PEER-REVIEW STATIONS TO PROMOTE ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Peer-review has long been used by writing teachers as a reliable and effective way to improve students' writing. It can strengthen students' critical thinking and writing as well as offer more detailed feedback throughout the writing process than an instructor's schedule may allow. In an English as a second language (ESL) context, however, many of these benefits are lost. Social or cultural pressure along with differences in language ability may prohibit students from offering productive feedback and at times even prove to be a hindrance (Leki, 1990). This paper will outline a tool to counter some of the issues many ESL writing teachers face with peer-review by introducing a practice developed for a second-year academic writing class that utilizes students' strengths. In this practice, student-reviewers focus on a particular area of academic writing in which they already show skill or interest, such as vocabulary or coherence, and review their peers' papers in "stations," focusing on these areas alone. A benefit of the practice is a boost of confidence as they hone and develop specific writing skills and are seen as "experts" by their classmates. Additionally, authors are not required to have their writing reviewed in every area, thereby increasing the chances that the feedback they receive is beneficial, practical, and specific to their needs.

Key words: Peer-review, peer-feedback writing, academic writing, teaching composition, ESL composition

INTRODUCTION

Peer review has embedded itself firmly in the conventions of the writing classroom, and most writing students have some experience with giving and receiving peer feedback during their academic career, regardless of their age or discipline. The second language writing (SLW) context in particular has a long history with peer review, but not without its complications. The peer-review process varies according to the circumstances, but traditional essay peer-review assignments often take shape as relatively solitary, quiet endeavors during which students read and evaluate a classmate's writing based on a rubric or other form of "guiding questions" supplied by the instructor (Liu & Hansen, 2002). The evaluation criteria tend to require reviewers to consider all aspects of the essay, both local and global, and the subsequent feedback consists primarily of written comments and annotations on the paper, which may also be followed up with some face-to-face response at a later date (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Previous studies on peer

review in SLW classrooms have yielded mixed results, often praising the effects on language development but also highlighting some negative perceptions of peer review among students.

The activity outlined in this paper attempts to break away from the orthodox model outlined above, with the aim of developing a more interactive exercise by applying a workstations approach, where students take turns to both give and receive oral feedback during the same peer-review session. Each station represents one of five writing aspects, and the advising students act as specialists at a designated station, providing expertise in that area only. Advisees are free to visit whichever station they wish to receive feedback on during the first half of the session, after which participants change roles and repeat the activity. This paper first examines some of the benefits and caveats observed from the research. It then explains the activity procedure, and the outcomes and limitations. Finally, it concludes with a summary of the writers' experiences when implementing the task in their classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why is Peer-review Important?
Regardless of any perceived flaws, peer review's prominence in second language learning remains strong. Learning is largely considered a social process, and human interaction, or "mediation", is said to constitute its foundation (Villamil & Guerrero, 2019, p. 26). Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development framework is widely applied in classrooms via varying degrees of differentiation and "instructional scaffolding", which is the term coined to describe the provision of support structures to assist learners in reaching their next developmental learning stage. Vygotsky's theory asserts that support structures can come from more advanced classmates as well as teachers; thus peer mediation and collaboration are important components in this application (Vygotsky, 1978). Peer review, therefore, plays an important role in student-centered learning and, as shown below, is particularly useful in writing contexts where it may be difficult for the teacher to check every student's work.

Numerous SLW studies into peer review have declared several benefits, including increased practical and cognitive skills for learners, as well as value for instructors. Firstly, there is evidence to suggest that it does have an overall positive influence on writing performance through fostering critical thinking and self-reflection skills (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Diab, 2011). Diab (2011) compared the effects of peer editing versus self-editing when revising and improving drafts, and found that although both had merit, a greater interaction with the writing process meant that students in the peer editing group became more critically aware of the gaps in their knowledge. The researchers judged that the peer editors were able to focus their attention more objectively on the writing and use social interaction to negotiate meaning, thereby noticing differences in mutual knowledge, which they actively used to reflect on and improve their work.

Secondly, peer review has the potential to significantly reduce a writing teacher's workload and allow them to view students' work from a more global perspective (Mittan, 1989, as cited in Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Yangin Eksi, 2012). Providing constructive feedback is a crucial part of their job and also arguably the most time-consuming and challenging, especially when an

abundance of sentence-level errors can cause distraction and draw attention away from more important aspects like logical organization of ideas and overall clarity. Implementing successful peer feedback not only lessens the teacher's burden, but it has the benefit of more clearly seeing students' understanding of good writing. As Mittan (1989, as cited in Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005) points out, even if they are not at the level where they can produce excellent work, they have an understanding of what constitutes high quality writing. Therefore, they can be rewarded for the knowledge they have beyond their writing ability.

Issues with Typical Peer-review Practice
Clearly, peer review has some positive implications for SLW; however, the literature also highlights some caveats. The principal drawbacks mostly relate to affective factors and issues with feedback quality, although the two often appear to overlap, with the former tending to influence or cause the latter. Student attitudes are a major factor in the success of a peer-review activity, and cultural differences are often cited as a root cause of ineffectual experiences. This is particularly pertinent when sociocultural issues come into play, namely collectivism (Hofstede, 2001), social hierarchy (Yu & Lee, 2016), and saving face, where *face* is defined as "the evaluation of self based on internal and external judgments" (Earley, 1997, p.43).

Zhang (1995) reported highly negative views towards peer review in comparison to teacher feedback and inferred that this negative perception had a strong link to the majority of the participants coming from an Asian background. Students from countries with a large power distance (Hofstede, 2001), like in many Asian cultures, may perceive comments from their peers to be of little worth (Nelson & Carson, 1998), and therefore view the activity as a waste of time. In addition, the aforementioned concept of face-saving can influence communication in peer review. While the premise of peer review matches many collectivist culture features and may lead to a positive group climate, the importance attached to maintaining harmony can lead to a reluctance to criticize (Carson & Nelson, 1992; Nelson & Carson, 1998). In a peer review study observing interactions between Chinese and Spanish learners, Carson and Nelson (1992) found that the Chinese students' desire to avoid embarrassing their partner resulted in them either giving a response so indirect that the criticism was not detected or withholding comments completely. This face-saving strategy may prevent group division, but at the expense of some students not receiving any feedback at all, which can lead to frustration for both parties. Consequently, a negative attitude to peer review can form.

Additionally, when direct feedback is given, there is no guarantee that it will help the writer make global revisions to their work. Several studies have shown that there is a danger for learners to focus too heavily on local errors at the word and sentence level, and to give the wider aspects little attention (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Carson, 1998), particularly when they are given little training in effective peer review (Rahimi, 2013). Mangelsdorf's 1992 study showed that while students demonstrated a preference and desire for globally directed comments about idea development and organization, only half of participants were satisfied with the responses received from classmates in these areas. Reasons for this trend are varied; for example, a lack of expertise in certain review areas (Carson & Nelson, 1996), a tendency to confuse reviewing with editing (Leki, 1990), or a basic lack of training in how to constructively participate in a peer-

review task (Rahimi, 2013). As mentioned previously, cultural and affective influences can exacerbate all of these factors, simultaneously increasing pressure on students and decreasing the chance of a successful outcome.

PROCEDURE

Background
Implementation of these workstations requires more preparation for the students and teacher than the average peer-review activity. However, once training and a framework for action is in place, the activity is established, and the students are familiar with their roles, there is little need for additional instruction or preparation. The aim of the preparation time is to familiarize the students with the expectations of their particular writing skill area as well as establish the peer-review stations procedure for the class. There are four main steps to prepare and implement the activity, which are introducing the categories and activity, creating the category student-groups, a norming session, and the activity itself.

The activity was implemented by two instructors of a year-long academic writing course of intermediate and high-level English students. One teacher taught two sections of intermediate-level (mid-tier) students while the other taught two sections of the high-level (high-tier) students. The mid-tier teacher (MTT) and high-tier teacher (HTT) varied their approaches slightly from each other to match the ability and flow of the class; however, each teacher approached both sections of their class in the same way. The following will describe the four-step procedure for implementing the practice and provide MTT or HTT variation as necessary.

Briefly Introduce the Categories and Activity
Before the idea of the activity was presented to students, the instructors decided on which categories would be used for the stations. They were:

- thesis and connection
- structure and formatting
- organization and cohesion
- grammar and vocabulary
- citations and references

Students checking "thesis and connection" would review the clarity of the thesis and how well the different sections of the essay supported the thesis. The "structure and formatting" category related to the order of the paper and correct formatting, whereas the "organization and cohesion" category reviewed an essay's overall fluency and whether paragraphs stayed on topic. Students reviewing "grammar and vocabulary" would look for correct grammar and vocabulary as well as repeated words. Those checking "citations and references" would look for the inclusion and correct usage and formatting of citations and references.

These categories were chosen because they seemed to cover most of what would be covered in a peer-review activity and seemed within the capabilities of the students. Additionally, the

difficulty and/or time it would take to check each of these categories as a reviewer seemed to be equal.

Each instructor took some class time to briefly explain what this new style of peer review was using a handout or a slideshow. This activity was introduced in the middle of the semester in the students' sophomore year, and they were familiar with the concept and some of the expectations of reviewing their peers' essays. As this was a new style of peer-review; however, it was necessary for the instructors to establish the basic idea of the activity to the students as well as a short explanation of the categories' names and what that would mean as a reviewer.

Creating Category Student Groups
After the activity and categories were briefly explained, students were asked to look back at their writing and the feedback they received and share their preferences on which category they would like to review. The MTT had students fill out and turn in a chart (Figure 1), numbering their preferred category 1-5. The HTT had students submit a Google Form showing their top-three category preferences.

Fig. 1.1 Writing Skill Category Preference Form

	1	2	3	4	5
Thesis & connection					
Structure & formatting					
Organization & cohesion					
Vocabulary & grammar					
Citations & references					

At the same time that students were turning in their preferences, the instructors were also reviewing students' work to decide their strengths, and therefore, in which reviewer group they should belong. The MTT started the activity earlier in the semester and the categories were decided after the classes' first essays had already been graded and returned. Therefore, they had to look back on writing samples they had already reviewed, which was more time consuming. The HTT started the activity later in the semester and was able to save time by grading essays at the same time as categorizing the students' writing.

Both teachers then took the students' choices and compared them with their own category preferences for students. At times, they aligned perfectly, and the student preference and teacher idea were the same. In situations where that was not the case, the teachers made the executive decision. The categories were split as evenly as possible, and instructors made the final decision on who would be a reviewer for which area.

Norming Session
Instructors conducted a norming session after the categories' placements were announced. When the activity and skill areas were first introduced, the descriptions of each were fairly brief. For the norming session, a much more thorough description of the breakdown of each category's reviewing criteria was created and given to students as a handout (see Appendix).

Groups of students got together to review the handout to ensure that they understood their category. They were encouraged to ask questions and talk to each other as well as the teacher, who was circulating, offering clarification as needed. Afterward, each student was given a sample essay similar to the one they would be reviewing. Individually, students assessed the sample essay, paying attention to only their area. For example, the students in the "structure and formatting" category only looked at issues and successes in the paper related to its structure and formatting.

After roughly ten minutes of individual review, they compared their corrections and the feedback they would give with others in their group for another 10 minutes. After students compared their reviews with each other, the teacher sat down with each of the groups for an additional 10 minutes to compare the groups' reviews with those of the instructor. Most student groups found errors and gave necessary notes and revisions individually and when they worked with their peer group. When the instructor sat with them, they were able to make corrections as required as well as answer any questions pertaining to the categories.

For the MTT, the norming session took an entire 90-minute class time. However, the HTT explained the different categories in the class prior to the norming session and assigned the individual review for homework. Their norming session took 45 minutes to an hour to complete in class.

Peer-review Stations Activity
Before class began, the teacher arranged the desks as shown in Figure 1.2. Each pair of desks (*station*) had a card that had the category name and description. Each category's card was a different color to ease recognition of the different stations through the activity. 1-2 members from each group sat down at their individual station, so about half of the class was a reviewer.

Fig. 1.2 Peer-review Workstations Seating Chart
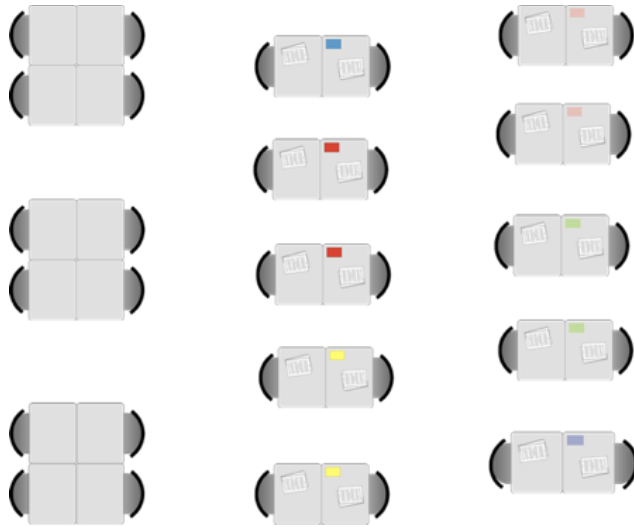
The remainder of the students would have their papers reviewed in areas of their choice. Students were not required to have their essays reviewed in each category but had to attend two different review stations. This ensured that all students were getting some review and the reviewers had something to do while helping students avoid superfluous feedback. Time limits were established by the students and kept by the instructor. At the end of the time limit, all authors having their papers reviewed would get up and go to a different station.

For those students who had gone to at least two stations and did not want to go to any more, or those who were waiting for a particular station to be available, there were groups of desks that were not stations. Students could sit there and work through the feedback they received from the reviewers. This allowed them to put the review into immediate practice. While students were reviewing and correcting papers, the instructors were there to answer questions and give additional feedback when asked.

For the MTT, this activity took two class periods. The first half of the class were reviewers on the first day; then those who were reviewers had their essays reviewed on the second day. The HTT allowed one day for the activity. Instead of the reviewers switching between the first and second classes of the week, they switched between the first and second half of class.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the peer-review stations proved popular with the participants, and the instructors came to view it as a valuable component of their academic writing classes. The students' post-task summaries revealed very positive responses both to their classmates' feedback and their own performance. The majority specified explicit corrections made by their peers that ranged from fixing basic formatting errors to identifying inconsistencies between the thesis and essay content or problems with logic. This confirmed that they were able to transcend concentrating on local errors only. More unexpected was the pleasure expressed in the students' own abilities to help their peers, and the confidence that they inferred they had gained when their partner

thanked them for advising them on points they either had completely missed or could not suitably revise by themselves. Ultimately, the summaries communicated a distinct tone of gratitude from the learners to their partners for helping them realize their own strengths, as well as noticing their weaknesses. Additionally, during informal conversation, students expressed that the activity was an invaluable part of the class and writing process and requested to repeat it in the second semester. From the teachers' side, their workload not only felt reduced, but they sensed an increased morale when giving the students individual feedback during personal tutorial sessions held after the peer-review stations task.

Limitations
There were two main limitations to the peer-review stations task setup and implementation. Firstly, there was an occasional mismatch between teacher and students' evaluation of their writing strengths and the reality when put into practice. This could be easily addressed by simply allowing them to change roles in future enactments of the activity. Secondly, it was not always easy to know whether all the advice was sound or accurate when assessing the students' performance, or whether it was being taken on board appropriately. Having students write a short paragraph outlining their feedback immediately after the activity could help to illuminate this. Attention should also be drawn to the practical and cognitive demands of the task; it may not be appropriate for all class sizes and levels. The task would work best with a minimum number of 10 students of at least lower intermediate ability.

CONCLUSION

Peer-review can be a significant help to both teacher and student, but, like all things, it is vital that the tool fit the job. If the teacher does not consider the hurdles students face when approaching this type of activity, they could be putting unintentional barriers in place. As previously mentioned, one such hurdle is that of culture and its effect on students' ability to correct their peers (Yu & Lee, 2016) or take their classmates' evaluations to heart (Nelson & Carson, 1998). Though circumstantial, the review stations did help mitigate the issue. In the activity, through correction and practice, students spent a year honing a specific writing skill that not all in the class had. Not only did this boost their pride, it also gave them a sense of duty to fulfil expectations of their role as a reviewer in their field. Additionally, separately fostering skill areas led them to be "experts" in their field, thus leading their classmates to have greater trust in the received student-feedback.

In peer-review, there is also an issue with students' tendency to focus on local issues (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Carson, 1998), especially if there is little training (Rahimi, 2013). As one could see in the procedure, norming is a necessary step when implementing this activity, which guarantees that students are getting training on how to be a reviewer in their field. Furthermore, the purpose of the activity is that student-reviewers are only looking at particular aspects of a piece of writing. When dividing the different skill areas, teachers can have stations that look at local and global issues, ensuring that students receive multifaceted feedback.

Finally, one of the key benefits of any peer-review practice is the time it saves the teacher. This practice does not negate the need for considerate feedback from the instructor, of course. However, when implemented, this tool *can* help provide a positive experience and effective critique for the authors. Feedback is one of the most important duties of a writing teacher, but the time can be overwhelming and even cause teachers to burn out. Through this practice, instructors can save time taken on distracting, minor errors to focus on more significant issues and give the feedback only they could provide.

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APPENDIX Student handout on category breakdown

Category breakdown	
Thesis & connection	**Organization & cohesion**
What is the thesis of this essay? Does the author include the topic, position, and support? How is the support? Do you think it is strong support? Does it truly support the position of the thesis (connection is not support)? Is the first section of the essay connected to the topic? Where can you see this? What about the second and third section of the essay? What areas do not connect to the thesis? Overall, does the essay prove the thesis?	Does the paper have a natural flow? Do the sentences in a paragraph stay on the same topic? Do they relate to the introduction sentence? Are there multiple topics in one paragraph (should the paragraph be split)? Are the sentences in a logical order? Are the paragraphs in logical order?
Vocabulary	**Grammar**
Is the vocabulary used correctly? Are the parts of speech correct (verb, noun, adjective, adverb etc,)? Does the vocabulary sound academic or does the author use slang? Is the same word repeated often? What are alternatives?	Are there fragments (sentences without subject or verb)? Are there run-on sentences (many sentences smashed together)? How is the punctuation? Are there commas or periods missing? Is the verb tense consistent? Does the author use really simple grammar? How can they make it more complex?
Structure & formatting	**Citations & references**
Does the essay have an introduction, body, and conclusion? Does every paragraph have an introduction sentence, supporting sentences, and conclusion sentence? Are there enough paragraphs? Is the support in the essay in the same order as what was said in the thesis? Intro-Hook, building sentences, and thesis? (pattern of building sentences?) Conclusion- restated thesis and closing thoughts? (pattern of closing thoughts?) Formatting: 12pt Times New Roman Double spaced (no extra space between paragraphs) Left aligned The first line of every paragraph is indented.	Does the author include citations where they should? Do they include references? Are citations and references done correctly?