

Students' Perceptions Towards Peer Feedback Approach in a Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Peer feedback is one of the commonly practised pedagogical approaches in writing classes. It can be seen as a powerful tool to provide students with an authentic audience who give different views on their writings and, thus, able to increase the student writers' confidence and motivation. The aim of this exploratory classroom study was to investigate how peer feedback was valued in a writing course. It also explored the potential benefits of peer feedback application in the writing class. The findings reveal that peer feedback was well-received by the students as it gave them the benefits of additional point of views from a wider audience. However, the findings also show that peers' linguistic competence, attitude and cultural values could affect the value and validity of the feedback which, in turn, could affect the effectiveness of this approach.

Keywords: *audience, peer feedback, peer groups, reviewers, writing*

Introduction

The approach to writing in the past had largely been product-oriented in which the person who most commonly reviewed students' writing in composition classes was the teacher. In the last decade, however, there was a shift from product to process-oriented in the approach to writing, given the strong support from social learning theories. A common respondent to students' writing, particularly in the early stages of draft development, is no longer the teacher, but other students in the writing classes. Working in pairs or groups, students read and respond to each others' drafts to facilitate fellow classmates produce better subsequent drafts.

There is a substantial amount of literature review on First Language (L1) and Second Language (L2) students' perception of peer feedback. Studies have shown that peer feedback activity is considered to have several positive effects on student writers' motivation level, audience awareness, critical thinking, content, organisation, autonomy, social and target language development (Allison and Ng, 1992; Arndt, 1993; Chaudron, 1984; Hansen and Liu, 2005; Tsui and Ng, 2000). Along the same line, proponents of peer feedback, such as Rollinson (2005), argue that the advantages of peer feedback over teacher response include the perceptions that the peers are less threatening, less authoritarian, friendlier and more supportive than the instructor. This helps to lower the student writers' apprehension and, consequently, makes them more motivated to write and revise.

Although empirical studies have revealed many advantages in practising peer feedback in writing classes, some researchers have also pointed out that Asian students expressed negative attitude towards peer feedback activity compared to those in the western countries (Carson and Nelson, 1996; Hyland, 2003; Zhang, 1995). Prompted by this finding, the present study sought to find out whether Malaysian students' also have similar negative attitude towards the peer feedback approach in the classroom. This paper, thus, reports the findings of the study carried out in a college writing classroom.

Peer Feedback in the Classroom

The term 'peer feedback' is defined as 'the use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other in such a way that learners

assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critique each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing' (Liu and Hansen, 2002, p. 1). Peer feedback is also mentioned as peer response, peer review, peer rating, peer assessment, or peer editing. Empirical studies on classroom practice have reported both the positive and negative sides of the peer feedback approach.

Researchers have argued the benefits of peer feedback from the cognitive, linguistic and social aspects. Cognitively, Villamil and De Guerrero (1996) attested that peer feedback constituted the social basis for the development of cognitive processes that are essential for revision. They put forward that 'it is the exchange of ideas during interaction, where both peers extend and receive help, that they are able to advance their knowledge' (p. 67). In this case, student writers with greater knowledge take the role of teachers and the others who are lacking knowledge are labeled as learners. Such a relationship is part of scaffolding in which they take turns supporting each other to accomplish the writing task. In addition, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) stated that in peer feedback activity, students can take an active role in their learning as they 'reconceptualise their ideas in light of their peers' reactions' (p. 746).

Linguistically, peer feedback can generally enhance the development of L2 learning. This is because the interaction can help students communicate their ideas and explore the target language as they discuss and comments on their peers' writings (Liu & Hansen, 2002; Mangelsdorf, 1989). In short, the activity gives them opportunities to negotiate ideas and discuss linguistic issues such as appropriate word choices or grammatical structures.

The implementation of peer feedback in class is also supported by collaborative learning theory which states that learning is a socially constructed activity which takes place through communication with peers (Bruffee, 1999). Such learning experience is a part of scaffolding in which experienced student writers guide less experienced peers in extending their current writing competence. Along the same line, Feris and Hedgcock (1998) claimed that peer feedback activity allows students to be engaged in unrehearsed, low-risk, exploratory talk which is less feasible in whole class and teacher-student interactions. Rollinson (2005) added that peer feedback has advantages over teacher feedback as peers are perceived to be less threatening, less authoritarian, friendlier

and more supportive than the teacher in the classroom. Rollinson (2005) also added that

Peer feedback, with its potentially high level of response and interaction between reader and writer can encourage a collaborative dialogue in which two-way feedback is established, and meaning is negotiated between the two parties. It also fosters highly complex socio-cognitive interactions involving arguing, explaining, clarifying and justifying (p. 25).

The beneficial effects of peer feedback, however, have not gone unchallenged. Tsui and Ng (2000), reported that participants often experienced ‘a lack of trusting the accuracy, sincerity, and specificity of the comments of their peers’ (as cited in Rollinson, 2005, p. 24). This negative behaviour towards peer feedback is also attested in other studies (Mangelsdorf, 1992; Zhang, 1995). The contention is that L2 students may not trust their peers’ responses to their writings because they are not the native speakers of English (Nelson and Murphy, 1993). Thus, another commonly cited concern is fear of being ridiculed by one’s peers due to one’s limited English proficiency (Linden-Martin, 1997). In a survey conducted by Lockhart and Ng (1993), they found that while students agreed that peer feedback enabled them to gain awareness of the audience and improve their writing, they were ‘unsure of their strength as competent readers’ (p. 23).

Along the same line, Nelson and Carson (1998) also reported that peer feedback is not always positively perceived by the students. The students believed that peer feedback is merely ‘finding mistakes or problems on each other’s essays’ (p. 122). In fact, Nelson and Carson (1998) found that the students perceived positive comments

as part of a script in which one good comment was used to ease the listener into hearing the problems with his or her essay. In fact, writers came to understand that a paper’s good points did not need to be mentioned to the group; what needed discussion were a paper’s bad points. (p. 122)

The studies also show that culture is influential in the students’ attitude towards feedback. Nelson and Carson (1998) and Hyland (2000), for example, claimed that students who come from cultures that make them feel they are in no position to criticise would reduce them to respond the least to their peers’ writings. This may negatively affect the entire

dynamics of peer feedback. Nelson and Carson (1998) observed that compared to their Spanish peers in the group, the Chinese depended more on group consensus for any changes to be made on the writings. It is found that the Chinese students 'frequently refrained from speaking because of their reluctance to criticise their peers, disagree with their peers, and claim authority as readers' (Nelson & Carson, 1998, p. 127). This is in line with Tang and Tithecott's (1999) journal entries that Asian students often commented on their worries about criticising others' work. One student wrote:

[It is] very difficult to tell the person who write this essay negative things frankly because I don't want to hurt his or her feelings. (Tang & Tithecott, 1999, p. 31)

Other researchers have found similar pattern of behaviour with Chinese students in peer feedback group. As one participant responded:

The reason why I keep my questions [to myself] sometimes is... because I... do not want to embarrass the writer or arouse an argument (Carson & Nelson, 1996, p. 8).

Procedures on Peer Feedback in the Classroom

There have been no standard procedures on carrying out the peer feedback activities in the classroom. However, some researchers have suggested a number of models on how to approach peer feedback in the classroom. The following figures clearly illustrate the steps involved in the suggested models.

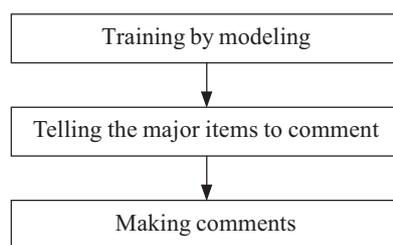


Figure 1: Saito and Fujita's (2004) Model of Peer Feedback Procedures

Other models have also suggested quite similar procedures. However, some may extend the number of stages according to the needs. Hansen

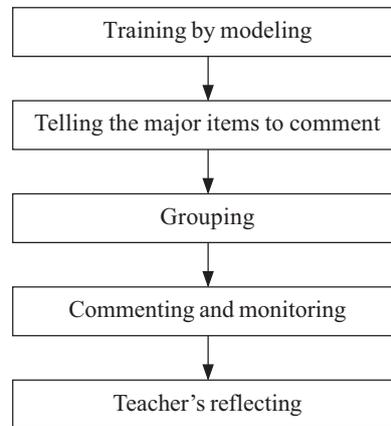


Figure 2: Sargent's (1997) Model of Peer Feedback Procedures

and Liu (2004), for example, believe that for more effective peer feedback, more detailed procedures are needed. Thus, they suggested 'before peer response', 'during peer response' and 'after peer response' stages to be included in the procedure.

The Study

Most of the studies on students' perceptions on peer feedback technique had been conducted in foreign contexts of ESL environment. Studies in the local ESL tertiary level seem to be scarce. This motivated the writers to find out whether Malaysian students perceive peer feedback in the classroom positively or otherwise. The findings can provide useful and relevant information for any classroom instruction to be improved on. The research questions can, thus, be expressed as follows:

- i. What are the students' perceptions towards peer feedback?
- ii. What are the factors that can influence students' perceptions towards feedback?
- iii. How can peer feedback approach be improved in the classroom?

Methodology

The data were collected from students' response to survey questionnaires and post-hoc interviews regarding their perception of the feedback sessions. The following section describes the context and instruments of the data collection, and the data analysis procedures.

Peer Review Sessions

A college writing course served as the context for the peer feedback sessions. The course consisted of three contact hours per week over a fourteen-week term. Throughout the writing course, students were involved in the practice activities of pre-writing, drafting, revising and peer feedback sessions as suggested in the course textbook. Students were required to complete one expository writing assignment at the end of the term. The assignment went through four stages of drafting before final submission with two peer feedback sessions per assignment and one instructor's comment. Students were introduced to the concept of peer feedback at the beginning of the term and the goals and benefits of the sessions were discussed. To help the students in the peer feedback sessions, a set of peer feedback checklist consisting of 15 questions adapted from the course textbook was used to guide students in their oral critique of a text written by a student writer. Students, then, engaged in paired discussion after reading each other's drafts. They could, thus, consider the comments that

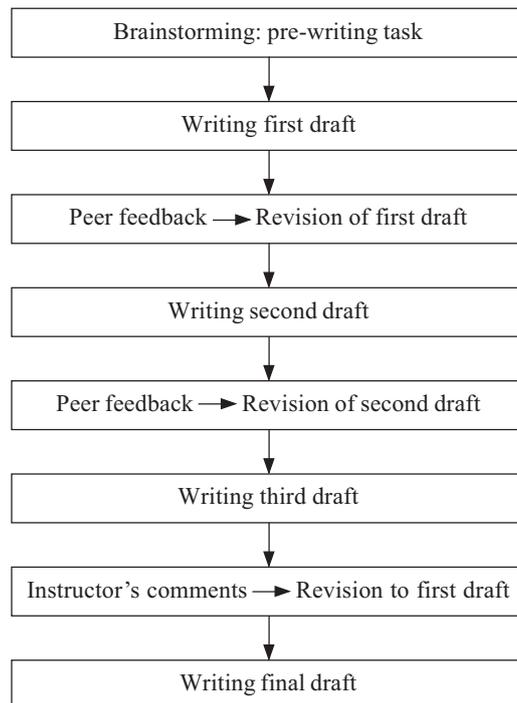


Figure 1: The Writing Cycle

their partner gave and plan how to revise their writing. It was emphasised that the input from the peer feedback sessions should serve as guidance for revision, but the final decision of what changes would be appropriate was the responsibility of the writer. A second peer feedback session with different partners was conducted based on a subsequent draft of the same assignment. In response to the peers' oral comments, students had to produce the third drafts that were read and commented by the course instructor. On the basis of the instructor's written comments, students produced the final draft to be submitted for assessment. Figure 3 is a diagrammatic representation of the writing cycle.

Respondents

19 students who were doing a college writing course took part in the study. The demographic background reveals that all of them are Malays who use English as their second language. They were doing a TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) programme, thus, their English Language proficiency can be considered quite proficient. Most of them often used the language at home and in their social network. These students had been classmates for two semesters, thus, they claimed that they were quite familiar with each other.

Instruments

A set of self-completed questionnaire was used to obtain the data. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part I consisted of questions designed to get information on how useful peer feedback was in helping the students revise their drafts, analyse their peers' writing and improve their own writing. Students answered these questions using a 4-point scale with space provided for them to write down the reasons for each of the answers that they had given. Part II of the questionnaire consisted of a list of 14 types of comments that students were likely to have encountered during peer feedback sessions. Students indicated the frequency of comment types given by their partner and how useful that type of comment was in improving their drafts. Part III of the questionnaire comprised three open-ended questions on which part of peer feedback they enjoyed most, which part of peer feedback they enjoyed least and what suggestions they had to improve the effectiveness of the peer feedback activity.

In addition, a list of semi-structured interview questions was also used to complement the questionnaire data. The interview was

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administered after class hours. Due to time constraint, the writers only managed to interview seven students.

Data Analysis

For the questions with rating scales, the responses were tabulated and means and standard deviations were calculated. In analysing the open-ended questions in Part III, the respondents' answers were coded and further refined into several categories. The responses during the interview were reported and discussed.

Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal that respondents' perceptions towards peer feedback were largely influenced by their attitude, culture upbringing and linguistic competence. This has certainly affected their behaviour during the sessions.

Table 1: Usefulness of Peer Comments

Type of comment	Mean Standard 0 = useful 2 = very useful	Deviation
told me if my ideas were clear or not	1.63	0.51
told me where to support ideas with additional information	1.51	0.55
suggested how I could explain my ideas more clearly	1.44	1.62
told me if my ideas were interesting or not	1.41	1.53
suggested specific ideas to add	1.39	1.56
discussed my paper in relation to my intended purpose	1.33	1.58
suggested words or sentence structures that I could use	1.30	0.61
discussed my paper in relation to my intended audience	1.26	1.57
corrected grammar mistakes	1.15	0.68
suggested ways of showing relationships between ideas	1.14	0.67
suggested how I could reorganise the entire essay	1.12	0.72
told me which ideas I should exclude	1.11	0.73
suggested how I could reorganise ideas within a paragraph	1.02	0.70
corrected spelling mistakes	1.01	0.73

The quantitative data indicate that the respondents found peer response useful in revising their drafts (mean = 2.83 on a scale from 1 to

4), in learning how to analyse writing (mean = 2.64), in discovering new ideas and view points (mean = 2.50), and in improving their writing skills (mean = 2.34). Table 1 below shows specifically which types of comments the respondents found most useful during the peer feedback session. The types of comments are rank ordered from the most useful comments to the least useful comments.

The data above indicate that the first five most useful comments are related to the content of the respondents' drafts. Five respondents gave the reasons that peer feedback was useful in providing more ideas to improve the content of their writing, four stated it helped clarify their ideas, three mentioned it helped them know which points to elaborate and one said it helped them decide which information to include or exclude. Other areas found useful by the respondents were greater awareness of the audience, assistance of organisation of the essay and correction of mistakes.

Students also indicated that the peer feedback sessions helped them in the improvement of their drafts and general writing skills. They mentioned that the sessions helped them learn good points from their partner's paper, exposed them to different styles of writing, helped them know how to edit, increased reflection, increased awareness of their weaknesses and increased confidence.

As for the open-ended question "How enjoyable was the peer reviews?", 13 respondents reported that they enjoyed the peer feedback sessions because the sessions contributed to the improvement of their essay content and writing skills. A respondent, during the interview claimed that the sessions were more meaningful than instructor's feedback because she could get feedback from people who were at the same level of thinking with her. She commented that

'My ideas and my friends' might be the same as were are at the same wavelength. But they probably see a better way of writing it, thus, when they commented on my writing, I can make sense of it.'

Similarly, another respondent felt that feedback from instructors can be more complicated and demanding because instructors '*know a lot of theories and have seen better work done by others*', thus, at times, she felt that instructors' feedback can be off-putting.

The respondents also mentioned that by reading their peers' drafts, they discovered other writing styles not known to them before. Another

aspect that the students mentioned contributing to their enjoyment of the sessions was the pleasure they experienced as readers and having improved awareness as a reader. The students stated they had pleasure reading their peers' essays as they discovered new ideas and liked these sessions because their analytical skills for reading an essay were being trained. The final aspect is related to the experience of sharing and interacting, mentioned by the students. The students reported that they enjoyed the peer feedback when they could suggest new ideas or opinions to their partners. One comment that is worth noting is the respondents felt that the process of learning was taking place in a friendly and enjoyable atmosphere. The respondent said that

'We can laugh and joke at the same time. We can freely argue and disagree with each other. With a lecturer, no matter how kind and friendly he or she is, you won't be like that. You feel obliged agreeing to the comments'.

Although most of the respondents favoured the peer feedback activity in the classroom, some claimed that they did not feel that the activity can largely benefit them. The interview data reveal their attitude towards the activity.

First, the respondents felt they should not be the ones to give comments on other people's work. They felt that it was the instructor's job to give comments. This is because they saw the instructor as the authority in the classroom. Thus, they felt that it was only apt for the instructor to give the feedback instead of the students. Furthermore, they felt that it was a waste of time as they knew that the instructor was going to give a final comment at the end of the session. Second, some of them felt they did not qualify to give comments because of their linguistic incompetence. They did not feel confidence in giving any comments on their peers' work whose English language competence was better than theirs. On the other hand, those with better linguistic competence did not seem to value the comments given by their less competent peers.

The interview sessions also reveal that culture does exert its influence on the respondents' attitude towards peer feedback. The respondents claimed that they did not want to hurt their friends' feeling with their comments. They were also afraid that their friends might take the comments negatively, which might affect their relationship. Thus, they certainly felt that any comments or criticism should come from the instructor. As stated by a respondent:

'Even if what I am saying is true, my friends might get offended and hurt. I don't want them to think that I am better than them. It makes me feel, you know... I don't want them to think I am above them. If the instructor criticised, they won't feel anything. Angry may be, but not towards me.'

This is in line with the findings in studies by Nelson and Carson (1998), Hyland (2000) and Tang and Tithecott (1999) that Asian students are quite reluctant to give comments because of fear of hurting other people's feelings. Malays, being brought up with strong emphasis on politeness and proper decorum, would avoid offending and hurting other people's feelings. This explains the respondents' refrain in making comments on their peers' work.

The interview sessions also reveal that the real reason behind their reluctance to embrace the peer feedback concept was the respondents did not like reading other people's work. In addition, they did not like correcting their peer essays especially the ones that they considered boring and contained a lot of mistakes.

The respondents also felt that the feedback activity did not benefit them because their partners did not seriously give constructive comments. They also complained that at times their partners were not able to give clear and directive suggestions. Thus, a respondent strongly recommended that the activity should not be continued as he did not want to make any changes to his essay based on comments that were not clear and constructive. Furthermore, he challenged the concept of peer feedback as he felt that some respondents did not fully understand it. He explained that most respondents only found faults rather than the good points of the essay. Thus, the activity could be demotivating for some respondents.

Despite the rejection of some respondents, both the questionnaire and interview data indicate that this peer feedback activity has potentials in the classroom. Some respondents suggested that the feedback sessions should be done in groups rather than in pairs so that more ideas could be given to further improve their subsequent drafts. The respondents would also like the present feedback checklist be improved and detailed out so that they can have a proper guidance on giving more constructive comments. In addition, the respondents felt that the sessions should be closely supervised by the instructor so that students will be more committed in giving constructive comments.

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Table 2: A Suggested Model of Peer Feedback Activity

Stage	Activity
<i>Pre-peer feedback</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instructor introduces and raises awareness of peer feedback concept to the students. By doing this, students will get an idea of the benefits of peer feedback activity on the developments of their writing and critical thinking skills. Students will also know what is expected of them during the activity, thus, will take the responsibility more seriously. 2. Instructor should establish grouping. The groups should consist of students of mixed abilities so that students can learn from each others' strengths and weaknesses. The grouping should be on a long-term basis so that students will feel comfortable in the group, thus, will be more open in giving and receiving comments. 3. Instructor should set up a checklist on aspects that students need to comment on. Instructor should go through this list with the students so that they will know how to use the checklist in checking their friends' work. 4. Training the students enables them to see the practical part of the concept. Instructor can model an example first so that students can see how it should be done.
<i>While-peer feedback</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instructor should control the time for students to check the work and give comments to the writers. They should also be given sufficient time to discuss any suggestions that need to be further elaborated. 2. Instructor should closely supervise the students' activity during the session but it should be done unobtrusively. This is to avoid the students from being conscious and dependent on the instructor.
<i>Post-feedback</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instructor can ask students to self-evaluate and reflect what they have gained from the activity. By this way, they can see for themselves what they have achieved and what they need to improve on. 2. Instructor is regarded as the authority in the classroom. Thus, instructor should give the final ranking and comments and relate it to the peers' comments. This can give the students to evaluate their feedback and also to balance some 'extreme' feedback. 3. Instructor can give meaning to students' feedback by collecting the feedback and use it as examples in their teaching. As attested by Sargent (1997), when teachers use students' feedback in their lectures, students will be 'more attentive as they know their questions, their words, and their names might suddenly appear in a lecture' (p. 50).

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study corroborate with the previous literature that indicates the value of peer feedback to student writers on ideational aspects of their writing. However, the negative perceptions of some of the respondents regarding the activity indicate that a more proper procedure should be drawn for the implementation of this activity in the classroom. The writers, thus, propose a model for a more effective peer feedback activity in the classroom. It is divided into three main stages: pre-peer feedback, while-peer feedback and post-peer feedback. The following table describes these stages and the activities involved in each:

Conclusion

Generally, this study has shown that peer feedback is well received by the students. This activity is considered to have several positive effects on audience awareness, critical thinking, social and target language development. However, in line with previous studies on Asian students, it is found that Malay students are also reluctant to give comments on their peers' work. Not wanting to hurt people's feelings is the major reason for this. Negative responses on the present practice of this activity imply that a better constructed peer feedback activity is needed. The paper, thus, suggests a model of peer feedback that can be implemented in the classroom. However, classroom instructors should adapt it to suit the needs of their own class.

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