One-to-one and Group Feedback in the L2 Writing Classroom: Benefits and Classroom Implementation

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With the introduction of task-based approaches to language learning and teaching, collaborative language learning, student-centered instruction, and learner autonomy in the last 15 years or so, pair and group work have become central to the language classroom in many L2 learning/teaching contexts around the world (see Edwards & Willis, 2005; Ellis, 2003; McDonough, 2004; Skehan, 2003; Willis, 1996). For instance, McDonough, (2004, p. 208), commenting on the multiple benefits of pair and group work for L2 learning, states that:

Pair and small group activities provide learners with more time to speak the target language than teacher-fronted activities, promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning, and give instructors opportunities to work with individual learners. In addition, learners may feel less anxious and more confident when interacting with peers during pair or small group activities than during whole-class discussions.

In the L2 writing classroom as well, pair and small group work is increasingly occupying center-stage in L2 writing research and pedagogy. One of the major aspects of pair and small group work in the L2 writing classroom that has gained increasing attention in L2 writing research and instruction is peer feedback, defined as students' critiquing and providing feedback on one another's writing (Berg, 1999; Matsuda, 2003; Rollinson, 2005).

In this paper, I will first give an overview of the main benefits of peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom. After that, I will identify the two main peer feedback techniques employed in the classroom, then describe with illustrative examples the procedures for implementing each technique, and conclude the paper with ways for promoting peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom.

Benefits of Peer Feedback

It is now well established that peer feedback is beneficial in the L2 writing classroom as peers can provide useful feedback at various levels (e.g., Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Hyland, 2000; Jacobs et al, 1998; Paulus, 1999; Rollinson, 2005). Indeed peer feedback has become a standard classroom teaching technique in many L2 writing classes. For instance, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) state that peer feedback has become a hallmark of L2 basic writing courses. They list (p. 257) the practical advantages of peer feedback frequently cited in the research literature as follows:

1. Text-centered peer cooperation is mutually supportive and instructive (Gaudiani, 1981) and supports “social growth” (Huff & Kline, 1987, p. 137).
2. Peer collaboration contributes to a comfortable atmosphere in which to discuss writing (Huff & Kline, 1987).
3. Peer interaction increases writers’ awareness of their audience (Huff & Kline, 1987), encouraging them to shift from writer-based to reader-based prose (Beaven, 1977; Horning, 1987).
4. In peer collaboration, writers must narrow the gap between intended meaning and the meaning which is presented in the text and understood by the reader/listener (Cumming, 1990). As Flower, Hayes, Carey, Shriver, and Stratman (1986) note, the “social contract between writer and reader” (p. 50) forms a useful basis for diagnosis and revision (compare. Beach, 1976).
5. Peer response decreases teachers’ marking responsibilities while increasing opportunities for student writing (Huff & Kline, 1987; Peckham, 1978), whereas written teacher feedback alone has been found to be only minimally effective (Kepner, 1991) or even to inhibit production (Hillocks, 1986).


More recently, Rollinson (2005, pp. 24-25) summarizes the main advantages of peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom as follows. Firstly, peer readers can provide valid and useful feedback. For instance, Cauk (1994) reported that 89% of the peer feedback provided by his intermediate/advanced level foreign language (FL) students was valid, and Rollinson (1998) reported that 80% of the peer feedback and comments provided by his college-level students were valid too. Second, peer writers do revise effectively on the basis of comments provided by peer readers. Mendonça and Johnson (1994) and Rollinson (1998) found that 53% and 65% respectively of revisions made were incorporations of peer comments. Third, peer feedback tends to be of a different kind from that of the teacher. Cauk (1994) found that teacher feedback was rather general, whereas students’ feedback was more specific. Fourth, becoming a critical reader of others’ writing may make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing. Fifth, peer feedback creates a sense of audience as writers need to write for audiences, preferably those that can give more or less immediate feedback. At the same time, peer audiences are also potentially more sympathetic than the more distant and possibly more judgmental teacher audience. Sixth, peer feedback can encourage a collaborative dialogue in which two-way feedback is established and meaning is negotiated between the two parties. Seventh, peer feedback may encourage or motivate students to write because it operates on a more informal level than the typically one-way, formal teacher feedback. Finally, when students see the benefit of peer feedback, their attitudes towards writing become more positive.

**Peer Feedback Techniques and Classroom Implementation**

It is possible to identify two main techniques for peer feedback implementation in the L2 writing classroom: the one-to-one or individual feedback technique, and group feedback technique. In this section, these techniques will be separately explained and illustrated with real examples of classroom implementation.

**One-to-one Peer Feedback Technique**

One-to-one peer feedback is perhaps the most common technique for feedback employed in many classroom contexts. Students are asked to write a paragraph or an essay on an assigned topic relevant to their context, setting, level, and course of study. After they have completed this assignment, they are required to swap their writing with a peer for editing, evaluation and feedback. A student’s example paragraph will be used here to illustrate a typical one-to-one peer feedback procedure. The example paragraph used below was taken from the writing course in a level 1 foundation program at a Gulf university. Their language proficiency level (spoken and written) was lower intermediate as determined by an entrance test.

It is worth mentioning that for feedback to have an optimal effect and benefit, it must combine both written and oral feedback because research has shown that explicit written feedback together with conference (oral) feedback significantly affects the level of accuracy in the students’ writing.
(e.g., Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). Specifically, Bitchener et al. found that students who received written feedback and conferencing significantly outperformed those students who received written feedback only. The instructions given to students below therefore include both written and oral feedback.

1. Write a paragraph 8-12 lines long on *How to maintain good health*.
2. Exchange your paragraph with a classmate for editing and feedback.
3. Read and edit your partner’s paragraph, making all necessary corrections and changes.
4. After you have done that, discuss your comments, corrections, or any other questions or clarifications you may have with your partner, the writer of the paragraph in your possession.
5. Re-write your original paragraph in light of both your classmate’s written and oral feedback, corrections, and comments, incorporating whatever changes and modifications you believe necessary.

In the example paragraph below written by Bodour (a pseudonym), Bodour’s original paragraph is followed by the peer-edited paragraph, and then Bodour’s revised paragraph follows the peer editing and feedback.

Original Paragraph:

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**Healthy Body**

Keeping your body health is very important. There are many ways that help us to do that. First, we should make regular check every six months to make sure that our body health and in balance. Second, we should do sports especial in morning because this time we can get vitamin “D” which is very important. Furthermore, this time provides us with energy that enables us to work and enjoy our life. Third, it better for us to have a balanced diet. we can get that by eating food which consist of four groups such as vegetables and fruits. In addition to, we should avoid the fast food because the body do not benefits from it. In conclusion, to keep our body health we should follow these advices.

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Peer-edited Paragraph

As can be seen below, the peer (Hala – also a pseudonym) has managed to identify a number of errors and issues in three components of language accuracy: grammar, vocabulary and mechanics:

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**Healthy Body**

Keeping your body healthy is very important. There are many ways that help us to do that. First, we should make regular checks every six months to make sure that our body is healthy and in balance. Second, we should do sports especially in the morning because in this time we can get vitamin ‘D’ which is very important. Furthermore, sport provides us with energy that enables us to work and enjoy our life. Third, it is better for us to have a balanced diet; we can get that by eating food which consist of four groups such as vegetables and fruits. In addition to, we should avoid the fast food because the body do not benefit from it. In conclusion, to keep our body healthy we should follow these advices.

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Revised Paragraph

As can be seen from the revised paragraph below, Bodour has incorporated many of Hala’s corrections and suggestions, which resulted in a substantially improved paragraph:

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**Healthy Body**

Keeping your body healthy is very important. There are many ways that help us to do that. First, we should make regular checks every six months to make sure that our body is healthy and in balance. Second, we should do sports especially in the morning because in this time we can get vitamin ‘D’ which is very important for the body. Furthermore, sport provides us with energy that enables us to work and enjoy our life. Third, it is better for us to have a balanced diet. We can get that by eating food which consist of four groups such as vegetables, fruits, milk and bread. In addition to, we should avoid the fast food because the body does not benefit from it. In conclusion, to keep our body healthy, we should follow these advices.
Group Feedback Technique

In comparison with the commonly used one-to-one or individual peer feedback technique described above, group feedback is a fairly new technique for peer feedback (Shehadeh, 2007). Like the one-to-one format, students are asked to write a paragraph or an essay on an assigned topic relevant to their context, setting, level, and course of study. After they have done that, a group of 2-3 peers will read and evaluate the writing, and then provide the relevant feedback to the original student-writer. Another student's example paragraph is used here to illustrate a typical group peer feedback procedure. The example paragraph used below was taken from the same writing course, at the same level, in the foundation program at the Gulf university mentioned above. Below are the instructions given to students in the group format. They also included both written and oral feedback.

1. Write a paragraph 8-12 lines long on *a social issue or concern you are aware of.*
2. Sit with your group (3 students in all).
3. Meet with another group.
4. Exchange your paragraphs with your partner group for editing and feedback.
5. Jointly read, edit, and provide all necessary corrections to the three paragraphs of the other group.
6. After you have done all this, discuss your comments, corrections, or any other questions or clarifications you may have with the writers of the paragraphs in your possession.
7. Re-write your original paragraph in light of your peers’ feedback, corrections, and comments, incorporating whatever changes and modifications you find necessary.

As was done with one-to-one feedback, in the sample paragraph below written by Hanadi (a pseudonym), Hanadi’s original paragraph is followed by the group-edited paragraph, and then Hanadi’s revised paragraph resulting from the group’s editing and feedback.

Original Paragraph

Society Problems

In our society we are facing lot of problems that affect our families and our life.
These days our society bleeding from dangerous problems related to drugs, crimes, families problems, moral problems and stranger habits that our children acquires from the surrounding environment.
For example the crimes that happened in teenager schools like fighting and killing each other, smoking, drugs, run from school and a lot of things and that result of family problems and the absent of the parents present in the child life.
Group-edited Paragraph

As can be seen below, the group (the group of three students—all pseudonyms) have managed to identify a number of errors and issues with this paragraph in three components of language accuracy: grammar, vocabulary and mechanics:

Revised Paragraph

Hanadi's revised paragraph below clearly shows that she has incorporated many of the group's corrections and suggestions, which resulted in a substantially improved paragraph:

Social Problems

In our society we are facing a lot of problems that affect our families and our life. These days, our society is bleeding from dangerous problems related to drugs, crimes, families problems, moral problems, and strange habits that our children acquire from the surrounding environment. For example, the problems that take place in teenager schools like fighting and killing each other, smoking drugs, running away from school and a lot of other things, all result from family problems and the absence of the parents from the child's life. Another example is watching TV programs that are bad for family and morals of society. Also, using mobile phones all the time without need a big social problem. Therefore, all society, leaders, families, schools, universities, and all must fight these social problems and bad habits in our society.
Discussion

It is clear from these examples that the editing/feedback and conferencing conditions in the group format are different from those in the one-to-one format. Indeed, the group feedback technique requires special care for setup and successful implementation. One way of setting up and implementing group feedback is to have every student in both groups have his/her writing edited and discussed by the other group, as shown by the example described above. This might, of course, require a whole class period to accomplish. Another way is that for every peer editing task, only one composition from each group is selected—on a rotational basis—for editing and feedback, so that all students in both groups are given equal opportunities for their compositions to be edited and evaluated. In this case, students in each group collaboratively read, edit, and provide feedback on the paragraph in their possession. After that, the two groups take turns to discuss their feedback and comments on the paragraph with the original writer from the other group.

It is true that in this group feedback format, students will enjoy fewer opportunities for their compositions to be evaluated and discussed; nevertheless, research has shown that group feedback resulted in significant improvement of students’ writing compared to the one-to-one peer feedback over just one semester (Shehadeh, 2007). In a specifically designed classroom-based study that sought to examine group feedback, Shehadeh investigated the effect of group feedback, as against individual peer feedback, on students’ writing in an EFL context employing a pre- and post-test design. He found that although students writing accuracy improved significantly in both situations, students in the group situation scored significantly higher than those in the one-to-one situation on the three components examined in this study (mechanics, vocabulary and grammar).

Shehadeh interpreted these findings in the light of Hedgcock and Lefkowitz’s (1992) earlier conclusion that collaborative group feedback makes learners better aware of the structure of their own writing so as to better self-correct:

> It is possible to argue … that the reason group feedback was more successful than one-to-one peer feedback in improving language accuracy in students’ writing in the L2 is because it constitutes a better context for raising learners’ awareness and enabling them to pay attention and notice their errors, weaknesses, and strengths in their writing than a context where only individual peer feedback is available (Shehadeh, 2007, p. 157).

He also interpreted his findings in light of students’ post-test reflections and comments on the experience which reveal that students in the group condition were more receptive to group feedback:

> One can also argue that the advantage of group feedback is partly due to the reliability of the feedback provided in the group format and students’ receptiveness to peer feedback in this format. Keeping all other variables constant, it is possible to argue that collaboration in editing and providing feedback on a peer’s writing is likely to produce more reliable feedback in the eye of the writer because it affords the editing group the opportunity to produce more comprehensive and trustworthy feedback than a setting where only one peer’s feedback is available. It follows that students are likely to be more receptive to feedback from a supportive and collaborative group of students than that from a single student only (Shehadeh, 2007, p. 157).

Finally, based on the findings of his study, Shehadeh (2007 pp. 157-158) identifies four practical advantages of group feedback:
First, … group feedback enables students to pool their joint efforts and discuss different aspects of the writing, thereby producing more comprehensive feedback. Second, group feedback boosts students’ confidence in the validity and reliability of their feedback because it is a result of a joint -not a single student's- effort. Third, knowing that the feedback supplied is a result of a joint effort from a supportive group, the writer’s receptiveness of this feedback is likely to be heightened. Finally, seeing the benefits of group feedback, students’ attitudes towards collaborative group work including group feedback are likely to be enhanced.

We must note, however, that the two main techniques for peer feedback illustrated here (one-to-one and group feedback) are not mutually exclusive or in competition with each other; rather they are complementary. Both techniques can provide students with a valuable tool to improve their accuracy in the L2. The selection of one of these techniques depends on the specific teaching context and a number of other factors including, for instance, class size, the interest of - and negotiation with - students, whether or not the technique was used before or not, and whether or not this technique was effective. The classroom teacher is best situated to identify and utilize the most effective feedback technique relevant to his/her teaching context.

**Conclusion**

Just as pair and group work have become central to the language classrooms in many L2 learning/teaching contexts, so has peer feedback in L2 writing research and pedagogy. This paper provided an overview of the major benefits of the two main techniques for peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom (one-to-one feedback and group feedback), and described the procedures for implementing both techniques, illustrating them with students’ written samples.

One might argue that peer feedback does not always lead to substantial improvement in students’ writing, and that students’ attitudes towards peer feedback are not always positive. Although there could be some truth in this, research has consistently shown that students’ writing has been substantially improved as a result of feedback provided by peers, and that most students’ perceptions and attitudes toward peer feedback are quite positive and favorable (e.g., Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Rollinson, 1998, 2005; Shehadeh, 2007; Storch 2005).

It is worth concluding this paper by suggesting ways in which the teacher can encourage peer feedback and utilize it successfully in the L2 writing classroom. Four such ways can be identified:

1. Have an especially outstanding student/group to discuss their feedback publicly so that all students in the class can benefit from their feedback, comments, and experience.

2. Select some students who have incorporated substantial amounts of peer feedback in their revision to demonstrate to the class how peer feedback enabled them to produce higher quality compositions.

3. Explicitly explain to the class the multiple benefits of feedback, demonstrating these with real examples.

4. Finally, given that training students for peer editing and feedback tasks increases their engagement and interaction, leads to better quality peer feedback and peer talk, and ensures successful implementation and optimal benefits (Berg, 1999; Stanley, 1992; Zhu, 1995), students must be given a training session demonstrating the procedure prior to starting the task. Students must also be given a complete written set of instructions and an oral explanation of the procedure.
References


