



## The relative effects of peer and teacher feedback on improvement in EFL students' writing ability



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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the relative effects of peer and teacher feedback on students' writing ability. One group received teacher feedback on every preliminary draft over one academic year while a second group gave and received peer feedback on every preliminary draft over the same period. Improvement was measured by gains between pre-treatment and post-treatment writing test scores. While there was no significant difference between gains for organization, vocabulary, content, or total essay scores, the teacher feedback group gained significantly more in grammar scores than the peer feedback group. Investigation of the feedback given by peers and the teacher showed that significantly more of the teacher's feedback related to meaning-level issues and content. The findings of the study suggest that it may be better for teachers to provide feedback on grammar and content, while peers provide feedback on organization and academic style.

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### Introduction

There has been a great deal of debate about whether teacher feedback leads to improvement in L2 writing ability (e.g. Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1996, 2007). Although this topic has been the focus of numerous studies, we are yet to reach a verdict about whether or not teacher feedback is beneficial in the improvement of writing ability.

The current study represents an investigation into the relative benefit of peer and teacher written feedback. The university and instructor in focus adopt a process approach to writing. According to Keh (1990), the process approach consists of pre-writing and the writing of three or more drafts. The writing of more than one draft by definition entails revision of the ideas expressed and/or editing of the language used. Therefore, in research on the effect of teacher feedback within the process approach to writing, it is difficult to justify a control group which receives no feedback between drafts. Guenette (2007) suggests that there is no point in using a group which does not receive feedback at all as a control group because no-one proposes that no feedback at all is one of the options open for consideration. However, the absence of a control group has been the main weakness of longitudinal studies on feedback in writing (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). For many instructors, the most viable alternative to teacher feedback would be peer feedback which has become almost as common as teacher feedback in writing classes. Therefore, to study the effect of teacher feedback, the learners in this study were divided into two groups, one of which received systematic teacher feedback on preliminary drafts of every essay for the period of one academic year while the other received no systematic teacher feedback, instead giving and receiving systematic peer feedback on the preliminary drafts of every essay for the same period. A pre-test, post-test research design was used in order to compare the

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improvement in writing ability made by the two groups over the one year period and ascertain the relative benefits, if any, of peer and teacher feedback.

Peers and the teacher may focus on different aspects of writing in their feedback leading to differences in improvement in writing ability of students in the two groups. For example; it has been suggested that teachers may focus on surface-level issues while peers may attend more to meaning-level issues (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006). In order to determine whether differences in the types of feedback given by peers and the teacher may have led to significant differences in improvement in writing ability, the kinds of feedback given by the teacher and peers were also compared.

The research questions for the current study are:

1. Is there any difference between the amount of improvement in writing ability achieved by EFL university students who receive systematic teacher feedback on their writing compared with those who give and receive systematic peer feedback?
2. Is there any difference in the types of feedback students received from teachers compared to from peers?

## Review of previous studies

A number of previous studies used various different definitions of improvement and various permutations of teacher feedback. Moreover, some studies had methodological problems making it difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions (see Ferris, 1999; Guenette, 2007). A brief overview of these past studies will be provided in order to clarify the methods and intentions of this study.

### *Improvement in writing ability*

The most important distinction which must be drawn is between improvement of a piece of writing, through revision, and improvement in the writing ability of the learner, which can only be determined in subsequent instances of writing. A number of researchers (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener, 2008; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) have demonstrated that teacher feedback had a significant effect on subsequent drafts of the same piece of writing. However, if we are to consider the effects of written feedback on improvements in learners' writing ability we need to consider its effect on subsequent instances of writing, rather than on subsequent drafts of the same text (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 1999, 2004, 2010; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2004).

In order to determine the effect of feedback on improvement in writing ability, a pre-test and a post-test need to be used. However, few studies on written feedback in writing have used a pre-test, post-test research design. Most of the studies on written feedback that have used a pre-test, post-test research design have been experimental studies in which students received feedback only once before measuring its effect (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, Wright, & Moldowa, 2009; Van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2011). A longitudinal study with a pre-test, post-test research design is likely to yield different results from such one-shot studies.

If a pre-test and a post-test are to be used, it is important to consider the characteristics of the tests in order to measure improvement as accurately as possible. In evaluating studies on feedback in writing, Truscott (2007) states that post-tests should be given in a different context from the research treatment. He found that many studies in classrooms also used post-treatment tests which were carried out in the same class and instigated by the same teacher as the feedback treatment, whereas if the post-tests were given in a different context from the treatment we may expect to see less effect. This is because, for example, students who have become conditioned to focus on grammatical correctness in a certain class are also likely to focus on grammatical correctness when taking a test in that class. In addition to this, it would also seem that in order to determine the effect of feedback on the improvement of writing, a direct writing test should be used, for indirect assessment of writing may lack content validity and construct validity (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Furthermore, Bitchener (2008) explains that we can only validly measure improvement if the pre-test and the post-test employ the same type of writing task.

### *Focus of feedback*

The main thrust of the discussion on the issue of teacher feedback was the "Grammar Correction Debate" between Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007) and Ferris (1999, 2004). As the name illustrates, this debate is limited to the effects of feedback on form on the improvement of learners' grammatical ability. Many studies (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Fazio, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Sheen, 2007) have emphasized teacher written feedback as an implicit form of grammar instruction and consequently targeted a particular grammatical form/s for feedback. In fact, in all of these studies combined only a limited number of grammatical forms have been investigated. Likewise, when assessing the benefit of such feedback, in many studies (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2009; Bitchener et al., 2005; Fazio, 2001; Kepner, 1991; Lalande, 1982; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Rob, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Sheen, 2007) the learners' ability to use that particular form/s was assessed through indirect writing assessment, rather than assessing their writing ability through direct writing assessment. It therefore remains unclear whether teacher feedback leads to improvement in writing ability more generally or even to increased acquisition of the many grammatical forms which have not been investigated in these studies.

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