

## Peer Feedback in Writing through Georgian EFL Undergraduate Students' Eyes

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### Abstract

Throughout the years educators, educational experts, teachers and tutors have been in the constant search of effective ways of teaching and assessing writing. The views about assessment of writing have encountered changes over the years. Therefore, feedback has become one of the fundamental aspects of teaching and learning writing. Peer feedback is one of the special ways to share the knowledge about writing and at the same time to contribute to creating the learner-oriented classroom environment within which students become active participants of their own path of learning writing. The primary objective of the present study is to investigate Georgian higher educational institutions' (HEIs') undergraduate EFL students' perception of peer feedback and its role in the process of developing their writing skills. The findings of the present study show that peer feedback is appealing for the learners, since they believe it develops their critical-thinking and self-reviewing skills and gives them the sense of active participation. However, the present research has also revealed that the elements of friendship-related bias need special attention and should be the subject of further research in that field.

Keywords: *higher education, peer feedback, writing, students' attitudes*

### Introduction

It is difficult to determine the most significant skill related to the study at university, but writing is one of the most complex and at the same time vital skills to acquire. Therefore, there has been a concern about developing the learners' writing skills, since it is a complex process that involves various factors, such as motivational, cognitive, cultural and social ones. What is more, writing is one of the most essential skills in many occupational fields, since it is extensively used in higher education and in the workplace (Ion et al., 2016; Celik & Aydin, 2016; Nguyen, 2016; Graham et al., 2013; Defazio et al., 2010). As a result, the ability to communicate effectively through writing is echoed to be essential for being competitive at the job market.

Due to the importance of acquiring composition skills, one of the primary objectives of higher education of Georgia is to prepare qualified professionals for the job market. Teachers, educators, educational experts and the writing tutors have been searching for effective ways to teach and assess writing skills of EFL learners. Not only the teaching method, but also the assessment of writing is of vital importance, since it is in direct correlation with

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developing the students' motivation and desire to write. The way students' writing is assessed may either motivate or demotivate them, it may also help them improve their writing skills or be quite inefficient in this direction.

Within the traditional view on education assessment is totally teacher-centered. Teacher is in the center of education and has put upon the responsibility to decide on what and how to assess, to choose the assessment method/format, assessment rubrics and criteria. Nowadays, when the major goal of higher education of Georgia is to promote independent and lifelong learning, the traditional teacher paradigm has changed and the in the center of education is the learner who should be an active participant of one's own learning, which includes being responsible to monitor one's assessment process, to take part in creating rubrics and be the assessor as well.

### **Peer feedback**

Feedback or *providing the knowledge of the results* is the foundation of different views on assessment that is regarded as the tool for generating information to facilitate the learning process (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Feedback is a narrative comment that is provided to students on their writing, term papers or other works done by them (Astin & Antonio, 2012, p.280). As it is defined, peer feedback is the communication that normally does not include formal grades (Liu & Carless, 2006). However, teachers often ask students to do the grading, the results of which are contradictory (Chaney, 2009; Peterson & Peterson, 2011). They depend on students' culture, personal peculiarities and the nature of the task. Iranian students, for example, prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback and do not always adequately react to the latter (Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007). This may be due to the fact that students trust teacher's qualification more than that of their peers, but this may also deal with negative emotions due to peer criticism.

It is also posited that feedback helps learners improve their writing, since it affects their awareness of writing (Tsui & Ng, 2000). It is suggested that, owing to implementing peer feedback in EFL writing classes, the learners prone to take responsibility for their own learning and performance through judging the works of others, become more careful in their work (Heywood, 2000). As it is suggested by Topping (1998), peer feedback is a tool that enables learners to make decisions about the elements of writing that make up a composition of high quality.

There are various reasons why peer feedback should be employed in the learning process. Firstly, it should be noted that through engaging students with peer feedback the learning process extends from private to more public domain (Liu & Carless, 2006). Furthermore, peer feedback can be a part of self-regulated learning, since it enables students to become active participats and managers of their own learning. It is also contended that by commenting on the work of peers, students develop objectivity in relation to standards which can then be transferred to their own work (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p.201).

## Benefits and Limitations of Peer Feedback

It is asserted that, when students believe that their writing is going to be read by an authentic reader, such as peer, they are prone to write better than the times, when their teacher is going to read it (Clark, 2003). Rollinson (2005) posits that peer feedback enhances the reviewers' critical reading skills that they need to critically read their own works as well. Other proponents of peer feedback suggest that through peer feedback the learners are able to discuss and negotiate their ideas, make modifications not only in peers', but also in their own written works, that finally leads to promoting not only good writers, but also good readers (Jiao, 2007; Kamimura, 2006; Zeng, 2006).

Another benefit of peer feedback is the fact that it gives learners the opportunity to take responsibility for monitoring their own learning process and hence to develop higher-order thinking skills. Therefore, peer feedback fosters a learner-oriented teaching and learning environment, since it provides meaningful negotiation and construction for writing (Lin & Yang, 2011). It has also been reported that peer feedback, besides students of other courses, is perceived positively by EFL learners (Lin & Yang, 2011; Sakumaran & Dass, 2014; Birdsong & Sharplin, 1986; Smith, Cooper, & Lancaster, 2002).

Although the recent studies support the application of peer feedback in EFL writing classes, there are some concerns about it. Rollinson (2005) posits that peer feedback consumes much time and energy from students as well as from teachers. Other limitations of peer feedback reported by the opponents is the assumption that giving negative criticism may cause the writers' irritation or offense (Afrasiabi & Khojasteh, 2015). Other opponents have concerns that some learners, due to the lack of knowledge and language proficiency, may be blind to errors in their peers' writing and, therefore, give them incorrect comments (Horowitz, 1986).

## Methods

Issues of peer feedback are to a certain degree contradictory, as shown above. On the other hand they have not been studied for Georgian reality. Therefore, the primary objective of the present research paper was to investigate Georgian undergraduate EFL learners' perceptions of peer feedback.

In order to obtain the data about the students' beliefs the current research paper employed the quantitative research method executed in questionnaires. The latter was designed and shared online via Google Forms. It was the Google's online application that can be administered free of charge. It is a very mobile way to obtain data, since it is user-friendly and offers different question types. Due to the convenient online tool such as Google Forms, the survey of the present study was multi-designed containing different types of questions such as Likert-scale and checkboxes.

The primary objective of the questionnaire was to investigate the undergraduate university students' attitude towards peer feedback in writing. Though, the survey was also aimed at observing the learners' attitude towards writing in general.

## Participants of the study

Participants of the study were 84 EFL students from both public and private higher educational institutions in Georgia. Totally, nine public and four private university students took part in the survey.

## Results and discussion

According to Table 1 below, the learners do not enjoy English writing activities, although the majority thinks it is an important skill in academic setting. 20.5% of the students strongly agree and 31.3% neither agree nor disagree with the statements that they use writing outside the university as the means of communication.

**Table 1:** Writing practice

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I enjoy English writing activities	6%	9.5%	25%	28.5%	31%
Writing is an important skill in academic setting	48.8%	13.1%	7.1%	6%	25%
I use writing outside the university as means of communication (e.g. with partners, or friends, etc.)	20.5%	19.3%	31.3%	13.3%	15.6%

Table 2 below shows the learners' attitude towards assessment in general and peer feedback in their writing classes. According to the data, 44% of the students consider the assessment of their writing important, while 13.2% of them neither agree nor disagree and 19% of the participants strongly disagree with this statement. 40.5% of students neither agree nor disagree that they give feedback to their peers' writing according to the relationship they have developed with them, although 27.4% of students strongly agree with this statement, and 14.3% of them disagree and 9.5% strongly disagree with it. It can be seen that 41.7% of student participants can accept their peers' opinions about their writing, while 21.4% of them neither agree nor disagree with this statement and the same number of students (10.7%) disagree and strongly disagree with it. 40.5% of the participants neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the students should not be responsible for providing feedback to their peers' writing. 21.4% of students strongly disagree and 11.9% strongly agree with this statement, although the majority (44%) believes that the combination of both teacher and student feedback is the best form of writing assessment, while 22.6% of participants neither agree nor disagree with this statement and 11.9% strongly disagree with it.

**Table 2:** Assessment of writing and students' attitudes

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Assessment of my writing is important for me	44%	11.9%	13.2%	11.9%	19%
I give feedback to my peers' writing according to the relationship I have developed with them	27.4%	8.3%	40.5%	14.3%	9.5%
I can accept my peers' opinions about my writing	41.7%	15.5%	21.4%	10.7%	10.7%
I think students should not be responsible for providing feedback on peers' written work	11.9%	9.5%	40.5%	16.7%	21.4%
Some combination of peer and teacher feedback is the most effective	44%	13.1%	22.6%	8.4%	11.9%

Table 3 below depicts the students' opinions about the positive aspects of peer feedback. 50% of student participants believe that peer feedback develops self-reviewing skills. 45.2% think that it will help them understand what peers think about their writing and that others can find mistakes and let them know about them that will lead them to improvement. 27.4% of students believe that peer feedback can develop a sense of participation in their writing class, besides, 20.2% think peer feedback increases interaction between students.

**Table 3.** Benefits of Peer feedback

Peer feedback develops self-reviewing skills	50%
Peer feedback will help me understand what my peers' opinions are about my work	45.2%
My peers can find my mistakes and help me improve	45.2%
Peer feedback gives me opportunity to interact with my peers	20.2%
I will have sense of participation in my writing class	27.4%

According to the data represented in Table 4, it can also be stated that the majority of the research participants (63.1%) feel a big responsibility while giving feedback on their peers' writing and 44% of the participants hope they are able to give useful information. However, some students (19%) feel that they do not have enough knowledge for it while 21.4% of them think they will not be able to provide constructive feedback. 20.2% do not feel comfortable when they give negative feedback to their friends.

**Table 4.** While giving feedback to my peers

I feel a great responsibility	63.1%
I can give useful information	44%
I do not know enough	19%
I will not be able to provide constructive feedback	21.4%
It is uncomfortable for me to give negative feedback to my friends	20.2%

### Summary and concluding remarks

According to the data obtained from the student survey, several concluding remarks can be drawn. It can be assumed that, though the Georgian learners of English think writing is an important skill in academic setting, they do not enjoy writing activities. The fact that the learners do not have an inclination to write may be conditioned by the learning environment that does not develop the learners' motivation. Besides, the writing activities may not be relevant to the learners' needs. However, further research should be carried out to investigate to what extent writing activities may be uninteresting for students and how it can be improved.

According to the results, the assessment of their writing is important to students. This means that the students want to be heard, they want their writings to be read and they also wish to be awarded for their compositions. The award in this case is the feedback they will receive from peers. What is more, they also state that they can accept their peers' opinion about their writing. In students' view, the best way to assess writing is the combination of teacher and student feedback.

Although students value peer feedback, some of them feel peer feedback is a great responsibility and some of them are not confident to be able to give constructive feedback to their peers. The majority of participants of the study showed a positive attitude towards peer feedback since they believe it develops self-reviewing skills and can increase the sense of active participation in the learning process.

Regardless the positive attitude that the research participants hold about peer feedback, the data revealed that some of them do not feel comfortable when they give negative feedback to their friends and what is more, they sometimes provide feedback to their peers according to the relationship they have developed with them. That is the issue that need further investigation, since the origins of this bias may be the cultural background and the value system of the student participants.

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