

# The Perception of Prospective English Language Teachers on Guided Peer Feedback Regarding Their Writing Skills

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## Abstract

The main goal of education is to create autonomous lifelong learners who have the ability to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for their future life. Constructivist theories of learning, especially current popular approach, communicative language teaching recommends creating cooperative learning situations in all kinds of educational context in order to achieve this goal. To empower students as self-regulated and collaborative learners, peer feedback is increasingly applied in process approach to teach writing. Thus, the circumstances under which peer feedback is beneficial for students' improvements are worth to be investigated in detail. Especially, the students' emotional state can mediate the impact of peer feedback on their performance. The results obtained may be informative for EFL writing teachers in terms of the aspects to take into account when implementing feedback in order to foster the development of students' positive attitudes toward it.

**Keywords:** Peer feedback, Writing skill, Cooperative learning.

## 1. Introduction

The use of peer feedback is regarded as an important tool in writing teaching and learning both in first language (L1) and second language (L2) contexts. In recent years, there has been an increased interest on peer feedback, due to its social, cognitive, affective, and methodological benefits (Rollinson, 2005). Therefore, peer feedback has become the object of several studies in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) academic contexts. Although researches carried out in this field both positive and negative results, it is possible to say that the practice of allowing peer feedback has generally been admitted to be a valuable pedagogical tool (Ferris, 2003).

### 1.1 Definition of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback, also referred to as peer review, peer response or peer editing is defined as the process by which students are supposed to exchange constructive criticism on their writing skills. Bartels (2003) says: "...peer response, in which students read each other's papers and provide feedback to the writer, usually answering specific questions the teacher has provided". But the most comprehensive definition of peer feedback is Liu and Hansen (2002)'s which considers peer feedback "the use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing." In brief, peer feedback in writing means sharing one's writing with other peer readers who give feedback and suggestions for enhancement. Also, with peer feedback, students and their peers play roles as writers and readers as well as givers and receivers.

### 1.2. The Benefits of Peer Feedback

Many researches have argued that peer written feedback has large number of advantages on students' writing skill. According to Bartels (2003), peer feedback can help create the feeling of being an audience for both the writers and the peer readers. It gives students chances for "communicative writing." Bartels (2003) further states that students can have many opportunities for "immediate feedback and negotiation of meaning", via peer written feedback. They can request clarification, ask questions and even argue about their peers' comments which can lead to more language learning. In terms of response and revision, it has been shown that peer writers can revise effectively on the basis of comments from peer readers (Rollinson, 2005). Besides, becoming a critical reader of others' writing may make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing (Rollinson, 2005).

Moreover, Caulk (1994, as cited in Rollinson, 2005) also states that peer feedback is of altered kind from that of the teacher. He mentions that teacher feedback is rather general whereas student reviews are more specific. On the same lines, Rollinson (2005) itemizes some benefits of peer feedback over teacher feedback: Peer response functions on a more informal level than teacher response. This may promote a change from (and a complement to) the more one-way interaction between the teacher and the student, where student may end up making revisions without necessarily agreeing with or even understanding the teacher's authoritative comments which is a very common situation in writing classes. The writer receiving comments from a peer has the right to

reject comments, and is thus more able to maintain the possession of her own texts.

Rollinson (2005) also adds that peers can have much more time providing feedback on their friends' writing than their teachers. Generally, in large classes, teachers often do not have enough time to provide their students with thorough comments on each paper while peer respondents can provide their friends with thorough ones by reviewing writings in many different aspects (Caulk, 1994, cited in Bartels, 2003). In addition, peer feedback tends to be more sympathetic than the more distant and possibly more judgmental teacher feedback. In terms of students' perceptions, students themselves find the peer response experience beneficial because they can avoid some certain mistakes next time and learn many things based on the way their peers correct their writings (Mendonca and Johnson, 1994, cited in Rollinson, 2005). Last but not least, they also realize that its social dimension can also enhance the participants' attitudes towards writing and their confidence in writing as well. (Chaudron, 1984, cited in Rollinson, 2005).

Despite many advantages, peer written feedback has its own drawbacks, because it is a very complicated process that requires training and structure in order to be effective, both in L1 and L2 classrooms (Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996). Furthermore, peer review procedures also take up much of the classroom time. Therefore, application of various kinds of feedback is recommended by many researchers to ensure the best effects.

### *1.3. Students' Attitudes toward Peer Feedback*

Students' attitudes toward peer feedback vary according to the researches. A number of studies involving both ESL and EFL students revealed that the majority had favorable attitudes toward peer feedback (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Saito & Fujita, 2004; Li, 2006; Kurt & Atay 2007; Strijbos & Pat-El & Narciss 2010). But the researches results are conflicting. As an example, in an exploratory study involving 40 advanced ESL writing students, many of the students found their peers' comments had been useful in the process of revision, yet some of the learners stated that they had found their classmates' observations either irrelevant or unclear (Mangelsdorf, 1992). Similar results were obtained in an investigation focusing on the perceptions and beliefs of a group of ESL secondary school students in Hong Kong (Sengupta, 1998). Many studies of peer feedback in ESL and EFL settings revealed that students' attitudes toward their peers' reviews and comments seem to be conditioned by the amount and quality of training and preparation they receive in class previous to their actual participation in peer-response groups; that is, the more planned instruction the students receive, the better they seem to respond to the activity (Berg, 1999; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Hu, 2005; Mittan, 1989; Rollinson, 2005; Stanley, 1992).

Some other studies investigating the attitude of ESL and EFL students do not show such positive results; on the contrary, they have presented a number of negative effects related to the implementation of peer feedback. Some students reported that they feel uncomfortable with this practice (Carson, 1992; Nelson & Carson, 1998), and usually prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback (Amores, 1997; Chaudron, 1984; Zhang, 1995).

It seems that more studies on students' attitudes toward peer feedback would be of value to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of some of the current pedagogical techniques and approaches used for its implementation (Ferris, 2003). Such information would also contribute to increasing our understanding of the nature of students' perceptions regarding the usefulness of peer feedback in the writing class, mainly in EFL academic contexts, where there seems to exist a general reluctance toward the systematic implementation of peer response in the writing class. (Mora & Romano, 2008).

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Research Objectives*

While teacher feedback has been the object of many studies, peer feedback perception has been neglected in feedback research as a consequence instruments for measuring feedback perceptions are lacking. Feedback which is perceived as fair and useful might be more attended to, as compared to feedback that is perceived as unfair, and useless. In addition, information about the particular sender of feedback could trigger social comparison, and as result influence how a recipient perceives and treats the feedback. In brief, the feedback perception may affect students' willingness to improve and their affect (emotional state), which may subsequently influence performance. This paper investigates the following question: **What are the reactions of prospective English language teachers to guided peer feedback on writing?**

### *2.2. Participants*

28 students (19 female, 9 male) enrolled in the first year of English Language Education department at a State University in Turkey participated in this study. Students taking Advanced Reading & Writing II course are between the ages of 18-27 and have roughly advanced level of proficiency in English, equivalent to level of C1 of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework.

### 2.3 Measures

8 – item feedback perceptions questionnaire was used. Affect was measured with 3 items; students' reactions to peer feedback, aspects of writing improving after feedback, usefulness and difficulty of giving peer feedback. The questionnaire was previously used with EFL students in a research by Morra & Romano. (Morra & Romano, Reactions to Peer Feedback, JCLL, Vol.35, 2008).

### 2.4 Materials and Procedure

The implementation of the approach lasted 9 weeks. Biweekly students brought to class copies of a first draft of the assigned essays that they had to write regularly as a part of the component of the "Advanced Reading & Writing II" course. They sat in groups of two and read each other's essay to give written feedback on the drafts according to the questions that were given to them by the teacher. In guideline, there are detailed set of instructions for gathering information about their reactions/ perceptions to peer feedback. (See Guideline below) **Peer Feedback Guideline** (Adapted from Oshima & Hogue, Writing Academic English, Pearson, Longman, 2006).

1. What kind of introduction does this essay have (funnel, entertaining story, etc.)?

How many sentences does it contain?

Does it capture your interest?

Where is the thesis statement placed?

2. How many paragraphs are there in the body?

The topics of the body paragraphs are as follows:

1. 3.

2. 4.

(If there are more or fewer paragraphs, add or delete lines.)

3. What kind of supporting details does the writer use in each body paragraph?

1. 3.

2. 4.

4. Check each paragraph for unity. Is any sentence unnecessary or "off" the topic?"

If your answer is yes, write a comment about it (them).

5. Check each paragraph for coherence. Does each one flow smoothly from beginning to end?

What key nouns are repeated?

What transition signals can you find?

6. What expressions does the writer use to link paragraphs?

7. What kind of conclusion does this essay have- a summary of the main points or a paraphrase of the thesis statement?

8. In your opinion, what is the best feature of this essay? In other words, what is this writer's best writing skill?

Out of the class, students revised and corrected their essays on the basis of the feedback given by their peers. The procedure was repeated on nine week cycle, with a biweekly session lasting about 45 minutes. Revised drafts were kept in students' portfolios and at the end of the 9 week term, they were also examined by the teacher.

The survey on peer feedback was applied in order to learn students' opinions and perceptions regarding the benefits of this instructional practice, its relative usefulness and pitfalls, and the aspects that they considered most difficult during the experience. After the final week of the application of peer feedback, in the 9th week, students were given 40 minutes of the class period to write down their answers to survey. Some of the students together with the survey, extended written comments and personal impressions of what they thought about the experience.

### 2.5 Analysis of Students' Responses

The results of the survey show that the students had positive attitudes toward peer feedback as reflected in the figures that follow. Students responded actively to their peers' feedbacks, as Table 1 illustrates, 67% brought back to class their revised compositions; all of those who did not (32%) included lack of time to redraft their essays as a common explanation. Some of these students had additional reasons—like not understanding their peers' comments, incapability of making the changes suggested, and having doubts about the justification for the comments—but none of them considered their peers' review worthless.

Of those who did respond to their peers' comments by revising their essays, said they valued peer feedback to their writing: 32% of them considered their classmates' comments "very helpful," 46% "quite helpful," 21 % a little helpful and 0% "not helpful at all."

**Table 1.** Students' Reactions to Peer Feedback

Survey questions

1. Did you hand in all revised versions of your composition after receiving feedback?			
A. Yes: 19/ 67%		B. No: 9/ 32%	
2. How helpful was the feedback you received?			
A. Very helpful: 9/ 32%	B. Quite helpful: 13/ 46%	C. A little helpful: 6/ 21%	D. Not helpful at all: 0/ 0%
3. What were your reasons for not handing in all the drafts?			
A. Lack of time: 16/ 57%	B. Not understanding peers' comments: 3/ 10%	C. Peers' observations were not useful: 5/ 17%	D. Others (specify): 4/ 14%

As regards the perceived benefits of peer feedback (Table 2), the students' reactions point out gains in three main aspects of academic writing: 71% of those who responded to their peers' feedback considered that it had helped them improve their use of English, 17% felt it was an aid to tighter organization, and 10% felt it was an aid to better focus on relevant points.

**Table 2.** Aspects of Writing Improving After Peer Feedback

Survey question

4. In which of the following aspects of writing did peer feedback help you most?			
A. To focus on relevant points: 3/10%	B. To organize your writing more tightly: 5/17%	C. To improve your use of English: 20/71%	D. Others (specify ): 0/ 0%

The experience of giving feedback was perceived to be beneficial (Table 3). Students considered it either "very" or "quite useful" (35% and 42%), while 0% responded "useless." When asked to rank the benefits of this practice, the highest percentages went to (50%), learning about criteria for judging compositions (14%), making students aware of their own mistakes and limitations and forcing them into the teacher's role. It is important to note here that the benefits of providing feedback to classmates recognized by many of the students were not exclusively restricted to the perceived improvement in use of English but to other, more global, aspects of writing such as topic focus, assessing others' writing.

Reviewing peer writing was regarded as "quite hard" by 53% and "easy" by 10% of the students. The main cause of difficulty when providing feedback was "use of English" (67%), "text organization" (21%), and "content" (10%). Most of the students who found the activity "very" or "quite hard" also reported that they had to resort to dictionaries, textbooks, and other reference materials as well as to other classmates and/or teachers in order to clear their doubts when reviewing their peers' texts.

**Table 3.** The experience of giving feedback

Survey questions

5. How useful was the experience of giving feedback?			
A. Very useful: 35/ 10%	B. Quite useful: 12/ 42%	C. Not very useful: 6/ 21%	D. Useless: 0/ 0%
6. Which of the following aspects did you consider most useful?			
A. It promotes cooperative work: 2/ 7%			
B. It fosters respect for texts written by your peers: 0/ 0%			
C. It makes you think about alternative ways of focusing a topic: 1/ 3%			
D. You have access to other styles of writing: 0/ 0%			
E. You learn about criteria for judging compositions: 14/ 50%			
F. It gives you ideas about how to organize your writing: 0/ 0%			
G. You learn new expressions and vocabulary: 0/ 0%			
H. You become aware of your own mistakes and limitations: 4/ 14%			
I. It forces you into the teacher's role: 4/ 14%			
I. You become aware that you write for others: 3/ 10%			
J. Others (specify): 0/ 0%			
7. In your experience, giving feedback to your peers was:			
A. Very hard: 8/ 28%	B. Quite hard : 15/ 53%	C. Easy: 3/ 10%	D. Very easy: 2/ 7%
8. Which of the following did you consider the most troublesome?			
A. Giving feedback on content: 3/ 10%	B. Giving feedback on organization: 6/ 21%	C. Giving feedback on use of English: 19/ 67%	D. Others (specify): 0/ 0%

### 3. Pedagogical Implication

The analysis of students' and teachers' responses reveals that prospective English language teachers can develop a positive attitude toward peer feedback on academic writing. It seems, however, that there are important aspects of this instructional practice that should be considered and especially taken into account in EFL environments in order to generate positive student responses to the practice. The results of the survey provided valuable information about some of those aspects of peer feedback that writing teachers could take into account at the moment of implementing it in the EFL composition class. Giving students appropriate training and guidance on how to go about reviewing their classmates' texts stands

out as a crucial point when trying to generate a positive attitude toward peer feedback. This notion has also been supported by previous studies (Berg 1999, Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Hu, 2005; Mittan, 1989; Porto, 2001; Rollinson, 2005). Providing modeling seems to help them realize what is expected from them as readers and writers and makes them feel more confident than if they have to work in a vacuum. That is, when confronted with another writer's text, very few students would know exactly what to do; in most of the cases, they feel at a loss as to what to say or comment about it. Together with appropriate and gradual training, the organization of small groups appears to be an effective technique to put peer feedback into practice since it might help to lower apprehension and fear and eventually lead to establishing a relaxed and stress-free atmosphere. This is critical in an EFL environment where many students have serious doubts regarding their capability to help other writers improve their texts.

### 4. Conclusion

This paper described the implementation of an approach to guided peer feedback on writing in a university EFL context and examined students' reactions to it. Clearly, with adequate training and guidance, learners can develop positive attitudes toward their peers' responses. When an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect is created in the classroom, writer-presenters get a sense that they will be heard, that their writing will not be received with indifference or be publicly debased. In turn, they will be ready to collaborate actively as reader-respondents to their classmates' writing, a role traditionally assigned to teachers. Guided peer feedback undoubtedly socializes students' compositions. In so doing, it fosters collaborative work, activates reading and writing competence, and raises linguistic and textual awareness. Factors to bear in mind, however, include language proficiency, age, school level, and cultural background, which may affect the instructional practice and, consequently, yield different outcomes.

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#### Notes

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