

Role of Teacher, Peer and Teacher-Peer Feedback in Enhancing ESL Students' Writing

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Abstract: The English language is learned as a second language in Malaysian secondary schools and writing is an essential component. Although some students may be able to write essays, the quality of these essays remains rather low. This paper describes a study that examined ESL students' perception of the role of teacher, peer and combined teacher-peer feedback in ESL writing. A total of 150 students from five secondary schools responded to a questionnaire comprising 32 items on a 4-point Likert scale, two multiple-choice items and three open-ended items. Results from the study showed that most of the students welcome the combined use of teacher and peer feedback in ESL writing. An implication of this study is that the two forms of feedback can play an important and complementary role in enhancing the acquisition of writing among ESL students.

Key words: Students' perception • Teacher feedback • Peer feedback • Combined feedback • ESL writing

INTRODUCTION

English is taught as a second language in Malaysian secondary schools and ESL writing is one of the essential components in the curriculum. However, ESL writing is a difficult skill to acquire as it involves more than just putting correct grammatical forms together [1]. Second language writers (L2) have less language knowledge and confidence compared to writers writing in English as a first or native language [2]. While first language (L1) writers have the luxury of time in developing their writing skills, L2 writers often struggle with the L2 and writing skills in general.

Feedback is considered an important enabling strategy for ESL writers [3, 4]. It is thus important to understand what students think of feedback and how it can assist writers in writing better essays. In general, teaching English as a second language is a big challenge for teachers in Malaysia. Students are still unable to acquire or comprehend the language even after eleven years of learning the language at both the primary and secondary school levels. Malaysia has accorded English as a second language as stated in Article 152 of the constitution. Many rural school students have difficulty understanding English and few are able to use English in everyday life [5]. After several years of studying English, the outcome is still less than satisfactory [6]. The final product in students' writing is often full of errors.

Teachers are often apprehensive about whether the students will examine the feedback given and make the necessary corrections [6].

Students who are competent writers of English are often able to express themselves effectively in the L2 classroom. Moreover, they are at an advantage when applying for jobs in the private sectors and multinational companies. However, the process of teaching and learning ESL writing in school is a daunting task both for teachers and students. In Malaysian schools, the English class is allocated only 200 minutes per week which includes ESL writing [7]. Teachers are required to teach all the language components with the allocation of the largest portion of time (usually 80 minutes per week) given to writing. Despite that, the time given is considered limited because students have to digest all input given within a short period of time and are yet expected to achieve the required proficiency set by the Ministry of Education.

Consequently, in writing classes students often hand in their first drafts of their writing as their final products. They do not produce multiple drafts of their essays because of time constraints, the large number of students in a classroom, absence of the practice of process writing and students' lack of motivation. These limitations pose as barriers for students in achieving the acceptable writing proficiency level. In any kind of learning, feedback plays a central role to ensure effectiveness [4]. In writing

lessons, though teacher corrections of errors in students' essays serve as examples for writers, in reality most students benefit little from the corrections because the students treat work handed in as final products rather than as a stage in the process of improvement or completion [8].

Past studies have shown the various types of errors made by Malaysian ESL students in their writing. Malaysian students' essays were found to contain errors on the use of determiners, subject-verb (S-V) agreement and the wrong use of the copula "be" [9]. Other errors included errors in tenses, mechanics, conditionals and S-V agreement [10]. In general, past research has shown that the ability to write in English among many Malaysian students is generally unsatisfactory even though English is considered a second language in Malaysia [11].

Effectiveness of Teacher and Peer Feedback: Various studies have been conducted in the past on the effectiveness of teacher feedback and peer feedback in ESL writing [12-16]. In general, teacher feedback is regarded as a main requirement for improvement in students' essay writing. Teacher feedback is defined as feedback from a source to a recipient in the form of information about the correctness, accuracy, or appropriateness of the recipient's past performance [17]. It is input or information given to the writer for revision [18]. However, in terms of the form and content of teacher feedback, research shows that most ESL writing teachers make similar types of comments and are more concerned with language-specific errors and problems. Therefore, it is not surprising that teacher comments are often confusing, arbitrary and inaccessible [19]. In addition, research reviews on teacher feedback suggest that even with well written feedback, there was no evidence that it would produce significant improvements in students' subsequent writing [20].

A majority of teachers mark errors painstakingly [21]. Teachers tend to treat error feedback as a job with little long-term significance. Although they spend massive amounts of time marking students' writing, teachers themselves are not totally convinced that their efforts are effective in terms of students' improvement. Too many error corrections can be discouraging to the learner-writer, thus teacher feedback should focus mainly on content [22]. Many ESL students greatly value teacher feedback and consistently rate it more highly than alternative forms such as peer feedback and oral feedback in writing conferences [23]. A study found that the 81 respondents

in the survey study overwhelmingly considered teacher feedback as effective compared to peer and self feedback [24]. Other studies in multiple-draft settings showed that teacher feedback helped students improve their writing. In the absence of teacher feedback, ESL students showed improvement in the content of their revisions, but those who were given teacher feedback made greater improvements [25]. Another study on teacher feedback showed that 93.5 percent of the 155 respondents in the study indicated that teacher feedback helped them improve their writing [26]. Similarly, teacher feedback has been observed as having a positive effect on the accuracy of the target form when participants are asked to revise their writings [27]. Although the results of research on the effectiveness of teacher feedback are inconclusive, the effectiveness of teacher feedback is fairly established in process writing.

Previous comparative studies on teacher and peer comments have been conducted both in L1 and L2 contexts. A study of secondary school L2 writers showed that the students described the teacher as a "figure of authority that guaranteed quality" [3]. In contrast to teacher feedback, peer feedback is a learning strategy in which a student evaluates another student's work via feedback. Good ESL writing needs drafting, revision, making changes and corrections and peers can actually provide useful feedback at various levels in the writing process.

The beneficial effects of peer feedback have been documented by a number of researchers in ESL writing [12-14]. The studies revealed that first, peer feedback is pitched more at the learner's level of development or interest and is therefore more informative than teacher feedback. Secondly, it enhances audience awareness and enables the writer to see egocentrism in his or her own writing. In addition, learners' attitudes towards writing can be enhanced with the help of more supportive peers and their apprehension can be lowered. Learners can learn more about writing and revision by reading each other's drafts critically and their awareness of what makes writing successful and effective can be enhanced and, lastly learners eventually become more autonomous writers.

However, although ESL students may perceive that peer feedback enables them to gain an awareness of the audience and could help improve their writing, they may still be unsure of their strengths as competent readers [28]. Many researchers are also not convinced of the ability of novice writers in helping their peers in the revising process [29, 2, 30]. A study [31] found that while

students agreed that peer feedback helped them to locate problems in their own writing, they only selectively incorporated the feedback into their revisions. Similarly, in another study [32] that involved Indonesian EFL students, the results revealed that peer feedback was perceived by the students to be a useful way to improve their writing although the improvement was observed to be superficial.

Peer feedback has its limitations. For instance, there are three main problems of peer feedback: (1) Students tend to respond to surface errors instead of semantic or textual one; (2) Students give advice that often does not facilitate revision; and (3) Students have difficulty deciding whether their peer's feedback is valid [23]. Other researchers investigated the impact of peer feedback in ESL writing classrooms and concurred that although peer feedback offers many ways to improve students' writing, its effectiveness is still highly questionable [33-36].

From the above reviews, it can be suggested that while the effectiveness of teacher feedback in multiple-draft settings appears to be established, the value of peer feedback is otherwise, particularly in ESL writing.

Comparative Studies on the Effectiveness of Teacher and Peer Feedback: Comparative studies have been conducted on the relative effectiveness of teacher feedback and peer feedback in enhancing ESL writing. Earlier studies found that teacher feedback brought more improvements than peer feedback and that the students doubted the quality and accuracy of their peers' corrections and comments [37]. In a study that compared written peer feedback and teacher feedback, it was found that neither types of feedback had helped ESL students to improve in their revisions [12].

More recent comparative studies on ESL writing yielded findings in favor of teacher feedback; the effect of peer feedback was found to be minimal [38]. In terms of preference for type of feedback, many students showed preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback [24]. The above findings in ESL writing indicated that teacher feedback was either more effective than peer feedback in enhancing ESL writing or was considered more favorably than peer feedback by students. Some researchers argued that when students are not forced to make a choice, they may welcome both peer feedback and teacher feedback [39].

The Study: The main aim of this study was to examine students' thinking of the role of the combined use of teacher feedback and peer feedback in enhancing ESL

writing in the hope that both types could be used to help improve students' writing performance. Hence, the research questions posited for the study were: (1) What are the students' perception of the role of teacher feedback in enhancing ESL writing?; (2) What are the students' perception of the use of peer feedback in enhancing ESL writing?; and (3) What are the students' perception on the combined use of teacher feedback and peer feedback in ESL writing? Students' perception in this study refers to the ESL students' beliefs on the effectiveness of employing teacher feedback, peer feedback and a combined use of teacher feedback and peer feedback in enhancing their ESL writing. Teacher feedback can be seen as any procedure given by a teacher which is used to inform a learner on whether an instructional response is right or wrong [40]. For the purpose of this study, however, teacher feedback refers to the written feedback given by teachers as response to their students' errors in ESL writing that looks into aspects of content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics of writing.

In peer feedback, other writers read and provide feedback on what their peers have written [8]. Peer feedback activities tend to generate more comments on the content, organization and vocabulary [40]. Since the writers are the students, peer feedback is understood as having other students to read and to give comments, corrections, criticisms and suggestions on what other students have written. Peer feedback in this study refers to a peer commenting on another student's paper on the aspects of content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics of writing in written form. ESL writing refers to the process of writing which is learning how to write by writing [13, 17]. This current emphasis on writing instruction focuses on the process of creating writing rather than on the end product [41]. In this study, ESL writing refers to the writing of essays in English through process writing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted using a survey research method. The participants of the study were Form Five students from five out of 24 national secondary schools in a southern state in Malaysia. One intermediate level class was chosen from the 5 schools in the district. Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using percentages and frequencies. The instruments comprised a 32 four-point Likert scale items, two multiple-choice items and three open-ended items.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the findings and discussion of the study in relation to the research questions. It presents the students' perception on the role of teacher and peer feedback in enhancing ESL writing as well as their perception on the combined use of teacher feedback and peer feedback in ESL writing.

Teacher Feedback and Peer Feedback: Figure 1 shows the aspect of organization in ESL to illustrate the students' perception on the role of teacher and peer feedback.

It shows that 96.7% of the students (145 students) strongly agreed or agreed while only 3.3% (5 students) strongly disagreed that their teachers often addressed the aspect of organization when giving feedback on their essay writing. Meanwhile, 78 students (52.0%) strongly agreed or agreed and approximately 72 students (48.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their peers often addressed the aspect of grammar when giving feedback.

This shows that the students seemed to have a positive response to the role of teacher feedback in enhancing ESL writing. The students perceived that their teachers tended to use positive feedback more frequently. They also thought that it was important for their teachers to correct all their written errors. In addition, the students agreed that their teachers often pointed out and corrected all mistakes when giving feedback on their essays. In general, the students perceived that their teachers did not only give general comments on their essay writing, but had also included specific comments. In general, the students placed their teachers in a higher position in giving feedback to their essays compared to their peers. The students considered teacher feedback as an important and necessary component in responding to their essay writing.

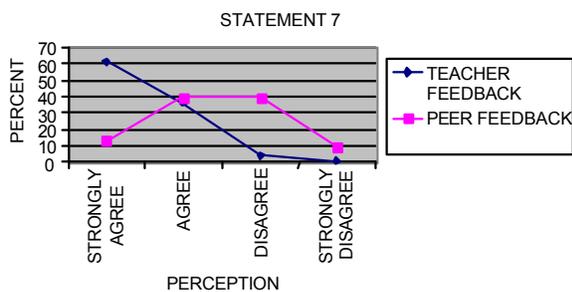


Fig. 1: Perception on teacher and peer feedback on organization of writing

In contrast to teacher feedback, the findings showed that the students had an overall positive perception of the use of peer feedback in enhancing ESL writing. However, the students perceived the role of peer feedback to be less facilitative in enhancing their ESL writing. The students had mixed perceptions on the reliability of peer feedback. This is supported by other previous research on peer feedback [38-40]. The students appeared to regard their peers as having an equal status with them and that their peers are less proficient in providing feedback compared to their teachers. It was also found that the students had mixed perceptions on the reliability of peer feedback. However, they thought positively of the use of peer feedback in enhancing ESL writing in general. It was found that about half of the students perceived that their peers did not provide positive feedback more frequently on their essay writing compared to their teachers who provided more positive feedback. More than half of the students believed that it is unnecessary for their peers to correct all their written errors. Most of the students thought that their peers do not often point out or correct all mistakes when giving written feedback compared to their teachers. They also believed that their peers only provided general comments on their essays.

On the combined use of teacher feedback and peer feedback in enhancing ESL writing, the students had mostly positive thinking of the combined use of teacher feedback and peer feedback in their essay writing efforts. It appears that the majority of the students preferred a combined feedback; that is teacher feedback and peer feedback, respectively as shown in Figure 2. The study showed that a majority of the students thought positively of the combined use of both teacher and peer feedback in ESL writing.

The results of the survey showed that many of the students think that both teacher feedback and peer feedback play a greater role in their ESL writing. They seemed to believe that their teachers are able to help them to improve their ESL writing. At the same time, they find peers helpful in general for their peers are able to give some input in enhancing their writing. They believe that learning to write essays using this combined method is beneficial because they can get different opinions from different people. All the students perceived some form of improvement in their writing with the combination approach. The students seemed convinced that they could improve their writing with assistance from both their teachers and peers.

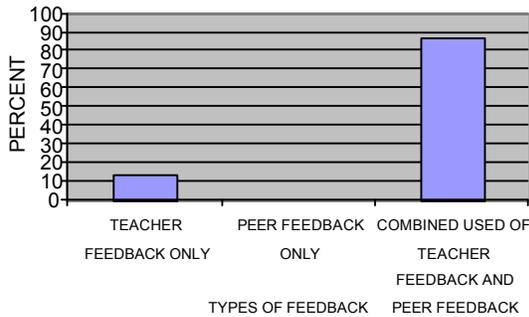


Fig. 2: Students' preference for peer, teacher and a combination of peer and teacher feedback

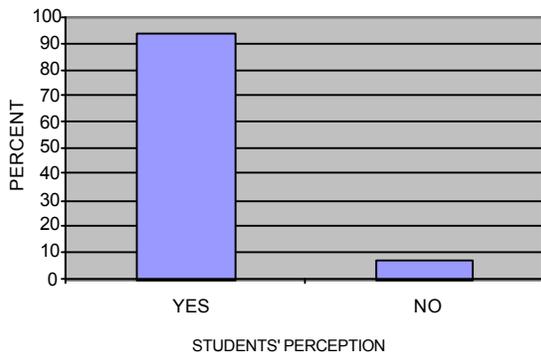


Fig. 3: Perception on the effectiveness of the combination of peer and teacher feedback

Figure 3 displays the percentage of students' agreement on the effectiveness of the combination of teacher and peer feedback.

A total of 93.3% of the students (140 students) thought that the combined use of both types of feedback is more effective for their ESL writing. Meanwhile, only 6.7% (10 students) thought otherwise. These students preferred teacher feedback over student feedback for their ESL writing. The students believed that that the combined use of teacher feedback and peer feedback is more effective and play a significant role in enhancing their ESL writing.

CONCLUSION

Teacher feedback can assist learners to notice a target structure, to compare it with their existing knowledge and to integrate it into that knowledge. Peer feedback, on the other hand, can also help learners to notice the target structure while reconfirming its use and providing additional input via the learners' input. Thus, the two forms of editing and response to writing can interact in a synergistic relationship, each shaping and in turn being shaped by the other. Combining teacher

feedback and peer feedback in ESL writing may not only possibly help increase immediate writing abilities, but also help promote durability of the skill. This study contributes to research in highlighting students' positive thinking of the important role of both teacher feedback and peer feedback in developing students' writing skills. An important implication for ESL writing is that although teacher feedback is considered more effective by many students, peer feedback with appropriate training provided to students may well serve as an important supporting role in helping learners in their writing. A combination of both types of feedback is thus crucial in the effort to improve students' writing in the ESL classroom.

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