

Please say anything but yes or no: Fruitful Peer Feedback in Writing

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### Feedback in L2 Writing

The importance of feedback has grown with the introduction of a process approach to L2 writing, because such an approach does not look at writing in a product oriented way but focuses more on what happens during the writing process. From the moment writers set pencil to paper until they write their final draft, they use some kind of feedback to improve the quality of their writing. This feedback can come in the form of teacher feedback, peer feedback or even self critique.

Peer feedback creates a sense of audience in the student writer and thus would make the writing activity a more authentic one. This consciousness would create a “psychological spur to greater effort” (White and Arndt, 1991, p.117). Another benefit of peer feedback is that it helps students develop their capacity for self assessment.

However, when attempting to employ peer feedback in writing classes, teachers may encounter some problems. As White and Arndt (1991) argue, most of the time for students “...checking one’s work is equivalent to looking for mistakes – mistakes of spelling, punctuation, grammatical structure, word order and so on” (p.117). The value of grammar correction for the development of writing quality is also a debated issue on which a consensus has not been reached yet (Ferris et. al., 1997; Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1999). According to White and Arndt (1991), a more important aspect to be checked especially at the drafting stage, is “underlying coherence” of the text.

In addition to the focus of students, the amount of feedback provided by students for each other, the resulting revisions after the feedback is received, the improvement in the quality of

the writing after feedback, and attitude of students towards peer feedback may create problems.

### Ways of Improving Peer Feedback

Although problems exist with the application of peer feedback in writing classes, its benefits urge writing teachers to find ways of improving peer feedback and thus make it useful for students. Shaping the form of feedback given by peers by means of guidance may be a way of improving peer feedback. Research has suggested that a relationship exists between the way feedback is given and the subsequent revisions. Sugita (2006), after comparing three types of teacher commentary; in the form of statements, imperatives and questions, found imperative comments resulted in more changes in student drafts.

Increasing the quality of peer comments through structured guidance, guiding students towards analyzing the work they are reviewing is another way of improving peer feedback. The teachers have to provide students with detailed and structured feedback checklists which focus on specific aspects of the writing task as needed. Flower et. al. (1986) suggest that four types of feedback functions need to be realized for peer feedback to be successful; analysis, evaluation, explanation and revision. Students should not only be evaluating each other, but also they should analyze and make explanations for the peer feedback to be successful.

Receiving peer feedback can be threatening for some students if a collaborative atmosphere is not created. Encouraging students to engage in collaborative relationship with their peers is a crucial step to be taken for peer feedback to serve its constructive function. According to Lockhart and Ng (1995), the interaction between peers during feedback takes place in authoritative, interpretative, probing or collaborative ways. Among these the probing and collaborative relationships are found to be more fruitful because through 'discovery mode' students communicate more about their products.

## Research Questions

In the light of the literature, the following research questions were used to guide the study which investigated the effects of guidance questions on the amount of peer feedback and resulting revisions.

1. Does changing the guiding questions on peer feedback influence the amount of feedback given by peer reviewers?
2. Does changing the guiding questions on peer feedback influence the amount of revisions made from 1st to 2nd draft?

## Method

In order to make a comparison between the traditional evaluative peer feedback questions and questions which encourage more analysis than evaluation on amount of peer feedback and resulting revisions, two types of checklists were prepared for use in peer feedback. Checklist A (Appendix A) contained evaluative questions such as: “Do the body paragraphs support and develop the thesis adequately?”. Checklist B (Appendix B) contained questions which encourage peer reviewers to first analyze, then evaluate, explain and make suggestions. An example of such a question is : “ Circle the thesis statement. What is the writer’s argument? Comment on the effectiveness of the thesis statement in helping you get the writer’s attitude to the topic.”

Secondly, students were given the following essay topic:

*Do you agree or disagree with the following idea:*

*Not everything learnt is contained in books.*

After students wrote their first drafts, they exchanged their papers and half of the students were given Checklist A (18 students) and the other half were given checklist B (18 students). Students provided feedback for the first drafts that they received from their peers. Depending on the feedback they received, they wrote their second draft. For the comparison, first the

written feedback was compared between the groups, second the revisions done were compared between the groups.

## Results and Discussion

A comparison of the responses received to the peer feedback questions on Checklist A and those in Checklist B showed that the responses received for the revised checklist were longer and more detailed than the traditional one. For example, for the introduction part the following question was asked to the peer reviewers on Checklist A: “ Does the introductory paragraph have general sentences which provide background to the topic? If not, how can it be improved?”. The responses received to this question on Checklist A were usually short, some of them limited to “Yes” or “No” leaving the second part of the question unanswered. In Checklist B, for the corresponding section the question asked to peer reviewers was: “Underline the background information (lead-in) What does it tell you about the topic? Does it make you interested in the topic of this paper? Why? Why not?”. This question differs from the traditional questions in that it asks the reviewer to perform an action by underlining and this also requires the reviewer to locate the information correctly. After doing this, the reviewer is asked to report the information given by the background information. Then the evaluative question comes and the reviewer is asked to evaluate the level of interest the background creates. Lastly a comment is requested from the reviewer. When the reviewer answers all these questions, the responses have a meaning and can be used for revisions more effectively.

Generally Checklist B generated more peer feedback. For example regarding the introduction questions mentioned above, examples of responses are: “ It begins to give background information with asking questions. With them she wants to explain how insufficient in knowledge we are. It makes me a little interested in the topic.” , and “It tells the place of books in our life. It interested me but not much because it sounds very classical.”. These sentences show the writer that the background was read and understood by the reviewer but not found sufficiently interesting. After reading this response, the writer would be more inclined to make the introduction more interesting rather than reading the response “No.” which sounds judgmental and maybe discouraging on the part of the writer. Responses which include a paraphrase of the writer’s ideas would also create a sense of audience which would make the writer feel the necessity to produce better, more interesting work.

## Comparison of Revisions Made After Receiving the Feedback

The revisions from 1st to the 2nd draft were analyzed according to Faigley and Witte's (1981) Taxonomy of Revisions (Appendix C). Because the checklist was prepared only for commenting on content and organization, all the revisions fit either the category of meaning-preserving changes or microstructure meaning changes on the taxonomy.

Table 1 summarizes the revisions made from first draft to second draft in both groups. The comparison of the revisions between the two groups shows that the revised checklist generated more revisions from first to second draft. On the whole, the biggest difference is in the number of additions (microstructure meaning changes) which is 25 in the traditional checklist group and increased to 68 in the revised checklist group.

|  | <i>addition<br/>(microstructure<br/>meaning<br/>changes)</i> | <i>addition<br/>(meaning-<br/>preserving)</i> | <i>Deletion<br/>(meaning-<br/>preserving)</i> | <i>Permutations<br/>(meaning-<br/>preserving)</i> | <b>Total</b> |
|--|--|---|---|---|--------------|
| Group A –<br>Preliminary<br>Checklist      | 25   | 22  | 9   | 4   | 60           |
| <b>Group B -<br/>Revised<br/>Checklist</b> | 68   | 25  | 7   | 8   | 107          |

Table 1: Comparison of revisions.

An example of an addition (Microstructure meaning changes) is given below:

1st draft: A newspaper include [sic.] all the new about the news of the day

2nd draft: It includes the events happening in not only the country which we live in but also around the world.

Such changes are made much more by the group of student writers receiving the peer feedback from the revised checklist group.

Figure 1 shows the comparison of total number of revisions made by the two groups of student writers:

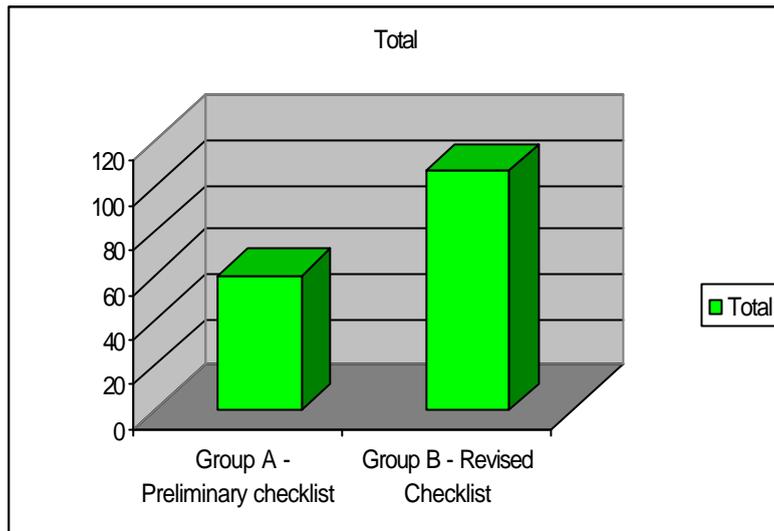


Figure 1: Comparison of total revisions.

In the light of the comparison of two groups, it can be concluded that the type of questions used to guide feedback influenced the amount of peer feedback generated by the peer reviewers. Questions which motivate students to analyze each others' essays rather than just evaluate them created more feedback. However, only generating more feedback does not guarantee that the feedback is going to create a change in the second draft of the essays. For this reason, the revisions were also compared and the comparison showed that changing the type of questions used increased the amount of revisions made by student writers. Questions which motivate students to analyze rather than just evaluate created more revisions by student writers.

## References

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Appendix A: Checklist A

**PEER EDITING CHECKLIST FOR CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION**

**My name is ..... and I am editing .....’s paper.**

|   |  | PEER EDITOR’S COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS |
|---|--|--|
| <b>ESSAY ORGANIZATION AND CONTENT</b>   |  |  |
| <p><b>1. Introduction:</b></p> <p>a. Is there an introductory paragraph?</p> <p>b. Does the introductory paragraph have general sentences which provide background to the topic? If not how can it be improved?</p> <p>c.. Does the introductory paragraph interest you? If not how can it be made more interesting?</p> <p>d.. Does the introductory paragraph contain a clear thesis statement?</p> <p>e. Can you get a clear idea about what this essay is going to be about by reading the thesis statement?</p> <p>f. If not how can the writer improve this? Help the writer develop a thesis statement.</p> <p><b>2. Body:</b></p> <p>a. Do the body paragraphs in the body part support and develop the thesis adequately? If not what is missing? Give your suggestion.</p> <p><b>3. Conclusion:</b></p> <p>a. Is there a concluding sentence that is either a paraphrase of the thesis or a summary of the main points?</p> <p>b. Is there a final comment?</p> |  |  |
| <b>PARAGRAPH ORGANIZATION AND CONTENT</b>   |  |  |
| <p><b>4. Topic Sentence:</b></p> <p>a. Does each paragraph have a topic sentence?</p> <p>b. Does each topic sentence have a controlling idea that can be developed?</p>   |  |  |

**5.Supporting sentences:**

- a. Does your partner give three supporting ideas to support his or her opinion?
- b. Do the supporting sentences flow smoothly?
- c. Are there sufficient concrete details to support each point?
- d. Are transitions signals used effectively both within and between paragraphs?
- e. Are paragraph boundaries appropriate?
- d. Does each paragraph have unity?

**6. Concluding sentences:**

- e. Are concluding sentences used?

Appendix B: Checklist B

**PEER EDITING CHECKLIST FOR CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION**

*Note for peer editors: Focus only on content and organization, do not comment on grammar or language use. Write your answers in the spaces provided.*

|  |
|--|
| <p>4. <b>Introduction:</b></p> <p>a. How many paragraphs are there? Label the paragraphs as introduction, body and conclusion according to their content.</p> <p>b. Underline the background information (lead-in) . What does it tell you about the topic. Does it make you interested in the topic of this paper? Why? Why not?</p> <p>d. Circle the thesis statement. What is the writer's argument? Comment on the effectiveness of the thesis statement in helping you get the writer's attitude to the topic.</p> <p>5. <b>Body:</b></p> <p>a. Put a box around the statements which support the thesis statement. What ideas are used to support the thesis, write briefly? Comment on the strength/persuasiveness of these ideas.</p> <p>b. Which examples or evidence is used to support the main points?</p> |
|--|

c. Would reading the essay help you change your view on this issue if you had the opposite view with the author? Why?

d. What new perspective does this essay bring on the issue that you did not consider before?

**6. Conclusion:**

a. How does the author conclude the essay? Which main points in the essay are restated? Which main points are not restated? Comment on the effectiveness of the conclusion.

b. What is the final comment of the author which helps you answer the question: So What? If you were the author, what kind of final comment would you make about this issue?

**4.Paragraphs**

a. What is each paragraph discussing? Write briefly in the space provided.

Par1:

Par2:

Par3:

Par4:

Par5:

Par6:

Par7:

- b. Which ideas in the paragraphs are irrelevant to the topic.(do not contribute to the discussion or destroy unity) Write them in the space provided.

**Write any suggestions that you have which would help to improve the content of this essay and make it more persuasive.**

## Appendix C: Faigley and Witte's (1981) Taxonomy of Revisions

1. B. Meaning-preserving changes (paraphrase the original concepts in the text by making them implicit or explicit, without altering the meaning. No new information is brought to the text. Primarily syntactical or lexical changes. All information is recoverable by inferencing.)

(II) Additions (information was previously inferred but is now explicit)

(12) Deletions (information was previously explicit but now must be inferred)

(13) Substitutions (elements are traded)

(14) Permutations (elements are rearranged)

(15) Distributions (a single unit becomes more than one unit) (16) Consolidations (multiple units are combined into one unit)

II. Meaning Changes (Affect the concepts and meaning by bringing new information to the text.)

A. Microstructure Changes (Simple adjustments or elaborations of existing text. Do not affect the overall summary, gist, or direction of the ideas in the text. Do not affect the overall interpretation of the text. May involve the use of cohesive ties, causing sentence sequences to be understood as consistent and parallel connected discourse.)

(21) Additions

(22) Deletions

(23) Substitutions

(24) Permutations

(25) Distributions

(26) Consolidations