Malaysian University Students' Perspectives towards the Role of Peer Feedback in Developing their English Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT

A plethora of research is available on the role of peer feedback on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' writing development. However, we know little about ESL learners' attitude towards peer feedback in the process of writing, particularly in academic settings. The objective of the current study was to explore the attitudes of a group of undergraduate students towards peer feedback in the process of writing their research proposals. In this qualitative study, we used learners' reflections and association tasks to collect the data, anlaysed using thematic analysis. As our findings indicated, peer feedback was regarded as a form of interactive and collaborative evaluation that could create motivation. An awareness of students' attitudes can help teachers create writing tasks that improve ESL learners' writing skills more effectively.

Keywords: English as a second language (ESL) writing, attitudes, peer feedback, English for academic purposes (EAP)

INTRODUCTION

In the English as a second language (ESL) context of Malaysia, learning and teaching writing remains challenging, with classes often being teacher-centred, form-focused, and exam-oriented (Marzaini et al., 2024). While peer feedback is a potential solution, its effectiveness varies, and research suggests that students may struggle to provide constructive criticism (Ferris &

Hedgecock, 2005) or hesitate to challenge peers due to cultural factors (Carson & Nelson, 1996).

Using association tasks and reflections, this qualitative study advances the field by addressing these gaps and exploring how university students perceive peer feedback in the Malaysian context. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on feedback quality, this research highlights students' emotional and cognitive responses, shedding light on how training and structured implementation can enhance the peer feedback process. Understanding these dimensions provides valuable insights for developing more effective collaborative writing practices in ESL classrooms.

According to the literature, peer feedback has a multi-faceted nature. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) reported that peers who provide feedback develop more than those who receive feedback. According to Xuan et al. (2024), peer feedback significantly affects students' writing development by increasing their motivation. Novakovich (2016) classifies peer feedback in terms of its quality, as follows:

1. naïve feedback, in which the peer encourages the feedback receiver (e.g., *I enjoyed reading your writing*)
2. editing, in which the peer edits the writing (e.g., *Correct this part*)
3. critical feedback, in which peers explain how the feedback receiver's writing affected them (e.g., *Your essay shifted my perspective about this topic*)
4. directive feedback, in which the peer instructs the feedback receiver to revise something (e.g., *You could give an example here to elaborate on your argument*)

The current study aims to investigate ESL learners' perceptions of peer feedback in a report writing course at a public Malaysian university.

METHODS

Qualitative methods were followed for data collection and analysis. Association tasks and reflections were used for collecting the data from ten sophomore students majoring in Applied Linguistics at a public university in Malaysia while they were completing a collaborative writing task (Appendix 1). In the association task, the students listed the first five ideas that would cross their mind when thinking about the word 'peer feedback'. We collected the reflections from the students' portfolios that they completed while doing the collaborative writing task. Thematic analysis method was used for analysing the data. Pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the results in Table 1 indicate, for the students in the current study, peer feedback is commonly associated with 'evaluation' (f=20), 'interaction' (f=14), 'direction' (f=10), and

'motivation' (*f*=4). It is interesting to see traces of the categories of feedback, as proposed by Novakovich's (2016).

Table 1
Results of analysis of association task

Repeating ideas	Emerging themes	Frequency (*f*)
Counter opinion, Constructive criticism, Critical response, Criticism, Critique, Evaluation, Impressions, Judgement, Judge, Rate, Rating, Reaction, Reflection, Review, Thinking	Evaluation	20
Communication, Event, Exchange, Forms, Opinion, Responds, Response, Sequences, Speak, Talk, Thoughts, Two-way communication	Interaction	14
Adjustment, Change, Empowering, Helpful, Improve, Improvement, Suggestions	Direction	10
Can either be positive or negative, Honest, Positivity, Stress	(De)motivation	4

We also analysed students' reflections, from which a number of themes emerged. Most notably, our participants turned out to view peer feedback as a component of a learning process which involves different types of feedback, recursively shifting from self-feedback to AI/machine feedback, peer feedback, and teacher feedback. We were surprised to find that some of the participants had never experienced peer feedback before. As one of the participants related, "*I have never applied peer feedback in my writing process so learning it this semester proved to be beneficial for the future,*" [Athirah]. Our data also indicated the significance of training students to provide and receive peer feedback effectively:

When it comes to criticism, I had some bad experiences before. However, with the way our lecturer has taught us to give feedback, I welcomed every critique with open arms. The feedback did not diminish my confidence, but nurtured it, enabling our group to fix our mistakes to produce a better essay. [Diana]

In the feedback literature, researchers like Kaya and Yaprak (2020) have already highlighted the key role of training. According to Bailey and Cassidy (2019), peer feedback will not be effective unless students receive training, clear instructions and examples, and frequent practice, and unless they constantly reflect on the feedback process.

The participants in our study also observed peer feedback to have created a supporting and constructive learning environment. As some of them stated, they intended to maintain using peer feedback as an effective learning strategy. For example, Adam reflected, "*I finally realised that the feedback from my peers proved to be helpful for me when doing*

this assignment and not only for this particular assignment but also for future assignments as well." As it is evident from these findings, peer feedback can play a significant role in developing students' writing ability.

The findings suggest that cultural factors play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of peer feedback. In collectivist cultures like Malaysia, the emphasis on maintaining harmony can influence the nature of feedback provided. Previous research (Carson & Nelson, 1996) has shown that students from homogeneous cultural backgrounds may avoid direct criticism to preserve group cohesion. This aligns with our participants' reflections, where they valued constructive and supportive feedback over overly critical comments. Such cultural tendencies highlight the need for structured peer feedback training that encourages balanced critique while respecting interpersonal dynamics. Addressing these cultural influences in ESL/EFL settings can enhance the effectiveness of peer feedback, ensuring that students engage in meaningful revision rather than offering surface-level agreement.

CONCLUSION

In the present study, we investigated students' perceptions towards peer feedback in the process of writing. The findings showed that students generally had positive perceptions of peer feedback. Additionally, the study highlighted that effective peer feedback requires proper training. Future research could investigate the long-term impact of peer feedback training on writing development and student engagement through longitudinal studies. Expanding the study to diverse ESL contexts would also provide deeper insights into the broader applicability of peer feedback in different educational settings.

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APPENDIX

Collaborative Writing of an Argumentative Essay (30%)

Objective

The goal of this assignment is to provide a hands-on opportunity for the students to experience the recursive process of writing collaboratively before they publish it online.

Important notes

- This assignment consists of three tasks: 1) Essay writing task (20 Marks), 2) Creating a video - read the essay with special effect on your audience (5 Marks) and 3) Portfolio (5 Marks).
- This assignment is done in groups of three.
- At each stage, share your thought, plans, write with your group members and receive feedback from peers and the instructor.
- If you wish to use visual material, remember you will need permission to publish them; therefore, you are advised to use your original photos and videos to avoid violating copyright rules.

Instructions

Task 1 (Group work - 20 Marks)
- Write a 600 to 650-word argumentative essay about a topic of your choice.

Task 2 (Group work - 5 Marks)
- Make a video no more than 5 minutes in which you read your essay to your audience.
- You may use music, songs, photographs, but please consider their copyrights to avoid copyright infringement.

Task 3 (Individual work - 5 Marks)
- Keep a portfolio. In your portfolio,
- report your challenges and solutions
- describe the process of development of your essay in a group (what you found useful/effective, problems or difficulties that you encountered, strategies that you used to overcome them)
- describe the experience of giving and receiving feedback from your peers and from me (What did you gain from the feedback? What did you find helpful or not helpful for you?)

- write a self-evaluation in 200-300 words to explain how you feel about online writing experience (the use of books, google Doc/wikispaces/Facebook, etc.) and how it helped or fail to help you develop as a learner and a writer. How does writing in an online platform affect your learning process? How would you want the course to be taught differently?)
- add photos, mind maps, etc. to vividly illustrate the process of the development of your work.

Submission notes

- Submit Task 1, the 600 to 650-word argumentative essay, via Putrablast. The group leader submits for the whole group to avoid duplicates. Compile the different drafts of your writing (no word limit) together with the final argumentative essay.
- Submit Task 2, the 5-minute video, by uploading it on Facebook group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/3473681852887493).
- Submit Task 3, the portfolio, INDIVIDUALLY via Putrablast.
- The deadline to submit the assignments is the end of Week 13.
- In Week 14, all the groups from both groups showcase their videos at The Fourth BBI3421 Academy Awards. Winners are announced and receive certificates.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR ASSIGNMENT 1

Below is the comprehensive guideline for you to carry out the group writing assignment.

A. FILL IN THE 'GROUP INFO' DOCUMENT AND CREATE YOUR FOLDER
- I have created a Google Docs folder. Add your information to the Google doc there and then create a folder for your group; you're required to organise the content of your folder according to the list below:

1. Stage 1: Choosing a topic (Week 3)
2. Stage 2: Researching and resourcing (Week 4)
3. Stage 3: Brainstorming and outlining (Week 5)
4. Stage 4: 1st draft (Week 6)
5. Stage 5: 1st draft Cont'd (Week 7)
6. 1st Peer review and teacher feedback (Week 9)
7. Stage 6: 2nd draft (Week 10)
8. 2nd Peer review and teacher feedback (Week 11)
9. Stage 7: Final editing and proofreading (Week 12)
10. Showcasing (Week 13)

B. BEGIN YOUR WEEKLY DISCUSSION AND COMPLETE EACH STAGE BY THE END OF EVERY WEEK

a. Use your names during your discussions so that I can see who exactly said and contributed what. All you need to do is to 'suggest' and type your discussions on the documents on our drive.

b. While revising and editing your drafts, also keep your document on 'suggest' mode. Then I will know what was exactly revised, deleted, or added.

C. COMPILE WEEKLY FILES IN A FOLDER

• Save your discussions of each stage at the end of each week.

D. DO NOT PRESS "Resolve" button at the chats.

• This will delete the whole discussion.

E. The Analytic Scale of Argumentative Writing (Nimehchisalem et al., 2021) will be used to rate your essays.