

An exploratory study into student attitudes toward peer review activities in an advanced academic writing class

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Abstract

Much research has lauded peer review activities for their focus on collaborative learning and learner development. However, other research has indicated that students can find commenting on their peer's work a difficult and intimidating process. This exploratory study investigates the experiences and attitudes of a group of freshman students in an advanced English academic reading and writing class in a Japanese University on a peer review activity they conducted as part of their assignment to write an academic research paper. Results from a post-activity questionnaire were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. These results indicated that students felt the feedback they received from their partners was useful to help them improve their writing. Moreover, there were signs that the peer review activity helped the participants to gain a better sense of audience awareness as well as encouraged them to reflect more deeply on the writing process in general. However, students also reported that they felt that they needed more training to confidently comment on their partner's paper. In addition, there were indications that different proficiency level between the peer review partner's caused some difficulties. After reporting the results of the questionnaire, the implications for future peer review activities are also discussed

Keywords: *Peer review; EFL academic writing skills; Collaborative learning; Learner autonomy; Mixed methods exploratory research*

Introduction & Literature Review

Since the 1980s, peer review activities have been well researched and are now advocated to the point that they are almost required in any educational courses focused on developing written composition skills (Berg, 1999; Hedge, 2001; Hu, 2005; Min, 2005; Rollinson, 2005; Saito, 2008; Hu & Lam, 2010). At its core, peer review is an activity in which writers read each other's work, critique it, and then provide feedback to their peer, with an aim to making iterative improvements to each writer's compositions collaboratively (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhu, 2001; Hu 2006). These activities came into favor as thinking around writing instruction shifted from being product-oriented to process-oriented and are deeply rooted in Vygotskyian sociocultural and social interactionist theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Paulus, 1999; Swain, 2006; Hu 2006). Under this theory, learners engage in negotiating the intention and meaning of their ideas within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to mutually scaffold each other's compositions and make improvements (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Hanjani & Li, 2014). As a result, it is theorized that this social interaction allows the writer not only to improve the quality of their compositions, but also develop the cognitive skills to become fundamentally more competent and autonomous writers by engaging learners more actively in the writing process (Villamil & de Guerrero 1996; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Rollinson 2005).

Benefits of peer review

In addition to the merits mentioned above, there has been a great deal of research which has shed light on a variety of possible benefits of learners engaging in peer review activities. Firstly, peer review brings a sense of audience awareness. As the writer knows their work will be reviewed by an authentic audience of their peers, this encourages the writer to consider and compose their writing with the needs of their audience in mind (Hu, 2005; Rollinson, 2005). It has been reported that this helps to make writing assignments more meaningful than assignments that are reviewed solely by the instructor whose feedback may feel more cold and distant (Rollinson, 2005). It can also engender a more positive attitude towards the writing process and develop skills that will be helpful to them when engaging in real-world writing tasks (Stanley, 1992; Berg, 1999).

Secondly, much research indicates that engaging in peer review encourages the development of self-reflective and critical reasoning skills (Caulk, 1994; Berg, 1999; Tsui and Ng, 2000; Rollinson, 2005; Miaoa, Badger, & Zhenc, 2006; Saito, 2008). When reviewing their partners work, the reviewer is required to engage in critical reading skills and consider what constitutes good writing practice at a deep level. Therefore, by providing advice to their peers, this helps their partner to improve their writing and may help the reviewer to notice weaknesses in their own writing (Miaoa, Badger, & Zhenc, 2006). In addition, when negotiating feedback with their reviewer, the writer needs to consider the advice that is given critically and evaluate its validity (Berg, 1999). It has been suggested that this two-way process of reviewing and negotiation of feedback aids learners in developing into more self-reliant autonomous writers than teacher-fronted feedback, which is often accepted verbatim without the engagement of any critical faculties (Caulk 1994; Rollinson 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000).

Finally, there is evidence that peers can provide high-quality feedback that is comparable to, and sometimes superior to, feedback provided by the teacher (Zamel, 1985; Caulk, 1994; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Saito & Fujita, 2004). It has been noted that through extended negotiations, peer reviewers may be able to give more specific feedback (Zamel, 1985). In addition, as peer reviewer are usually engaged in the same writing tasks, peer feedback can often be perceived as more sympathetic and specific than teacher feedback that can come across as overgeneralized, perplexing, and judgmental (Caulk, 1994). To illustrate this, Caulk (1994) found that 89% of the comments made by the reviewers in his class were useful in helping their peer partners to improve their writing, he also found very little damaging advice given by their peer partners. Interestingly, he also found that 60% of the students in his class had made suggestions that he did not consider when reviewing the papers himself.

In summary, as a result of writing for a real audience; engaging with the writing process at a deeper more cognitive level; and receiving detailed and supportive advice from their peers, it can be suggested that peer review activities have numerous benefits for helping learners to develop into better writers.

Difficulties of implementing peer review activities

The studies outlined above exhort the benefits of peer review activities. However, much research points to the difficulties of implementing these activities in language classrooms. Firstly, despite the finding mentioned previously, which suggested that the majority of advice provided by peer reviewers is of high quality, there is also evidence that reports contradictory findings. For example, a study conducted by Connor and Asenavage (1994) found that only 5% of suggestions made by their peers

actually made their way into the writer's subsequent drafts. Other studies have indicated that some students often struggle to give meaningful comments as they lack the knowledge to identify valid issues with their peer's work (Leki, 1990; Lockhart & Ng, 1993; Tsui & Ng, 2000). This results in cursory or so called 'rubber stamp' advice which is of little use (Stanley, 1992). Consequently, it is widely agreed that in order for peer review activities to be successful, learners must first engage in extensive training activities to learn how to identify issues when reviewing a composition, how to give meaningful comments and how to engage with their peer effectively when discussing their review (Stanley, 1992; McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1998; Berg, 1999; Paulus 1999, Min, 2005; Rollinson, 2005; Saito, 2008).

The second obstacle to the effective implementation of peer review activities is the perceptions of the students. Students may lack trust in their peer's comments. Several studies have found that students often have a preference to receive feedback from their teacher whose feedback they perceived to be more authoritative (Sengupta, 1995; Zhang, 1999; Tsui & Ng, 2000). Moreover, there is evidence that some students can find the act of criticizing their peers work and having their own work scrutinized by their peers an uncomfortable experience, which risks having detrimental on their confidence and motivation (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Liu & Sadler, 2003). This seems to be an issue, particularly in EFL contexts. (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Hu, 2002; Levine et al, 2002; Min, 2005). For instance, a study by Levine et al (2002) found that Israeli students in an EFL context tended to write briefer comments and reported a low level of satisfaction with the activity compared with their counterparts studying in an ESL context in the US. In addition, several studies have reported apprehension to peer review activities in Confucian cultures wherein students may be reluctant to be critical of their peers work in order to maintain group harmony, and have a tendency to highly value feedback of teachers over that of their peers (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Hu, 2002; Rollinson 2005). As a result, it has been strongly suggested that instructors should try to raise awareness of the benefits of peer review; provide demonstrations of peer review comments and use non-threatening practice activities; and provide close support to the peer review groups with any issues they might have so that their students can better understand what is expected and develop more positive attitudes toward the activity (Jacobs et al, 1998; Hu, 2005; Rollinson, 2005).

The final complication is the significant amount of class time that it takes to conduct peer review activities. As has been mentioned above, in order for peer review activities to be successful, it is recommended that students engage in extensive preparation and training activities. For example, Min (2005) conducted 4 hours of in-class modeling and demonstration activities to prepare her students for peer review as part of her study. This commitment of classroom time may not be feasible within the constraints of many learning programs (Rollinson, 2005).

To summarize, in order for benefits of peer review to be fully realized, a great deal of care must be taken to address the possible difficulties that both students and teacher might encounter. Training activities should be provided so that students can understand how to effectively review their peer's writing; instructors should raise their students' awareness to the benefits of peer review and provide support to their students to engender a positive attitude to peer review activities; and teachers should organize their learning programs to provide ample time for these preparation activities.

Thesis statement

Given the benefits and difficulties of using peer review activities outlined above, this study explored the attitudes toward peer review of a group of students in an advanced academic reading

and writing class at a Japanese University. After undergoing training and then reviewing their peers work, the students completed a questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire was to (1) investigate how effectively the students felt they could review their partners report and whether the students felt they learnt anything themselves from reviewing their partner's work and (2) how useful the students felt the comments they received were for improving their reports.

Methodology

Participants & Writing project overview

The participants in this study consisted of 20 freshman students enrolled in an Advanced English program at Rikkyo University Niiza Campus, Japan. The Advanced English program is an advanced skills based course that aims to prepare students for transition into an international academic environment. This study was conducted during the spring semester of the program, which focuses on developing academic reading and writing skills, and it should be noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic all classes were held online via the Zoom web conferencing platform. During this semester, the students complete two writing projects which take the students through the academic writing process. This study focused on the first writing project. In this project, students had to write a persuasive essay on a topic of their choice. The students first researched information on the background of their topic and researched three distinctive ideas as to why their topic is interesting, with an aim to persuading the reader of their report to become interested in their topic too. From their research, the students then created an outline for their report and then were given instruction on how to construct each paragraph of their essay, including; one background paragraph with citations; one body paragraph for each of their three main ideas with citations; a conclusion paragraph; and a references section. Once their first draft was completed, the students then prepared for the peer review activity.

Peer Review procedure

The peer review activity consisted of three 100-minute classroom sessions. As was mentioned in the literature review, without adequate training, students with little experience of peer review activities can encounter many difficulties (Stanley, 1992; McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1998; Berg, 1999; Paulus 1999, Min, 2005; Rollinson, 2005; Saito, 2008), and of the 17 students who completed the questionnaire, only 3 had done any form of peer review before. Therefore, the first session, consisted of peer review training activities. The training started with an awareness raising activity, sometimes referred to as the 'propaganda phase' of peer review training (Rollinson, 2005). Here the students discussed what they thought the possible difficulties and benefits of doing peer review would be. Consistent with the literature outlined earlier, many students were worried that their linguistic level was not sufficient to correct their partners work and that they may not be able to understand the ideas in their partner's reports. At this point, as has been suggested in numerous studies, the students were instructed that their role is not so much to correct their partners paper. Rather, they should focus their attention primarily on the reviewing the structural elements that were covered in class, and the development of the ideas in their partner's report rather than correcting lexical mistakes (Leki, 1990; Stanley, 1992; Min, 2005). As for the benefits possible of peer review, ideas from the students quite naturally tended to focus on how they could receive

comments that might help to improve their report. At this point, the instructor tried to raise the students' awareness to the fact that peer review is a two-way-street and that the reviewer can also gain much from the reviewing process, such as reflecting more deeply as to what constitutes a good paragraph and possibly even picking up useful ideas that the reviewer used to improve their own composition of the paragraphs in their own reports (McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Berg, 1999; Rollinson, 2005; Saito, 2008).

After completing the awareness-raising activities the students then completed a practice activity where students worked in groups to analyze and review a sample paragraph that had deliberate deficiencies for the students to find (Hu 2005, Rollinson 2005). The students first analyzed whether the structural elements of the paragraph were present and then look at the content of the ideas to see if any improvements could be suggested. In addition to providing critical advice to improve the paragraphs, students were also encouraged to give positive comments as to what they felt to be the strengths of paragraph. Students were also asked if they could find any grammatical or lexical corrections in the language, as there has been some evidence that giving form and content feedback at the same time does not have an adverse effect on student revision (Ashwell, 2000). However, it was reinforced that students should chiefly attend to commenting on the structural aspects and the content of the paragraph and that it was fine if they made no comments on form at all.

After completing the training in the first classroom session, the students were given until the next classroom session to get their reports ready for review. In the second session, the students were put into pairs randomly to do the peer review as previous research has recommended that working in pairs is more comfortable for the students and also allows more opportunity for detailed discussion than larger groups (Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Paulus, 1999). The initial plan for the second session was that the peer review partners would first briefly present their reports paper to each other orally and then spend the first half of the 100-minute session individually reviewing their partner's paper using a specially designed review sheet, similar to the one they used for the training exercise (see Appendix A for a copy of the review sheet). Then they would spend the second half of the session discussing their comments together. However, after checking in with the students at the halfway point, it was clear that the students needed significantly more time for review their partner's reports. Therefore, the decision was made to extend the time to review until the end of the class, and then the students were given until the next classroom session to complete their reviews. In the final classroom session, the students joined with their review partners to discuss the comments that they made on their review sheets. While the students were discussing, the instructor checked in with each group periodically to address any questions and give assistance. After concluding their discussions, the students were then given time to make amendments to their drafts based on the comments given by their peers, after which they submitted their updated drafts to the instructor and complete a questionnaire on their experiences with the peer review activity.

Questionnaire & Analysis

Once the peer review activities were concluded, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire with questions relating to their experience with the peer review activity. Out of the 20 students in the class, 17 students completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire employed a mixed methods approach, using Likert questions to gather statistical information on the student's experiences in the peer review activity and open ended questions to gather more detailed qualitative data on the student's experiences in the peer review activities. These results were then analyzed to

find trends in the student’s responses. A copy of the questionnaire form adapted from the Google Form can be found in Appendix B. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section covered ethical considerations and asked the participants agreement to take part in the study and that they were over 18 years of age. The second section focused on the participant’s experience reviewing their partner’s work. The participants were asked how difficult they found reviewing the structure, content, and language of their partner’s report. They were also asked what they felt was their biggest difficulty with the peer review, as well as how much they felt they learnt themselves from reviewing their partner’s paper. The third section of the questionnaire focused on how useful the participants found the feedback that they received from their peers; asked the participants to rate how useful they found the feedback; asked what they felt was the most useful piece of feedback they received; and asked if they had any suggestions that might improve the peer review activity.

Results & Discussion

This section will report on and discuss the responses given by the participants in the questionnaire. Data from the Likert questions will first be presented and then discussed using responses for the open ended questions and how the results relate to the literature. The implications of these results will be discussed at the end of this section.

Peer reviewing their partner’s paper

In the first section of the questionnaire, the participants answered questions relating their experiences reviewing their partner’s reports. Questions 2-4 asked the participants to rate how difficult they found it to review the structure, content, and language of their partner’s reports on a scale of 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). The results of these questions can be seen in Fig 1 below.

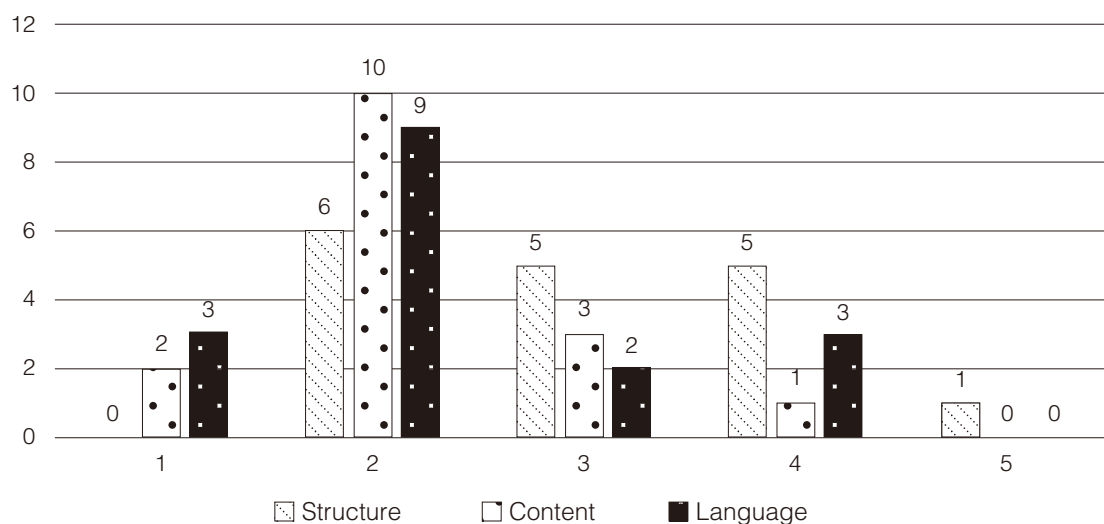


Figure 1. Difficulty the participants felt in reviewing the structure, content, and language of their partner’s report

From these results, we can see that the majority of participants found reviewing the structure of the report the easier of the three criteria, with 11 out of 17 responding 3 or above; 6 responding 2 and no one responding 1. In addition, this was also the only criteria where any participant responded that

they found it very easy (5). These results indicate that even if students have issues with commenting on the content and language of their peer's report they can still provide valuable feedback from checking that all the structural elements are present. On the other hand, the participants found reviewing the content and language of their partner's reports more challenging. With 12 out of 17 respondents reporting that they found it either very difficult (1) or difficult (2) for both criteria.

There were two major themes from the open ended questions that may shed some light on why many of the participants felt this way. First of all, despite a full 100-minute class room session of training on peer review techniques, several of the participants commented that they did not feel that they had the skills to comment confidently on the content of their peer's report. For example:

"It was difficult for me to review the content of my partner's paper. because I didn't know what was the point to correct and how to advice the content"

"Advising about the wording was the difficult part because it was hard for me to express why it looked weird."

"when I read the partner's one, I couldn't understand the meaning of the contents, and tell her it is a little difficult to understand so put it the detail more. then she asked me what contents should I put? but I couldn't answer clearly. I can feel its writing is difficult to read but tell how to improve the contents is very difficult for me even I know some tip from teacher."

"I feel guilty when I don't think the report is that good, but it doesn't come up with any useful suggestions. And I don't know how to make my language more friendly".

This supports the idea from the literature that extensive training is necessary for students to gain the skills and confidence to give meaningful comments on their partner's work (Stanley, 1992; McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1998; Berg, 1999; Paulus 1999, Min, 2005; Rollinson, 2005; Saito, 2008).

Second, several of the participants felt that the proficiency level of their partner's report was "too good", so they could not find anything to comment on, and their own proficiency level was not good enough to comment on their partner's report. For example:

"Because there was a good article in front of me, it was little difficult to find poor things."

"Giving good advices, because my partner had a good report and little to say about its content"

"My friend's report looked really good, so it was little bit hard for me to find what sentence to improve on her report"

"There was perfect paragraph so I was supposed to say advice but it was hard to find the advice it is difficult for me that I find some points to fix about my partner's report"

"Giving advice was so difficult, because my partner was so excellent."

"Making comments was the most difficult because I didn't have confidence about my English skill"

and I didn't know much about other's topic. Also, I was concerned about whether I misunderstood other's concept."

There were also other comments that students of higher proficiency felt uncomfortable about making critical comments of their partner's report.

"The balance of good comments and improvement points [was difficult] because if there are more improvement points it is good for my partner but I think he or she might lose his or her confidence."

As for what might account for these comments, one possible explanation might be that students in the Advanced English program are selected based on a TOEIC placement test, which only tests the students' receptive reading and listening skills. This means that students in the advanced English program can vary quite widely in their productive spoken and written skills. In fact, observing the work the students were producing whilst composing their first drafts, the proficiency gap between some of the students was quite apparent, which might account for the comments above. Unfortunately, it is hard to find any studies that focus on conducting peer review activities with student of differing proficiency levels, so it is difficult to connect these findings with the literature.

Question 6 of the questionnaire, asked the participants whether they felt that they could learn anything themselves from reviewing their partner's report on a scale of 1 (nothing at all) to 5 (very much). The results of this questions can be seen in Fig 2 below.

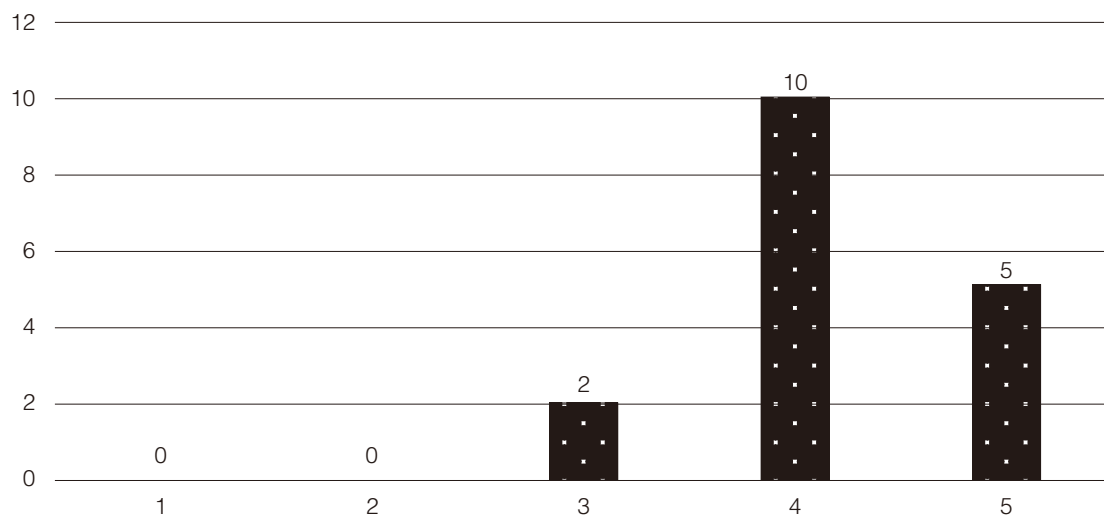


Figure 2. How much did you learn from reviewing your partner's paper?

From these results, we can see that despite the difficulties that many of the students reported feeling in reviewing their partner's report, the vast majority of the of the participants responded that they were able to learn something from the reviewing process, with 10 out of 17 responding 4 and 5 responding the maximum 5. This is interesting as it suggests that the participants felt they were able to gain a lot more out of the peer review activity themselves than they were able to give to their partners, which in turn indicates that the message of peer review activities being a two-way-street as supported in the literature was successfully received by the participants (McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Berg, 1999; Rollinson, 2005; Saito, 2008).

Again there were two prevalent themes in the open-ended responses that help to illuminate these results. Firstly, many participants felt that they could learn various aspects of structure, content, and language from reviewing their partner's reports that they could transfer to their own reports. For example:

"It was very easy to read her essay like her [construction of] body paragraphs were well connected."

"My partner was used a lot of citations, so I learned that how to use citation like her."

"I learned the languages such as good vocabulary and sentence, and the importance of using details, especially the numbers."

"The way my friends used the phrases was great, so I want to utilize them next time."

"I could learn a lot of good vocabularies I couldn't come up with"

These quotes were interesting as many of these points, such as use of citations and how to structure a body paragraph, were covered in the classroom when they were composing their first drafts. This supports idea from the literature that peer feedback can often be perceived as more sympathetic and specific than teacher feedback that can come across as overgeneralized, perplexing, and judgmental (Caulk, 1994). More interestingly, there were several comments that indicated that students were engaging in a deeper level of self-reflection. For example:

"I could find not only my partner's good and bad point but also mine. It was very valuable for me"

"I could see from her report that there was interest and enthusiasm for the topic, which I lacked"

"This was my first time reading other's personal writing, so I could know that there are many patterns in writing reports."

"Because my partner's topic was the thing I never learned of, everything was new for me and her English and writing skill was enough for me to learn about that topic"

These comments were very interesting to see as they tie in very closely with the ideas exhorted by Vygotskyian sociocultural and social interactionist theory that the social interaction through peer review activities not only allows the writer to improve the quality of their compositions, but also develop the cognitive skills to become fundamentally more competent and autonomous writers (Villamil & de Guerrero 1996; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Rollinson 2005).

Receiving feedback from their peers

The second section of the questionnaire focused on how useful the participants felt the feedback that they received from their peer review partner was for improving their reports. Question 8 of the questionnaire asked students to rate how useful they found the feedback they received on a scale of 1 (not useful at all) to 5 (very useful). The results of this questions can be seen in Fig 3 below.

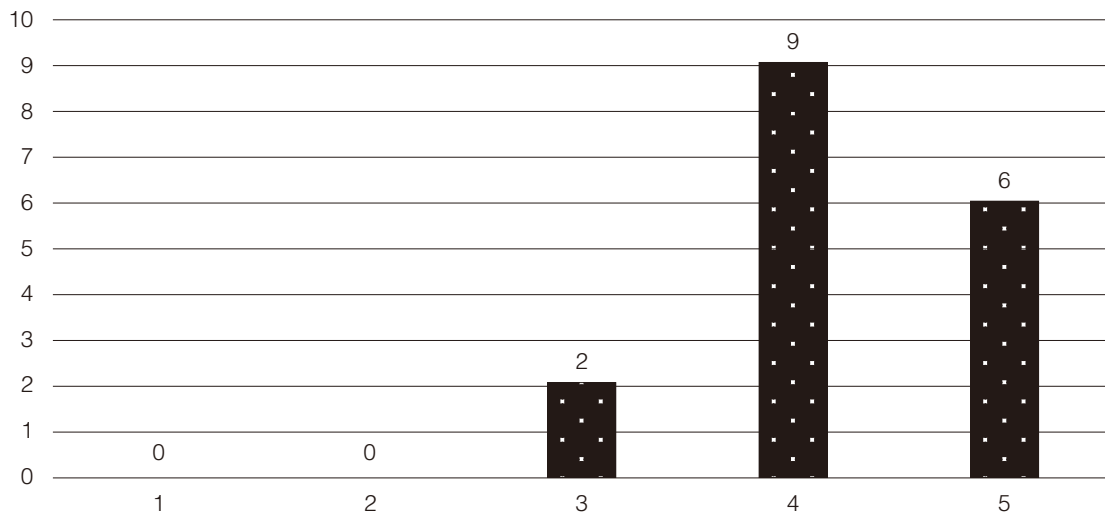


Figure 3. How useful was the feedback you received from your peer review?

Again, it was very interesting to see that despite many of the participants reporting that they found it difficult to review and make comments on their partner’s papers, the overwhelming majority of the respondents found the feedback they received to be useful with 9 of 17 responding 4, and 6 responding the maximum 5. These results reinforce the idea that the students may have underestimated their ability to comment on their partner’s paper and they were, in fact, able to give better comments than they thought.

The response to the open ended question revealed two themes as to what the students found useful from the comments they received from their peers. Firstly, many quite naturally commented that the comments they received were useful to help them make improvements to the structure, content and language of their paragraphs. For example:

“About the topic sentence because I completely forgot about it”

“Adding citations to all of the paragraphs not just writing with my knowledge I already have”

“The content of the report suddenly turned negative, so I think it is better to write more introductions”

“In the feedback, I was suggested to add some specific numbers and that was useful to make my report more persuading.”

“Make more long and complex sentence. Because I realized that I was not using skills for writing good sentences like using adjectives and relative pronouns.”

As was mentioned before, all of these points were covered comprehensively in class activities when the teacher instructed the students on how to compose their first drafts. However, through talking with their peers these aspects seemed to become more apparent. This further reinforces the assertion from the literature review the peer comments have the power to be more impactful than teacher comments that may feel more distant (Caulk 1994). Moreover, the students also gave many comments that the feedback they received helped them to gain a better appreciation of the reader’s perspective of their ideas. For example:

“My partner advised me from different viewpoint from mine. And, I can learn which is easy and difficult for others to understand.”

“When I finished my report, I thought that it was perfect and nothing to change, but I don’t know as a reader, what do they think about it or is there anything hard to read.”

“The feedback about some sentences that my partner didn’t understand was the most useful. because I could know that I could understand it myself, but others couldn’t.”

“I think the most useful thing for me is which parts of the report are interesting, because I just want to get the word count.”

These comments were fascinating because this corresponds with many studies that claim that peer review activities encourage the writer to consider and compose their writing with the needs of their audience in mind, which helps to make writing assignments more meaningful than assignments that are reviewed solely by the instructor (Stanley, 1992; Berg, 1999; Hu, 2005; Rollinson 2005). Particularly, the comment *“I think the most useful thing for me is which parts of the report are interesting, because I just want to get the word count”* strongly indicates that through talking about their report with their peer, this student’s attitude toward their composition had changed from being merely a required assignment for their class, to viewing their report as a meaningful piece of writing.

Implications for the future peer review activities

The results from the questionnaire have raised some implications for how the author will conduct review activities in future classes. Firstly, it seems that a single 100-min classroom session of training activities seems insufficient to prepare the students for peer review activities. This was reflected in the responses to the final question of the questionnaire where students were asked how they felt their peer review experience could be improved. For example

“I thought I need know how to write report well before doing peer review otherwise I couldn’t reply his or her report with confidence.”

“Trying to give more detailed advices for the partner.”

“I don’t have enough information to do peer reviewing so that makes me difficult”

“practicing to put my opinion into words by discussing even the smallest things”

However, trying to find the time to conduct more training activities in an already busy syllabus is a challenge. In addition, students also reported, somewhat contradictorily, that they found the comments they received to be very useful. Therefore, without a frame of reference of what constituted useful feedback, it may be the case that the students did not realize that the feedback that they were giving was actually much better that they thought. This follows the literature that students particularly in EFL contexts tend to find critiquing their partner’s work an uncomfortable experience (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Hu, 2002; Levine et al, 2002; Min, 2005). Moreover, 14 out of the 17 respondents

reported this was their first time to do peer review activities; their lack of confidence may simply be a result of their lack of experience and this lack of confidence may correct itself naturally as student gain more experience with peer review in subsequent writing projects.

This being said, it is useful to find whatever ways possible to make the student's peer review experience more positive. One possible solution is to not only rely on one dedicated training session to prepare students for peer review, but to incorporate reviewing practice activities into other lessons in the syllabus too. For example, when teaching students how to write an introduction, the instructor could have students review and comment on a sample paragraph. This would not only give students some experience of reviewing paragraphs before the peer review training session, but may have the added benefit of being an effective and learner-focused way to have student learn about what constitutes a good paragraph. Another idea could be to share the results of this study, during the 'propaganda phase' of the peer review training. This may help to raise awareness to the fact that the comments they make may be more useful than they realize and that the purpose of peer review is not so much to correct every aspect their partner's report but to engage their peer in discussion to find out where improvements might be made collaboratively (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhu, 2001; Hu 2006).

Finally, another important implication of these results is the need to deal with group dynamics and proficiency differences within the peer partner groups. Several of the participants mentioned that their partner's papers were so well written that it was difficult to find anything to comment on. Some also felt uncomfortable about being overly critical of their partners reports when they found many issues. It is difficult to say for sure that differences in proficiency were responsible for these comments. However, if this is the cause of the issue, then it may be useful for the instructor to view students' drafts before the peer review activity, and then pair students of similar proficiency level together. However, It has been commented that this may deny the opportunity for students of lower-proficiency the chance to learn from reviewing a report of higher proficiency (Hu, 2005).

Moreover, some students commented that it would be helpful to have time to get to know their partners better before reviewing their report.

"If I become more friendly with partner, it will be very helpful for us"

"The balance of good comments and improvement points because if there are more improvement points it is good for my partner but I think he or she might lose his or her confidence. It depends on people's personality but I didn't know my partner well. So, that was the most difficult thing for me."

This problem was exacerbated by the fact that all classed at the university were being held online via the Zoom web-conferencing platform due to the global COVID-19 pandemic at the time of this study, so students had little opportunity to talk with their classmates and naturally build interpersonal relationships with each other outside of class during the semester. It was suggested to the students that the peer review partners try to meet outside of class via Zoom so that they could get to know each other better, but it is hard to know how many groups actually did this. One idea is to try to find some class time to incorporate ice breaker activities into the peer review training sessions so that students have the opportunity to build some rapport with their partners. Another idea, could be to allow students to form their own groups. However, as mentioned above, there is some evidence that in these situations students of similar proficiency tend to form pairs among themselves, which results in less proficient writers losing the chance to benefit from viewing the work of students with better writing skills (Hu 2005). This is not an easy problem to solve, and there seem to be few

detailed studies that deal with this issue in the literature. However, it will be interesting to look more into how to develop better relationships between peer review partners and experiment with different techniques in future peer review activities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the post-activity questionnaire reflected a lot of the benefits purported in the literature. There was evidence that the participants felt they were able to receive useful feedback from their peers to improve their reports. Furthermore, there were also indications that through engaging with their partners, some were able to gain a sense of audience awareness, which made their assignment more meaningful and also reflect more fundamentally on the writing process as a whole. This reinforces the notion that peer review activities are a two-way-street, where students not only provide advice to their partners but can also gain a lot themselves through the reviewing process. However, some of the common difficulties associated with implementing peer review activities were also present in the results. Many of the participants reported that they did not feel confident and found it difficult to make comments on the ideas in their partner's reports, supporting the assertion in the literature that students need extensive training before engaging in peer review activities. In addition, there were indications that differing proficiency levels between the partners was also causing some issues with lower-proficiency partners struggling to find points comment on their partner's papers and higher-proficiency students worrying that they might hurt their partner's feelings if they were too critical. Therefore, care should be taken to make sure that peer review partners can build rapport and feel comfortable with reviewing each other's work. To conclude, the results of this exploratory study leave this author with no doubt that peer review activities hold great value for improving students' writing skills in a multitude of respects, and I look forward to experimenting more with these activities in future writing classes.

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Appendix A – Peer review form

Introduction		
Starts with an EFFECTIVE hook	O / △ / X	Good points Advice
Contains DETAILED Background information with CITATIONS	O / △ / X	
Contains a CLEAR thesis statement	O / △ / X	
Body 1		
Contains a CLEAR Topic sentence	O / △ / X	Good points Advice
Contains DETAILED reasons and examples to support the ideas with CITATIONS	O / △ / X	
Contains a GOOD Concluding sentence	O / △ / X	
Body 2		
Contains a CLEAR Topic sentence	O / △ / X	Good points Advice
Contains DETAILED reasons and examples to support the ideas with CITATIONS	O / △ / X	
Contains a GOOD Concluding sentence	O / △ / X	
Body 3		
Contains a CLEAR Topic sentence	O / △ / X	Good points Advice
Contains DETAILED reasons and examples to support the ideas with CITATIONS	O / △ / X	
Contains a GOOD Concluding sentence	O / △ / X	
Conclusion		
Restates the thesis in DIFFERENT words	O / △ / X	Good points Advice
Summarizes the main ideas in DIFFERENT words	O / △ / X	
Ends with a POWERFUL final message	O / △ / X	
References		
All citations are Referenced at the bottom	O / △ / X	Advice
References are written CORRECTLY	O / △ / X	

Appendix B – Questionnaire form adapted from the online Google form Peer review feedback form

I am currently writing a research paper on the peer review activity we conducted in your Advanced English 1 class, and I would like to collect some feedback from you about the review. I would greatly appreciate it if you could answer a few questions on your experiences in the peer review activity, and could you please provide as much detail as possible on the questions where you have to write an answer.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time. No personal information will be collected and your responses will be anonymous. In addition, your answers to these questions will have no effect on your grades.

If you would like to ask me any questions about this research, please contact me at xxx@rikkyo.ac.jp. if you would like to ask questions to someone else about this research, please contact the head of Journals and Research, Prof. Richard J Sampson, at xxx@rikkyo.ac.jp

Do you understand the content of the research, and give your consent for your responses being used in an academic research paper?

- Yes
- No

Are you over 18 years old? (students under the age of 18 cannot take part in the study)

- Yes
- No

Did you take part in the peer review activity (those who answer no cannot take part in this study)

- Yes
- No

Peer reviewing your partner's paper

1) Have you ever done a peer review before this class?

- Yes
- No

2) How difficult was it for you to peer review the STRUCTURE of your partner's paper

Very Difficult 1 2 3 4 5 Very Easy

3) How difficult was it for you to peer review the CONTENT of your partner's paper

Very Difficult 1 2 3 4 5 Very Easy

4) How difficult was it for you to peer review the LANGUAGE of your partner's paper
Very Difficult 1 2 3 4 5 Very Easy

5) What was the biggest difficulty you faced in the peer review activity and why?

6) How much did you learn from reviewing your partner's paper?
Nothing at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much

7) Please explain your answer to question 6

Receiving feedback from your peer

8) How useful was the feedback you received from your peer review?
Not useful at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very useful

9) Please explain your answer to 8

10) What was the most useful piece of feedback that you received and why?

11) How could your peer review experience be improved? (Please make at least one suggestion)