

Investigating the impact of peer feedback on the writing performance of EFL learners

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This Action Research (AR) report provides

- an overview of existing findings on the relevance and positive effects of peer feedback;
- practical recommendations for the successful initiation of peer feedback in the classroom;
- results from an AR project focusing on the impact of peer feedback on EFL learners' writing performance.

1. Rationale and personal relevance

Feedback is an essential part of learning in general and hence also language learning in particular. It provides the basis on which learners can evaluate their language proficiency and their own progress. In traditionally set classrooms, which are teacher-centred, feedback is provided by teachers or other people presumed to be more knowledgeable or proficient than the learner (Marzban & Sarjami, 2014). However, this is not the only option. The concept of peer feedback allows peers, that is individuals who have reached approximately the same level of proficiency, to share their opinions on other learners' performances. Even though several studies on the effectiveness of peer feedback have already been conducted, researchers have not yet reached a consensus on the usefulness of such an approach. While some focus on the advantages peer feedback can have for the learners and their language awareness (cf. Wang, 2014; Sato & Ballinger, 2016; Ciftci & Kocoglu, 2012; Hyland & Hyland, 2006), others emphasise potential pitfalls and negative implications for all parties involved (cf. Saito & Fujita, 2004; Storch, 2004).

Apart from the afore-mentioned relevance of this topic in general and the potential benefits for the learners, which will be discussed later, my interest in peer feedback also arose out of a lack of personal experience. When I was a student in school, peer feedback was not encouraged by my teachers and only very few lecturers at university use this method when teaching. During my FAP (= Fachpraktikum within the BEd programme), I had the opportunity to initiate a peer feedback phase among students. Unfortunately, my practicum ended before I could see the results of this procedure. Hence, my Praxisphase (within the MEd programme) seemed like the perfect occasion to familiarise myself with and experiment with the practice of

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peer feedback. Therefore, one aim of this study was to close the personal gap of knowledge in this field.

2. Investigating the impact of peer feedback

The aim of this research project is to enhance our understanding of the effects peer feedback can have on one specific skill of language learning, namely writing. Writing in particular was chosen because not all skills could be covered within a single study. Moreover, apart from being a skill that is tested in almost all written exams in Austrian schools, including the final written exam before graduation, writing is an essential part of many people's everyday communication, be it in private or professional settings. In particular, the aim of this study is to answer the following research question:

“How does peer feedback impact the writing performance of EFL learners?”

In addition, when originally conducting the project, students' attitudes and opinions towards peer feedback were also investigated. However, due to the limited length of this article, only the findings regarding the impact of peer feedback on students' writing performance can be discussed.

2.1 Existing research and findings on peer feedback

In order to design a meaningful peer feedback intervention, existing literature in this area was consulted to learn more about different approaches towards peer feedback as well as their advantages and potential obstacles.

2.1.1 Peer feedback and learning theories

It seems obvious that feedback aims to promote the development of specific abilities. However, in many cases learners are still provided with comments on their work only after its final stage (Rachmayani, Rifai & Rohadi, 2018, p. 59). Nevertheless, a paradigm shift seems to have taken place. As Hovardas et al. (2014, p. 133) argue, the emphasis has shifted from summative to formative feedback (i.e. giving information on performances) and assessment (i.e. judging performances). Formative assessment, which is usually ungraded is aimed at monitoring learners' current abilities and setting goals for future learning. In contrast, summative assessment evaluates students' performances after a certain period of time, usually by comparing it to set standards (University of Greenwich, 2015). Another difference between these two approaches is that in contrast to summative feedback, where students only receive feedback on their final product, formative feedback is given on several occasions during the preparation process. When focusing on writing, formative feedback means that the authors get comments, for example when they initially plan their writing or on their earlier draft(s). Such an approach would find its theoretical basis in theories like process writing (Wang, 2014, p. 81). In relation to this theory, Seow (2002, p. 316-317) identified several stages such as “planning”, “drafting”, “responding” and “revising” within the writing process. Furthermore, if peers are included in such instances of feedback giving, collaborative learning theory (Wang, 2014, p. 81) as well as a socio-cognitive perspective (Sato & Ballinger, 2016, p. 13) also play an important role. In the latter, the focus lies on the importance of social interaction and communication for successful learning. This means that in order to develop new or improve existing abilities, learners have to interact with other people. When incorporating peer feedback

in the EFL classroom and especially when targeting the development of writing skills, these theories have to be kept in mind.

2.1.2 Benefits and limitations of peer feedback

As Ciftici & Kocoglu (2012, 64) point out, several studies have also questioned the effectiveness of peer feedback due to the uncertain quality and hence usefulness of the students' comments. It was found that in order to overcome this issue, learners have to be explicitly trained in the requirements of giving and receiving peer feedback (Wang, 2014, p. 81). Further factors identified in relation to the effectiveness and success of peer feedback were for example the relationship between the learners (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 86; Sato & Ballinger, 2016, p. 19), cultural backgrounds (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 92) or gender differences (Narciss et al., 2014, p. 72).

One of the aspects undermining peer feedback's success is students' unwillingness to provide their peers with feedback. This is due to the specific nature of the relationship between the learners. Previous studies discovered that peers are often unwilling to give their peers negative feedback because they want to avoid conflicts and are aware of the face-threatening potential of such actions (Sato, 2016, p. 5). As a result, the givers of feedback often employ formulaic expressions in order to reduce the risk of confrontation (Wang, 2014, p. 92-93). Potential examples being "well done" or "very interesting". This habit leads to another issue, namely the uncertainty of the quality of peer feedback. One of the consequences arising from this uncertainty is that some learners might be hesitant when it comes to trusting their peers' comments and incorporating suggestions when editing their written texts (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 91). A third aspect is feedback givers' perceived lack of knowledge which also explains another reason why learners are shy to give feedback (Xu & Yu, 2018, p. 210). Several studies found the perception of this so-called "teacher authority" (i.e. the belief in the superiority of teachers' expertise for giving feedback) (Wang, 2014, p. 81; Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 86) to be a highly influential factor. Even so, teacher feedback was proven to be a potential source of misunderstandings between teachers and learners (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 87) as they can be "vague, inconsistent and authoritarian" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 84).

In general, the incorporation of peer feedback on colleagues' writing tasks was found to benefit both, the giver and the receiver of this feedback. Research highlights the positive effects especially on the giver of feedback, which are found to be even greater than for the receiver (Richter & Smith-Dluha, 2019). Ciftici and Kocoglu (2012) found that peer feedback significantly improved "students' overall writing performance". Students provide each other with linguistic support (Sato & Ballinger, 2016, p. 1), and the authenticity of the writing situation is increased as an audience for the authors' work is created (Ciftici & Kocoglu, 2012, p. 63). In addition, an awareness for the audience's needs is developed (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 90) when students write their own texts, as well as when reviewing their peers'. When reading, their understanding of the reader's wants and expectations deepens, because they find themselves in this position. This experience helps them to consider their audience's needs when writing or editing their future texts. In addition, when learners give feedback on their peers' work, they have most likely done the same task themselves and hence have a different perspective on its requirements and "potential problems/difficulties" (Hovardas et al., 2014, p. 135). Besides, peers have a similar language level and therefore, their feedback is more graspable for their colleagues. Furthermore, their colleagues' work can serve as an example text for the specific genre, add to their knowledge of this text type and provide them with useful phrases as well as vocabulary or structural considerations (Hovardas et al., 2014, p. 134). The "critical

detachment” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 92) that is reached when reading somebody else’s text also supports the learners in improving their skills when evaluating their own texts (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), which also leads to increased learner autonomy (Wang, 2014, p. 80). Being able to work autonomously will also motivate students and enable them to express themselves more effectively.

2.1.3 Recommendations on how to initiate successful peer feedback in writing

An essential aspect of initiating successful peer feedback is establishing a supportive and “non-threatening environment” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 93). Such an environment would allow for mistakes and not condemn them, but quite contrariwise see them as an intrinsic and indispensable part of learning. Teachers’ attitudes towards mistakes are of crucial importance in this respect. Furthermore, as can be seen from the elaborations above, the process of peer feedback is highly complex (Hovardas et al., 2014, p. 149) and especially for younger learners cognitively very demanding (Hovardas et al., 2014, p. 133).

As mentioned before, in order to heighten the quality of peer feedback given by students, they require specific training. Hence, one suggestion is to use a scaffolding approach to continuously familiarise learners with the procedure (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 90). As part of this step-by-step introduction, teachers need to explain the process in class and students should be given guidelines (e.g. guiding questions) which they can orient themselves to when giving feedback (Signorini, 2014, p. 13; Ciftci & Kocoglu, 2012, p. 68). Such directions should include three aspects, namely praise, criticism and suggestions for improvements (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 86; Hovardas et al., 2014, p. 135). Hyland and Hyland stressed that longer, more detailed and specific comments were found to be more useful and effective (2006, p. 88). Moreover, they also suggest that in order not to overwhelm writers, marginal comments placed directly next to the relevant passage should be used (2006, p. 88). Apart from providing concrete suggestions (Xu & Yu, 2018, p. 213), it was found to be beneficial if the person writing the comments explained them to the receiver of feedback (Rachmayani et al., 2018, p. 64) (e.g. orally in class or virtually). Such practices support students’ reflective skills as they have to justify their opinions and think of improvements themselves. Besides, internalising such thinking processes will help them in their future writing. Moreover, to ensure the meaningfulness and usefulness of students’ peer feedback, the teacher should comment on students’ remarks in order to guide their future development (Wang, 2014, p. 93; Sato, 2016, p. 20).

Apart from these general directives, learners should also be given clear instructions which aspects of writing they should focus on. For instance, when working with (official) assessment criteria, teachers might have to adapt them according to their students’ current cognitive and language level in order not to overwhelm them. Including a checklist of such criteria can be very beneficial for students as their awareness of the requirements is increased, especially if they are similar to those the teacher will use for their final assessment. Depending on students’ language and cognitive level, checklists can vary from detailed descriptions, including examples and space for comments, to more brief, list-like formats. Another point to note is that students’ feedback was found to mostly centre around rule-based or organisational matters (Wang, 2014, p. 81; Xu & Yu, 2018, p. 213), for instance correctness of spelling and grammar, or structure of paragraphs. Using guidelines that direct the students in alternative directions (e.g. content, task fulfilment, range of lexical or grammatical structures, etc.) can also help to counteract this tendency. In addition, Xu and Yu (2018, p. 210) mentioned that demonstrating or modelling the procedure of giving feedback in class would also be helpful to the students

and moreover increase the level of validity. Teachers could, for example, walk students through the process of giving feedback in class; this means letting the students watch as the teacher himself/herself provides comments on a sample text while explaining his/her thought process step by step.

3. Initiating peer feedback in the EFL classroom

3.1 Information on participants

Before the research was conducted, information about the learners themselves and their previous experience with peer feedback was ascertained via an online conference with their English language teacher. This was essential as the instructions and guidelines had to be tailored to the specific target group's writing development and in order to secure the quality of useful feedback.

The participants of the study were 19 5th-grade students from an AHS in Lower Austria². Their language level was A2 – B1 according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2017) scale. Within this project, targeted writing skills (level B1) would enable the students to “write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within [their] field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence” (Council of Europe, 2017, p. 23). In combination with the concrete task, students had to “write accounts of experiences, describe feelings and reactions” (Council of Europe, 2017, p. 23).

The text type chosen was an article, because the students were familiar with this genre and had already produced some themselves. The reasoning behind choosing a text type the learners were already familiar with was that the focus of the study should be on the development of their writing skills through peer feedback and not on the introduction of a new genre.

3.2 Intervention: Data collection and methodology

Due to the fact, that the interaction with and also between the students was exclusively online³, this action research project was designed in three phases. In the first phase, students were given a writing task in which they had to type and submit electronically a 250-word article (see appendix for specific instructions) about their experiences with distance learning during the COVID-19-induced lockdown (positive effects, challenges and future outlook). I took part in an online session and explained the task to the students in order to be able to directly and personally answer individual questions. The students had one week to complete the assignment before the second phase began. This phase was again introduced during an online session. In addition to explaining the peer feedback task, I also provided the students with an example of how feedback could be given. As mentioned above, this form of modelling should make the process of giving feedback more easily understandable to the learners. In combination with the guiding questions (see appendix) the students received, this enhances

² Note: There were 27 students in this class, but since eight did not complete all stages of the task, only the data of the remaining 19 was taken into consideration.

³ The current study was conducted during a global pandemic (summer term 2019) and communication was only possible virtually.

the quality of the students' feedback. The questions were based on the assessment scale for writing GERS B1 (BMBWF, 2019). These criteria were used as a basis to 1) raise students' awareness towards the requirements against which their performances would be measured and 2) ensure the validity of students' feedback. Students' writing was also usually assessed by their English language teacher according to these criteria and students definitely had a basic knowledge about them. However, it is not clear just how familiar they were with the specific requirements. The learners were given one week to complete this task. As I did not know the students' proficiency levels or their strengths and weaknesses, the distribution of the texts for the peer feedback phase was done electronically and at random. Every student received one article to review. In the following third stage, students had to edit their first drafts based on their colleagues' comments. The two versions, first and final draft, were then assessed by me using the above-mentioned (original) B1 scale (BMBWF, 2019)⁴. The focus of the analysis lay on differences between the two versions. Furthermore, the learners were also asked to fill in a questionnaire about their attitudes and views towards giving and receiving peer feedback for which they had four days. These thoughts and comments were not included in the assessment. The questionnaire was taken from Wang (2014) and Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012) and adapted (language as well as content-wise) to the circumstances of this study. Moreover, even though the questionnaire was formulated in English, students could also answer the open-ended questions in German if they wished to do so. The reasoning behind this was that they should feel comfortable and able to express their honest opinion without any language restrictions. It was also made explicit that while their writing performance was evaluated, their feedback giving skills and their answers to the questionnaire would not be graded in any form.

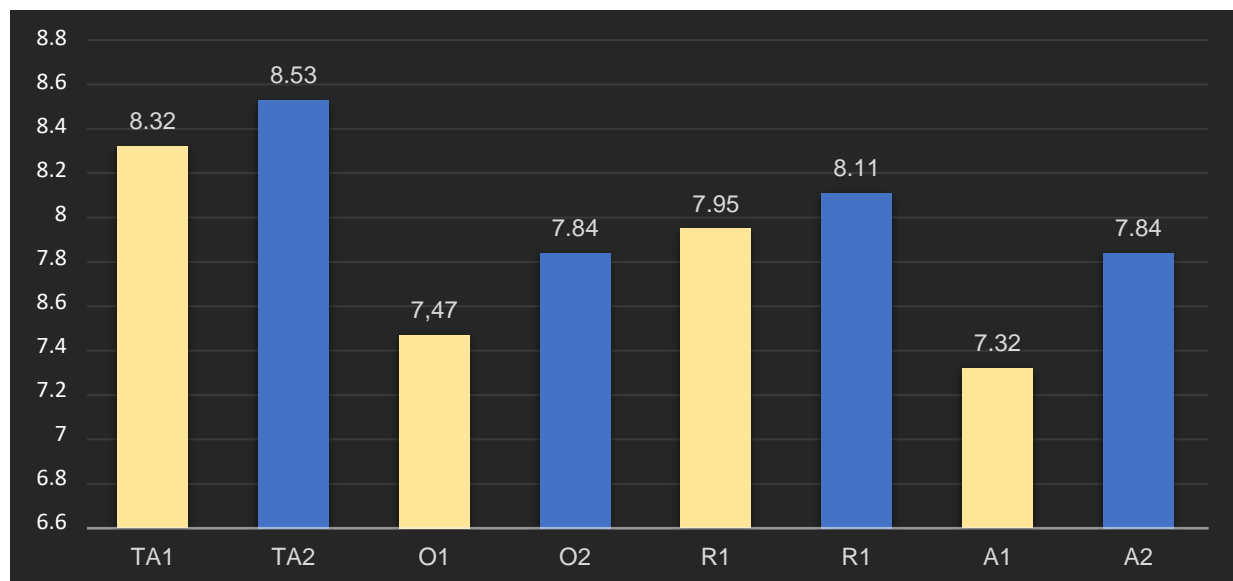
3.4 Findings and data analysis

In the following section, the results of the study will be presented. As mentioned above, the students' performances were assessed using the GERS B1 writing scale which focuses on four aspects, namely Task Achievement, Organisation, Lexical / Grammatical Range and Lexical / Grammatical Accuracy. Students' individual scores were then added and used to calculate the mean of all the students' scores.

The following graph shows the mean of the students' scores for the individual aspects in their first and final draft. The mean for each area (Task Achievement; Organisation; Vocabulary & Grammatical Range; Vocabulary & Grammatical Accuracy) was calculated by adding up the scores of all students and dividing them by 19 (total number of students).

⁴ Note: the scale ranges from 0-10, with 10 being the top score.

Figure 1: Mean of students' writing scores for the individual aspects assessed.⁵



As can be seen, the average of the students' scores improved in all four areas. The highest difference can be found when looking at the accuracy of the performances followed by organisation before and after the peer feedback. This correlates with the findings described in the literature above, according to which students often focus on rule-based aspects or organisational matters when giving feedback.

One of the restrictions of the assessment scale used is that students' individual improvement can only be indicated if he/she manages to reach a higher level on the scale (i.e. their changes justify the allocation of an additional point). An example would be if a student reached 5 points for the organisation of their first draft, but 6 for the final version due to noticeable improvements. This means that progress can only be measured if the final score was above the initial score achieved in the first draft. The same also holds true for the opposite direction if students performed worse in their final version. As a result, when assessing the articles, several improvements in different areas could be identified; however, they sometimes were not enough to justify the reaching of the next higher level. Hence, the numerical representation does not entirely depict the students' development.

Based on these results, the research question can be answered as follows: In the given study, peer feedback impacted EFL learners' writing performance positively. The students' overall scores improved in all areas measured. Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that some students did not improve their writing skills or even scored fewer points in their final drafts compared to their first versions which was partly due to misleading suggestions from their peers. I realised this when looking through their comments myself. This pitfall could potentially

⁵ Note: TA = Task Achievement; O= Organisation; R = Vocabulary / Grammatical Range; A = Vocabulary / Grammatical Accuracy. 1 refers to students' first drafts and 2 to their final versions. Mean was rounded to two digits.

be avoided by matching pairs deliberately (e.g. pairing equally proficient students with each other) or having several peers comment on one text.

4. Conclusion and recommendations for further practice

Overall the research into the impact of peer feedback on students' writing skills showed that the initiated peer feedback led to improved scores in all areas under analysis when comparing students' first and final drafts.

The conclusions I could draw for my own teaching were that peer feedback should be part of a teacher's toolbox. Moreover, due to the time constraints of this project only one cycle of peer feedback could be included. Hence, I would suggest repeating such cycles several times as well as varying the structure of the process (e.g. including online / face-to-face, live / asynchronous or (non-)anonymous formats) to target different types of learners. It could also be helpful to ask students to review several essays for each task. Furthermore, I believe the development of peer-feedback skills to be a process which requires repeated implementation and training as well as thorough preparation on the teacher's side. Teachers should also be prepared to give feedback on students' comments. In this way, students are slowly familiarised with the procedure and guided towards providing and receiving helpful and valid support for their learning.

Application Box

Previous studies as well as this AR project have shown that peer feedback can influence students' learning positively. However, several aspects have to be considered in order to initiate peer feedback successfully in the language classroom. The following list should serve as a helpful guide for teachers wishing to engage in this process:

- Establish a supportive classroom-environment (value mistakes as opportunities for further development)
- Provide learners with guidelines on how to give feedback (it is useful to demonstrate the practice, for example by discussing an example together), e.g.:
 - Be respectful
 - Use "I-messages"
 - Explain your opinion / provide examples
- Give clear instructions which aspects the feedback should focus on (e.g. content, grammatical accuracy...) → see Appendix for guidelines used
- Give feedback on your learners' feedback
- Incorporate peer feedback activities repeatedly using different formats of feedback (written / oral, online / face to face...)
- Be aware that peer feedback takes up a lot of time

Situational variables such as learners' language or cognitive level will determine the amount of guidance needed. The more learners are already familiarised with the procedure, the less scaffolding will be required.

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Appendix

Instructions for writing task

Writing task

Due to Covid-19, you have been experiencing a very unique situation in the last couple of weeks and months. Not going to school and changing to e-learning has moved your place of work to your homes. Clearly, everybody has a personal opinion on the topic. A popular youth magazine wants to dedicate a whole edition to how students have been affected by these changes. That is why the publishers ask students to write short articles about their own experiences with e-learning..

You want to tell everybody what your thoughts on the current situation are and decide to write an article for this magazine.

In your article you should:

- mention positive effects of studying from home and explain what their advantages are
- give examples of challenges you faced and describe what the problem(s) was / were
- suggest possible home-learning methods or activities (e.g. video conferences, online tasks...) that you think should be part of your regular teaching even after you return to school again. Give reasons for your opinion.

Write about **250 words**. Do not forget to follow the structure and language of this specific text type.

Guidelines for giving feedback

Feedback task

Please read through your peer's article and give him / her feedback on their work. Make sure that your comments are **respectful and meaningful ("I-messages")**. Focus on the following aspects: content, structure, grammar and vocabulary use. Please also give examples or suggestions for improvement when you comment on a specific aspect.

Write your feedback directly under your colleague's text. You can also use the "comment-function" in word or highlight words within the text.

Here are some guidelines that should help you. (Do not simply answer the questions with yes / no, but explain your opinion.)

1. Content
 - a. Do you understand what the author tried to say?
 - b. Did the author talk about all three bullet points (advantages, disadvantages, possible methods / activities)?
 - c. Did the author justify his / her opinion? – Do their explanations make sense to you?
 - d. Did the author use the language typical for this text type?
 - e. Did the author stick to the word limit?
2. Structure

- a. Does the text contain all relevant parts of a magazine article (title, paragraphs...)?
 - b. Did the author structure the text in a way that it is understandable to the reader?
– How?
 - c. Did the author use (fitting) linking words?
3. Grammar / Vocabulary
- a. Did you find any grammar / vocabulary mistakes?
 - b. Are there any language structures that you would like to include in your own text?
4. Overall comments:
- a. What did you especially like about your peer's work?
 - b. Which areas do you think could be improved?
 - c. What is your overall opinion of the text?