

Perceptions of Tertiary Level Students About Peer Feedback in Writing Classes in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Peer feedback of writing involves writers receiving constructive criticism and suggestions on their work from peers, typically from classmates to improve the quality of their writing. It is widely used as a collaborative learning strategy for developing writing skills. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of first-year students regarding peer feedback. The researcher used a volunteer sampling technique; the participants were from two universities, one located in Dhaka, the capital city, and another in Chittagong, a large city in Bangladesh. The interview data revealed that participants have positive perceptions toward peer feedback. Although there are some challenges with peer feedback, the study found that to gain the highest benefits, students need to be educated regarding its benefits and develop a multicultural setting in the class where everyone's voice will be respected.

Keywords: peer feedback, perceptions, writing skills, collaborative learning

1. Introduction

Among the four skills of language, writing is considered to be one of the most difficult skills for second language learners to achieve perfect writing skills. For this reason, much emphasis is placed on this skill to gain desired competence. Still, the outcome is not up to the mark in the context of ESL/EFL writing to produce proficient writers. Additionally, the traditional teaching methods of writing are not enough to enhance the overall quality of students' writing. Along with writing instructions, other means are required such as suggesting, commenting, and quality feedback to improve the quality of students' writing. While feedback in writing refers to constructive comments, suggestions, and evaluations provided to a writer regarding their written work, peer feedback is widely used as a collaborative learning strategy for developing writing skills. It involves offering constructive input on peers' work, either orally or in writing, while also receiving feedback from peers (Baker 2016, Yang & Carless 2013). It can be considered as an alternative to teacher feedback, as it is a formative assessment provided by peers of equal status (Topping, 1998). Additionally, collaborative learning has proliferated by it (Van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2010; Webb, 1991). However, offering feedback to every student in the class demands significant time and dedication. Hence, while peer feedback can aid teachers, it cannot fully replace instructors' feedback. This perspective is shared by Yong Wu and Christian D. Schunn in 2021, who emphasize the time and effort required to provide feedback. Additionally, peer feedback offers the provider the chance to engage in critical thinking and enhance their understanding of their own writing arguments and organization. The capacity to deliver effective feedback and critically evaluate classmates' writing (particularly at a global level) is crucial for academic success, as highlighted by Gieve in 1998 and Thompson in 2002. In addition, it facilitates the development of learner autonomy and collaborative learning. It was found in studies conducted by De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Teo, 2006) that novice writers benefited from receiving and giving peer feedback. In 1973, According to research by Sager, students who assess their own writing become better writers. They were 99 percent accurate in evaluating their own writing when they were taught how to use rubrics. Her study demonstrated that instructing students about writing scales significantly improved their critical evaluation skills. This improvement was reflected in their writing scores as well. A key difference between teacher and peer feedback, however, lies in the fact that peers lack expertise in the subject matter, whereas teachers do. Therefore, peer feedback may be partially accurate, entirely inaccurate, or even misleading, depending on the perception of the peer. Furthermore, the peer assessor typically does not hold the status of a 'knowledge authority' in the eyes of the person being assessed, leading to certain hesitancy in accepting judgments or advice from peers (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Strijbos, Narciss, & Du'nnebier, 2010).

2. Literature Review

Several studies have found that peer feedback has reflected a positive output from the perspective of students' writing skill development. Muamaroh and Pratiwi (2022) found that peer feedback manifests cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Ahmad, Sanif and Atim (2022) identified a positive experience with peer feedback, enhancing the learning process by complementing teacher feedback and fostering meaningful class interactions. Wijaya (2022) highlights that continual cultivation of peer feedback practices in academic writing enhances learning environments, making them more enjoyable, meaningful, and holistic. Sutaryo, Latif and Hasan (2023) discussed that peer feedback is deemed important for improving group essays.

Peer feedback also helps students reach higher levels of critical thinking and learner autonomy. It also helps students improve their critical reflection abilities, listening comprehension, evaluation skills, adoption of explicit criteria, and ability to provide high-quality feedback. Through their assessments, students also gain knowledge of metacognitive processes like introspection, the capacity to defend their work, and the acceptance or rejection of recommendations based on their arguments (Liu & Carless, 2006).

Tsui and Ng (2000) found that students learned more about writing through reviewing peer texts than from receiving peer comments. Min (2005) investigated the impact of training on peer feedback and found that learners enhanced their ability to provide peer comments on global writing aspects, such as development and organization, through modeling and individual conferences with their teacher. Lundstorm and Baker (2009) conducted pioneering qualitative research on the benefits of peer feedback, focusing on the review of peer writing. However, a limitation of their study was that participants engaged in peer feedback activities using sample essays rather than their own authentic texts. While using sample essays was intended to ensure uniform quality, it likely influenced participant behavior, as providing feedback on or revising essays not authored by classmates may have been challenging, particularly concerning global writing aspects, due to the lack of ownership and a genuine audience.

Despite the advantages, various studies have identified certain drawbacks associated with the utilization of peer feedback. As highlighted by Rollinson (2005), one notable challenge is the time-intensive nature of peer feedback, particularly for learners unfamiliar with the process. This entails extensive tasks such as reading, note-taking, collaborating with peers to reach consensus, and providing detailed written or oral commentary, all of which can consume a considerable amount of time. Similarly, Løkensgard Hoel (2001) identified challenges related to time. She found that peer feedback is time-consuming to implement specifically during the initial stage. She indicated that this time-intensive nature could deter teachers from adopting it as a teaching method. Furthermore, the initial stages of peer response may impose significant demands on students, as they may not be accustomed to the level of responsibility it entails. Additionally, students may struggle with conducting effective peer feedback due to the frustration caused by inadequately conveyed feedback from their peers. Besides, peer feedback is difficult to implement when students in the same class have often almost the same level of language competency. Sometimes students think that a writer better than themselves is only worthy to evaluate their writing.

Kangni (2015) examined the difficulties and methods related to peer review in EFL writing teaching. In his study, he identified three major problems and related strategies with peer feedback in EFL writing instruction. These problems included students' doubts about their capacity to provide accurate and knowledgeable feedback, students' mistrust regarding reliability, and a lack of structural feedback in the peer feedback process.

A study with 51 Chinese undergraduate students by Cheng and Warren (2005) found friendship bias in peer feedback on language proficiency. Out of the eight interviewees, four expressed difficulties in giving their close friends full grades since they didn't want to offend them.

In their research, Tsui and Ng (2000) identified similar issues among students, noting a lack of trust in their peers' feedback. Consequently, students were reluctant to consider their peers' comments, as they believed them to be ineffective beforehand.

Therefore, Min (2005) and Torwong (2003) opined the necessity for peer feedback training and the provision of qualified and credible feedback. Rigorous peer training is essential to equip students with the skills to provide and receive effective feedback on their compositions. Moreover, the significance of peer feedback has been heavily emphasized in second language (L2) learning theories, aligning with shifts towards communicative language teaching and the process approach to writing, which transition classrooms from teacher-centered to student-centered environments. However, despite some drawbacks, numerous studies have shown that the benefits of peer feedback outweigh its limitations (Lam, 2010; Van Zundert et al., 2010). In summary, while peer feedback holds significant potential for enhancing the writing abilities of ESL/EFL students, it is crucial to highlight its advantages. Therefore, educators must remain updated and adaptable to integrate written reflections into teaching and learning processes to evolve and enhance the educational system (Tosuncuoglu, 2019).

Despite numerous studies examining peer feedback, many of them focused on the advantages and disadvantages of being given and receiving feedback. However, students' perceptions in terms of being a crucial factor regarding peer feedback are ignored in many of those studies. No study has been conducted in the Bangladeshi context that examines students' perceptions of peer feedback. This study aims to provide a general explanatory framework that captures students' views on peer feedback, which can be applied to similar contexts in other cultures.

3. Research Questions

- 1) What are the students' opinions towards peer feedback in writing classes?
- 2) How do students evaluate their differences in writing skills due to peer feedback?
- 3) What are the perceived benefits and challenges that students associate with engaging in peer feedback activities in the context of writing classes?
- 4) To what extent can the effectiveness of peer feedback be as writing skills?

4. Theoretical Framework

Peer feedback, which can also be referred to as peer response, peer review, peer editing, or peer evaluation, is the process of using students as collaborators and sources of information while they comment on and critique each other's written and oral drafts during the writing process (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Peer feedback has its theoretical roots in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a cognitive process molded by social interactions rather than an isolated undertaking. The mind develops through interactions with the surrounding world. According to Liu et al. (2001), peer interaction is crucial for improving students' learning since it helps them to create knowledge through social sharing and interaction.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Participants

This research work involved first-year students enrolled in the BA (Hons) English program at two universities: one located in Dhaka, the capital city, and another in Chittagong, a large city of Bangladesh. The researcher sought approval from professors to obtain students' email addresses and received consent from 20 students through the professors. Subsequently, the researcher sent emails to the students, outlining the study's objectives, significance, and prerequisites. Among the 20 individuals contacted, 17 provided responses, and 10 indicated their willingness to participate in the interview. To safeguard participants' identities in adherence to research ethics, pseudonyms (S1–S10) were assigned for referencing purposes in data extracts. At the initiation of the interview, language-related information was gathered through demographic details, as illustrated in Table 1. The table reveals that the participants were bilingual English users, with infrequent usage of English beyond the classroom setting. Their English learning duration spanned 10 years. Despite a higher number of male participants ($n = 6$) compared to female participants ($n = 4$), their ages ranged between 18 and 20 years.

5.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Using semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection, the researcher explored students' perspectives on peer feedback using the qualitative research paradigm. Ten first-year students in Bangladesh participated in the interviews, which were conducted through the Zoom platform. As the researcher was situated in the USA during the data collection phase, Zoom served as the medium for interview sessions. Each interview lasted around 30–40 minutes, accommodating the interviewee's language preference, whether in Bangla or English. A Word document was manually transcribed from the Zoom interviews. Analyses were then conducted using a thematic analysis method. Participants gave permission for the audio and video recordings to be saved before the interview process starting. The researcher translated the Bangla interviews into English. The researcher transcribed the interviews after recording them. This study focused primarily on the content provided by participants, so suprasegmental characteristics such as gestures, facial expressions, pitch, and intonation were not recorded. Before analysis, these transcriptions were reread, re-checked, and re-transcribed (van Manen, 2016).

To conduct data analysis, the investigator manually reviewed transcripts within Microsoft Word files. During this process, noteworthy concepts related to the research question were identified and marked with distinct colors, while relevant codes were assigned throughout the transcriptions. A coding approach that combined deductive (top-down) coding, based on research questions, with inductive (bottom-up) coding, derived from transcriptions by reading them multiple times. Following coding, the codes were organized to establish themes in a separate Microsoft Word document. To ensure accuracy, these themes were cross-referenced with the initial codes to explore their connections. Three main themes emerged from this analysis: [themes specified in the original text]. Subsequently, the themes were shared with the participants for a member check, inviting them to suggest any

necessary amendments to improve the trustworthiness of the analysis. The participants concurred with the identified themes, and as a result, no revisions were deemed necessary.

6. Findings

6.1 *A Catalyst for Writing Improvement*

The positive impact of peer feedback is evident through participant interviews, where unanimous agreement emerged regarding its efficacy in enhancing writing skills. Participants noted that, at times, feedback from teachers can be challenging to comprehend, whereas peer feedback offers a more accessible and understandable alternative. Additionally, peer feedback encourages individuals to approach writing from different perspectives, fostering critical thinking. It serves as a valuable tool for self-awareness, highlighting previously unrecognized weaknesses in writing, as indicated in the following excerpt:

In my opinion, it's helpful. Sometimes it might happen that students can't catch teachers' explanations in that case peer feedback can help them. Because in peer feedback students' explanations can be easy to understand to each other. Also, one's thinking way could be more explorable by looking at others' work. (S10)

Well, to me it is a positive thing. Peer feedback can help an individual to know about weaknesses they may not be aware of. Also, different people have different ways of writing. So, some way of writing may benefit the other person to unlock their skills. (S6)

Peer feedback offers a unique opportunity to keenly observe the writing styles of others, thereby facilitating the enhancement of one's own writing. It involves the presentation of the same issue in distinct ways by peers, employing varied sentence structures and writing techniques.

Yes, it can help us observe the versatility of the writings. With time, every one of us comes up with our own set of word collections, and sentence structures and grows our unique writing style and way of narration. Peer feedback might help us to look into different writing styles to improve ours. (S3)

Consequently, the feedback provider gains exposure to new writing styles while delivering feedback. Students can suggest areas for improvement and pinpoint areas where they might be deficient through this collaborative process.

Peer feedback certainly helps with improving writing skills. One can adapt various writing techniques from peer feedback. With that, peer feedback can help one to focus on the part he is lacking. (S2)

To elaborate, I took the IELTS exam a few months ago. As my writing was appreciated, I helped a few of my classmates with their writing and all of them saw the room where to improve and they got higher marks in the writing section from the next exams. (S1)

6.2 *The Multifaceted Benefits of Peer Feedback in Writing*

Peer feedback gives exposure to different points of views which helps to foster analytical ability and critical thinking. Moreover, it contributes to the enhancement of soft skills and facilitates socialization among peers. As peer feedback encourages students to think from different perspectives it helps students to grow as rational people. Additionally, it serves as a friendly avenue for learning, promoting versatility, and encouraging the sharing of intellectual resources, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

Peer feedback can promote analytical ability and critical thinking ability since through peer feedback one gets a chance to expose one's mind to different points of views. (S6)

Peer feedback has many benefits. Notably, it helps to socialize with peers and it can certainly help them to improve their soft skills. Then peer feedback can help one think from different perspectives which can help peers to be rational. (S4)

Peer feedback paves the way for getting to learn something in a friendly way, observing versatility, better understanding and sharing resources. (S1)

6.3 *Challenges in Peer Feedback Processes*

The provision of peer feedback within the same class introduces the potential for bias based on interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the equal status of being both the feedback provider and receiver among peers creates a lack of confidence in delivering constructive criticism. Furthermore, challenges arise when individuals with unclear concepts on a given topic attempt to provide feedback, posing difficulties for both the provider and recipient. Moreover, giving honest criticism is frequently hampered by the fear of upsetting friendships or egos, which puts the feedback giver under mental pressure. The following excerpts indicate:

I try to be honest. It is realistic for me not to have the same type of bonding with everyone in my class. So, my feedback might be seen as biased. Also, it is my fear that I might not be able to give accurate solutions as I am also learning just like everyone else in my class. (S8)

I think there is a bit of pressure to choose my words accordingly not to hurt my peers in any way or make them feel inferior. Other than that, some peers are strict about their thoughts even if they are wrong. So talking to them and convincing them is not easy task. (S5)

6.4 Strategies for Effective Peer Feedback

Educating the students regarding the benefits of peer feedback and advocating the idea of growing collectively can be a great way of making peer feedback more effective. Furthermore, refining one's own writing skills before providing feedback to peers is essential. Ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the relevant concepts among all participants before engaging in the feedback process is equally necessary. Additionally, developing a culture of respect for students from all backgrounds is also essential to maximizing the value of peer feedback, as mentioned in the following excerpt:

I think, spreading the benefits of peer feedback and endorsing the idea of growing collectively is a great way. Besides, emphasizing more on group projects and evaluating everyone's contributions, encouraging everyone's participation so that they don't feel like not interacting with each other. (S2)

By spreading the benefits of this process, students can be aware of this. First of all, make sure that everyone has understood the given concept. Only then, they can give proper feedback to each other. (S5)

Weekly reflections can be a magical method to optimize peer feedback. Also, respecting every culture and different background can create a peaceful and comfortable environment which is important for peers to communicate without walking on eggshells. (S9)

7. Discussions

This study investigates the perception of tertiary-level students in the writing class regarding peer feedback. In this section, students' perceptions regarding peer feedback are discussed in relation to previous studies. Using interviews as the data collection method, the findings reveal that most of the students have positive views regarding peer feedback. Students found peer feedback more accessible and easier to understand, helping them develop critical thinking. These perceptions are consistent with the opinions of Jonassen et al. (1995) and Falchikov (2001), who suggest that knowledge about both writing and subject matter is further developed, enhancing learning. Furthermore, as opposed to feedback solely from a single teacher, students become more benefited when they receive feedback from multiple peers (Cho & Schunn, 2007). Besides, peer feedback helps in socialization and the development of necessary skills. This aligns with the claims of Topping (2009) that peer feedback makes students aware of their audience and enhances social skills such as the ability to give and receive constructive criticism, defend one's viewpoints, and decline unhelpful suggestions politely. However, the challenges of peer feedback include the difficulty in providing honest feedback due to fear of damaging friendships. This concern is echoed by Topping's claim that some students worry that feedback content could negatively affect their interpersonal relationships (Topping, 2009). Additionally, when students themselves do not have a clear understanding of the subject matter, they cannot provide proper feedback to their peers. Finally, to fully benefit from peer feedback, teachers should educate students regarding its effectiveness and teach them how to give feedback properly to their peers. Furthermore, to ensure its success, there should be a level playing field for all students, accepting students from all cultures and backgrounds.

8. Conclusion

This study explored the beginner tertiary-level students' perceptions of peer feedback in the writing class. Most of the students have positive opinions regarding peer feedback despite having some difficulties. Students mostly acknowledged that peer feedback worked as a catalyst for improving writing skills as well as critical thinking. Also, it helps in the socialization process of the students and makes them grow rationally. However, despite these positive aspects, there are some challenges too. It is not always possible to provide honest feedback to peers for fear of damaging friendships. Even, sometimes students do not feel comfortable enough to comment on their peers. Besides, when the subject matter is not clear to the students, both the feedback provider and the receiver face difficulties. To meet the highest benefits of peer feedback, it is necessary to orient pre-present-post outcomes for students regarding its benefits that peer feedback would help them grow collectively. In addition to that, the development of multicultural settings to reap the maximum benefits of peer feedback should be implemented.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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No additional data are available.

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