



THE USE OF PEER FEEDBACK AS A TECHNIQUE TO PROMOTE BETTER ESL WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

With a history that goes as far back as to ancient Greece, peer feedback has grown in both prominence and value to become a venerable teaching strategy in the modern educational context. It is characterized by widespread acceptance, especially in ESL writing classrooms. Studies have been carried out to investigate the reason behind the popularity of peer feedback. Most researches indicate that the technique bears the potential to improve the English writing skills of ESL students. Consequently, the approach has been adopted across diverse learning contexts due to its efficacy. It has been found to boost the confidence, independence, critical thinking skills, and audience awareness of ESL writing students. Notwithstanding challenges such as student apprehension, time constraints, and teacher-peer conflicts, a combination of the benefits of peer feedback results in better ESL writers provided that teachers prepare the learners adequately and implement the technique appropriately.

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INTRODUCTION

The Use of Peer Feedback as a Technique to Promote Better ESL Writers: Feedback is a critical component of the learning process, as its provision fosters the retention of learned content among students. This fact has long been known and, as a result, most educational frameworks, if not all, incorporate feedback within their structures. According to Thokwane (2011), providing learners with feedback can potentially uplift their confidence, encourage them to take charge of their learning, empower them to address relevant shortfalls, and help them to augment their strengths. Apparently, feedback represents an invaluable aspect of the learning process. In the impartation of writing skills, feedback empowers students to evaluate the extent to which they have acquired new knowledge by offering them an opportunity to reflect on their abilities before and after the process (Thokwane, 2011). Since the advent of formal education, teachers have mainly employed two variations of the concept, namely teacher and peer feedback. Its former version occurs when a teacher conveys an assessment report to a student following an assigned task (Thokwane, 2011). The latter version of feedback, on the other hand, entails the evaluation of the quality of a student's work by colleagues (Van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006).

Peer feedback has grown in popularity and value in recent years, more so, in the context of higher education (Van den Berg et al., 2006). Its widespread acceptance as a potent tool in the educational context raises a question regarding its ability to promote the learning of writing skills among ESL students. This paper's objective is to demonstrate, through evidence drawn from the literature, that peer review bears the potential to help ESL students become better writers.

The Emergence and Growth of Peer Feedback

The use of peer review in teaching dates back to ancient Greece (Thokwane, 2011). It is reported to have emerged as a result of resource constraints that necessitated the incorporation of peer tutors into the teaching-learning process to give underprivileged children a chance to get an education (Njeri, 2016). However, the first well-ordered use of peer tutoring is ascribed to Dr. Andrew Bell, who transformed a military asylum into a normal school in Britain (Njeri, 2016). Despite this humble beginning, the use of peer review in education grew in importance over the years to become a crucial teaching tool. Thokwane (2011) describes peer feedback as having become a venerable teaching strategy, which is receiving more widespread attention in the 21st century more than at any other time in history. The popularity

of peer feedback in teaching stems from its reported efficacy in ameliorating student's writing skills (Thokwane, 2011). Numerous studies have been carried out to evaluate this learning tool's effectiveness, with most of them establishing that there exists a positive correlation between peer feedback and the improvement of English writing skills among ESL students (Kustati and Yuhardi, 2014). This has been a major reason for the adoption of this strategy in various learning contexts. However, there are additional reasons behind the popularity of peer review in the ESL writing classroom. According to Ekşi (2012), the increased attention that peer feedback has received beginning in the 1980s is partly attributable to the fact that relying entirely on teachers for feedback can overwhelm them and compromise the quality of their work. That is, teachers usually deal with large classes concurrently alongside other activities. If a teacher's feedback is the only evaluation tool in use, it is bound to come late and is unlikely to achieve the desired goal of improving a student's writing. Consequently, while teachers' feedback is highly valuable and preferred by some students and experts, the number of students one tutor usually handles is large, making it difficult for them to provide objective assessments in a prompt manner (Kunwongse, 2013). The implication of this challenge is that teacher feedback has to be used in conjunction with other methods of evaluation.

The other reason behind the rise of peer feedback to prominence is the fact that it is well supported by theories of teaching and learning, among them the collaborative learning theory posited by Bruffee, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, interaction and second language acquisition theory, which was proposed by Long and Porter, as well as the cooperative learning theory by Oxford (Kunwongse, 2013). Such extensive theoretical support suggests that peer feedback could be a potent tool for improving writing in ESL classrooms. When combined with the first two reasons and many others that have not been highlighted herein, the prevalence of peer review in learning contexts becomes plausible. Educational stakeholders employ it to achieve outcomes, which peer feedback has the potential to deliver as indicated by reports in current literature. The next section focuses on the various formats taken by peer feedback in the ESL writing classroom.

Approaches in Student Peer Feedback: Peer feedback in the learning context, as noted earlier, entails the critiquing of one student's work by colleagues for purposes of promoting better outcomes. Basically, the students assume a role that has traditionally been played by teachers and help one another to identify the areas of weakness and to suggest the ways of addressing them. This does not imply that the peer reviewers eliminate the teacher from the equation; rather, they help the latter to provide more comprehensive and personalized responses. Peer feedback can be given via different media, a factor that introduces variations in how it is done. For instance, students can give responses to their peers' work orally in face-to-face forums or through audio-visual channels in distance-learning contexts (Kunwongse, 2013). However, Moloudi (2011) observes that this approach to peer feedback has several drawbacks, which make it ineffective and unpopular. In face-to-face peer reviews, students tend to feel embarrassed and uncomfortable because they have to conduct these sessions in a language in which they are not proficient (Moloudi, 2011). Moreover, the individual whose work is being reviewed is likely to feel intimidated and discouraged, especially if the

teacher is also involved (Moloudi, 2011). These concerns are plausible because naturally, a few people, if any, enjoy the public display of their shortcomings. Typically, students, especially those who fall in the ESL category are bound to feel uncomfortable if a teacher discusses their writing-related weakness or any other shortfalls, for that matter, with the entire class. Consequently, written peer feedback is used more frequently. Written peer review mostly takes place via the digital technologies of the modern era. Specifically, it is conducted online where students can share soft copies of their work synchronously and discuss them with the aim of helping each other to improve their writing skills (Moloudi, 2011). This approach is favored by students because it eliminates factors such as skin color, gender, and age, which act as obstacles in face-to-face peer reviews (Moloudi, 2011). In fact, to increase objectivity in the review process, anonymity can be introduced so that reviewers do not know the individuals whose works they are evaluating. This approach has the potential to ensure that peer reviewers provide honest feedback without the fear of upsetting a friend or an acquaintance. Moreover, it requires less time and can easily be reconciled with course content (Moloudi, 2011). It is worth noting; further, that online peer review is not subject to physical and time constraints, which means that it saves class time (Moloudi, 2011). Students can do it at home, over the weekend or at any other time after class. Undoubtedly, the popularity of digital format peer feedback in tertiary level ESL writing classes is justifiable. It is clearly advantageous over the traditional forms of peer review. More importantly, it can be inferred from the literature that this peer feedback technique is instrumental in improving ESL students' writing capabilities.

The Role of Peer Feedback in ESL Writing Classes: Peer feedback plays a pivotal role in ESL writing classes. The ways through which this objective is achieved vary significantly. In this section, the mechanisms by which peer feedback influences learning among ESL student writers are discussed in depth. The reason behind this approach is to ensure that each of the mechanisms of action by which peer feedback affects learning is discussed exhaustively before moving to the next one. The implication is that only a few of these roles will be covered. However, they will be adequate to achieve the overall goal of the paper.

Response and Revision: The positive impact of peer feedback insofar as response and revision are concerned is widely documented in the existing literature. Diverse research studies have established that peer feedback helps both ESL writers and reviewers to bolster their writing skills. For instance, Kunwongse (2013) concluded that this tool could assist learners in developing adequate target language proficiency to improve their self-editing capacity. That is, by continuously receiving feedback and providing it to peers, a student learns to identify and correct mistakes that they would otherwise miss. This ability is critical in the development of writing expertise. At all levels of writing, reviewers are usually present. However, in advanced writing contexts, only works that meet specified criteria can be taken through the review process. Those that fail to meet the threshold are often expressly rejected. Consequently, the acquisition of self-editing skills is crucial in the process of learning how to write well, especially for those students whose careers in later life may require professional writing. Wakabashi (2013), on the other hand, found that peer readers could supply their colleagues with valuable comments that, if incorporated in the

draft, yield a more meaningful written piece. In most cases, this happens in situations where the peer reviewers have been trained to carry out the exercise effectively. This implies that the tutors who employ peer feedback extensively in the classes or those who fully appreciate its value start by training their students to become effective reviewers (Kunwongse, 2013). Alnasser (2018) concurs by noting that attempts to involve untrained students in a peer feedback system can potentially result in poor-quality writing. Consequently, adequate training has to precede the use of this tool in order to realize positive outcomes. Concisely, trained peer reviewers give responses that culminate in more meaning-based changes (Kunwongse, 2013). The result of this kind of input is an improvement in writing skills in ESL classrooms where the technique is used appropriately.

Further, it has been established that the use of peer feedback in ESL writing classes reduced associated errors and made the students critical readers. Rollinson (2005) found that by providing and receiving feedback, ESL student writers build their critical abilities to a level where they can critically appraise their work as they write. Additionally, in a study carried out by Tsui and Ng (2000), one of the participants reported that by reading fellow students' written work, he was able to develop the ability to detect mistakes in his work. Considering that self-evaluation is a notable challenge to most writers, it is arguable that peer feedback fosters an important skill in those who use it. In fact, reading another person's work does not only improve the ability to detect mistakes; it also boosts the reader's vocabulary base, which is part of the process of learning how to write effectively. In summing up the role of peer feedback under the response and revision subtitle, it is apparent that this technique helps ESL writing students in numerous ways. Learning how to write accurately and effectively in a foreign language can be extremely challenging, especially for those who start at an advanced level of their educational career. Younger people tend to learn new languages with more ease in comparison to their older counterparts (Oroji & Ghane, 2014). The use of peer feedback provides practical solutions to the different facets of writing that present non-native language learners with problems. It ameliorates their ability to edit, strengthens the meaning of a written text, and improves their capacity to appraise their own work critically. These three are some of the most important aspects of the writing process. The fact that they can be improved by peer review suggests that the technique is indispensable in the ESL writing classroom.

Cooperative and Collaborative Learning: Peer feedback is known to foster cooperative and collaborative learning among ESL writing students. A typical peer interaction session entails "asking questions, giving additional related information, making suggestions, and reacting (responding) to numerous aspects of their peers' compositions" (Hirose, 2008). Kunwongse (2013) believes that these interactions give the learners a chance to improve their writing and communication skills in English. The growth occurs through the development of a support mechanism by which the learners actively evaluate the texts of their peers in order to provide a basis for revision (Kunwongse, 2013). The effect of these interactions, which normally take place for an entire semester or more, is that the students begin to cooperate in their writing activities. In other words, a culture of working together develops, and once it does, students cannot seek assistance, for instance, from the teacher before they ask they enlist the help of their

colleagues. Therefore, peer feedback builds connections, which foster collaborative learning. As a matter of fact, once the relationships have developed, they extend beyond the classroom (Kunwongse, 2013). Classes in which teachers rely on peer feedback as one of the ways to boost learning exhibit some intriguing behavior patterns among members. Kunwongse (2013) asserts that he personally observed such students tutoring one another before the examination. This tendency emerged from the collaborative atmosphere that had been created by the peer feedback system. Apparently, the socialization that occurs during peer reviews encourages students to band into small groups, which work together to tackle learning tasks (Kunwongse, 2013). Therefore, when faced with tests such as examinations, they naturally fall into small groups, which help one another to prepare. At this stage, the behavior occurs out of habit. However, it is important to note that there is an air of confidence that comes over students as they begin to appreciate the value of peer feedback. This can partly explain why they formed groups and tutored one another in preparation for exams, as reported by Kunwongse (2013). Clearly, this technique carries immense value in ESL writing classes. The value of collaboration in any field of human endeavor is proven and documented. In the classroom context, Child and Shaw (2016) observe that the idea is almost universally acclaimed as being useful. In fact, collaboration is listed as one of the most crucial skills of the 21st century, which individuals require to participate productively in the workplace and society (Child & Shaw, 2016). The implication is that it can yield positive outcomes in learning environments. Since the peer feedback system is naturally collaborative, it helps learners to tap into the benefits of working together. The value peer feedback brings to education from this perspective is, therefore, unparalleled. It is a noble approach to learning in all contexts, but it achieves the greatest impact at advanced levels of education.

Audience Awareness: Writing is usually done with the aim of conveying a message to a target audience (Xiping, 2016). Professional writers understand the value of knowing the audience and meeting their expectations (Xiping, 2016). Skilled writers seamlessly integrate audience anticipations with the purpose of a written piece. In other words, they know how to strike a balance between audience expectations and purpose. Xiping (2016) refers to that ability as strategic writing knowledge, which only expert writers possess. This means that in the process of equipping learners with writing skills, they must be taught how to identify their audiences accurately and construct their messages appropriately. The peer feedback system has the potential to develop this capacity among ESL writing students and is, consequently, a crucial aspect of the process of teaching non-native speakers how to write effectively in English. Its potential in this regard cannot be ignored. According to Rollinson (2005), the need to identify and direct a message at the right reader stems from the fact that every writer requires feedback. The responses are usually obtained when a written piece addresses the correct audience. Consequently, by reviewing one another's work, ESL writing students develop an appreciation for audiences. They get to know that the idea behind writing is to achieve a particular reaction from the target audience. This happens when peer reviewers identify shortcomings in the written work and provide comments aimed at helping the writer to maximize the impact of the text on readers. In other words, peer feedback teaches the student to organize their work in a manner that resonates with the targeted readers and, in effect, their writing

becomes efficacious (Rollinson, 2005). In the end, as Kunwongse (2013) puts it, the students learn how to achieve “real communicative purpose” with their written work (p. 280). This skill is invaluable in the context of writing in English.

Boosting Students’ Confidence: Another notable role played by peer feedback in the ESL writing classroom is boosting the confidence of the students and encouraging them to become independent and active learners (Kunwongse, 2013). Apparently, feedback from peers fosters a sense of ownership among learners in relation to their written texts because it is not deemed authoritative, as is the case with teacher feedback (Tsui & Ng, 2000). This means that the peer feedback system grants students the leeway to choose whether to incorporate their peers’ comments into their writing or not, based on relevance. As the ability to determine feedback that adds value to their writing grows, the students become less reliant on their tutors. In the long-term, they emerge as self-confident writers with the capability of making appropriate judgments on how to make their writing effective. In other words, they become self-sufficient in their writing skills, which is one of the core objectives of teaching ESL students how to write. In a bid to explain how peer feedback boosts ESL writing students’ confidence, Balderas and Cuamatzi (2018) contend that since peer feedback involves members of the same class, no power imbalance exists among them. As a result, they can comfortably ask questions whenever they are in doubt (Balderas & Cuamatzi, 2018). Moreover, both the writer and the reviewer can provide solutions for both their problems and the issues faced by peers (Balderas & Cuamatzi, 2018). This feeling of being completely at ease with one another allows them to address some issues that teacher feedback may not point out. In cases where peers are unable to assist, the teacher can always step in. This tendency to seek solutions from peers before turning to the teacher fosters independence in the learning process.

The development of independence in learning is another important role played by peer feedback. As students become more reliant on each other for revision comments and correction, the teacher becomes less involved. This trend builds the capacity to carry out self-correction among students. In other words, they take charge of their own learning (Balderas & Cuamatzi, 2018). This ability carries numerous benefits for students. According to Meyer, Haywood, Sachdev, and Faraday (2008), independent learning improves performance, heightens motivation and confidence, increases student self-awareness, and fosters social inclusion. Reportedly, students in self-regulated learning environments exhibit higher levels of motivation, enjoy the learning materials, and participate more actively in knowledge acquisition activities as opposed to those in restricted settings (Meyer et al., 2008). Additionally, students in self-regulated learning contexts were found to have higher self-esteem (Meyer et al., 2008). These benefits of independent learning are either directly or indirectly associated with the use of peer feedback. The implication is that this technique carries immense potential in the ESL writing classroom.

Enhanced Critical Thinking Skills

In addition to the roles that have been discussed in preceding paragraphs, the peer feedback system has been found to promote critical thinking among students. In this regard,

Kunwongse (2013) argues that when a student is tasked with the responsibility to respond to a peer’s work, they have to assess it critically to provide constructive comments. This implies that they have to be keen when reviewing a fellow student’s writing and, later, in their work. When they undertake this activity continuously, their ability to appraise other students’ work and their own writing matures. In a study conducted by Silva et al. (2016) to evaluate the relationship between peer review and the development of critical thinking skills, it was found that by assessing fellow students’ work, reviewers encountered different perspectives, which expanded their thinking. In other words, as a result of peer feedback, study participants acquired the ability to view issues from a multiplicity of perspectives (Silva et al., 2016). Since this capacity is a crucial aspect of critical thinking, it is apparent that peer feedback increases the propensity to think critically.

Social Benefits

The peer feedback system also has a social dimension, which is connected to group dynamics. It allows students to enjoy the numerous benefits of teamwork. For instance, a study by Chen and Lin (2008) established that peer reviews created cohesiveness among students. This closeness, in turn, led to the development of positive attitudes among the learners because they encouraged one another to overcome the challenges of writing. Consequently, a class in which the peer feedback system is employed tends to be more receptive of the content and acts favorably towards the relevant learning activities (Chen & Lin, 2008). This positivity can be instrumental in helping ESL writers to master the art of writing effectively. Banding together and pushing one another forward allows areas of weakness to be addressed collectively. As a result, even the most challenging aspects of writing become easier for ESL students to handle.

Challenges of Using Peer Feedback in ESL Writing Classes: Peer feedback, as demonstrated by the preceding section, bears the potential to benefit ESL writing students immensely. In fact, the role it plays in developing the learners who rely on it to facilitate their knowledge acquisition goes beyond equipping them with English writing skills. Peer feedback improves confidence, self-esteem, independence, and attitudes (Rollinson, 2005). These are additional benefits in the context of the ESL writing classroom because the primary goal of employing peer feedback in this environment is to achieve better writing outcomes. Concisely, peer feedback has a plethora of benefits for ESL students in the process of learning how to write in English. However, alongside those advantages, the technique also has drawbacks that cannot be ignored. This section illuminates on those shortfalls in a bid to lay a foundation for the next segment, which will delineate ways of making the most out of peer feedback in ESL writing classes.

Time Challenges: The first problem associated with peer feedback is the time it requires to unfold appropriately. It often begins with students who are unfamiliar with peer feedback as a learning approach (Kunwongse, 2013). Consequently, the concerned tutor has to prepare the learners to conduct peer review effectively. That is because the peer feedback is quite complex, as a student has to write a draft, submit it for review and wait for the assessor to provide revision comments before they can finalize their work (Rollinson, 2005). These steps require ample time, but since all the activities have to be done within fixed timeframes, the outcome is often a hasty process

that may not achieve all the perceived or anticipated benefits. Consequently, incorporating peer feedback into the conventional class schedule can be difficult. In other words, the time that is usually available to teachers to take students through given learning concepts is too short for the peer feedback process. This means that teachers have to be creative in how they employ this learning approach to achieve its full potential. Otherwise, the benefits associated with the technique are unlikely to be attained.

Student Perceptions and Characteristics: Another major obstacle to the effectiveness of peer feedback in the ESL writing classroom context relates to learner characteristics and behavior (Rollinson, 2005). In most cases, students initially show a notable level of skepticism towards the value of peer feedback in their learning (Rollinson, 2005). Their apprehension stems from the fact that the teacher is the only trained professional in a classroom to evaluate students' work. When the tutor attempts to delegate this role to students, especially in an ESL writing class, the learners usually doubt their ability to critique their colleagues' work appropriately (Kunwongse, 2013). As a result, the teacher has to take time to convince the students about the value of peer feedback before they begin to take it seriously. Otherwise, it is unlikely to serve the intended purpose effectively. Another issue that falls under this challenge is cultural diversity. The globalized nature of the contemporary world has led to extensive heterogeneity in learning institutions. Moreover, since the paper is concerned with ESL students, with most originating from Asian countries, cultural differences present a formidable challenge to the peer feedback approach. For instance, Kunwongse (2013) explains that the Asian culture discourages behavior that shames others. The implication of this cultural orientation in the context of a peer feedback system is that Asian students are likely to conceal some critical comments from their colleagues to maintain group cohesion (Kunwongse, 2013; Rollinson, 2005).

Moreover, Chinese students tend to show reluctance towards claiming the authority that is given to them by the peer feedback system (Rollinson, 2005). With such students in an ESL writing class, the peer feedback system is bound to face challenges that limit its optimal functionality. It is also important to add that age differences among learners, and other factors such as their inter-language level can hinder free and objective interaction, which is demanded by the peer-review process (Rollinson, 2005). As an example, younger students may find it difficult to be critical towards older classmates. In addition, if the learners are at different levels of proficiency in the acquisition of the English language, they are unlikely to assist one another meaningfully because a student at a lower level of expertise cannot offer much assistance a colleague with more advanced language skills. As a result, these disparities tend to have a limiting effect on cooperation and collaboration, which are critical components of the peer feedback system, by rendering it ineffective. If the numerous benefits of collaborative learning under the peer feedback system are eliminated, the overall outcomes of the process are bound to be less than optimal.

Teacher-Peer Conflict: Conventionally, the teacher is the figure of authority in a classroom. In this capacity, instructors can play numerous roles in the process of facilitating learning. One of the main responsibilities of a teacher in the classroom is to provide students with feedback regarding their

performance in learning activities. The peer feedback system appears to usurp the teacher's authority in this context by designating students as co-evaluators. Some teachers, especially those who are skeptical about the value of peer feedback, may find it difficult to allow students to discharge this role without interference (Rollinson, 2005). For instance, in cases where peers provide feedback orally in the presence of the teacher, the latter is likely to give additional comments, which may be helpful, but in reality, they undermine the peer feedback system. Concisely, some instructors lack the ability to balance between teacher and peer feedback to achieve effective learning.

Effective Use of Peer Feedback: Peer feedback is lauded as a potent learning approach in the process of equipping ESL students with writing skills. However, it is also known to have several shortfalls that limit its efficacy. Owing to this duality, the full potential of peer feedback can only be realized by addressing the challenges associated with the technique. There are two main areas of focus in the process of making effective use of peer feedback include proper preparation of the group and the appropriate use of the approach (Rollinson, 2005). Preparation entails setting up the group and training it to appreciate the need for peer feedback and its benefits. Additionally, the preliminary phase is meant to show the students how to give and receive peer feedback in a manner that permits the people involved to benefit. For instance, it is important to divide a class into the right number and size of groups, which should also be constituted appropriately (Rollinson, 2005). Details such as the number of drafts to be written also fall under this phase. Once this step is complete, the students have to undergo pre-training, which mainly equips the students with knowledge about the objectives of peer feedback. After arranging the class into groups, agreeing on how the process will be run, and delineating the objectives of the process, peer feedback can be employed. The implementation occurs in accordance with guidelines that were established during the preparation phase. For instance, reviewers should know that the goal of their feedback is to help the writer to produce a better subsequent draft. Once the rules of engagement have been determined, the teacher can allow each group to establish its own feedback procedures as long as a result is congruent with the overarching goal of improving the writing skills of the participants (Rollinson, 2005). Variations such as the provision of feedback orally, online, or on written hard copies and whether the feedback is to be given in small groups or before the whole class also form part of the implementation. These requirements suggest that a great deal of planning has to be done by the teacher before using the peer-feedback approach. However, if everything is done correctly, the technique can be highly beneficial to ESL writing students.

Conclusion: In conclusion, it is apparent that peer feedback can help ESL students to become better writers. This improvement occurs via several interrelated developments such as the ability to look at a written work critically, collaboration in learning, as well as independence and active learning. As students acquire these skills, they become more confident not only in their writing but also in other learning pursuits and life in general. Therefore, the full impact of using peer feedback goes beyond the improvement in classwork. Challenges such as time constraints, student perceptions and characteristics, and teacher-peer conflict may sometimes threaten the effectiveness of this technique. However,

appropriate preparation and careful implementation of the approach can bring immense value to ESL writing classroom.

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