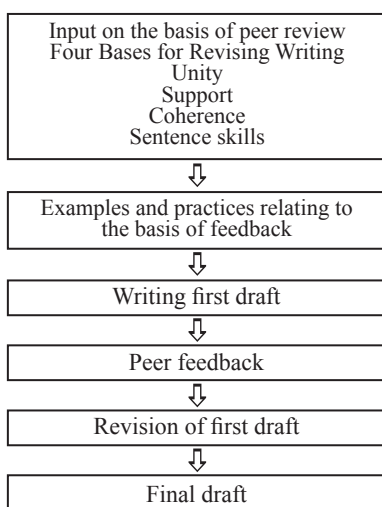
| Input on the basis of peer review<br>Four Bases for Revising Writing<br>Unity<br>Support<br>Coherence<br>Sentence skills |
| :---: |
| ⇩ |
| Examples and practices relating to<br>the basis of feedback |
| ⇩ |
| Writing first draft |
| ⇩ |
| Peer feedback |
| ⇩ |
| Revision of first draft |
| ⇩ |
| Final draft |

**Figure 1** Stages in the research design

In order to obtain positive and reliable feedback, the students were provided with a set of criteria as guidelines for judging a piece of essay. This enabled them to assume the unaccustomed role of reviewer or critic. Prior to the review sessions, students were trained on how to identify weaknesses in essays through various paragraph and essay examples for the duration of three weeks, which covered 9 hours. Specific guidelines were provided to assist them to focus their reviews on four essential components of an effective essay. The components were unity, support, coherence, and sentence skills. This served as a guide and assisted them to become responsive and responsible critics of each others' work. Altogether, there were four essays which were reviewed during the research.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data consisted of students' responses to a questionnaire and semi-structured interview data. Semi-structured interviews were carried out at the end of the study, to capture students' perceptions regarding the use of peer review as an option for writing improvement. Six students volunteered to be interviewed. The interview data were transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed.

## FINDINGS

### Questionnaire Analysis

The following statistics presents responses obtained from the questionnaire with regard to students' preferences to the source of feedback provided. Examinations of the students' preference show that a majority, 64.7% of the students preferred feedback from lecturers. 29.4% stated that they preferred feedback from both their peers and the lecturer. Only two students that made up 5.9% conferred that they preferred peer feedback.

**Table 2** Preferred source of feedback

| Source of Feedback | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Peers | 2 | 5.9% |
| Lecturers | 22 | 64.7% |
| Both peers and lecturers | 10 | 29.4 |

The data also showed that all 34 students found the peer review sessions and feedback received had improved their essays. As shown in Table 2, 33 students acknowledged 'better improvement' to their revised drafts while one considered the improvement gained from the peer reviews as highly useful and excellent.

**Table 3**  Improvement level of reviewed essays

| Category | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Excellent | 1 | 2.9% |
| Better | 33 | 97.1% |
| No Difference | 0 | 0 |

Also shown by the questionnaire data were information pertaining to specific areas which the students perceived as having improved based on the review provided by their peers. The majority stated that there was improvement in all four components of their essay writing ability, which were unity, support, coherence, and sentence skills. Base on Table 4, only 4% to 6% of the students reported that there were no improvements in the specific components of their reviewed essays. Thus, it can be concluded that the research had shown positive impact, as can be shown by the data collected through the questionnaires.

**Table 4**  Improvement categories of reviewed essays

| Category | Excellent | Better | No Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Unity | 5 (14.7%) | 25 (73.5%) | 4 (11.8%) |
| Coherence | 5 (14.7%) | 23 (67.7%) | 6 (17.6%) |
| Support | 4 (11.9%) | 24 (70.5%) | 6 (17.6%) |
| Sentence skills | 6 (17.6%) | 24 (70.5%) | 4 (11.8%) |

**Semi-Structured Interview Analysis**

The questions in the semi-structured interview focused on the following aspects:

1. How they felt providing feedback to their peers;
2. How they felt receiving feedback from their peers;
3. Strengths of peer review;
4. Shortcomings of the peer review exercise, and
5. Using peer feedback in writing classes.

**Student 1 (TM)**

When asked about his perspective of the peer review sessions, TM acknowledged the positive impact of the peer review process. He was very supportive of the idea of peer review and he was one of the two students who preferred feedback from his peers as compared to the lecturer. He also mentioned that the main advantage that he experienced was the learning and sharing which occurred between peers. These were evident in the excerpt below:

**Excerpt TM:**

> I feel comfortable giving feedback because my intention is to help my friend. I also feel comfortable when they comment on my essay because I am open to constructive criticisms. Peer review is a two-way process of learning. I feel comfortable and most of the time we will review the essay together so we can cover each other's weaknesses and discuss together. More people could have a discussion so that different ideas and opinions could be contributed.

However, he stressed that one of the weaknesses was that sometimes the comments were not appropriate or accurate when the proficiency level of the peer giving feedback was weak. When asked about the possibility of carrying out peer review sessions during writing lessons, TM commented, "I find that by giving comments and feedback on peer writing has helped not only my friend but I am more conscious of how I write. Nowadays, students can be quite matured and exposed, so I think I can try this out and see whether it works or not…see whether they experience what I experienced. After all, students must learn to go through and edit their own essays and cannot rely 100% on teachers."

**Student 2 (ASK)**

When asked about her perspective of the peer review sessions, ASK highlighted several advantages of peer review. These were evident in the excerpt below:

**Excerpt ASK:**

> We review our essays together so we can identify each others' weaknesses and discuss. I became more aware of my own writing weaknesses and try to write better. Giving feedback also boosts my confidence to believe that I can write better. Peer comments help to improve my essay since sometimes I tend to miss out mistakes even when I have reread the essay. Also, since it was my friend who reviewed my essay, I tend to write carefully because I don't want to embarrass myself by doing the same mistakes.  Personally, I prefer feedback from both peers and lecturer.

She also admitted that the peer review sessions forced her to revise more, so that she could provide constructive feedback to her peers. In addition, she became more aware of the common mistakes she did when writing. She continued by saying that, "The only drawback is when you team up with someone who is lazy, or who does not have sufficient knowledge of the language, then you're in trouble. I think it would be good if there were two or three reviewers instead of one." ASK was also optimistic when she talked about the possibility of trying out peer feedback sessions with her students in the future. She elaborated by saying that, "Now that I have experienced peer feedback, I think I can try this out with my own students later…the writing process is important because this is where the real learning takes place. Learning from our own classmates is less stressful and more enjoyable!"

**Student 3 (SAA)**

When asked about her perspective of the peer review sessions, SAA provided mixed feelings about the effectiveness of peer review. These were evident in the excerpt below:

**Excerpt SAA**

I don't feel comfortable giving feedback because I am afraid that they feel bad about my comments. Besides that, I do not feel I have enough knowledge to give others feedback as I tend to do a lot of mistakes especially sentence skills. However, I become more aware of my writing weaknesses and become more conscious of the mechanics of writing especially effective sentence skills. There should be more examples provided as to how to give constructive feedback to our peers.

**Student 4 (SR)**

When asked about her perspective of the peer review sessions, SR acknowledged the strengths of peer reviews. These were evident in the excerpt below:

**Excerpt  SR**

I do not feel shy because they are my friends and they do not mind getting constructive feedback. I feel that the criticisms were helpful as it enables me to improve my writing. I didn't realize that we can actually learn from each other. Sometimes, they point out something that do not seem to be a mistake to me. We discussed and I manage to understand. The limitation of peer feedback is mainly the level of knowledge we have. My friends and I do not have the required experience and credibility to contribute towards a really constructive criticism to improve our writing. Perhaps with additional practice, we can give better comments.

She added that as classmates, working together is good as they support each other, "We identify some strengths and some weaknesses in our work and suggest how to improve our respective essays."

**Student 5 (MW)**

When asked about his perspective of the peer review sessions, MW admitted to being uncomfortable giving feedback to his peers because he rated his proficiency as average. In addition, he felt a little embarrassed when peers identified specific weaknesses in his essays.

**Excerpt  MW**

I feel awkward giving feedback since I don't have the confidence because I do not have enough knowledge and my proficiency is just average. I also feel shy when

my friends comment on my essay. The good thing is that the discussion between peers is informal and there is no time limit since we can discuss after class.

### Student 6 (YHK)

YHK admitted feeling uncomfortable and surprised when students were asked to comment on their peer's essays. He felt that he was unable to provide relevant feedback because his English is quite weak. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that peer review can be effective if the peer is more able and has a good command of the language.

### Excerpt  YHK

> I prefer feedback from the lecturer. As a student, I still need guidance and feedback from the lecturer. Some students do not have the ability to provide feedback as they are also facing problem writing essays. I feel that I don't have enough knowledge to provide feedback since I am also weak in grammar. In my point of view, the overall advantage of peer review is only that we are able to exchange ideas when writing certain topics. This strategy is only suitable for those proficient students. More guidance and training should be provided to students before we can comment on the work of others.

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the efficacy of peer review as written feedback on student teachers' essays. Although a majority of the student teachers preferred feedback from lecturers, all of them acknowledged that the peer review sessions conducted had a positive effect on their essay writing and that by incorporating the feedback from peers, there were improvements in their final essay drafts. This study was a small-scale study, and the results obtained cannot be generalized to other educational contexts. Furthermore, the conclusion made about the efficacy of peer review was based on the student teachers' understanding and perspectives of the process. An interesting perspective that came into view was that a majority of the student teachers had the desire to continue using peer feedback and forwarded some practical suggestions to improve the quality of peer review such as the need for peer review training and advocated the use of more than one peer reviewer.

Therefore, peer review training is important to ensure the effectiveness of peer review sessions. As writing teachers or instructors, we need to realize that peer-review is an on-going process which requires time and effort to establish an environment that encourages peer-review as a way to develop independent critical readers and writers. Patchan, Charney, and Schunn, (2009) found that with guidance, students can provide feedback similar in quantity and quality to that of instructors.

The peer review sessions succeeded in making the student teachers more aware of their own 'weaknesses and mistakes'. These peer feedback sessions provided not only the opportunities to read the essays of others but also provide the possibility that they

could reflect on their own draft. This proves what Rollinson (2005) stated that peer feedback also trains students to be critical readers of their own writing. To conclude, peer review activities cannot guarantee improvements in a piece of writing. What is more important is that students can become more critical readers and revisers through reading others' writings critically. As asserted by Lantolf and Thorne (2006), peer interaction should be included as activities conducive to learning through the ZPD, especially in secondary and higher education settings.

This study contributes to research in highlighting student teachers' positive acceptance of the important role of peer feedback in developing writing skills. Another important implication is that with proper guidance and appropriate training on how to provide effective peer feedback, these student teachers are made aware of the usefulness of peer feedback and its potential effects within their own classrooms when they become English language teachers themselves. The idea of sharing the assessment process with students is a positive beginning towards the use of assessment for learning.

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