



# Optimal feedback structure and interactional pattern in formative peer practices: Students' beliefs

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 15 November 2016

Received in revised form 30 January 2018

Accepted 12 February 2018

### Keywords:

Peer feedback

Student reactions

Feedback structure

Interactional pattern

## ABSTRACT

This multi-methods study explored the perceptual reactions of 338 college students to peer feedback prior to and after instruction, addressing its structural and interactional aspects alike. The data were collected through questionnaire, verbal protocol, demographic checklist, and group interview. Based on the quantitative results, a relatively conservative (e.g., desire for some of the errors to be corrected), dependent (e.g., tendency towards cooperative follow-up assignments), and restrictive (e.g., perceived superiority of language errors) view at early stages was gradually superseded with a more confident (e.g., call for receiving hints), democratic (e.g., demanding feedback on content errors), and autonomous (e.g., preference for solo post-feedback activities) inclination. Protocol results reported the students' deeper understanding of peer activities and higher perceived self-regulation in the post-treatment condition. The group interview indicated, above all, that students preferred assessment by multiple and different (rather than the same) partners and that peer feedback gradually encouraged competition rather than jealousy and retaliation since their tension and shyness considerably lessened.

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## 1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) scholars are progressively looking for autonomous and cooperative learning and assessment. This explains why, in spite of the significant role teachers play in the feedback process, much of the recent feedback research is concentrating on putting the learners at the center and involving them more in the learning process. Moreover, one of the eminent aspects of assessment studies in recent years has been the shift of focus from objective and one-shot grading to a more subjective and formative (ongoing) evaluation. As long as autonomous learning involves active participation of learners to form their own process of learning, and cooperative learning encompasses shared attempts in doing tasks, peer assessment matches these new objectives (Van Zundert, Sluijsmans, & Merrienboer, 2010).

Peer assessment is "an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners" (Topping, 1998, p. 250). Research on students' perceptions of peer feedback has mainly addressed the interactional (e.g., group size, quality of interaction, type of task) and interpersonal (e.g., degree of intimacy, trust in peers' competence, psychological safety) mechanisms underlying paired activities (e.g., Mulder, Pearce, & Baik, 2014; Sato, 2013), leaving their structural aspects (e.g., amount of feedback, method of correction, area of feedback) fairly untouched. In addition, the present studies are not consistent or conclusive in their findings since formative peer feedback is

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warmly embraced in some (e.g., Loretto, DeMartino, & Godley, 2016; Planas Lladó et al., 2014; Russell, Van Horne, Ward, Bettis, & Gikonyo, 2017; Sato, 2013) but reacted negatively in others (e.g., Ghahari & Farokhnia, 2017, 2018; Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010; Xiao & Lucking, 2008).

Motivated by the gap in the literature, the present study was set up to apply peer practice in English as foreign language (EFL) writing classrooms. The intention was to elicit the students' perceptions and preferences in pre-treatment and post-treatment conditions, with a particular focus on structural and interactional dimensions of peer feedback. Peer feedback was treated as both a learning intervention and a social process, and the data was collected via four sources: questionnaire, verbal protocol, demographic profile, and group interview.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Peer feedback: benefits and challenges

A legacy of sociocultural theory and the learner-centered paradigm, peer feedback (PF) is a technique in which learners assess and/or are assessed by their associates. It is built on the idea of *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Tudge, 1990), that when peers work on a task in pairs or groups, and are gradually assisted by a more proficient partner, they are likely to have more gains than when they work alone (Diab, 2016). In educational processes, this happens in various forms such as “grading a peer's research report, providing qualitative feedback on a classmate's presentation, or evaluating a fellow trainee's professional task performance” (Van Zundert et al., 2010, p. 270).

The benefits of PF are countless. It can be productive and authentic concerning learner development (Sivan, 2010). Students' involvement in peer activities can expose them to a wide range of answers to similar problems, increase their abilities in critical appraisal, and shift them from passive recipients to more independent ones. However, providing for high quality peer practice demands “time for organization, training, and monitoring” (Foley, 2013, p. 212). If applied effectively, it can enhance the “frequency, extent and speed of feedback for students while keeping workload for teachers under control” (Gielen et al., 2010, p. 305). Getting learners involved in the evaluation procedure leads to an increase in the quantity of assessors and feedback options, develops reflection, and thereby contributes to learner autonomy (Gielen et al., 2010).

Previous studies suggest that PF can be beneficial for learners under certain conditions, and that learning how to apply it in classes is a salient and long-term ability (Nilson, 2003; Peng, 2010). It has been documented that PF can boost learners' autonomy and confidence if applied at early stages of classes (Sivan, 2010; Warner & Miller, 2015). Teachers hold positive views towards PF (Van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006) often to accommodate their heavy workload (Ruegg, 2015), but they are particularly concerned with design quality (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000, cited in Ghahari & Farokhnia, 2018) and training and practice (Van Zundert et al., 2010) as potential mediators. With practice, Van Zundert et al. declared, the reliability and validity of peer assessment and students' attitudes tend to be improved. Learners too find PF helpful in increasing the level of cognitive thinking (Cheng & Warren, 2005) both before and after peer exercises (Liu & Chai, 2006; Peng, 2010, pp. 89–107; Tsivitanidou, Zacharia, & Hovardas, 2010) or just after the exercises (Azarnoosh, 2013), but they sometimes demand teachers' comments to complement those of their peers (Kwok, 2008). Similarly, students appreciate being involved in finding the principles of their own assessment (Sivan, 2010), regard PF as authentic, reliable, and fair (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999), and acknowledge its positive influence on their learning process (Mulder et al., 2014).

Contradictory results, however, exist in the literature, suggesting some negative views that prevail towards peer practices. Most objections concern their validity. According to Strijbos, Narciss, and Dunnebie (2010), “as students are not experts in a subject area, peer feedback is susceptible to variation” (p. 291). Lack of experience in peer practice affects learners' confidence (Sivan, 2010), and, in case of grading, makes them to under-mark or over-mark each other (Ghahari & Farokhnia, 2017; Gielen et al., 2010; Min, 2003, 2005; Rotsaert, Panadero, Estradac, & Schellens, 2017; Wang, 2009). Teachers are also often skeptical about the practicality of peer practices for accomplishing them is time-consuming (Rollinson, 2005) or in need of enough prior training (Min, 2005). These problems can be partly improved by utilizing comprehensible criteria, having double or multiple assessors, concentrating on the salient areas of writing, or by having some experienced assessors (Foley, 2013).

Another challenge for peer practices is students' little trust and confidence in their own and peers' knowledge as assessors (e.g., Gielen et al., 2010; Miao, Badger, & Yu, 2006; Van Zundert et al., 2010). Van Gennip, Segers, and Tillema (2010) introduced *trust issue* (i.e. trust in one's own as well as peers' knowledge and ability as assessors), *psychological safety* (i.e. sense of safety and security to take interpersonal risks in groups), and *value diversity* (i.e. variety in opinions about the aim, task, and mission of the group) factors as the most notable affective problems of peer practice. Besides, there is accumulating evidence that students' emotional state and expectations can mediate the efficacy of feedback, as students often express concerns about the fairness of PF and assume that evaluation is a role of the teacher rather than learners (Pope, 2005; Shute, 2008; Zhang, 1995). Teachers' realization of learners' beliefs, creation of a non-threatening friendly environment, and clarification of the assessment criteria, as Panadero, Romero, and Strijbos (2013) and Han (2017) suggest, can, to a large extent, enhance the efficacy of PF and bring about positive attitudes towards it.

### 2.2. Students' perceptions of formative peer feedback

Research on the views of learners toward PF did not start until 1990s. The focus of research has been mostly on “student preferences and expectations based on one-off questionnaire surveys” (Lee, 2008, p. 145). Sato (2013), for instance, conducted

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