

# Peer Feedback for Teaching Essay Writing

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## Abstract

本研究では、ライティングの授業でピアフィードバック活動を行うことの利点を明らかにした。本研究では、大学の英語ライティングクラスに参加した日本人EFL学習者17名によるピアフィードバック・コメントを定性的に評価した。一人ひとりが書いたエッセイの内容、構造、文法を相互に評価した。その数週間後に、学習者はエッセイを書くテストを受験した。本研究では、この活動中に書かれたコメントと、相互評価活動の後に書かれたエッセイを質的に分析した。その結果、学習者は、意味を明確にすることや、エッセイを発展させることの重要性を理解したことがわかった。

**Keywords:** Writing, Peer Feedback, Essay, EFL Learners (ライティング、ピアフィードバック、エッセイ、EFL学習者)

## 1. Peer Feedback: Categorizations

Teaching writing to Japanese EFL learners is rewarding to a learner in terms of working on a tangible piece of language practice. However, students do not always understand the written feedback or suggested corrections given by the teacher. This study suggests that the students understand the process of evaluation of a written essay when they are involved in this activity. By doing a peer feedback activity for an essay, they relate to the possible errors they end up making unintentionally. In the present study, I discuss about a short experience of trying peer feedback in a writing class, where the students

exchanged their individually written essays and gave their corrections and comments based on (a) the content of the essay, (b) the structure of the essay, and (c) any grammatical or spelling errors in the sentences.

Johnson (1995: 111) discusses in detail the importance of paying attention to student-student interaction to facilitate an able communication in a classroom. Grice (1975) while illustrating 'logic and conversation' explains that maxims, cooperative principle, conversational and conventional implicatures are all at play when we are communicating or understanding the formal and implied meaning of an utterance. VanPatten et al (2010) discusses the importance of form-meaning connection in SLA. The present study finds peer feedback to be important as a metalinguistic activity for a learner.

To understand the peer feedback comments, this study follows the praise, criticism, and suggestion categorization suggested by K. Hyland and F. Hyland (2001). The research field of teaching and research on writing in K. Hyland and F. Hyland (2006) is further tested by other authors. Lee (2010) finds that suggestion is the most common type of feedback among university students in Japan. McKee (1981) and Tsui and Ng (2000) emphasize the importance of raising an awareness among learners about their weaknesses and strengths. Yu (2019) qualitatively analyzes the peer feedback on postgraduate thesis to trace the cognitive and metacognitive development in learning the writing process. Diab (2016) compares teacher, peer, and self feedback to see that pronoun agreement and lexical errors are effectively reduced by all these feedback activities with different advantages. Taferner (2008) found though skeptical in the beginning, after a term the students were used to it and perceived that this activity helped them understand writing strategies.

This study focuses on peer feedback as an individual activity that helps students look at an essay as a discourse and this leads to writing improvements among the students who not only read these comments but also who wrote

these comments. The key questions answered in this paper are:

- a. Does the activity of giving and getting a peer feedback improve essay writing among university students?
- b. What improvement in essay structure, content, and grammar can be seen after peer feedback activity?

The peer feedback activity is a simplified version of the rubric followed in TOEFL independent writing test evaluation (ETS: The Official Guide to the TOEFL® Test, 2012, pp. 208-211). The three parameters used for general evaluation of the class right from the first assignment and for the peer feedback activity includes:

- a) Content: In this section, the reviewer judges if the content of the essay suits the topic. In addition to this, development of the essay with appropriate examples, reasons, and details is looked upon.
- b) Structure: The organization of the idea with a good beginning, middle and end is looked for in this section. A logical flow of thought with good order and connection between the sentences and paragraphs is noticed in this section.
- c) Grammatical or spelling errors: The language use of the essay based on any grammatical and spelling errors are underlined and a corrected version is suggested.

When a sentence or sentences are too vague to understand the meaning, it is underlined and “meaning is not clear” is written as a comment somewhere around it.

Before this activity, the students had experienced writing an essay and

receiving teacher's feedback based on the same categorization. In the beginning of the course, the relevance of pre-writing or a short planning before writing had been emphasized. The students learnt to practice the development and organization of ideas based on this. This peer feedback activity was a graded activity to make the students participate well. All the students who made valid comment(s) in each section were rewarded with scores. However, in this activity, where the students acted as editors, they were not asked to give any scores themselves to the essays. The students were given 20 minutes to read the essay and give their comments. They were asked to use a different color pen for this activity and were also asked to write their names.

## 2. Data

The data were taken from an English Writing class for undergraduate university students from different disciplines and who were in their second, third, or fourth year. This course was designed for 16 weeks and the syllabus included paragraph writing in the beginning and essay writing towards the end. There were 17 students in the class, and the written activities were designed in groups first, and later the writing assignments were done individually.

The data for this study includes the last few weeks of individual essay writing before the peer-editing activity and the final test on essay writing after the activity. The comments were analyzed qualitatively along with the improvements in essay writing of the students after the peer-editing activity.

## 3. Peer Feedback: Analysis

The peer feedback written for the essays were unexpectedly mostly a praise. However, the criticism or suggestions were also there. The comments were classified based on praise, criticism, and suggestion.

*Table 1: Distribution of peer feedback comments into praise, criticism, and suggestion*

	Praise	Criticism	Suggestion
Content	22	3	4
Structure	14	1	0
Grammar	8	40	2

Note. Of all the criticisms 3 were written comments and 37 were grammar errors underlined and corrected.

Praise, criticism and suggestion in each of the three parameters is discussed below with examples.

### **(a) Content**

**Praise.** Content of the essay was praised the most. Simple praises like ‘good’ and ‘easy to understand’ were used. Praises like the ones in (1) – (5) in the feedback comments clearly mentioned what was good. Grammatical errors in the feedback comments are underlined; corrected forms are given in ( ) parentheses next to them.

- (1) I think it is good that you use the concrete examples in your essay. [comment for an essay on tourism]
- (2) I understand the reasons that the sale of books has decreased. [comment for an essay on decrease in sale of books]
- (3) It’s good to write the site from which you chose data. [comment for an essay on environmental problems]
- (4) He mentions the merits and demerits of SMS effectively. [comment for an essay on text messaging]

The comments like these imply that the students understand what makes a

good content like, examples, reasons, source of data and a balanced account of merits and demerits.

**Criticism.** The criticisms were less but they were well-described.

- (5) I don't understand the meaning of "What is bullying in the first place?" and the answer to this problem. Where is the answer? [comment for an essay on bullying]

The introduction paragraph of one of the essays on bullying ends with this question. (6) mentions the whole paragraph and an abrupt ending of the paragraph with this question as mentioned in the comment (5) is relevant because this question has not been addressed anywhere in the essay later.

- (6) A few people succeed in school. I think a lot of students are bored in school. And some children probably hate school. It is because there are people who bully them. Bullying destroys life of people. But there are successful people who fail in school days. What is the most important thing (is) to be successful? What is bullying in the first place?

[Excerpt from the essay on bullying]

- (7) It is (has) thin scientific basis.

Similarly, comment in (7) was written for an essay written on 'the benefits of genetically modified food'. The comment criticizes that the essay was based on the opinion of the author and reference to a data source would have given a scientific basis to the argument or opinion.

**Suggestion.** The suggestions were mostly for additions in the reasons or

about other required details.

- (8) I think this essay will be better if you use deta of (data to tell us) the reason why people travel. [comment for an essay on tourism]
- (9) I think that you should mention more 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph about novels (more about novels in the fourth paragraph). [comment for an essay on sale of books]

### **(b) Structure**

**Praise.** The praise for structure is based on a simple understanding if the essay has a beginning, middle and end. The other criterion is the judgment if the paragraphs are organized in an easy-to-understand way. The feedback comments had praises for both criteria.

**Criticism.** In one of the essays, the feedback comment mentions that

- (10) ...the three paragraph is short (the three paragraphs are short). [comment for an essay on unfair part-time jobs]

The feedback implies that details required for the essay are missing because three of the middle paragraphs are too short.

**Suggestion.** There were no feedback comments that were suggestions for the structure of the given essay.

### **(c) Grammar**

This section had good feedback in terms of suggested grammatical or spelling corrections. There were comments about meaning of the phrases,

expressions or sentences.

**Praise.**

- (11) The sentence is (sentences are) easy to read. [comment for an essay on sale of books]
- (12) Sentence structures are also clear, smoothly (clear and smooth to read). [comment for an essay on essentiality of arts for children]
- (13) The grammar is well (good). The spelling mistakes are so little, I like this writing. [comment for an essay on education]
- (14) Spelling is almost good. [comment for an essay on text messaging]
- (15) There was not anything difficult to read in the sentence flow (The sentence flow was good). There was not miss the spelling too (There weren't any spelling mistakes). [comment for an essay on bullying]
- (16) I can't find mistakes. All Ok! [comment for an essay on necessity of art education]

**Criticism.** The criticism comments on sentence structures and grammar were the highest in number (Table 1) of all the feedback comments. It included written comments as well as the corrections suggested by underlining the errors. The errors cited were not all the existing errors and the corrections were also not correct sometimes. The sentences (17), (18), and (19) below suggest that this activity of peer feedback cannot be perfect as the peers are L2 learners themselves.

- (17) Do you think what subject is the least needness at school (Incorrect form)
- (18) **What subject** do you think is the least need (needed) at school? (Suggested corrections in bold)

(19) What subject do you think is the least needed at school? (After all corrections)

However, there were many correct criticisms for grammar like the attempt to form a simple question with the movement of ‘what’ towards the beginning of the sentence as in (18). Different kinds of errors like missing auxiliaries (by insertion of ‘do’ or ‘don’t’), word choice errors (like use of ‘society’ instead of ‘social’), spelling errors (‘growing’ changed to ‘growing’).

**Suggestion.** Only two suggestions came up. One, was a suggestion to indent at the beginning of the paragraph (this may not be included in a grammar error) and the other was a comment where the student who gave the feedback tried to compare his language abilities with the author of the essay.

(20) I checked some grammar and spelling mistakes. However, probably, your grammar skill is better than I. You should have confidence in yourself.

The comment in (20) implies that the person who gave the feedback was aware that mention of grammatical errors would not encourage the students. Hence, s/he used positive words in the comment to encourage the author of the essay.

The feedback comments given is a sign of improvement because the comments presuppose the students’ understanding of the three parameters (content, structure, and grammar as mentioned on page 44 above) used for peer feedback comments. A higher number of praises implies that the written essays do not need the mentioned improvement anymore. However, when the student who wrote the praises had an improved essay after writing a feedback of praise, it counts as a merit of the peer feedback activity. The comments

that were criticism and suggestions had a two-way improvement for both the recipients and the givers of the feedback.

#### 4. Improvements

The comparison of the essays written by the same students before peer feedback and the one written after peer feedback shows improvements in the understanding of the notion of clarity of meaning. Out of 17, 11 essays in Test 2 had shown improvement in terms of content, structure, and grammar. 1 of the essays was still left incomplete and could not be included in the analysis.

- (a) Content: The content of the essay is related to the topic or answers the question. The feedback in (5) asked for answering the question that was raised in the essay. In Test 2 essay no such unanswered questions were written.
- (b) Structure: The organization of the essay. The students' essays are better developed in terms of a beginning, middle and an end. The essay written after the feedback activity has details and examples to explain the points conveyed. (7), (9), and (10) are the examples of the feedback that led to an improvement in the better developed and organized essays.
- (c) Grammar: The clarity of meaning of a sentence. The students understand that the meaning needs to be conveyed through the sentences in a clear way. This helps them eventually improve on the grammatical construction of the sentences.

The improvements imply that not just the feedback received but also the activity of writing a peer feedback helps the students understand the evaluation process. They develop an understanding of what differentiates a

good essay from a bad one in terms of content, structure, and grammar.

Further analysis of the essays [numbered (i) – (xvi)] written after this activity showed the following results:

- a. (i) and (ix) essays improved because the students gave feedback to the essay that was better developed and was better in sentence construction, respectively.
- b. The essays (iii), (viii), and (xiv) showed improvement based on the content of the essay in being more related to the topic. Criticisms by peer had led to these improvements in keeping the content related to the topic.
- c. The essays (ii), (v), (vi), (vii), (x), and (xi) improved due to grammar criticism.
- d. Sometimes, specific errors were focused upon in the feedback and it helped in the improvement of specific errors especially grammatical errors.
- e. There were (five) cases of no improvements. This was because the feedback only had praises.

## 5. Notes and Discussion

The results can be summarized in the following points:

- Reading essays written by other classmates made the students aware of their own possible writing style and errors.
- The peer feedback activity has led to improvements but a criticism or suggestion in the feedback were better received and improved upon compared to praises. An increased number of such activities can help us understand the benefits of criticism and suggestion in detail.

- The relation of grammatical errors like word-choice and word-order errors with the meaning of the sentence was better understood after this activity.

This study has shown that Japanese EFL learners who were not trained essay writers nor were they confident in giving feedback based on grammar, benefitted from this activity because they practiced their metalinguistic skills. In further studies, an assessment of repeated peer feedback can help in understanding the steps of improvement and suggest how this feedback activity can be improvised upon.

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