EFL students' writing performance: A study of the role of peer and small-group feedback

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Abstract

Writing in English is often regarded as the most difficult of the four English language skills. Feedback is considered an essential component of the writing process as it helps students improve their writing skills. There is a general agreement that waiting for the instructor's feedback in a large class is impractical; therefore, implementing "peer input" in the writing classroom is a problem. The effectiveness of peer feedback in improving students' writing skills has been dealt with in many research works. However, how peer feedback should be done has been ignored and is only used in restricted circumstances. In this study, two kinds of peer feedback were examined to see which one had the most impact on students' writing. The sample comprised 65 EFL students from Qassim University. Results showed that providing students with online-class peer feedback and small group peer feedback improved their writing skills. However, neither of these approaches proved to be more successful than the other. As an implication of this study, Saudi universities need to adopt an engaging, practical, collaborative, and nonthreatening approach to writing which will help students develop their writing skills towards global communicative competence.

Keywords: EFL; peer feedback; online-class; Qassim University; small-group feedback; writing performance

1. Introduction

For successful communication, one must write, understand others' speech, and read in English language properly. Among the four English language skills, writing is the most difficult for EFL students to master (Abri, 2021; Chen, 2021; Elboshi, 2021). A writer must consider several things when s/he writes, such as the topic of the work and its target readership. Other aspects of writing include content, organization, vocabulary, and the mechanics of language use (Hentasmaka & Cahyono, 2021). As writing is a fundamental mode of communication in today's culture, EFL students should be excellent at writing (Misiejuk et al., 20210). Planning, drafting, redrafting, and editing are all processes that authors must follow before submitting a piece of written work.

Even though English is a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, all students in Saudi Arabian educational institutions must take it as an academic subject (Alfallaj, 2020; Al-Ahdal & Hussein, 2020). Therefore, some students still lag in their English language competence (Saeed et al., 2020). As writing is a complex skill that considers many variables including the topic, audience, and purpose, L2 learners often lament how difficult writing is. Students learning English as a second or foreign

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language, however, must master the skill of writing, according to Alsehibany (2021). Additionally, writing involves a protracted process that starts with preparation and concludes when the work is published. Due to these issues, Saudi EFL students are especially averse to attending writing courses. Consequently, a breakthrough is much needed to improve teaching of writing. One of the procedures for boosting students' writing is prompt feedback, not only from the teacher but also, from the peers.

In previous research, peer feedback has been proven to substantially enhance students' writing skills (Cui et al., 2021; Yatifi et al., 2021; Yu, 2021). Despite this, the most effective method to get peer input has been largely disregarded. Aiming to understand how different types of peer critique are applied inside EFL writing classes is the reason for conducting this study.

As a means of course correction, EFL students require constant feedback at every stage of the writing process. By doing so, students can enhance their writing abilities. Kaçar (2021) stated that feedback is a constant procedure during the writing process to get enhanced instruction. Peer feedback is one kind of input that the scientists are now looking at. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Growth theory supports the idea that giving feedback to others leads to cognitive growth (Newman & Latifi, 2021). To improve one's writing, it is critical to get feedback from others. Given the possibility that students may benefit from one another's work, peer review is seen as essential (López-Pellisa et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2020; Simonsmeier et al., 2020; Yu, 2021). By getting feedback from their peers and learning from those who are more accomplished, EFL students may gain from one another competence in writing.

Undergraduate peer review increases student commitment to writing while also helping them comprehend the connection between their writing and their curriculum in ways that are novel and unique. It motivates students to write and promotes self-reflection, both of which are essential for critical thinking. When students learn to think critically and creatively about their writing, they become more than just good writers who can answer a prompt. By including peer review in the writing process, instructors offer their students the opportunity to learn from one another while also considering the importance of writing in the course. The assignment objectives also become apparent. Instead of being wholly sidetracked by language and mechanics or nervousness, students are forced to concentrate on objectives as they evaluate whether or not specific samples fulfill the writing criteria. It is no secret that peer feedback helps learners improve their writing. Students say, "It teaches them just as much, if not more, about recognizing and articulating their peers paper's flaws as it does about integrate their own comments."

Having students provide feedback on one another's papers can have various benefits, including providing opportunities for students to improve their ability to provide constructive feedback, receiving feedback on their drafts, and having a larger audience for their work rather than that of a single instructor. For students to take the process seriously, peer review must be handled properly. Students tend to be dubious of the usefulness of getting input from their fellow students rather than teachers. Unspecific or tangential comments from peers may be seen as "busywork" by them. In this study, fundamental concerns for improving the quality of peer feedback are presented before various methods for managing peer review are described. The process of peer review may be carried out in a variety of settings. Alternatively, students may read shorter pieces in class and debate them afterward by going through their classmates' work before class and preparing comments on them before class begins. In order to decide on what structure to employ as teachers, one should consider how much class time one has available for peer review, how many essays you would want students to workshop throughout the term, and how much involvement you would like in the workshop process.

A brief assessment of the previous data shows that instructors' feedback is the most often used review option in writing courses. Many instructors still believe that social media should be used in the classroom to help students learn better. When teaching L2 learners how to write, the Problem Frames

Approach (PF) has been proven efficient. According to this theory, students need constructive feedback that points them in different directions while simultaneously allowing them to participate and react.

Teaching students how to negotiate meaning and attempt to comprehend criticism via a writing conference may benefit both instructors and students. As a result, PF permits the existence of such modes and may be seen as a method of producing educational benefits. Because it necessitates collaboration and active learning like reading and evaluating resources before presenting your results with your peers, learning the PF technique is beneficial. Since PF is given in scaffolding dynamic, it may have an immediate positive impact on learners' writing skills (Bai & Guo, 2021; Duong & Pham, 2021).

The more peers are involved in a project, the more likely it is for them to get more out of it. To put it another way, the PF approach may be described as a collaborative effort involving individuals of comparable social status that yields high-quality outcomes. In the course of the process, peers discuss the positive and negative aspects of a particular text, and they come up with suggestions that may help enhance the overall quality of the work. Some research suggests that PF may replace teacher feedback if learners are properly trained. This has also been appreciated by academics as well as professionals. Studying the literature shows, on the other hand, a growing body of work on the PF technique that offers new and helpful suggestions that may lead to a more effective implementation. This means that learning about the most effective and up-to-date classroom methods will be difficult for all writing teachers to do all at once. One may not obtain the best outcomes if you do not know how to convey knowledge to students optimally.

Researches have shown the benefits of giving feedback training to students from the same social background (Al Abri et al., 2021; Huisman et al., 2019; Pham et al., 2020; Simonsmeier et al., 2020). When it comes to providing constructive criticism to others, students need to be taught how to do so before they can do it independently. Studies have shown that individuals who got peer feedback training had much better writing quality than those who did not. A student's peer feedback will be most effective if they have the same social background since cultural differences may make it challenging to sustain social contact (Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Bhatti et al., 2020; Magulod, 2018). Additionally, some academics have looked at how students perceive peer feedback, and the results imply that peer input may eventually replace teacher feedback (Camarata & Slieman, 2020; Ho et al., 2020; Kusumaningrum, 2021; Maysyaroh et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020).

2. Research Purpose

This study looked at how EFL students' writing skills were influenced by peer feedback provided in Qassim University. To begin with, students had the option of commenting on the writings of their classmates by giving feedback on what they had written. In the second method, students were split into smaller groups to provide feedback to one another. Before giving feedback to their peers, either in class or in small groups, certain explanations were given. This study aims to ascertain the effectiveness of peer feedback on the writing performance of the students. The study takes an experimental approach by seeking peer feedback and examining how it helps students improve their writing abilities.

3. Materials and Method

3.1 Sample

A total of 65 students from the department of English Language and Translation at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia were recruited in this study. The students were enrolled in the fourth semester. They studied two previous writing courses which may be interpreted to mean that they had

some skills in writing. They belonged to the same cultural background with an age range with group mean age at 23 years. The researchers got consent from the students to participate in the study, their participation was wholly voluntary. Furthermore, the researchers informed them of the purpose of the study and assured them that all information shared will remain confidential.

3.2 Design

A causal-comparative study was conducted because it examined and contrasted the efficacy of two distinct types of peer inputs. Students in the Argumentative Writing course were included in two classes, Class A with 33 students and Class B with 32 students. Peer feedback was given to Class A students in a large group setting and Class B students in smaller groups. To check the homogeneity of the two groups, the Levene test was performed. The findings showed that students' writing skills were comparable across all grade levels. The test of homogeneity of variances was employed. The computed levenes statistics of 0.43 showed the proper normality of data.

Table 1. Types of Intervention to Two Groups

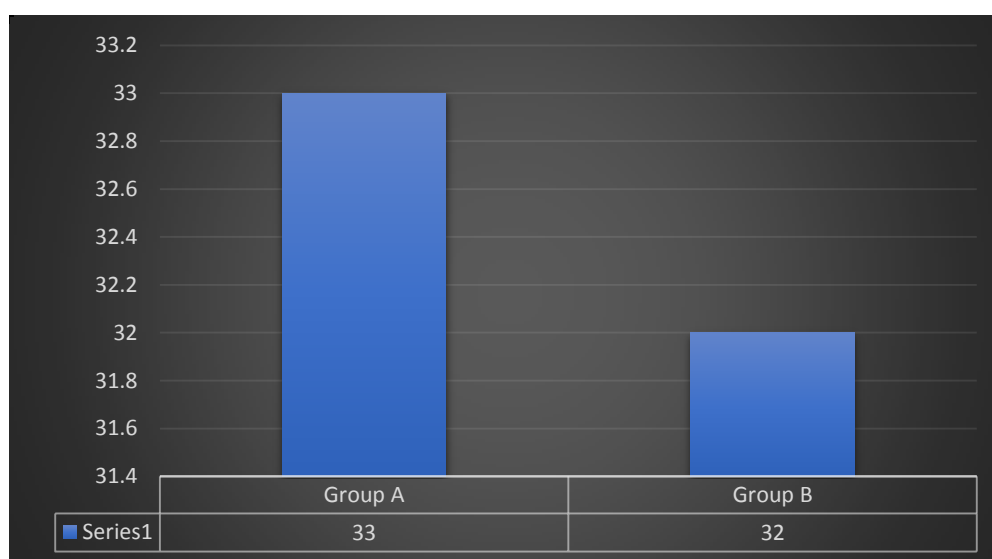| Group A	Group B
Group Online Peer Feedback Provision	Small Group Online Peer Feedback Provision
Involves the presentation of students output in Class. Students Names were removed to avoid confidentiality.	Involves the presentation of students output in groups. Students Names were removed to avoid confidentiality.

Figure 1. Representation of the groups of respondents

3.3 Instrument and procedures

This study used two writing essay tests to gather data from the students: one for pretest (65 essays) and the other for posttest (65 essays). Students were asked to write opinion essays. As to the treatment processes, each week, there were two meetings. The treatment consisted of students writing three essays in which they expressed their own opinions and received comments from their peers. There were many parts to these sessions. The pretest was conducted at the first meeting. At the second meeting, students learned about how to write an argumentative essay. Students were given three more sessions to compose their first opinion essay, which they did in meetings three and four, finishing it and receiving peer comments (the fifth meeting). During the sixth, seventh, and eighth meetings students were required to prepare a second essay and a third essay (in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh meetings). In order to offer the students more hands-on experience giving and receiving evaluation

from their peers, the therapy was divided into three sessions. Except that when peer input was given, students in Class A received it in-class, while students in Class B received it in small groups, both groups went through the identical phases. A post-test was conducted at the most recent meeting. Class A and Class B were treated significantly differently, as shown by the distribution of peer comments. Using a random selection process, five students from Class A were assigned to work in groups to provide comments on their peers' written work. Since it included all students and was done in front of the class, it was referred to as "in-class peer feedback giving." Student groups were split into smaller subgroups and comprised of Class B members. In other words, there were three students in the group.

To reduce the possibility of biased results, the writings of students were evaluated by two independent raters who had taught Argumentative Writing courses earlier. A decade of teaching writing expertise had given each of the raters familiarity with the scoring criteria used to evaluate each student's written work in this research. As for the grading criteria, this was adopted from Magulod (2018), and it includes five different elements, including content (30%), organization (25%), vocabulary (25%), language use (15%), and mechanics (5%). The grades range from very good, good, fair, and poor. The t-test for independent sample was used to see whether there was a significant difference in the pretest scores between the two groups after the essays had been evaluated by the raters. A statistical examination of the results of the study indicated the posttest scores of the two groups could be compared.

4. Results

This study used both descriptive and inferential statistics to examine the pretest scores of the students to see how peer input affected their writing skills. The statistical computation showed a mean score of 74.35 with a standard deviation of 6.88 for Class A students receiving in-class peer evaluation. In the meanwhile, the average Class B score with provision for small group comments was 73.45 with an SD of 6.12. Data revealed that both group of respondents had the same level of fair writing pre-test performance.

Table 2. Pre-test scores of the respondents

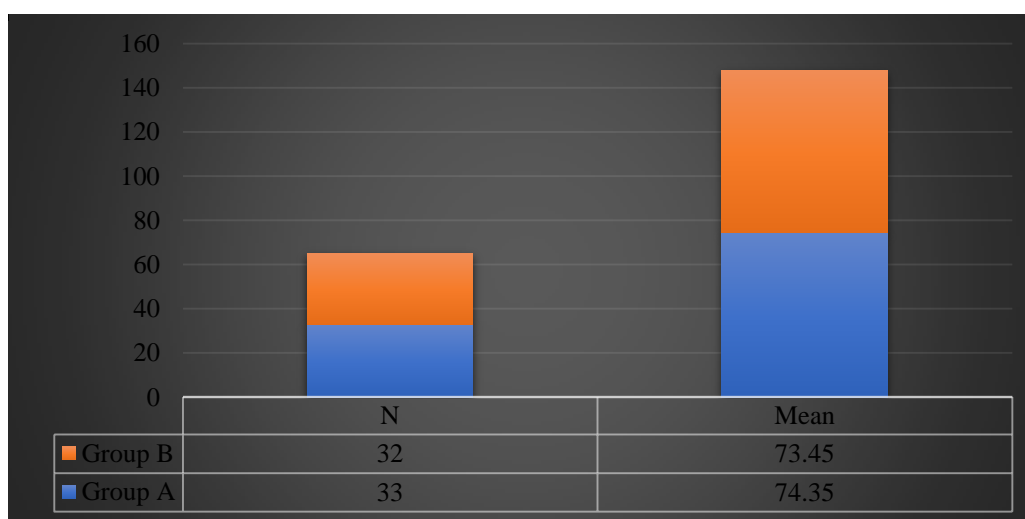|	N	Mean	STD
Group A	33	74.35	6.88
Group B	32	73.45	6.12

Figure 2. Pre-test scores of the respondents

Table 3 and Figure 3 show the post-test performance of the respondents. Group A scored a mean of 84.43 with the standard deviation of 11.54 and Group B scored 83.45 with the standard deviation of 8.43. This shows an improvement in the writing performance of the respondents as a result of the interventions.

Table 3. Post-test scores of the respondents

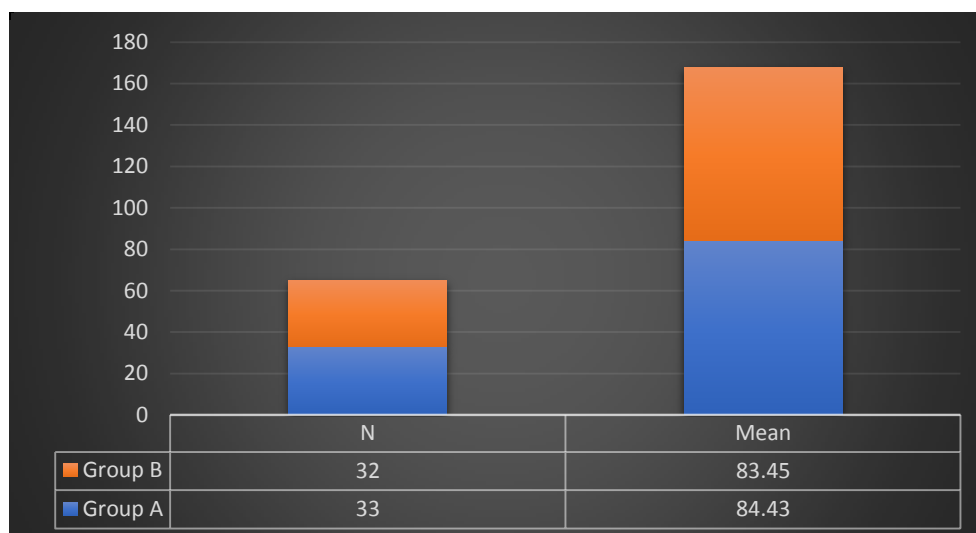|	N	Mean	STD
Group A	33	84.43	11.54
Group B	32	83.45	8.43

Figure 3. Post-test scores of the respondents

Table 4. Group A and B Pre and Post writing performance

Group A	N	Mean	STD	Mean Difference	t-value	P value
Pre	33	74.35	11.54	-10.08	8.56	0.00**
Post	33	84.43	8.43			
Group B	N	Mean	STD			
Pre	32	73.45	6.12	10.00	10.45	0.00**
Post	32	83.45	8.43			

**= significant at 0.01 level

Table 4 illustrates the differences between Group A and Group B before and after the exam. This demonstrates that the pre- and post-test scores of the two groups vary significantly. This was done to see whether students' writing performance had changed significantly as a result of the various treatments. The study's findings revealed a substantial difference between respondents' pre- and post-test scores.

5. Discussion

According to this descriptive statistical study, students' writing skills increased due to peer assessments in class or small groups. As previous studies have shown, students benefit from peer feedback (Álvarez et al., 2020; Burgess et al., 2021; Lumabi & Tabajen, 2021; Salinas, 2020). Due to the social constructionist viewpoint, peer evaluation provided in class or small groups may be considered collaborative learning. According to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development hypothesis, children may acquire a second language through their peers, students' abilities grew due to

collaborating, as shown by their final grades. A student's ability to collaborate with others to enhance his or her writing will be considered a way of learning. It is also worth noting that the results of this study coincide with those of many other researchers. It has been shown in many studies that by reading and commenting on their classmates' work, students may become a valuable resource for their peers. Their writing scores demonstrated the efficacy of peer comments – whether they were given in class or small groups – this study also shows that peer comments are eager to help students improve their writing abilities. These students responded by reading each other's essays carefully and offering suggestions on how to improve their peers' essays after using peer feedback in the classroom and peer feedback in small groups. As a result, students and their peers took an active role in their education and may rethink the idea in light of what their classmates have said in class. Some writing experts believe that peer feedback may help students improve their writing abilities (Han & Xu, 2020). Students who have undergone peer feedback training improve their writing since they know how to provide feedback on their peers' writings, whether in the classroom or a small group environment. Since the activities requiring feedback were completed in various sequences, students had several opportunities to practice giving it. This study also indicates that students learn more effectively when they provide comments to their classmates. Students, who took turns being "reviewers," or those who learned from and commented on their peers' papers, did better on tasks requiring written communication (Chong, 2021; Gravett et al., 2020; Kusumaningrum, 2021; Zhang & McEneaney, 2020). Providing comments on other people's writing encouraged students to go back and re-examine their work, which improved their own. Due to the inclusion of students from various backgrounds, the research was able to provide better results than the pretest results. As a whole, students' writing performance increased when they had access to two kinds of peer input: in-class peer feedback and small-group peer feedback.

Many previous studies' findings were corroborated in pre- and post-treatment studies. When the posttest findings were statistically calculated, there was only a tiny difference between the mean in-class peer feedback ratings and the small group peer feedback scores. Thus, the difference between the two groups was not significant (Finkenstaedt-Quinn et al., 2021; Kusumaningrum, 2021; Wu & Schunn, 2021; Zainurrahman, 2021). Finally, students' writing abilities were similar in classes that offered in-class peer critique and small-group peer feedback. In other words, according to these results, the effects are the same whether peer feedback is given in a big or small group (i.e., in-class peer feedback giving). Thus, in-class and small-group remarks are referred to as "peer feedback," which encompasses both kinds of criticism from classmates. The only significant difference between the two groups was the number of pupils in each. The most important finding of the research was that instructors were freed of part of their duties since students could also offer comments to their peers. The teacher may not have to put in more time or effort to check the students' work. In spite of the importance of teacher comments, research has shown that peer comments are as helpful. Students' work may benefit from peer feedback instead of teacher remarks.

6. Conclusion

This research showed that both in-class and small-group peer evaluation improved students' writing abilities. But neither in-class nor small-group peer feedback worked better than the other. That is, there are no differences in outcomes, regardless of how peer input is provided. Teachers of EFL writing should also include exercises that encourage students to provide and receive evaluation from one another. Peer feedback can be used in addition to any other kind of input, including feedback from teachers. Other kinds of peer feedback supply may improve students' writing ability, and future researchers should disclose them to the public.

7. Recommendations and Limitations

College instructors should use in-class and small-group peer evaluation to motivate and help their students become better writers. The institution should offer seminars and training on the process approach to writing and different prewriting techniques to enrich the faculty development program. To assist students in enhancing their writing, attitudinal constructs about writing should be reexamined. Comparative research should be conducted with more extensive samples and a genuine experimental study such as factorial design, cross-over, and Solomon four group designs to evaluate the direct effect of prewriting techniques on college students' writing performance and attitude. Regarding its scope, the study uses a post-test-pre-test research methodology, but is limited in its scope. Hence, the issue of whether there is a connection between the respondents' writing attitude, performance, and personal profile should be considered for future studies. In addition, this research also restricts its scope to the effectiveness of the prewriting step, which is only one of many steps in the process approach to writing. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of other writing techniques related to drafting, revision, editing, publication, and presentation as part of the writing process approach.

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