Student perceptions of electronic peer feedback in the EFL writing classroom

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This paper

- gives an overview of the main tenets of using electronic peer feedback in the EFL writing classroom;
- reports on the first phase of a larger study investigating the usefulness of electronic peer feedback to enhance student writing;
- provides insights into student views on their experience with electronic peer feedback;
- makes suggestions for teachers who are planning to use electronic peer feedback in their own classroom.

1. Rationale

Despite the fact that a great number of EFL teachers are aware of the benefits of approaching writing as a process involving various drafts, they might find themselves avoiding draft assignments owing to the heavy workload they already face. As a consequence, they design assignments as single drafts and provide only one round of corrective feedback for final assessment purposes. One possible solution to this dilemma can be the implementation of peer feedback activities. This approach, which is also commonly referred to as peer review, peer editing or peer response (e.g. Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), generally involves students commenting on each other's work.

An increasing body of research (e.g. Berg, 1999; Cho, Schunn & Wilson, 2006) supports the view that peer review not only reduces the EFL writing teachers' workload, but can also improve student writing as peer reviewers tend to

- use language that is more comprehensible to their own peers;
- respond to the writing as readers, providing a supportive writing and reading community;
- provide feedback from multiple readers, which allows for comparison;
- assign ratings with adequate reliability and validity similar to expert ratings if the peer reviewers are given training with the evaluation rubric.

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Despite these benefits students are sometimes wary of peer review, particularly in an EFL context, as many view their peers' comments as a poor substitute to teacher feedback, due to their perception of the teacher's authority and status in comparison to that of their peers (Kietlinksa, 2006). This negative view, however, is generally not supported by empirical findings. A number of studies have shown that peer review comments, even in an EFL context, are frequently more accurate than students recognize (Wang, 2009; Cho, Schunn & Wilson, 2006).

Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of peer review is found on the affective level. Most importantly, students gain confidence in their own work by being able to measure their skills against their peers. Being given the opportunity to read the work of their classmates, learners are often happy to confirm that their own skills generally match the level of the collective group (cf. Lundstrom & Baker, 2008). Such confirmation can reduce overall anxiety in writing and thereby create a productive learning environment. In addition, by having an authentic audience of readers, students develop an emotional sense of both text ownership and of belonging to a classroom community which inspires writing motivation (cf. Kietlinska, 2006; Tsui, 2000; Jacobs et al 1998; Byrd, 2003).

In the last 20 years, developments in computer-mediated peer-editing tools have brought to the fore a range of new opportunities for EFL writing pedagogy. Chen (2016) in her meta analysis of technology-supported peer feedback in EFL writing classes points out that students giving peer feedback electronically tend to

- stay focused and on-task more than in face-to-face scenarios;
- participate more equally when communicating digitally;
- resort to more lexically complex constructions and more formal, precise communication when compared to face-to-face editing sessions;
- can look back at their peers' comments later at home when they are in the revising stage;
- feel less inhibited critiquing each other's work.

However, working with digital peer review is not all rosy. In this respect, Chen also reports that the biggest frustrations for students and teachers with e-feedback are unexpected tech problems and slow or no connection to the internet. In addition, some students see the online peer review process as an unnecessary chore which is more time-consuming than traditional in-class peer review. Finally, it seems that although students like e-feedback formats, they miss oral communication for clarification and interaction and would ideally prefer to use both channels of feedback: digital and face-to-face. Nevertheless, most researchers seem to agree that carefully designed, teacher-guided peer review activities can generate added value in terms of both writing skills and writing confidence for EFL students.

2. Research questions

The synthesis of the literature on EFL peer feedback and computer-mediated peer review leads us to conclude that there is clear merit in using digital peer review in EFL writing classes. By exploring the potential of combining peer feedback with modern technology to improve student writing in the EFL classroom, we decided to investigate the effectiveness of electronic peer feedback in our own classrooms. This study reports on the initial phase of a larger project on the use of electronic peer feedback in tertiary EFL writing classes. The research questions this paper seeks to address are the following:

RQ1

> How useful do students consider electronic peer feedback?

RQ2

> Where do students see the advantages and disadvantages of electronic peer feedback?

3. Study description and methodology

Drawing on a mixed-method approach in the context of action research (cf. Ivankova & Wingo, 2018), both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to answer these questions. This initial part of a larger study in progress was carried out in the winter term 2017/18 at the department of English and American studies of the University of Vienna. We used the e-learning platform Moodle and its Workshop tool for electronic peer feedback in their EFL tertiary-level writing classes (groups A and B). All the participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the Bachelor's program. Their English language level was expected to correspond to C1 or above according to the CEFR. Both groups had to write a text transformation, a common exercise within the genre-based approach of teaching writing to increase the learners' awareness of generic conventions (Caudery, 1998). The students in group A had to transform a product review into an internal proposal memo and group B was told to turn a scientific research article into a popular science magazine article.

Table 1: Overview of the two participating groups

	Group A	Group B
Language competence (CEFR)	C1 or above	
Target text	Internal proposal memo	Popular science magazine article
Number of students	31	28
Planned feedback process	Each student gives feedback to 2 peers and receives feedback from 2 peers.	
E-feedback tool	Moodle Workshop	

All the students were informed about the use of the Moodle Workshop tool in class and were also provided with detailed further instructions on the respective Moodle pages. This tool involves three phases:

Phase 1: Students upload their draft assignment onto Moodle according to a set deadline.

Phase 2: Students are then randomly allocated peers' assignments to review. Teachers can set the number of drafts to review, the length of time to provide feedback, and whether the reviewer remains anonymous or not. Teachers also create a number of prompts to guide the reviewer, such as broad evaluative prompts: "Which section of this paper is the strongest? Which is the weakest? Why?" to more specific prompts targeting writing skills addressed in class: "Are the points linked logically and with signposting?" As the reviewer reads their peers' papers, they fill in text boxes on Moodle, thereby responding to these teacher-guided prompts.

Phase 3: The feedback is sent to the original student author. Students are then given a time frame to revise their work and submit a final draft.

Our research then surveyed the students after the feedback activity. All the students were requested to fill in a short questionnaire on their experience. In total, 31 students from group A and 28 students from group B responded. The survey included scaled questions, numerical ratings and open questions that allowed for more nuanced responses.

It has to be noted here that due to technical issues Group B only gave feedback without receiving any. This glitch was due to the teacher failing to enact the final switch to be done manually in Moodle. This means that although the students in Group B had a chance to look at two other colleagues' papers, they did not receive any feedback on their own work. However, for our study this limitation generated insightful findings as we were able to compare the two groups' experiences.

4. Findings

4.1. How useful do students consider Moodle electronic peer feedback?

To address the first research question, i.e. the usefulness of electronic peer feedback, we extracted relevant data from the participants' questionnaires. Accordingly, question 1 on the survey asked the learners to rate their experience with the Moodle Workshop tool on a scale from (1) highly useful to (5) not at all useful. Figure 1 illustrates the results obtained for this item from group A.

Figure 1: Group A - Usefulness of electronic peer feedback
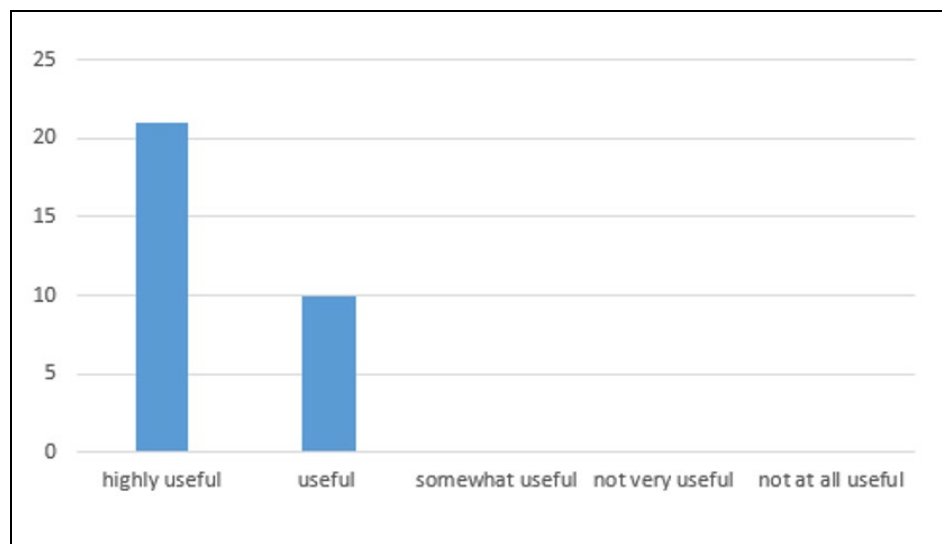
As Figure 1 shows very convincingly, all the participants in group A found the electronic peer feedback either highly useful (N=21) or useful (N=10). Figure 2 displays the results obtained from group B:

Fig. 2 Group B – Usefulness of electronic peer feedback
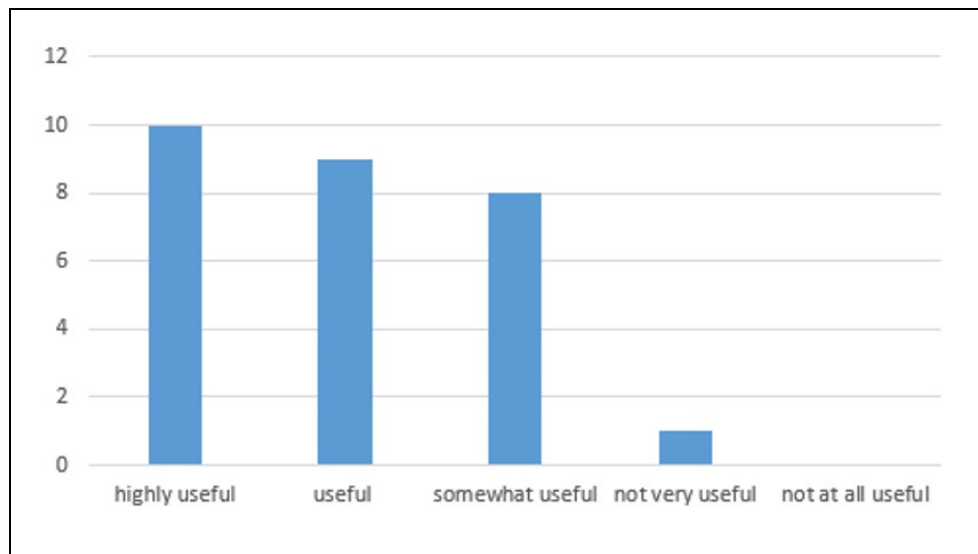
In contrast to Group A, the results collected from group B show a more diverse picture with 10 students describing their experience as highly useful, 9 as useful, 8 as somewhat useful and 1 as not very useful. As described earlier, the learners in group B only gave feedback without receiving any due to technical issues. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that despite the absence of comments on their own work, the students to a large extent still found the activity beneficial.

4.2. What advantages and disadvantages do students experience using Moodle Workshop peer review?

The second research question addressed in this study relates to the benefits and drawbacks of electronic peer feedback from the point of view of the participants. In this respect, the advantage most frequently identified by the students was that they developed higher order editing and revision skills by reading their peers' texts, which then led to what they perceived to be positive revisions in their own text:

> *I consider giving feedback even more helpful. I think I gained more from giving feedback than from receiving it because I 'learnt' how to really read a text when you want to improve it – I could apply what I learnt when I edited my own work. (B3)*

This is a result confirmed by previous research which surprisingly shows that students benefit more by giving feedback than by receiving it (Lundstrom & Baker, 2008). In particular, they appreciated the fact that they could review two papers rather than one.

Secondly, the type of feedback they received from their colleagues was described as "professionally guided" (by the teachers), "anonymous", "objective", "focused" and – perhaps most importantly – "easy to understand". For instance, one student reported that she felt the Moodle electronic feedback allowed for a

> *[m]ore relaxed kind of feedback in a way that students understand each other and use a simpler way of explaining things and are somehow on the same level in that*

> *they make similar mistakes, therefore, know what they did in order to improve it, and then share that knowledge. (B18)*

The third most frequently mentioned aspect refers to the idea of flexible time management. Digital feedback does not take up any extra class time and the students can give feedback when they want, where they want and without time pressure:

> *One advantage is the fact that you can give the feedback at home via your laptop over a cup of coffee which makes the whole thing more relaxed compared to giving feedback during the lesson where you have to come up with good arguments and suggestions for improvement within 5 min or so. At home you can take your time and reread passages to check meaning etc. (A29)*

A number of students also commented on an increased sense of community by realizing that other students are not perfect, either. On the contrary, they felt that they can truly help their colleagues improve their writing.

While most students in our study reported that they found using the Moodle Workshop peer review tool as 'useful', a small number of students evaluated the activity as only 'somewhat useful' or even 'not very useful'. These students highlighted core disadvantages which can grouped into four categories:

As far as the disadvantages are concerned, a small number of participants (who felt that their experience with the Moodle tool was somewhat useful, or not very useful) reported the following reasons, which can be grouped into four different categories:

- technical problems ("complicated usage")
- time-management ("too time-consuming", "too many prompts")
- lack of two-way communication ("no chat function")
- low quality of feedback ("some students took it more seriously than others")

5. Discussion and implications for teachers

The main findings of the study show that students by and large found the electronic peer feedback beneficial. Even when there were technical problems, as in the case of group B, the participants still ranked the activity as useful. This demonstrates that the online tool generally facilitates a positive peer review experience. Clearly, this should encourage teachers to experiment with online peer feedback tools as an alternative to in-class face-to-face peer review.

In addition, students affirmed that engaging in peer review helped them revise their own assignments and submit what they perceived as higher quality work. Not only did they appreciate receiving feedback from multiple readers rather than one teacher, but also the comments were written from peers to peers in language that students understand. This means that in using Moodle Workshop, with proper guidance, we can generally expect positive revision outcomes.

Furthermore, the very act of reviewing in itself seemed to improve our students' understanding of good writing. Many of our participants stated that after reviewing their classmates' work, they went back to their own assignment with fresh eyes and did some additional editing, even before receiving any feedback.

A further finding is that the flexibility of the electronic peer feedback tool is one of its primary advantages over face-to-face peer review in the classroom. Our students appreciated working outside of class, according to their own schedule and location. The implication is that this type of feedback opens up class time for other activities while simultaneously allowing students the time and space they need to comfortably give quality feedback.

In a nutshell, the findings of this part of our study ostensibly show that the majority of the students in our project appreciated being given the opportunity to provide and receive electronic feedback. As has been demonstrated, the benefits outlined in this paper clearly outweigh the disadvantages and therefore we would like to encourage EFL writing teachers to try electronic peer review not only as a means to reduce their own workload but also as a means to increase their students' motivation to engage further in the editing process.

Without doubt, further research is necessary to substantiate the perception expressed by many of the participants in this study according to which electronic peer feedback indeed leads to better writing outcomes. The question whether this is in fact the case or not will be investigated in the next phase of our project, alongside the effective design of peer review prompts. Our final aim is to create guidelines for teachers in using Moodle Workshop grounded in pedagogical research.

Our tips
- Experiment with electronic peer feedback tools – but get help from experts (e.g. from Moodle experts, video tutorials, handbooks).
- Guide your students carefully along the way and provide enough support.
- Be prepared for technical problems – especially the first time.
- Remember that multiple feedback is more useful than feedback from one reviewer.

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