EFL Students' Perceptions of Peer Feedback in Writing Classes at a University in HCM City

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ABSTRACT

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The study aimed to identify EFL students' perceptions of peer feedback in writing classes at a university in HCM city. 60 English - major students participated in the study. The researcher employed a quantitative method with survey questionnaire as the instrument. The questionnaire was designed the students to express their perceptions about the importance and the benefits of peer feedback in their writing as well as their problems when they give and receive peer feedback. The data collected was analyzed, using SPSS software version 26. The results indicated that participants had positive responses towards peer feedback in learning writing skills though they faced some difficulties in those activities. Additionally, the learners responded that feedback from their peers about their writing performance provided them certain benefits, which contributed to improving their final writing products later.

Introduction

In many ways, English writing is regarded as the most challenging language ability for English foreign language learners. According to Nunan (1989), the act of writing requires the writer to control over a variety of factors both inside and outside a sentence. This means that writers must simultaneously maintain control over the content, format, language, punctuation, spelling, and letter formation. Writing can be approached through writing instruction, but it has been viewed as tough work because it takes a wide range of abilities and knowledge based on topic and grammatical rules, making it difficult to transfer ideas and thoughts into writing (Jalaluddin et al., 2015).

In order to enhance writing abilities, it is crucial to regularly and formatively provide comments and feedback on writing projects (Hyland, 2019). Providing writers with continuous and formative comments, feedback, or error-marking is crucial for improving their writing in foreign languages. According to Bichener, Young, and Cameron (2005), writing instructors have various feedback alternatives to use in writing education. Feedback offers the foundation for students to assess their own development and level of language ability. In traditional teacher-

centered classes, teachers normally provide feedback. However, in student – centered classes, peer feedback which allows peers – individuals with approximately the same level of proficiency, to share and comment on others' performance has been widely applied.

Numerous theoretical frameworks offer support for peer feedback, including process writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), collaborative learning theory, social scaffolding in collaborative dialogues (Donato, 2000), Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), and several others. Peer feedback creates a social space for conversation and discussion by enabling students to interact with one another through comments on each other's writing. Researchers have strongly recommended peer feedback as the first step in the process writing approach. According to Topping (1998), peer feedback is when students offer suggestions on how their peers should improve their learning in terms of quantity, level, value, and quality. Peer feedback has been demonstrated in a number of studies to be beneficial for both teaching and learning. Peer review will provide students with feedback from a wider range of audiences, which may offer different viewpoints. It will also help students become more confident in their writing, increase their motivation to learn, sharpen their critical thinking abilities, and help them develop social skill (Topping, 1998; Lee, 1998; Omelicheva, 2005).

Literature review

Definition of peer feedback

Peer feedback has emerged as a substitute feedback technique in higher education recently. According to Falchikov (1995), peer feedback was the process by which groups of people give their peers summative grades or formative reviews. Similarly, Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002 defined that in a peer feedback exercise, students evaluate and explain each other's work by applying their knowledge and abilities. According to Shute (2008), formative peer feedback is "all task-related information that a learner communicates to a peer of similar status which can be used to improve his or her academic writing performance." Different researchers have different definitions of peer feedback. This paper, however, employs Shute's definition (2008), in which, peer feedback is the tool helping learners modify their writing performance to gain certain progress.

The role of peer feedback in writing enhancement

Numerous studies have shown strong evidence in favor of the use of peer assessment and feedback in English writing classes as it holds a variety of benefits. According to a study by Peng (2010), the results showed that although the students had no prior experience, they had good attitudes and perceptions of the peer feedback activities. Additionally, the research by Williams (1992) found that the majority of students thought peer assessment was engaging and helpful. Salih (2013) discovered that student authors place a high priority on grammar, whereas peer reviewers should place a higher priority on feedback clarity. This demonstrates that students should pay attention to other elements that contribute to the formation of high-quality writing in addition to grammar. On the other hand, some research present various viewpoints on peer writing feedback. Another finding of Cheng and Warren's study (2005) was that students lacked sufficient confidence while evaluating their colleagues' papers. After that, some

students expressed dissatisfaction with the standard and quality of the feedback that they had received from their peers (Xiao & Lucking, 2008). Despite any potential difficulties, using the peer feedback technique in the classroom is crucial to its success. (Paulus, 1999). In order to effectively apply peer feedback in the classroom, teachers should have a thorough discussion with the students about the process. Students should be made aware that peer feedback is a useful tool for reviewing each other's work as they might be hesitant to approach their teachers. As students get better at applying feedback criteria and clarifying their understanding of the subject being assessed, the peer feedback process as a whole encourages students to be critical, independent learners. When used properly, peer feedback can help students develop various life and learning skills, including learner accountability, critical thinking, and evaluation abilities.

Previous research on peer feedback in writing classes

Several research have looked at the effects of peer input on developing EFL writing skills. Sirikarn (2019) performed a mixed-method study on 21 Thai undergraduate English majors to investigate the influence of peer feedback. The researcher used a five-point Likert scale questionnaire with 36 statements and six open-ended questions, as well as a paired samples T-test. The findings demonstrated that the students' writing abilities increased significantly, as evidenced by the mean scores on the pre- and post-test. Additionally, the students supposed that receiving feedback from their peers was a valuable way to engage in class interaction and this activity helped them understand the writing process, enhance effective strategies, strengthen their critical thinking abilities, and developed both intellectually and socially through teamwork. Also, Sirikarn (2019) investigated students' attitudes toward receiving comments from their peers in order to improve their English writing skills. Twenty-one undergraduate English majors were the research sample. The results showed that students felt positive about using peer feedback, and there was strong agreement across the four categories of writing process, effective techniques, critical thinking, and social interaction.

In 2020, Nurhayati conducted the research in which thirty students were employed as participants. The results reflected a clearer description of how peer feedback affects learning activities and writing assessment procedures. More possibilities for learners to learn from peers' and their own failures led to more meaningful learning. This is as a result of the evaluation or assessment session involving peer and self-feedback. This research also found that the two most important ways for students to reflect on their learning are through self-evaluation and peer feedback. Peer feedback, according to the study, motivates learners to advance. The students considered it as beneficial since they could get feedback from their classmates on their writing mistakes, including grammatical and spelling mistakes. These kinds of exercises are important for students' writing development because they allow them to reflect, share ideas, and use their peers' comments to identify improvement areas.

On the other hand, Ghadi (2016) conducted a study in Iran to look at how peer assessment affected the writing skills and autonomy of 48 Iranian upper - intermediate EFL learners. The participants were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. Both groups took writing pre - test, post - test and questionnaires. In addition, the subjects in the experimental group underwent a semi-structured interview. According to the data analysis from the questionnaires, peer assessment has a considerable impact on Iranian EFL learners' writing

abilities. Also, the students felt more obligated to read and evaluate their classmates' writing and had positive beliefs about the use of peer assessment. In another study by Sukumaran (2014) in Malaysia, the researcher used the mixed method approach with a questionnaire and open-ended question to gain students' insight into peer feedback towards their writing skills. The participants were final-year students who were required to write academic essays as part of the learning outcome. According to the findings, participants had a positive opinion peer feedback activities in their writing process. While the majority of students in the study supported peer feedback, the minority expressed their concerns towards peer feedback, which they supposed that the peer feedback about their writing sometimes confused them.

It has been discovered that including peer feedback on colleagues' writing assignments is advantageous for both the giver and the receiver. Richter & Smith-Dluha (2019) claimed that the benefits were found to be even greater for the provider of feedback than for the receiver. Also, according to Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012), students' overall writing performance improved dramatically as a result of peer feedback. Additionally, developing awareness of the needs of the audience has increased thanks to peer feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). When leaners read their peers' texts, they gain a deeper grasp of the reader's desires and expectations. This experience enables them to write or revise their future works with the demands of their audience in mind. Also, peers are normally at the same or similar language level, consequently, their classmates can understand their feedback better. Additionally, the work of their peers can be used as an example text for a particular genre, expand their understanding of this form of writing, and offer them helpful vocabulary or structural (Hovardas et al., 2014, p. 134). The "critical detachment" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 92) that occurs when reading a text written by another person helps students become more effective at revising their own texts, which results in increasing leaner autonomy (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

In 2022, Vo conducted the research on student's attitude towards peer correction in writing skills. 13 non – English – speaking students participated the study, in which they completed the questionnaire and then they were interviewed. The results showed the most significant advantage that peer correction provided to the participants was to help them write more seriously since they are aware that they have a real audience reading their product. Also, the participants believed that peer assessment help them identify strengths and weaknesses in their writing performance. Peer feedback can be considered as a type of cooperation learning. In a study by Phan (2023) which investigated EFL students' perceptions towards cooperative learning in writing skill at a university in Mekong Delta, fourteen non – English major students were participants. The results collected from the questionnaire reflected that cooperative learning promotes an active, participatory, and exploratory learning environment as it requires students to engage in interaction, share ideas and information with others.

While a number of studies have supported the use of peer feedback in the classroom, some research expressed concerns about this issue. Kurihara (2016) investigated how peer evaluation influenced the writing skills of 35 students in a group. It was discovered that, although students who received comments from peers fared similarly, those who received feedback from the instructor did much better. In a research conducted by Nguyen (2016), 49 bachelor's students majoring in English enrolled in two third-year English writing classes in the teaching EFL

program. The researcher carried out a survey and the findings showed that the practice of peer feedback was not formally implemented in this particular context, meaning that the EFL learners could not benefit greatly from this feedback approach in terms of opportunities to improve their metacognition. They also anticipated that the practice of peer feedback in their writing classes would change.

While there are many benefits to using peer feedback in writing classes, teachers should take it into consideration. Peer feedback is a time-consuming process since students must read drafts, make notes, and work with another reader to reach a consensus by providing written input or conversing with the writer in person during a feedback circle. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate students' perceptions of using peer feedback in writing classes to maximize the students' writing ability.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the survey was seeking to answer the following research questions:

What are EFL students' perceptions of peer feedback in writing classes?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study selected 60 students (17 males and 43 females) majoring in English in a university in HCM city as participants. Their age ranged from 19 to 21 years old. The participants were selected randomly from different classes. All of the participants took two writing courses, and they took Writing 3, in which they learned how to write academic essays. The students were in their second year of higher study, with English competence corresponding to the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Over the course of ten weeks, the students received two 135-minute writing courses every week.

Design of the Study

A quantitative design was employed to answer the research question, with the questionnaire as the instrument. The questionnaires contain 15 items, using the Likert scale, which ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree to collect students' perceptions of the benefits of peer feedback, the interaction and motivation as well as the problems when applying using peer feedback in writing classes. The collected data was analyzed statically, which is suitable to the duration of time and size of participants.

Data collection & analysis

To collect data, the researcher met participants face to face in their classes and gave the questionnaire to them. The researcher explained the objective of the survey, which is to collect the students' perception of peer feedback in their writing courses. The participants received the questionnaire and completed it voluntarily in 20 minutes. The data collected was then analyzed, using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software version 26.

Results/Findings

Regarding participants' ideas of the importance of peer feedback in writing classes, the majority of the respondents expressed that peer feedback plays a crucial role in their writing study, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' perception of the importance of peer feedback in writing classes

Not important	Not very important	Quite important	Important	Very important
0%	8,3%	25%	51,7%	15%

Table 1 shows that the majority of participants supposed peer feedback was crucial for their writing lessons while 15% thought it was very important and a quarter believed that it was very significant. These results suggested that students gained benefits from feedback as they have developed their writing skills.

Table 2

Participants' perceptions of the benefits of giving peer feedback to their classmates

	Item and Description	N	Mean	S.D
1	peer feedback helps me understand more about the task's instructions and requirements.	60	3.90	.65
2	Peer feedback helps me gain more ideas for the writing tasks and arrange ideas more logically.	60	4.05	.79
3	Peer feedback provides me more vocabulary for the tasks.	60	3.93	.77
4	Peer feedback provides more grammatical structures.	60	3.90	.73
5	Peer feedback helps me avoid grammatical and vocabulary errors.	60	3.92	.70
6	Giving and receiving peer feedback helps me improve the ability to assess my own written work.	60	3.83	.78
	Overall mean score	60	3.92	.74

(N: Number, M : Mean, SD: Standard Deviation)

With regards to respondents' perceptions of the benefits of peer feedback towards writing performance, the descriptive data showed positive results (M:3.92; SD:.74). According to Table 2, the majority of students supposed that peer feedback activity made them understand more

clearly about the instructions and requirements of the task (M = 3.90, SD = 65). They also found peer feedback effective in helping them widen their ideas and vocabulary for the tasks (M = 405, SD = .79; M = 3.93, SD = .77). Moreover, the respondents expressed that reading their peers' feedback contributed to preventing them from making grammatical and vocabulary mistakes (M = 3.92, SD = .70). A high percentage of participants claimed that they were provided more grammatical structures to complete the tasks (M = 3.90, SD = .73).Thanks to reading their peers' written work and giving feedback, the respondents believed that they understand more about the instructions and requirement of the task (M = 3.90, SD = 65) and their ability to assess their work improved as well (M = 3.83, SD = .78).

The results about how the respondents perceived the interaction among peers and self-motivation in writing lessons is shown in Table 3 with rather high overall mean score.

Table 3

Participants' perception of the interaction and self-motivation in writing lessons

	Item and Description	N	M	S.D
1	Peer feedback activities increase my interaction with my teachers.	60	3.88	.78
2	Peer feedback activities increase the interaction with my classmates	60	4.05	.76
3	Peer feedback creates sense of participation in the writing lessons.	60	3.81	.70
4	Peer feedback activities motives me to learn writing skills.	60	3.76	.78
	Overall mean score	60	3.87	.75

Looking at Table 3, it can be noticed that peer feedback activities offered most of students more opportunities for interaction with their instructors and their classmates. (M= 3.88, SD = .78; M=4.05, SD = .76). Through peer feedback activities, students also developed their motivation in learning writing skills (M = 3.76, SD = .78)

Despite the benefits, the data about problems in complementing peer feedback activities were collected and displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Participants' problems in peer feedback activities

	Item and Description	N	M	S.D
1	I don't really trust my peers' feedback.	60	2,90	.82
2	Different feedback from peers makes me confused.	60	2,84	.84
3	My language proficiency is not good enough to give feedback to my classmates.	60	2.96	.97
4	I'm more focused on giving feedback about mistakes in written work rather than on positive aspects.	60	3.4	.85

As can be seen from Table 4, the participants had problems in both giving and receiving peer feedback for written work. When they received feedback from their partners, a number of the students did not really trust the peers' comments (M = 2,9, SD = .82). In other cases, when they received different feedback from peers, they found it confusing and hard to improve their writing later (M = 2,84, SD = .84). In contrast, in terms of giving feedback, the respondents felt a lack of confidence as they supposed their language proficiency level is not good enough (M = 2,96, SD = .97). Finally, they tended to focus more on giving comments about the errors instead of recognizing positive items in their partners' writing (M = 3.4, SD = 85).

In summary, the participants positively perceived peer feedback in writing lessons in terms of the benefits for future written work and class interaction. However, the respondents still faced some problems in giving and receiving feedback activities.

Discussion

The results of this study confirmed that students have positive responses towards peer feedback in writing classes. The outcomes are consistent with Nurhayati (2020) findings, which highlighted the participants were able to learn from their peers' mistakes and avoid them in their own writing. Also, the study showed that both receivers and givers gained benefits from peer feedback on their writing performance, which is similar to the findings by Richter & Smith-Dluha (2019). In terms of interaction development, the study's results are aligned with the findings by Sirikarn (2019), who found that through peer-feedback collaboration, feedback users can enhance their critical thinking abilities, social skills, and intellectual reasoning. Regarding the problems faced by the students in peer feedback activities, the fact that students felt confused about different feedback corresponds to what Ghadi (2016) mentioned in his study. The results of the study are different from the findings by Nguyen (2016), which suggested that learners could not benefit greatly from the peer feedback approach.

Conclusion

The study's results indicated that participants had a good attitude toward peer input on their writing skills. Teachers may utilize the data to organize peer feedback activities in class to assist students improve their writing abilities, including ideas, vocabulary, and grammar. This approach promotes teacher-student and peer interaction, as well as key abilities like analysis, critical thinking, and communication.These characteristics will benefit both students' future employment prospects and their social life.

A number of suggestions can be proposed for utilizing peer feedback activities in writing classes. First of all, students need to have peer feedback training so that they clearly understand the purposes and the methods of giving feedback. At this step, teachers play the crucial role in guiding and preparing their students for the activities. Students should be provided feasible evaluation criteria and clear explanations by teachers to develop their confidence for the task. The second recommendation would be reasonable grouping, which can effectively increase the student's trust. Students of mixed language proficiency should be in the same group, and it would be advisable for groups to exchange their feedback together. This approach can help students of different levels have opportunities to learn from others and improve themselves.

Due to time constraints, the current study has some limitations, which needs to be considered. First, the study employed a quantitative method with single instrument – a survey questionnaire. Secondly, the samples were chosen from a university in HCM city, so the results might not be generalized for different contexts or institutions. Therefore, it is recommended that future research should take these limitations into account to gain more complete results.

Acknowledgments

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