Implementing peer feedback for writing tasks

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> 'Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man's growth without destroying his roots.'
>
> Frank A Clark

Introduction

My interest in peer feedback started after attending a seminar focused on Professor John Hattie's project 'Visible Learning' (Hattie 2012). The project was conducted over 15 years across three continents and involved synthesising over 65,000 studies and over 800 meta-analyses, across all education sectors, with the aim to establish what strategies are the most effective to improve learning. Very high on that list is feedback. After I consulted the available literature more thoroughly, I realised that, in this context, 'feedback' refers to 'peer feedback'. Surprisingly, there is ample evidence that teacher feedback is, if not harmful, not very useful to students. This reflects my own and my colleagues' frustration that our students often seem to 'ignore' the feedback we provide to them. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) explain that teacher feedback often falls outside the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – the area of development where learners are ready for new stages of learning – but peer feedback is mostly within that ZPD, and students are more inclined and capable to apply that feedback. This article presents my experiences with facilitating peer feedback for writing tasks in an academic context.

Context and participants

UTS College (formerly known as UTS Insearch) is a pathway college attached to the University of Technology Sydney. UTS College delivers Academic English (AE) courses, Foundation Studies and several Diploma courses that articulate into UTS undergraduate courses. The new AE course, developed throughout 2020, is built on four pillars: learning outcomes, proficiency, authentic assessments, and 21st century skills. The overall purpose is to prepare students primarily for the English language demands, but also for the academic skills demands, of higher education. Successful completion of the AE Level 5 course, which I teach, guarantees direct entry to all UTS courses.

The student cohort in the first cycle of my research consisted of students from China, Indonesia, South Korea and Russia, while in the second cycle almost all students were from China, with one student from Saudi Arabia. The students in the two cycles were varied: one student was a PhD candidate, 11 students had enrolled in master's degree courses, and 13 students progressed into an undergraduate course. The two main areas of study were IT and Business, with only one or two students studying degrees in Education, Design, Event Management, Medical Science and Engineering. Due to the pandemic, the majority of students were located in their home countries, and courses were held live online. The platform used for course delivery was Canvas, and lessons were conducted via Zoom and Ringcentral.

Research focus and research questions

One significant feature of the new AE syllabus course is the emphasis on developing skills that will be utilised during the students' tertiary study, including research, tutorial discussion, self-directed learning and peer-assisted learning. A number of lessons, activities and material have been produced to aid the development of these skills. It is at the teacher's discretion how those are implemented.

While students usually see the value of developing these skills, it seems that the most controversial aspect is peer feedback. Unsolicited comments revealed that students were doubtful about a peer, possibly someone with less developed skills, examining their work and commenting on it. Class observations showed that peer feedback activities were often the most difficult to engage students in.

Endeavouring to better understand the students' hesitations and provide more engaging content, I posed the following questions:

1. What are the main obstacles to student engagement in the peer feedback process?
2. What systems can be put in place to support students when applying peer feedback?
3. How effective are these approaches?

Research design and data collection

I conducted the action research project over the course of two cycles, each lasting 10 weeks, applying Kemmis and McTaggart's cyclical model (1988, as cited in Burns 2010:7), where the process of planning, action, observation and reflection is applied and adapted based on the observations and findings from the previous cycle. I developed a number of activities to introduce peer feedback to students (see Appendix 1), including model peer feedback sessions, eliciting desirable behaviour and language needed to provide constructive feedback. This was followed by activities focusing on behaviour in groups (see Appendix 2) and templates to apply peer feedback (see Appendix 3). Based on feedback from Cycle 1, I developed some additional resources focusing on language used in peer feedback sessions. The intervention was conducted from Week 3 to Week 9. Throughout most sessions we stressed the relevance and importance of feedback, often referring to quotes like the one used at the beginning of this article. Students seemed to respond well to those quotes, so, even though it was not initially planned, I continued collecting them, and the students, without being prompted, started gathering relevant quotes from their cultures and sharing them with the class.

To better understand the students' attitudes towards peer feedback, I conducted a short survey using the Likert scale, at the beginning and at the end of the cycle, supplemented by semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to further probe some of the answers supplied in the survey. In order to establish how well the support systems and processes functioned, I asked the students to video-record some of their peer feedback sessions, one or two each week. I kept a journal where I noted the students' behaviour and comments after each such session. In addition to observing the students' behaviour, I also noted down my own reflections based on their interactions immediately after the peer feedback sessions.

To allow me to strengthen the data, enabling adoption of a more objective approach to data collection (Burns 2010:95), I analysed student writing samples prior to the intervention and after it, and I facilitated end-of-course reflections in which students recorded their opinions on several aspects of the course, including peer feedback.

Findings

Despite adjusting some of the lessons and material, and introducing a few new strategies related to peer feedback ones, the findings over the two cycles yielded very similar results and are discussed jointly.

The survey at the beginning and end of the intervention, complemented by a semi-structured interview and end-of-course reflection, generated some interesting results. The students' attitude towards peer feedback changed significantly. At the beginning of the course, only 12 out of 15 students completed the survey. This can be interpreted as a vote of no-confidence in the activity by those three students. Seventy per cent of students who completed the survey thought peer feedback was either very useful or useful. By the end of the course, all 15 students completed the

survey; 94% of them – all bar one – thought of peer feedback as useful. When asked to further elaborate, the students expressed apprehension about peer feedback at course commencement. One student remarked, 'I prefer to cooperate with those of similar level,' while another stressed, 'I don't like it when any members are passive.' At course conclusion, students were much more positive, with one student pointing out: 'I do have more time for speaking in breakout rooms.' Another remarked that he 'had to do it to believe it is useful.'

Due to curriculum constraints, I provided only one model of peer feedback implementation in the first cycle. However, students' feedback taught me not to rush the process and, in the second cycle, I provided a second model with reading and listening activities to be completed for homework. The students completed the activities more confidently. When we checked the exercises in class, one student commented, 'So, peer feedback is basically telling others what they did wrong?' It led to an interesting discussion on how students ascertain that something was wrong and how to convey that appropriately to their partner. I felt more confident that students had understood the nature and purpose of peer feedback.

Throughout the intervention, students were asked to video-record some of their sessions, a minimum of one each week. The recordings from the first few weeks were very difficult to watch. The students spoke very little, and most interactions were focused on the technicalities of the activity to be completed, such as negotiating how much time would be spent on Task 1, how much on Task 2, asking about email addresses, etc. One such example is an excerpt from a recording where one student's camera was switched off while the other student stared at the camera with knitted brows and a pursed mouth. After a period of quiet, where only the rustling of paper and clicking of the mouse could be heard, the student whose camera was on asked, 'So, yeah, we check the sentences, right?' The student whose camera was off did not reply immediately until his peer repeated the question. He then said, 'yeah, I think.' For the rest of the recording, no one spoke. In other recordings, students interacted more, but it was still largely transactional. 'Let me check the email,' 'how do I spell your name,' and 'do we read all sentences?' are typical examples from those recordings. I have to admit that I would have probably given up on these sessions had it not been part of my action research project.

However, the tide turned in Week 6. Later sessions show more interaction, interpersonal engagement and critique of the writing. The same two students mentioned above were engaging in constructive feedback in a recording from Week 7. Both cameras were on; there was even an occasional smile. 'You have a good topic sentences,' said the first student, whose camera had been switched off previously. The second student nodded before the first student added, 'but you need evaluation also.' I felt that my resilience and insistence on continuing with the activities had paid off.

Interestingly, in the first cycle, without being pre-taught, some of the more advanced students used hedging when pointing out mistakes. One such example is a student saying, 'hey, is this maybe the wrong tense?' or another student pointing out, 'this sentence looks a bit strange to me. I would probably make it into two sentences. What do you think?' This reminded me to pre-teach hedging and polite expressions in the second cycle.

While I only rarely entered breakout rooms when students critiqued each other's work, I was diligent in taking notes on their behaviour after they finished those sessions and re-entered the main room in Zoom (Figure 1). I recorded students' ad hoc unsolicited comments as well as my own observations of their behaviour and body language. Most students avoided making negative comments as they were aware that this pertained to my research. They restricted their negative comments to 'overwhelming,' and 'I'm not an expert – how can I be confident to provide feedback?'. I noticed one student in particular who did not comment on the activities in general. Only when she was paired with a seemingly weaker student would she make remarks like 'I'm not confident when I have to assess my peer's work.' Interestingly, she never made such comments when paired with a student she perceived as being better than her. The body language reflected their opinion better than any words – many students entered the main room with cameras off or with their heads hanging low. If looking straight ahead, their demeanour was serious, and their faces lacked any expression.
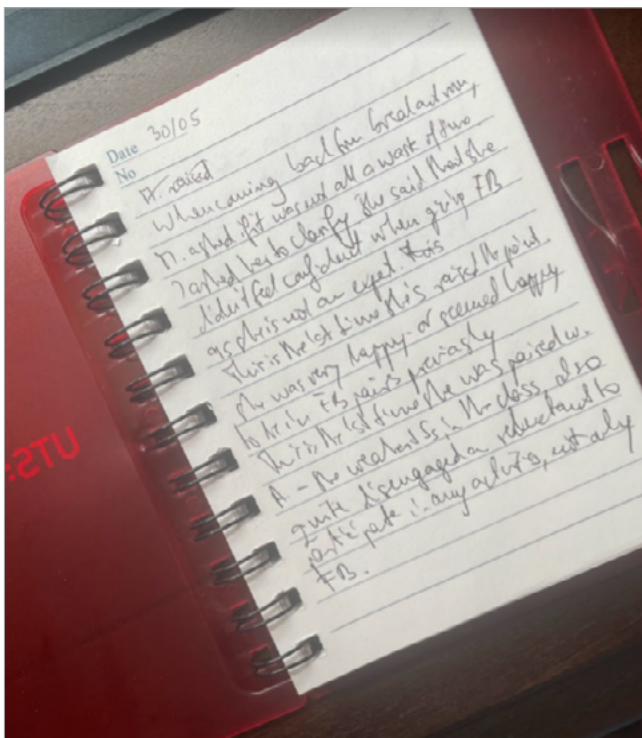

Figure 1: One journal entry after a peer feedback session

Their comments and body language changed enormously from Week 6 onwards. They became quite vocal and were happy to let me know how they realised some of their own mistakes while looking at their peer's writing. One student, for example, was so thrilled he could not contain his excitement and burst out, 'I make exactly the same mistake, exactly the same! But I never see it. Now I can see it!' This kind of reaction is confirmed in literature on peer feedback. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) found in their research that students providing feedback improved their own writing abilities more than those students receiving feedback. Similarly, Choi (2013:207) concluded in his research that 'the effects of providing peer feedback were assumed to be greater than receiving peer feedback.'

The triangulation process was somewhat impeded in the first cycle as I did not allocate enough time for collecting and analysing writing samples. I rectified this in the second cycle, and proceeded to analyse clause structure, tense, and word form, as well as referencing. There was an improvement in clause structure and word form, but it was unclear whether this was related to peer feedback. The relationship between peer feedback and improved referencing and citations is clearer. I proceeded using referencing practice activities as I had done in previous courses and the previous cycle but noticed a noticeable improvement in the students' work. The improvement could be clearly assigned to peer input.

The second triangulation exercise of collecting end-of-course reflections seemed the most insightful. The video-recorded course reflection (Figure 2) took place in Week 10, after all exams were completed and students were preparing for their graduation. I believe that students felt freer to provide more in-depth information on how they felt about this component of their course; they felt less inhibited about providing recommendations as to how those activities could be improved. The responses to the question 'what do you think about peer feedback?' could be summarised by the comment 'it is very useful.' Some chose to elaborate and gave recommendations. Those responses could be classified into three categories. The first, and largest, group mentioned how insecure they were when activities were of a general nature and recommended that all activities should be clearly structured, with a narrow definition of what was expected of the students. The second group of students explained how some students lacked the language to express their feedback and recommended more lessons spent on practising language used for feedback. The third group of students suggested having more, but shorter, peer feedback sessions, focused on one specific aspect. One such example mentioned by a student was, 'we need to practise more small tasks, for instance checking tenses in introduction of essay.'
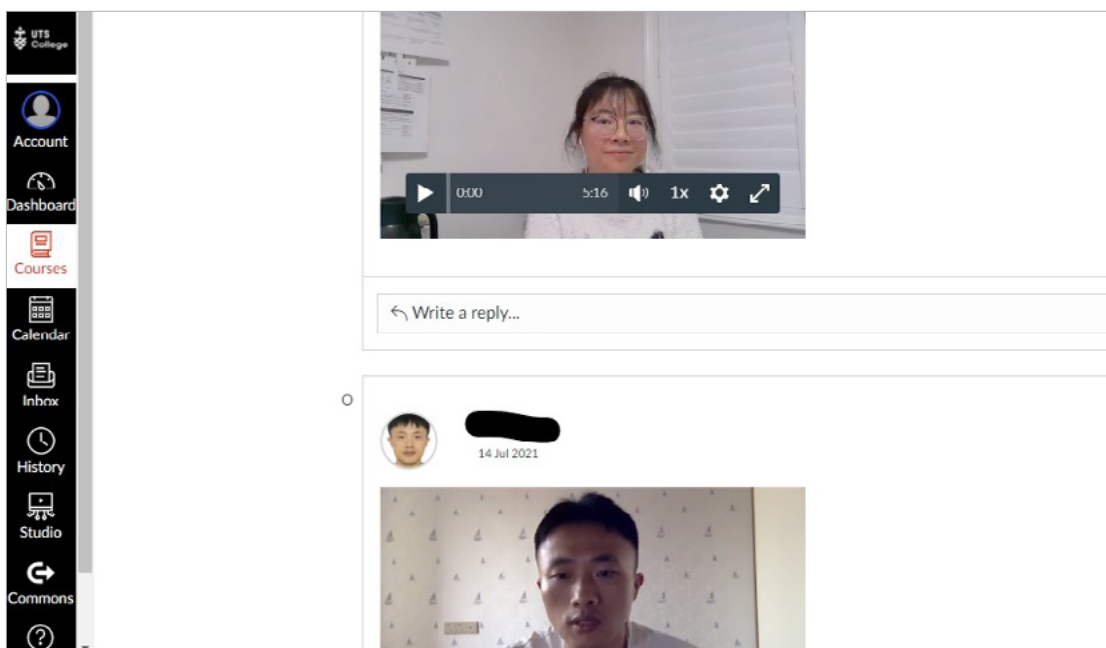

Figure 2: Screenshots of end-of-course reflection video recording

Discussion and reflections

The profile of my students in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 varied significantly, but the students' responses were quite similar. The major difference was that the students in the first cycle were more willing to provide feedback and needed less prompting. But when it came to their impressions of peer feedback, the responses were almost identical. The first theme that can be identified in their responses was focused on more scaffolding and practising before being expected to conduct peer feedback. Several stressed the need to have a checklist for each activity, pointing out, 'sometimes we forget about the criteria.'

This was interesting to me as I thought I had done a sufficient number of activities that allowed for practising the language, processes and structures needed for peer feedback. In terms of my own teaching practice, it makes me question how many times I have conducted activities under the false impression that I had done enough field building and practice/joint construction. It is a good reminder that I need to do more concept checking in my classes and ask for students' feedback more often, not just at the end of the course.

The second theme that emerged from the students' recommendations was related to requesting more specific instructions when peer feedback sessions were being organised. They particularly stressed the need for narrowing down the expected outcomes. One typical critique was 'I am in breakout room and don't know what to do' and a common recommendation was: 'tell us exactly what you want.' This is another reminder of the importance of concept checking.

However, my own observations revealed very different issues. I noticed how interaction and openness regarding critiquing a peer's work increased as the course progressed. My observation notes show how students said very little in the first sessions, regardless of how detailed the instructions were. Both the amount of feedback and quality of feedback increased over the weeks. My conclusions regarding this change are two-fold. Firstly, the need for students to feel comfortable in the classroom, to trust their teacher and their peers, cannot be stressed enough. Only with trust comes readiness to engage in activities that are not the stereotypical language classroom activities. Only when feeling comfortable with their surroundings are students prepared to open up and engage in risk-taking activities. Secondly, the more the course progressed, the more the students were confident in their own skills and abilities to provide valuable feedback. This confidence garnered a belief in the peer's feedback, increasing the value of such feedback.

Other learnings about my own practice from these two cycles were the need to be better organised, to record observations more meticulously and to structure all peer feedback activities more consistently. In addition, it is necessary to increase opportunities for students to familiarise themselves with the notion of peer feedback and give more examples of what is expected, as well as language that is desirable when providing feedback. Most importantly, though, it is vital not to skip activities and processes that build rapport, trust and belief in oneself and each other.

Conclusion

Although this research project involved a relatively small group of students, and the findings cannot be generalised, it is possible to answer the research questions posed with a certain degree of confidence:

1. What are the main obstacles to student engagement in the peer feedback process?

    The main obstacles could be divided into obstacles caused by teachers and those caused by students. Teacher-induced obstacles are related to vague instructions given to students without clearly defined outcomes, while student-generated obstacles are based on students' lack of confidence and hesitancy in taking risks.

2. What systems can be put in place to support students when applying peer feedback?

    The first obstacle can be rectified by making instructions very clear, narrowly defined with clear outcomes and expectations. The second is built over time by creating a safe environment in which students trust their teacher and peers and do not fear taking risks.

3. How effective are these approaches?

    The above findings show that such an approach – clearly defined expectations and instructions within an environment of trust – yield positive results for all. Rollinson (2005:29) concludes that 'by giving the students practice in becoming critical readers, we are at the same time helping them towards becoming more self-reliant writers, who are both self-critical and who have the skills to self-edit and revise their writing.'

It goes without saying that further research into this topic is needed before ascertaining any generalisations about peer feedback. However, I do feel confident enough to make the following general conclusions, that are not only applicable to peer feedback but, I feel, more generally in teaching practice:

1. The most important aspect for success in study is creating an environment of trust and safety.
2. When students are expected to achieve more, they will.

> **'Feedback is a gift. Ideas are the currency of our next success. Let people see you value both feedback and ideas.'**
>
> Jim Trinka and Les Wallace

References

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Please click the following link to view the author's presentation at the 2021 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Colloquium: https://youtu.be/qZRyX_dy5Ho

Appendix I: Introducing peer feedback worksheet

A. Before reading the text

a. What are the steps to take when reading a long article?

b. Read title only:

   What is this article about?

c. Read abstract:

   What is this article about (more specific)?

d. Skim read:

   What sections of the article should you read?

   What sections should you not read?

B. While reading the text

a. Intro: first two paragraphs:

   i.   Why do teachers focus on peer feedback?

   ii. What are some issues related to peer feedback?

   iii. When is peer feedback particularly effective?

b. Intro: Benefits of peer feedback for the reviewer

   i. What is usually not investigated in peer feedback research?

   ii. What is ZPD? Explain!

c. Intro: Need for L2 research

   i. What are the two main questions this research tries to answer?

d. General discussion

   i. What are the answers to above research questions?

   ii. Why?

C. What did you think of this text?

Appendix 2: Behaviour and attitudes in group/pair work

The success of a group/pair activity will depend on two factors – attitudes of the individual and attitudes of the group as a whole. Positive attitudes include helpful ways of thinking and behaving which make for a good discussion. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, are unhelpful and do not further the purpose of the discussion.

Look at the following attitudes and mark each of them as either positive or negative.

The student	Positive	Negative
1. Has previously thought about the topic		
2. Is willing to listen to others		
3. Never takes anything seriously		
4. Is willing to change her/his opinion		
5. Makes long speeches		
6. Is not afraid to say what she/he believes		
7. Will not give others a chance to speak		
8. Will talk to the teacher only		
9. Encourages other members of the group to speak		
10. Makes sarcastic remarks		
11. Is tolerant towards others' beliefs		
12. Expresses her/his opinion briefly		
13. Becomes easily angry or upset		
14. Will support good ideas from other group members		
15. Interrupts rudely		
16. Pretends to agree with the rest of the group, although she/he really does not		
17. Can relieve a tense or emotional situation with a joke		
18. Shows that her/his own comments relate to points other speakers have made		
19. Holds whispered conversations with her/his classmates		
20. Thinks that time spent on discussions is time wasted		

Appendix 3: Checking an essay – checklist

My name: _____

Partner's name whose essay I have checked:

_____

Step 1: Read the introduction.	
1. Does the introduction include background information, a preview of what follows and a thesis?	
2. Does the introduction address the instruction, topic and limiting words in the question?	
3. Does the thesis take a clear position on this topic?	
4. Has the position been defended with arguments?	
Step 2: Read the first and last sentences of each body paragraph.	
5. Does each body paragraph relate to the topic and link back to the thesis?	
6. Are the relationships between the paragraphs clearly expressed using transitions?	
Step 3: Choose one body paragraph for further analysis and carefully read the whole paragraph.	
7. Does the paragraph have a clear topic?	
8. Does the explanation clearly and completely support the topic?	
9. Has evidence been used to prove the ideas as facts?	
10. Does the paragraph present and rebut counter arguments to the writer's position?	
11. Does each sentence clearly follow on from the one before, using accurate linking expressions and pronoun referencing?	