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Undergraduates' Perceptions of Anonymous and Open Digital Peer Feedback in Academic Writing

Salim Razi

Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University

Turkey

salimrazi@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aimed at revealing undergraduates' perceptions of receiving and providing peer-feedback either 'openly' or 'anonymously' in a digital online environment in EFL academic writing. The data were collected during an Advanced Reading and Writing Skills course at the English Language Teaching department of Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University in Turkey in the spring semester of the 2014-2015 academic year. Two experimental groups similar to each other in terms of academic writing proficiency were set up. Students submitted their writing assignments through the text-matching software Turnitin and peer-reviewed three papers either anonymously or openly. The participants were categorized into three sub-groups with reference to their writing assignment scores in the fall term. Each student received feedback from a good, a moderate, and a poor peer. Following this, students revised their assignments and resubmitted. Finally, students submitted a reflection paper in which they explained how they benefited from digital peer-feedback. In addition to discussing the effectiveness of open and anonymous peer review, the results also revealed how students reacted to the different types of feedback that they had received. The results highlight the importance of anonymity, specifically in the case of providing peer feedback, through which they change roles and become readers rather than authors. Since the relevant literature provides very limited information regarding the administration of the anonymous peer review process in a digital environment provided from multiple sources, the results are important in terms of maximizing the gains of the anonymous multi-mediated writing model.

Keywords: Academic writing, Anonymous multi-mediated writing model, Anonymous peer feedback, Digital online feedback

10. Introduction

Peers may help each other identify problems that they have overlooked. Therefore, the relevant literature considers peer-review beneficial as a common practice of scaffolding in accordance with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Peer-review contributes to the acquisition of better writing skills both by the author and reviewer. Yet, managing peer-review can be a complicated task for lecturers. With the help of recent technological developments, digital platforms facilitate the management of exchanging peer-feedback by enabling facilities such as anonymous peer review, matching multiple reviewers for a single paper, and submission of several drafts. In this respect, benefiting from such features of digital platforms is expected to contribute to learners' writing performances. For instance, the relevant literature indicates that anonymity results in more critical feedback and university students prefer anonymity in peer-feedback exchange. Relevant to these discussions, this study aims to investigate language learners' perceptions on receiving and providing peer-feedback either 'openly' or 'anonymously' in a digital online environment in EFL academic writing.

11. Feedback

Peer feedback is considered part of the formative developmental process by Hyland (2000). In the process of exchanging feedback, student authors become readers, which is regarded as "[a]n opportunity to change roles" (Berggren, 2015, p. 67). Several theories provide support for peer review in writing classes. For example, to some extent, peer review benefits from communicative interaction to enable a socially mediated process (Kayi-Aydar, 2013). However, Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD through which learners scaffold each other (Weissberg, 2006), seems to be its most essential contributor. Peer review can be regarded as a vital component of the process approach (Wette, 2015), which encourages student creativity by thinking (e.g., brainstorming, planning, drafting and revising). Peer review also refers to the social / genre approach (Tribble, 2015), since it requires the cooperation of student authors at different proficiencies, which depends on scaffolding.

As peer feedback reveals writing problems that have been overlooked (Ruecker, 2010), it is considered beneficial (e.g., Hu, 2005; Hu & Lam, 2010; Zhao, 2010, 2014) both for authors and reviewers (Aghaee & Hansson, 2013). There appears to be a greater benefit for reviewers than authors (Lu & Law, 2012; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). By means of peer review tasks, learners become more autonomous (Hyland, 2000; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996) and they develop higher order thinking skills (Mangelsdorf, 1992). However, since the reliability of peer review is questionable (Aghaee & Hansson, 2013), peer review might be problematic for two reasons, both concerning reliability. Firstly, students *misleading* each other due to their own deficiencies should be considered as this results in a *lack of trust* in peer feedback (Berggren, 2015; Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Paulus, 1999; Rinehart & Chen, 2012; Rollinson, 2005; Ruecker, 2010; Saito & Fujita, 2004; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006; Zhao, 2014). Secondly, students are reluctant to criticize friends (Liou & Peng, 2009). The anonymous multi-mediated writing model developed by Razi (2015) aims to provide a solution to these

problems. In the model, learners submit their draft, have their papers matched with three peers. Then they complete the task anonymously. Since this requires matching learners with different writing proficiency levels, asymmetrical and symmetrical feedback is distributed in a balanced way (Hanjani & Li, 2014).

12. Methodology

This study mainly aimed at revealing undergraduates' perceptions of receiving and providing peer-feedback either 'openly' or 'anonymously' in a digital online environment in EFL academic writing. The research questions were:

- **RQ1:** Do EAP learners prefer receiving peer feedback openly or anonymously?
- **RQ2:** Do EAP learners prefer providing peer feedback openly or anonymously?
- **RQ3:** In what ways do EAP learners think that peer review is beneficial or problematic?
- **RQ4:** How do EAP learners consider the quality of peer feedback they have received in a digital environment?
- **RQ5:** Do EAP learners think that exchanging peer feedback contributed to better writing?

12.1 Setting and participants

The study was conducted in the English Language Teaching Department at the Faculty of Education, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey in the 2014-2015 academic year, spring term. The participants were first year students enrolled on an Advanced Reading and Writing Skills course taught by the author. Two experimental groups of participants from three intact classes were constituted in accordance with the participants' academic writing proficiency. There were a total number of 60 participants in the experimental group (42 females, 18 males) and 30 participants in the control group (21 females, 9 males).

12.2 Instrument

Text-matching software, Turnitin, was used as the digital environment through which the participants peer-reviewed assignments. To learn about their perceptions, the participants answered open-ended questions in the form of a questionnaire.

12.3 Procedure

To divide the participants into two experimental groups, their scores in the Advanced Reading and Writing Skills course (2014-15 fall semester) were considered by categorizing them as 'good', 'moderate', or 'weak'. The participants were aware of this categorization but did not know into which category they were placed. They received feedback from three peers, and also provided feedback to three peers, either openly or anonymously. This justification was

rather important for retrieving reliable results, as instructors should consider different student groups carefully and give precise instructions about the peer review task (Rollinson, 2005). The syllabus suggested by Razi (2011) was adapted in accordance with the aims of the Advanced Reading and Writing Skills course. The participants submitted an ELT-related review paper on a topic chosen by themselves at a length of approximately 1,500-words (excluding abstract and references) as an assignment. Then they provided and received either open or anonymous peer feedback within a digital environment.

13. Findings and Discussion

13.1 Do EAP learners prefer receiving peer feedback openly or anonymously?

The participants' responses as illustrated in Figure 1 indicated that a great number (75%) of them, regardless of whether they received feedback anonymously or not, preferred receiving feedback anonymously. Yet, the participants who received anonymous peer-feedback supported anonymity more than the others.

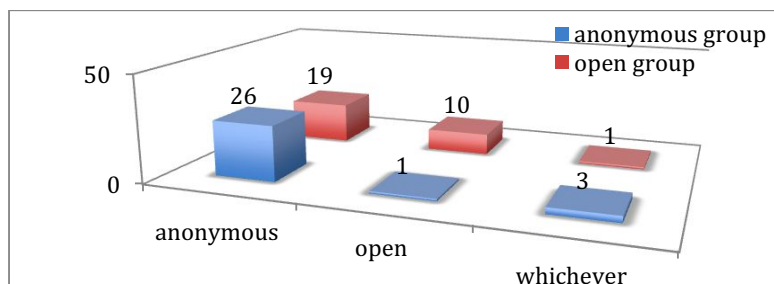


Figure 1. Preferred way of receiving peer feedback.

13.2 Do EAP learners prefer providing peer feedback openly or anonymously?

The participants' responses as illustrated in Figure 2 revealed that a vast majority (86.67%), regardless of whether they provided feedback anonymously or not, preferred providing peer feedback anonymously. A careful investigation of their responses to the first two research questions highlights the importance of anonymity, specifically in the case of providing peer feedback, through which they change roles (Berggren, 2015) and become readers rather than authors. The relevant literature reports better writing performance and more critical feedback in when anonymity is present (Lu & Bol, 2007), and anonymous peer review also provides heightened awareness in academic writing (Robinson, 2002). A previous survey study also revealed a preference for anonymity among university students (Hosack, 2003).

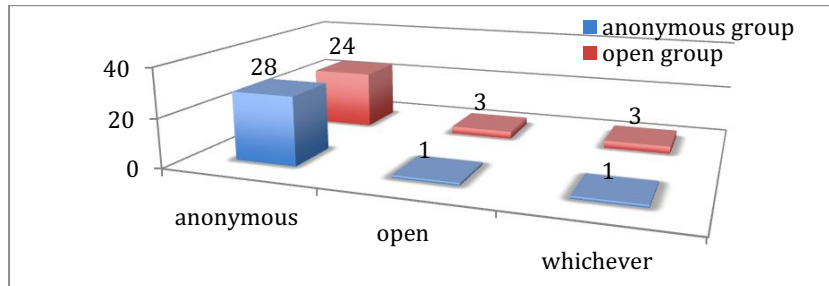


Figure 2. Preferred way of providing peer feedback.

13.3 In what ways do EAP learners think that peer review is beneficial or problematic?

To answer RQ3, the participants in the anonymous and open group were asked to report in which ways they benefited, if any, from the peer review process. Their responses were grouped, as illustrated in Table 1. Please note that the numbers in parentheses represent the frequency of the item. In accordance with the results, it can be inferred that the participants in both groups benefit mostly from peer review with regards to the mechanics of their paper, such as the grammar, punctuation and spelling. However, they report a limited contribution regarding the content, such as flow of ideas, use of linking devices, and vocabulary selection. The participants indicated that peer feedback was problematic from several aspects, as listed in Table 1. They mainly complained about receiving either weak or wrong feedback from peers.

Table 1

Benefits and Problematic Aspects of Peer Review

	<i>f</i> (anonymous group)	<i>f</i> (open group)
<i>Benefits</i>	grammar (21)	grammar (18)
	punctuation (12)	punctuation (10)
	spelling (11)	spelling (9)
	flow of ideas (7)	flow of ideas (4)

	academic writing rules (5)	vocabulary selection (4)
	vocabulary selection (4)	academic writing rules (3)
	linking devices (3)	linking devices (2)
	complexity of sentences (1)	headings (1)
		paper style (1)
<i>Problems</i>	weak feedback (16)	weak feedback (10)
	irrelevant feedback (2)	wrong feedback (8)
	wrong feedback (7)	no contribution to flow of ideas (3)
	no contribution to flow of ideas (1)	irrelevant feedback (2)
		mistrust of reviewer's suggestion(s) (1)
		no contribution to developing more complex sentences (1)
		reviewing three papers creates too much workload (1)

13.4 How do EAP learners consider the quality of peer feedback they have received in a digital environment?

To answer RQ5, the participants were asked to answer a 5-scale Likert question (1 = *very poor*, 2 = *poor*, 3 = *acceptable*, 4 = *good*, 5 = *excellent*) regarding how they perceived the quality of peer feedback received in terms of writing a better paper. The overall mean score highlighted their appreciation for the contribution of peer feedback ($M_{overall} = 3.58$, $SD = 0.79$). In addition, an independent samples t-test revealed significant differences between the perceptions of the anonymous group ($M_{anonymous} = 3.83$, $SD = 0.59$) and the open group ($M_{open} = 3.33$, $SD = 0.84$) with a medium effect size ($d = 0.66$) [$t(50.66) = 2.57$, $p = .01$]. This finding indicates that the participants regarded peer feedback as being more beneficial when carried out anonymously.

13.5 Do EAP learners think that exchanging peer feedback contributed to better writing?

All participants in the study regardless of receiving anonymous or open peer feedback indicated the positive contribution of receiving peer feedback on the writing of their papers; only three participants ($n_{anonymous} = 2$, $n_{open} = 1$) highlighted a slight contribution. Similarly, a vast majority (93.33%) indicated that providing peer feedback contributed to them writing

better papers. Only two participants from the two groups did not consider that there was any contribution, whereas two other participants indicated a slight contribution. It is interesting to note that one of the participants, who indicated that receiving feedback from peers did not contribute to writing a better paper, paradoxically, appreciated the contribution of providing feedback to other peers in terms of writing a better paper.

Metacognitive experiences occur when careful, conscious monitoring of one's cognitive efforts is required (Abbott, 2006). Receiving feedback from several peers and revising accordingly requires deep analysis by the employment of *metacognitive revising strategies* (Nishino & Atkinson, 2015). Such a development of metacognitive skills is expected to contribute to becoming autonomous language learners, as written corrective peer feedback triggers form-focused cognitive progress.

In addition to the findings from the quantitative data, it is important to analyse the participants' comments regarding peer feedback. Firstly, the following expert highlights the importance of matching student papers with multiple reviewers in the anonymous multi-mediated writing model:

#1: "I received weak feedback from several of my friends. They just skipped my mistakes since they did not care about the assignment. Receiving feedback from three peers minimized this problem as at least one of them called my attention to the problems in my paper. In addition, the detailed rubric that we used to provide feedback was very beneficial. In this way, as reviewers, we knew what to focus on while providing peer feedback."

Secondly, the following expert participants indicate the contribution of exchanging peer feedback within a digital environment via the anonymous multi-mediated writing model.

#2: "Since the complete writing process was on a digital platform, I felt a bit stressed but anyway, this helped me motivate myself to finish the task in time."

#3: "I enjoyed writing in such a way where cutting edge technology was available. This increased my motivation for writing."

#4: "I benefited from submitting drafts in terms of avoiding plagiarism."

#5: "It enabled us to work anywhere and anytime we wanted. This was so practical!"

#6: "Digital peer review was so practical in comparison to the traditional type of peer review. I could benefit from using different colours, for example, while providing feedback on different types of mistakes."

#7: "I didn't have to run after my friends begging them to provide feedback on my paper. It also helped us save our planet by working paper-free."

Thirdly, the following experts underline why the participants support exchanging peer feedback anonymously via the anonymous multi-mediated writing model:

#8: "It is more objective, as we do not know who is giving the feedback."

#9: "In anonymous peer review, I think we hide our emotions along with our identities."

#10: "One of my friends lost a friend simply because of open peer review as the reviewer criticized her."

#11: "When reviewers know our identity, they might review our papers based on their thoughts of our personality."

#12: "In the case of open peer review, I could not criticize effectively to avoid hurting my friend's feelings."

#13: "No one criticizes his/her best friend's paper truthfully."

#14: "Knowing the author put me under the impact of my prejudices against them."

#15: "Not everybody can control his/her emotions. Some friends behave very badly after being criticized by a peer."

Fourthly, it is also important to consider why other participants disregarded anonymity in peer feedback. In this respect, the following experts provide justification for their thoughts:

#16: "I prefer open peer review as it encourages the reviewer to be more careful in providing feedback."

#17: "I want to know about the reviewer as I need this information to decide whether to trust his/her suggestions or not."

#18: "I want to receive open peer feedback as I later have the opportunity of talking to my reviewer about the details of my paper and his/her suggestions."

Finally, the following expert participants reveal how they benefited from exchanging peer feedback:

#19: "I spent too much time on the same page while writing my paper and this prevented me from recognizing my mistakes. Peer reviews helped me to identify such mistakes."

#20: "I learned from my friends' mistakes."

#21: "I realized my own mistakes by reviewing my friends' papers."

#22: "I can find a mistake in my friend's paper but I have difficulty in identifying a similar mistake in my own paper."

#23: "I benefited from my previous mistakes while providing feedback."

#24: "Providing feedback to my peers helped me to learn and to remember academic writing rules better."

14. Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the present study. Firstly, it is clear that EAP learners prefer both receiving and providing peer feedback anonymously, and anonymity seems more important while providing peer feedback in order to keep the reviewer's identity hidden. Secondly, peer review, either openly or anonymously, is considered beneficial, especially with regards to the mechanics of writing such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling. However, the contribution of peer review to the other components of papers such as flow of ideas, vocabulary selection and academic writing rules is limited. Thirdly, EAP learners can be considered as providing 'good' quality feedback, yet students should be aware of the existence of weak or wrong peer feedback that probably comes from lower proficiency learners. This situation provides evidence for the necessity of receiving feedback from multiple peers in accordance with the reviewers' writing proficiency. Fourthly, anonymity in peer review enabled better quality feedback. Finally, EAP learners believe that both receiving and providing feedback helped them write better.

With regards to these conclusions, the anonymous multi-mediated writing model is suggested in writing classes to increase the benefits of students from exchanging higher quality feedback. In the implementation of the model, students should be grouped carefully and provided with precise instructions about the peer review task (Rollinson, 2005). It is also important to familiarize them with peer feedback on a digital platform, which eliminates the social constraint of face-to-face feedback (Ho & Savignon, 2007). Instructors are expected to model how to use the rubric in order to provide more effective peer feedback. It is important to note that asking students to do peer review means extra work for them, which might be demotivating. Therefore, their efforts in the process of peer review should also be appreciated in their final grades (see Razi, 2015 for a suggested formula).

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