

## Promoting Collaborative Writing in the FL Classroom

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### **Abstract**

*Collaborative writing is implemented in the essay writing class to increase the amount of interaction among students in order to enhance and improve their writing skill. The interaction that takes place during peer feedback increases the quantity of comprehensible input they receive on fostering exchanging ideas, correcting errors and reflecting, which would develop their writing skill, help them learn, and help them become less dependent on teachers.*

*This paper explores some of the issues in using peer review to develop essay writing in our essay writing class. It focuses on fostering interaction and collaboration among EFL students in order to build knowledge that is essential for developing a well-constructed essay. It examines the effect of peer feedback on EFL students' final version of their essay on the rhetorical mode of comparison/contrast. Analysis of data of first and final drafts indicated that the majority of peer input made in the peer sessions were incorporated in the revised versions suggesting the efficacy of peer revision in improving writing performance. Results also show the dominant role linguistic accuracy played in the revisions.*

*Overall, the findings of this study support the claim to include peer revisions in EFL writing instruction.*

### **1. Introduction**

Peer revision is a feedback process originated in L1 composition writing classes and transferred to L2 process oriented writing classes. It is an activity during which students discuss each other's drafts in peer revision sessions and offer recommendations for revision. The suggestions provided are supposed to incur positive changes and lead to improvement in writing.

The literature provides conflicting findings on the benefits and the effectiveness of the practice. L2 research cites some advantages of utilizing peer revision. It enhances a sense of audience (Paulus 1999, Mittan 1989, Mangelsdorf 1992) and enables the writer to see unclear points in their texts. It encourages critical thinking, helps students use negotiation to develop their ideas (Mangelsdorf 1992, Min 2005,

Lockhart and Ng 1995), and offers opportunities for interaction and scaffolding, allows them to demonstrate their knowledge of writing as well as apply it in their revision (Mendonca and Johnson 1994, Mittan 1989, Tsui and Ng 2000, Tuzi 2001). It reduces errors in revised drafts (Diab 2010) and hopefully in their future writings.

These views did not pass without being challenged. Several disadvantages of peer revision were identified. Nelson and Murphy (1993) mentioned some problems that in cultures where teacher-centered classes are the norm, a) students may not trust their peers' modifications because as the peers themselves are L2 learners, they were not considered capable of critiquing text and correcting errors, and b) their subjects were inconsistent in incorporating their peers' modifications. Only when they were negotiating in a cooperative environment did they incorporate the modifications, but tended not to do so when the interaction took place in a defensive environment. Mendonca and Johnson (1994) investigated how peer interaction shaped students' revision activities. They found that writers tended to be selective in the adoption of peer modifications.

In Zhang's (1995) study, the participants (Asians) demonstrated very low (6.2%) adherence to peer feedback in comparison to the preferred (93.8%) teacher feedback. Zhang related this to cultural background. This view was supported by Carson and Nelson (1996) whose study showed that their respondents (Chinese) stopped short of participating in peer feedback. Leki (1990) concluded that students who have advanced writing skills may not accept intervention from those who have less superior writing skills.

These negative views may cause students to favor other types of feedback such as teacher feedback, however, the literature indicates that students not only find peer revision effective but they incorporate changes in their final writing. Mangelsdorf (1992) in her investigation of L2 students' attitude toward peer feedback indicated that 69% were in favor of peer revision. All the students in Mendonca and Johnson's (1994) study found peer revision helpful in developing their ideas. Furthermore, 53% of the modifications incorporated into the essays resulted from peer comments.

Concern has been voiced on the problem of students' concentration on more microstructure modifications than high-level ones that affect meaning. In their study on the impact of peer revision on L2 writing in the rhetorical modes of narration and persuasion, Vilamell and DeGuerrero (1998) found that although their subjects were strongly advised to concentrate on content and organization first and then grammar, they made more revisions in grammar in the persuasive mode than in the aspects of

language they were instructed to follow. Leki (1990) showed that students tend to respond to surface level errors instead of dealing with semantic ones.

However, some L2 studies revealed evidence on the utilization of macrostructure modifications in final versions. Using Faigley and Witte's (1981) taxonomy to categorize types of revision, Connor and Asenavage's (1994) study of two groups of university freshman ESL students demonstrated that one group made meaning- level changes though the other group revised more surface errors. Hedgecock and Lefkowitz (1992) showed that peer feedback resulted in changes in content, organization, and vocabulary. Mangelsdorf (1992) presented a use of content modifications as high as 68%; however, the participants in her study were instructed to focus on macrostructure levels only. Content was "the students' second most important concern" in the narrative mode in the Villamil and De Guerrero (1998:505) study.

Teachers often question the extent of provision of revision in developing students' writing ability. ESL research explored the appropriateness of peer editing for writing instruction but very few EFL studies have investigated this issue. Further EFL studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of peer revision and explore its impact on writing improvement as well as revealing which aspect of language students tend to revise.

ESL research has voiced concern in relation to cultural issues. Some students view the teacher as the sole authority figure in the classroom, the provider of knowledge, and the one who corrects errors. This view may inhibit them from offering reviews or/and accepting them. Concern about these issues paved the way for examining the impact of EFL peer input on final versions. It initiated the research questions below:

1. Did the participants incorporate peer input suggested in peer sessions in their final versions?
2. How were problem points revised with regard to various language aspects?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Participants*

Twenty-four students from a college of education in Saudi Arabia working in groups of 4 constituted the subjects of this study. They were all female speakers of Arabic training to be English language teachers at intermediate and secondary levels. Their ages ranged from 18-22 years (M=18.9). They were admitted to the college on the

merit of acquiring 80% or over in their secondary school certificate examination. Their competence in English was at the intermediate level as judged by their performance on the examination at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> year. They were enrolled in a 3-credit college required essay writing course which focused on enabling students to write well-organized essays using a process approach. Prior to this essay-writing course, the participants had practiced little writing except in a paragraph writing course at the college.

### *2.2 The Writing Class*

The participants were enrolled in a 13-week essay writing course, administered by the researcher, which required the students to provide focused and coherent essays. Half of this time was devoted to develop the students' writing ability in the rhetorical mode of comparison/contrast and train them in means of revision and peer collaboration. This mode remained constant because the literature reveals that peer revision varies according to the rhetorical mode of the text and some modes impose higher cognitive demands than others which may influence the performance of participants during peer revision (Villamil & De Guerrero 1998, Yagelski 1995). Two weeks were devoted to familiarize the students with the comparison/contrast mode and enable them to comprehend the underlying features of this mode. Several reading texts on the rhetorical mode of comparison/contrast were presented for discussion in class and students were assigned writing tasks which were also discussed in class. Research shows a necessity for teaching participants the act of interacting in peer sessions (Berg 1999, Conner and Asenvage 1994, Nelson and Murphy 1993, Stanley 1992, Mittan 1989, Min 2005, Tuzi 2001). Stanley (1992) conducted a study in which a group of participants were provided with 7 hours of instructions on conducting peer revision which also included study of the genre. She concluded that this group provided a greater number of modifications than that which received less instruction. Following the aforementioned researchers, the participants were coached in working collaboratively to edit each other's texts. They were trained on how to give effective feedback, address each other, and present opposing ideas politely so as not to offend the writer. Sample students' texts were presented for role-play to practice revising them in the same way they would tackle each other's essays. To avoid constraints on directions provided by the researcher, the participants themselves provided guidelines for revision to be undertaken. Prior to revision, the class discussed the means of editing through brainstorming and generated ideas in which they would respond to each other's drafts. It was thought that this practice would provide motivation, give them

clear vision and guidance through editing, and assist them in acquiring control over specific strategies for revising text. Table 1 presents a taxonomy of the descriptive aspects of language adhered to during peer reviews as suggested by the participants under the guidance of the researcher who was the essay writing instructor.

**Table 1: Taxonomy of Descriptive Aspects of Language**

Micro-level revision	Linguistic Adequacy	<p>a. Grammar: tenses, subject-verb agreement, well-formedness of compound and complex sentences, reference, number, complete sentences, comparatives, superlatives, prepositions, transitions, use of articles.</p> <p>b. Mechanics: punctuation, spelling, capitalization.</p> <p>c. Vocabulary: inappropriate or misused lexis, repetition, expressing meaning effectively, substitution, addition, deletion, word order.</p>
Macro-level revision	Content	Thesis statement, clear statement of topic, logical ideas, ideas relevant to topic, clear statement of main ideas and supporting details, explicit statement of similarities and differences, relevant examples supporting main ideas.
	Organization	Clear progression of ideas; material logically organized; use of transitions to connect paragraphs; message can be followed; essay clearly divided into introduction, body, and conclusion, paragraphing.

Students wrote three essays of 500 words each for this study. Extracts from the first two essays (sample texts) were discussed with the whole class using the taxonomy and a suggestion sheet that consisted of two columns (one each for problem points and suggestions). The third essay was discussed in groups and later rewritten and submitted to the researcher without being reviewed by the groups. The third essay (draft and fair copies) constituted the data for the study. Topics for the third essay were selected by the students themselves from among a group of topics generated through brainstorming. Each member of a group chose a specific topic to address. It was thought that choosing their own topics would exclude unfamiliarity with topics and provide more concentration on writing and editing. Members of each group were advised to select different topics from the topics brainstormed as variation in topics might call for more clarification of ideas and augment discussions on content and organization (Mendonca and Johnson 1994).

### **3. Data Collection Procedure**

The participants were divided into 6 groups of 4 members each. Groups of 4 rather than dyads were used because multiple comments might assist in giving the writer a wider perspective of the suggestions (Zamel 1985). Caulk (1994) stated, "... the quality of the feedback students in (his) study received rose with the number of students giving feedback to each student" (186). Each group constituted members of varying language ability levels and included one moderately good writer. This allocation may entail little feedback on the moderately good writer's essay; however, it may alleviate the discussion and augment suggestions. The groups remained constant. Each group nominated a reporter whose duty was to record problem points and modifications suggested by the group in the suggestion sheet. Each member of the group submitted a copy of her first draft which was subjected to oral revision by the members of the group. The problem points were underlined in the text and together with the suggestions for improvement after approval by the members of the group were recorded by the reporter on the suggestion sheet, revised by the group, and submitted to the researcher at the end of the revision session. The researcher made copies and handed in the originals to the writer who was asked to write her final version as homework and submit all 3 papers (the first draft, the peer suggestions sheet, and the final version) to the researcher the following week. The participants were advised to decide for themselves whether or not to incorporate the suggestions made by their peers in the peer sessions in their final versions.

Attempts were made to record peer discussions to analyze participants' interaction but abandoned due to poor sound quality incurring difficulty in accurate transcription of data.

### **4. Data Analysis**

The subjects in this study were 24 students; however, the data for analysis consisted of 20 first drafts, 20 final versions and 20 peer suggestion sheets. The first draft writing session was performed in class and had 4 absentees. The absentees were allowed to write drafts in the following session but their work was not included in the analysis of data. Therefore, instead of 24 first drafts only 20 were provided. However, all 24 students participated in all activities. Quantitative and/or qualitative analysis was performed in two phases and focused on aspects in the texts that were perceived as problem points that warranted editing.

#### *4.1 First Phase*

The problem points were identified by markings on the draft text or/and written remarks on the suggestion sheets. The researcher compared the drafts with the suggestion sheets to capture all comments made in peer input sessions. Although the majority of the problem points were both marked on the texts and recorded on the suggestion sheets, in very few cases they were only marked and edited on the text and not recorded on the suggestion sheet.

Peer comments were then compared with modifications observed in final versions. The researcher compared the participants' drafts, suggestion sheets and final versions to see whether students had incorporated their peer suggestions in final versions. Peers' comments were then categorized as incorporated in final versions or not incorporated.

#### *4.2 Second phase*

In this phase, peer comments were submitted to quantitative analysis to identify the categories generated according to the taxonomy of the descriptive language aspects. The researcher and a second rater, an English language instructor who has a Master of Education with an English major and more than 15 years of teaching experience at the tertiary level, examined two essay extracts jointly to familiarize the rater with classifying the problem points according to the descriptive language aspects. Then, the problem points in two suggestion sheets were identified and classified by the researcher and the rater independently and an interrater reliability of 93% was achieved. Each of the coders coded nine suggestion sheets independently. Problem points were then categorized according to the descriptive language aspects. The following are examples of problem points. The examples illustrate the linguistic accuracy aspect as it comprised the majority of the participants' modifications.

People in the past think... (grammar, tense)

The schools are in a very bad conditions (grammar, number)

...also women breaked... (grammar, form)

Different cultural don't prevent... (grammar, part of speech)

Poor countries hasn't achieved... (grammar, subject-verb agreement)

Men and women should complete the each other (grammar, article)

Women are not allowed to ride cars (vocabulary, misused lexis)

People they are open-minded (vocabulary, repetition)

On the other hand they can send... (mechanics, punctuation)

Supervisour, wither (mechanics, spelling)

### 4.3 Post interview

Post interviews were conducted by the researcher to identify reasons for incorporating or not incorporating peer suggestions and to find out if the participants had consulted sources other than peer input in revising their final versions.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 First phase

Did the participants incorporate peer input suggested in peer sessions in their final versions?

To answer this question, we compared participants' first drafts, final versions and suggestion sheets and calculated the frequency of occurrence of modifications revealing 374 (93.5%) instances of peer modifications incorporated into final versions while 26 (6.5%) were not incorporated.

**Table 2: Frequency of Revisions**

	Frequency	%
Incorporated	374	93.5
Not incorporated	26	6.5

The comparison reflected two main patterns: a) participants incorporated or did not incorporate peer suggestions b) participants modified a given part of their texts without input in peer sessions.

#### *a. Use of peer input*

The participants incorporated the majority of modifications made in peer sessions into their final versions. The excerpts below illustrate modification resulting from peer intervention. They are chosen in harmony with the taxonomy of linguistic aspects. Some peer input assisted the writers to modify their texts by changing certain grammatical or lexical elements that they thought inappropriate and others helped them recall rules of punctuation.

*First Draft:* Each nation has its own language and that is why there are thousands of languages speaking on earth.

*Final Version:* Each nation has its own language and that is why there are thousands of languages spoken on earth.

In the above excerpts, the writer changed 'speaking' to 'spoken' on the suggestion of her peers. When asked why she had made the change, she responded, "They

convinced me that I used the wrong word. They say language don't speak, people speak must be spoken like spoken by people."

*First Draft:* Although French language has the least speakers many countries learn their students this language.

*Final Version:* Although French language has the least speakers, many countries teach their students this language.

In this example, the writer provided a comma after 'speakers' and changed the term 'learn' to 'teach' in her final version. In the post interview she said, "I forgot the comma until they (peers) told me in the discussion put comma at end of sentence with although." As for changing 'learn' to 'teach', she stated that they had a heated argument as to the appropriateness of the use of 'learn' which she believes is suitable though her peers do not agree. Nevertheless, she resigned herself to their point of view and effected the change because the argument made her think that other people who read the essay (instructor) may have the same opinion.

*b. Peer input not incorporated*

In 6.5% of the peer input, the participants did not follow their peers' suggestions as shown in the following examples.

*First Draft:* But as a traditional country....

*Peer Input:* But as a country that has been affected by tradition

*Final Version:* But as a traditional country....

Peers suggested changing ' traditional country' to ' a country that has been affected by tradition'. However, the writer did not accept the modification and adhered to her original statement. In the post interview she said, "No need to change my words. The other words add nothing." This indicates that the writer resisted changing her original statement which implies that sometimes students may not completely trust their peers' judgment and therefore do not use their comments in revising their essays.

*First Draft:* They have to cook and clean the house.

*Peer Input:* Some women do household chores.

*Final Version:* They have to cook and clean the house.

Apparently the peers' suggestion to substitute 'They have to cook and clean the house' with 'Some women do household chores' did not appeal to the writer who maintained her original expression. The writer's response in the post interview was, "I did not understand the meaning of 'chores' in the peer session. When I checked meaning in dictionary it is the same as my words. Why change?" This shows that

their peers' explanation did not suffice and the writers consulted other sources. It seems that some sort of learning is taking place here. Although this particular student did not follow her peers' advice, a new term was added to her existing knowledge.

*c. Independent modification*

The comparison of the first drafts, final versions and suggestion sheets indicated that more than half of the participants (12 or 60%) modified some parts of their texts without receiving input in peer sessions.

**Table 3: Frequency of Incorporated Revisions**

Peer Modified	Self Modified
374	21
94.68%	5.32%

Twenty-one instances of independent correction were revealed. The following are some examples of those instances.

*First Draft:* The position of a country is determined by its economical estate.

*Final Version:* The importance of a country is determined by its economical status.

When the student was asked why she altered the words 'position' and 'estate' although the change was not suggested by her peers, she stated, "I think 'importance' is a better word but 'estate' I wasn't sure about spelling. I check dictionary. I find meaning wrong. I looked for another word and find 'status'. Here again, the student resorted to the dictionary to solve a problem and as a result acquired new knowledge.

*First Draft:* On the other hand, the roads are dangerous because there are no roads built recently.

*Final Version:* On the other hand, the roads are dangerous in poor countries because there are no new roads built recently.

In the interview, the student explained the changes she made by saying, "Because I talked about rich and poor countries. Here I mean poor countries. I want you (instructor) to understand I mean poor countries." As for adding the word 'new', she said, "To make it more clear".

### *5.2 Second phase*

The second phase of data analysis was carried out to answer question 2.

How were problem points revised with regard to various language aspects?

In this phase, peer comments were submitted to quantitative analysis to identify the categories generated according to the descriptive language aspects. The researcher worked with another rater to achieve reliability. Both coders categorized the problem points according to the descriptive language aspects and frequencies counted. The findings indicated that revision focused primarily on linguistic accuracy (96%) whereas content (4%) and organization (0%) received little and no attention, respectively.

## **6. Discussion**

The findings presented were based on the taxonomy that was prepared, written and refined by the participants themselves under directions from the researcher. During the discussions, they were highly motivated and extremely involved in illuminating the problem points they wanted to amend. It seemed that they were to some extent aware of the surface difficulties they encountered in writing and were anxious to acquire means of overcoming them. The practice developed their awareness further for elements that need adjustment and helped them to acquire more strategies for modifying text.

The findings of the study confirm Villamil and DeGuerrero (1998) and Mendonca and Johnson (1994) among others which revealed the impact of peer modification on final drafts. The former yielded similar findings to the present study. They found that 74% of the modifications made in peer sessions were incorporated into the final versions.

A similar conclusion was reached by Mendonca and Johnson (1994) who observed the incorporation of 53% of the modifications generated through peer interaction into final versions.

Nelson and Murphy (1993) examined the social behavior of group members toward each other. They claimed that the nature of the interaction in peer sessions determines the extent to which peer recommendations are adopted. They suggested that cooperation among peers encourages writers to use peers' comments in revising.

Apparently, collaboration was evident among the group members in the present study. They collaborated to effect change. The members of the group whether as reviewers or writers were active partners, the reviewers providing recommendations and the writers interacting with their peers and using their responses in revising their drafts.

According to the Vygotskian notion of 'zones of proximal development' (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1986), learners' cognitive development is enhanced through suitable guidance of other learners through social interaction and collaboration. The participants in this study interacted and collaborated positively to extend each other's writing ability as could be witnessed in the modifications applied in their final products.

Collaborative revision facilitated productive work among members of the group prompting sharing of knowledge and highlighting awareness raising. By exploring several alternatives provided by peers during the discussions, the students were able to recognize weaknesses in their as well as in others' writing thus developing critical thinking.

Though students benefited from collaborating, they showed some reluctance in using peer comments. They did not fully trust the linguistic ability of their peers given that they were all L2 learners. When in doubt, they adhered to developing their own independent ideas and seeking confirmation through other resources thus inflicting self-correction which is an indication of language growth. Self-correction provides for productive work to occur thereby developing critical thinking among individuals of the group.

Self-modification was clearly shown in the participants' adherence to dictionary use. They looked up words to verify meaning and acquire new expressions. Some of the problem points encountered related to spelling, repetition, part of speech and number. Dictionary use paved the way for checking spelling, varying their vocabulary so as to avoid repetition of the same word, confirming the plural of a noun, finding the correct tense, and verifying the part of speech.

The results also show the predominant role linguistic accuracy played in the modifications. Our students' concern with micro-level modification could be attributed to the way they perceive language learning. Linguistic accuracy is emphasized throughout their previous language learning. Besides, many of the linguistic accuracy items they revised were studied in their grammar course in their first year at college. As intermediate learners who are still not quite proficient in L2

language structure, they may perceive accuracy of form as the most important aspect they should deal with.

Studies in L2 (Ashwell, 2000; Leki, 1990; Paulus, 1999) indicated students' focus on grammar when revising. In their study on the impact of peer revision on L2 writing, Villamil and DeGuerrero (1998) found that L2 students focused primarily on grammar when revising in the persuasive mode and to a lesser degree in dealing with revision in the narrative mode although they were explicitly instructed to concentrate on macrostructure revision first and then microstructure.

Another aspect of language that students showed concern with but to a far lesser degree (4%) than linguistic accuracy is content. There is some evidence of L2 students concern with content. Ashwell, 2000; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Hedgecock and Lefkowitz 1992; and Villamil and DeGuerrero (1998) found that content feedback had a moderate effect on revision.

The linguistic aspect of organization did not merit any modification in the present study. It was not considered in the peer sessions or in self modifications. Peer intervention ignored idea development. Writers were not offered guidance to clarify or specify ideas mentioned in their essays. One explanation for the negligence of this and the content aspect in the peer sessions and self-modification is probably the incompetence of our students in L2. Their deficiency in this area deprived them of observing and detecting related problem points. This deficiency, I believe, results from lack of attention to writing in L2 in their previous years of encountering the foreign language. Writing is one of the two productive skills that donot receive warrant the importance they deserve in pre-college L2 teaching and learning. This entails concentration on this aspect in our teaching.

Few studies in L2 literature considered the aspect of organization in peer feedback. Min (2005) revealed that his subjects generated more macro modifications during peer review and attributed this to the extensive training they received. In Villamil and DeGuerrero (1998), organization was the least aspect revised by their students although they were probably more proficient in the FL than ours as they had been exposed to the L2 (English) in a country where it is the mother tongue for about a year. However, caution should be exercised in stigmatizing students as form-focused revisers who are mainly concerned with micro modifications. In accordance with Ferris (2003), the small number of words in the students' essays (500 words) may have resulted in the lack of macro-modifications and initiated the adoption of micro-modifications.

Given that our participants ignored revision in content and organization, it is appropriate to suggest that we give more consideration to these aspects in our teaching than to the linguistic adequacy aspect.

## **7. Conclusion**

The small number of subjects involved in this study and the low language proficiency level pose a barrier to generalizing the findings to other contexts.

Four main conclusions are drawn from this study on peer input: 1) It suggests that student writers benefit from peer revision as indicated by the incorporation of peers' suggestions in their final versions; 2) Students initiated self-modification which is an indication of language growth; 3) Peer input was not the only source of revision utilized as participants in their pursue of text improvement also consulted other sources (dictionaries) indicating variation in strategies used to improve writing and acquire new knowledge; 4) Students were more concerned with micro modifications than global ones probably because as intermediate students they lacked the competence that facilitated going beyond micro structures.

Overall, the findings of this study support the claim that peer input is a valuable means of feedback in EFL writing practice. It enabled the students to consolidate features of the comparison/contrast genre, facilitated communication among individuals, encouraged student autonomy even in a culture like ours where authority lies on the hands of the teacher, developed awareness of weaknesses, and enhanced critical thinking and language development.

The issue for further investigation is to examine whether peer input is consolidated and used in the improvement of quality of writing in subsequent individual versions.

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