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Peer and Teacher Feedback in A Foreign Language Research Writing Course: A Case Study of Doctoral Students' Perspectives in Finland

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The provision of feedback on student work has been a common and even recommended practice across levels of education throughout the years. In the field of academic writing pedagogy, giving feedback has become a crucial part of the teaching/learning process given that composition skills are quite intricate and difficult to master, requiring a cycle of continual drafting, feedback and re-drafting until a final version is produced. Teacher feedback appears to be the most utilized in current classrooms, with peer feedback beginning to be applied in many disciplines as well in recent times. Nevertheless, it appears that most research studies on the uses and the benefits of teacher and peer feedback focus on undergraduate students with graduate students' voices less contemplated in this regard. Considering this potential research gap as well as the fact that doctoral students are often more skilled and competent writers, this study analyses these students' attitudes and views toward the need of teacher and peer feedback in a research writing in English course delivered in a Finnish university with a mix of international and local students. The results seem to indicate that both types of feedback, but specifically a combination of both, were well-accepted and highly-regarded by these students, particularly as far as reader-friendliness is concerned.

1. Introduction

Feedback can be defined as the information provided to someone on their performance and competency on a certain task (Martinez & Vargas, 2014;[15] Luna, 2009).[14] In academic settings, it is said to enable students to learn from the mistakes pointed out and, therefore, improve their learning process (Burke & Pieterick, 2010).[1] In other words, "it helps learners become aware of any gaps that exist between their desired goal and their current knowledge, understanding or skill and guides them through actions necessary to obtain the goal" (Burke & Pieterick, 2010, p.18).[1]

In composition classes, feedback has become an integral part of teaching given the complexity of this skill (Gonca & Eksi, 2012).[3] It is common for teachers to provide feedback at several stages of student writing until the final version is reached across different education levels. This process of revising several drafts taking into account teacher feedback appears to advance student writing abilities and 'writability' self-awareness. Peer feedback has also started to be applied ever more often as a way to promote the importance of revising and editing.

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Yet, its long-term impact still remains understudied (Lou et al., 2016).[13]

Considering the applications of teacher and peer feedback mentioned above, the benefits of both types of feedback have attracted the attention of several researchers (Lee, 2017),[8] particularly in undergraduate studies and in contexts where the language of writing is not the students' home language. However, it appears that little attention has been given to how the level of language proficiency of student-writers may affect their perspectives on their preferences for feedback (Liu & Wu, 2019)[12] as well as on the usefulness of teacher and peer feedback in their writing. Graduate students, and in particular doctoral candidates, are often more experienced and knowledgeable writers given that they will most probably have engaged in writing activities for their master's degrees or even article publications before they reach their doctoral programs. This raises the question on whether teacher and peer feedback are as needed and effective for doctoral students as they are for writers at a novice level of academic writing as undergraduate students usually are.

With this in mind, this study collected insights on a group of doctoral students' perspectives on the value of teacher and peer feedback for their research writing abilities. Therefore, this paper first presents a theoretical framework on teacher and peer feedback in writing followed by a description of the research context and design which leads to a discussion emerging from the answers to a questionnaire circulated among the doctoral students involved in this study.

2. Writing Feedback in Undergraduate and Graduate Studies

Even though some researchers have claimed that error correction is ineffective (Gonca & Eksi, 2012 referring to a study developed by Truscott in 2007),[3] its impact has been described by others as almost as profound as the effect of regular instruction (Hattie & Timperley, 2007);[4] therefore, feedback practices are applied in a variety of disciplines and education contexts. Regarding feedback and writing in specific, due to the complex nature of writing, it involves several stages and steps (Gonca & Eksi, 2012),[3] and it can only be mastered after extensive drafting and re-drafting; therefore, writing feedback has become particularly important for the development of this skill. In addition, universities across the world are offering more and more programs for international students (Iqbal, 2012)[6] and, since a great amount of the assignments and projects submitted by students have to be written in the

language of instruction, which might not be a language mastered by international students, a variety of writing courses are offered to enhance academic writing skills. Lillis (2001)[10] highlights that writing is, in fact, a 'key assessment tool' in many educational settings, namely in higher education ones. Also, in the specific case of graduate students around the world, the tendency is to choose to write in English in the hope that their research will become more accessible worldwide. Therefore, many students require training on the mechanics of academic and research writing in English with writing feedback being a crucial part of their training. This feedback is said to not only have a fundamental role in the teaching-learning relationship (Li & Barnard, 2011),[9] but also to "encourage students to assume responsibility and control over their writing" (Burke & Pieterick, 2010, p. 23)[1] with the teacher's main role becoming more of a feedback provider, guide and facilitator than an instructor (Gonca & Eksi, 2012).[3]

Two main types of feedback have been used in present day teaching-learning contexts, especially in the writing classroom: teacher feedback and peer feedback. Teacher feedback has always been present one way or another even if in an indirect way; however, peer feedback can be considered a relatively recent approach. It can be defined as "the quantitative evaluation and qualitative feedback of a learner's performance by another learner among students." (Patchan & Schunn, 2016, p. 228).[17] According to Lee (2017),[8] teacher feedback tends to focus predominantly on language form and less on content and organization, while peer feedback has come into the picture to either encourage students to become more aware of the importance of reviewing and editing or even occasionally to relieve the teacher from the heavy workload related to providing feedback to several drafts from many students (Gonca & Eksi, 2012;[3] Ho & Duong, 2014; [5]Patchan & Schunn, 2016).[17]

Whichever the reasons, and despite reports that some students prefer teacher feedback over peer (Liu & Wu, 2019)[12] and resist taking this kind of feedback seriously as described by Lee (2017)[8] when citing a study carried out by Nelson & Carson in 1995, peer feedback has been described as having a myriad of advantages by several authors. Enhancing students' understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, fostering critical thinking and promoting learner autonomy are some of the benefits mentioned by Lee (2017)[8] (based on studies developed by Tuzi in 2004, Hu in 2005 and Yang et al. in 2006 respectively). McCarthy (2017)[16] mentioned an increased knowledge of subject matter as well as improved quality of work and a development in constructive reflection

skills. Li, Liu & Steckelberg (2010)[11] accounted for benefits on the level of greater sense of accountability and responsibility of those who provide peer feedback resulting in better quality of their own writing which corroborates with Patchan & Schunn's (2016)[17] idea that students who propose revisions in their peers' work practice and improve their own revision strategies. Another aspect that became clear, however, is that, despite the benefits reported, "it is increasingly recognized that training has a pivotal role to play to facilitate effective peer feedback" (Min, 2005, 2006, 2008 in Lee, 2017).[8] Philippakos (2017)[18] stated that appropriate training could be the key for the decrease in the reluctance to accept feedback provided by peers because students become more aware of, certain of and engaged in their role as reviewers.

Gonca & Eksi (2012)[3] affirmed that there is a need for more research regarding the efficacy of feedback in addition to Weaver's (2006)[20] concern some years earlier that there are few research studies that focus on student perspectives. Similarly, Poulos & Mahony (2008)[19] reported that "few studies have been identified in which the research focus is specifically on students' views of feedback" (p.144). Even though several studies on the topic have, since then, been developed (e.g. Martinez & Vargas, 2014;[15] McCarthy, 2017;[16] Philippakos, 2017)[18] and a book with an extensive meta-analysis of the benefits of both types of feedback has been released (Lee, 2017),[8] we came across very few studies that focused on the perceptions of graduate students in specific on the topic (e.g. Landry, Jacobs & Newton, 2015;[7] Ho & Duong, 2014)[5] and among these, only one concerned doctoral students. Landry, Jacobs & Newton (2015)[7] focused on peer assessment in specific, i.e., awarding a specific grade based on the analysis of the peer's work which is not exactly as peer feedback because this one may not necessarily require a grade but simply comments on the peer's performance. The same authors also state that "particularly at the graduate level, wherein most students are required to publicly disseminate their research findings as part of their academic program" (Landry, Jacobs & Newton, 2015, p.39),[7] peer assessment can be definitely relevant. Ho & Duong's (2014)[5] research study concerned only master students, and Liu & Wu (2019)[12] focused on preferences of students and teachers based on language proficiency, but not on graduate level.

Doctoral students have a different writing "baggage" than undergraduate students. Usually doctoral students already have extensive experience in writing and many have written in a foreign language in their master thesis or pre-dissertation articles; therefore, as a teacher who was teaching research writing to PhD candidates for the first time after years lecturing academic writing to undergraduate students only, it became compelling to understand the significance of feedback, peer or teacher, in experienced writers. Was there a real need for such feedback at this level? If so, what are the main benefits of such feedback? Are peer feedback and teacher feedback equally important at this level? Do teachers need to adjust the way writing feedback is given to PhD candidates?

Considering this and given the afore-mentioned advantages and constraints of peer feedback, our research aimed at understanding the affordances of teacher and peer feedback in a research writing in English course for doctoral students in a Finnish university. Thus, our research questions are as follows:

How do doctoral students perceive the usefulness of teacher and peer feedback?

What effects do doctoral students believe preparing peer feedback will have/might have had on their own writing?

3. The Research Writing Course Context

Our research study was carried out with a group of doctoral students taking an elective course called *Research Writing* in a Finnish university which, at the time, focused on technological and applied sciences programs. The *Research Writing* course was taught on a blended learning mode with most of the coursework being accomplished independently. The language of instruction was English. Several educational resources, ranging from videos, Power Point presentations, handouts and interactive practice exercises were produced specifically for this course by a former instructor with the aim to provide extensive, meaningful independent practice on how to better write academically in English for doctoral purposes. The course was organized in 10 modules that covered topics, such as, formal style, reader-friendliness, punctuation and structural features of abstracts, introductions and conclusions. In addition to the online independent coursework, students could also complete offline work, i.e., attending events related to research writing or reading a specific book on the topic could count as independent coursework.

Furthermore, these students were also required to meet their lecturer three times per semester in assigned groups of three. In these meetings, students brought their own English written texts, usually excerpts of their doctoral dissertations, which they should share online three weeks prior to the meeting so that both peers and teacher could read. The meetings were open discussions on each other's texts. A short training on how to provide peer feedback

was delivered before the course started and a feedback form was distributed so as to work as the basis for peer feedback provision. The form included the following items: overall structure, coherence, paragraphing, relevance, originality, argumentation, style, cohesion, grammar, paraphrasing, quotations and referencing.

According to Liu & Wu's (2019)[12] six-dimension analytical framework of feedback in second language writing, feedback can address source, mode, tone, focus, scope and explicitness (see Figure 1). In our discussion and feedback meetings, the source of feedback came from teacher and peers, and it was delivered mainly in spoken form though sometimes the teacher would provide the written feedback prepared before the meetings to the student after the meetings were finished. As for the tone, the training we provided to students before the feedback sessions aimed to convey the message that positive feedback should be the starting point and a good balance between positive and corrective comments should be in place; therefore, it is reliable to say that the tone of feedback from both teacher and peers was balanced as students followed instructions given in the training session. The focus was global with special attention given to content, organization, structure, style, and particularly reader-friendliness which was a large portion of the online course as well. Nevertheless, the teacher would sometimes focus on one or two grammar points when a recurring error persisted throughout the same text. The scope was comprehensive and the explicitness was direct.
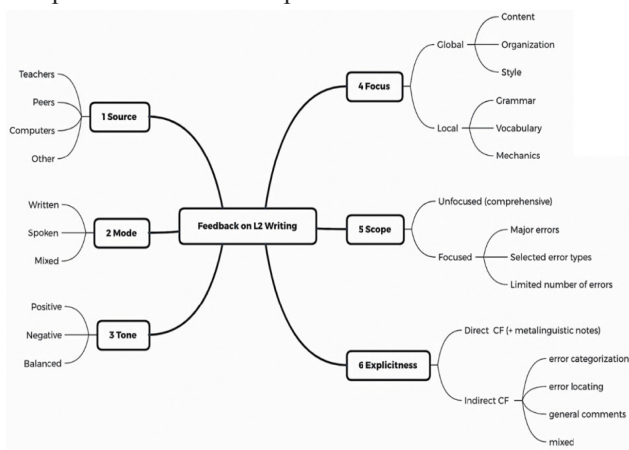
Figure 1. Liu & Wu's (2019)[12] six-dimension analytical framework of feedback in L2 writing (p. 302).

Regarding the course credits, students could choose to earn between 3 to 5 credits for the course, depending on their own personal academic requirements. This meant that each online and/or offline activity coupled with the face-to-face meetings corresponded to a certain amount of points earned which were then converted into credits.

Therefore, students were free to choose the number of course activities they would like to complete according to the credits they would like to achieve. The course would usually accept up to 36 students per semester which would be distributed between two to three instructors.

4. Methodology and Participants

In order to probe the level of usefulness of peer and teacher feedback on doctoral/research composition in this Finnish higher education institution in particular, a qualitative/ quantitative research methodology was applied with focus on survey design to identify and categorize opinions (Creswell, 2012).[2] Out of the 36 students that were accepted in the course that semester, only 12 were assigned to the author of the article and, out of those 12, only 10 completed the survey distributed. Answering the survey was voluntary and anonymous, and an official request to collect information from these students was issued and signed by the students. The questions revolved around the value of peer and teacher feedback and their perspectives on how the provision of peer feedback might have impacted their own writing. From the 7 questions included in the survey, only the answers to 4 were considered for the purpose of this article (see list of questions in Annex 1). The entire group of students taking the course at the time of the research had a ratio of exactly 50%/50% for national and international students; however, the group of 12 students the author welcomed that semester had 8 international students and 4 national.

5. Data analysis and Discussion

As mentioned previously, the two main questions asked were *How useful was teacher feedback for your writing?* and *How useful was peer feedback for your writing?* On a Likert scale from 1 to 5, one meaning "not useful at all" and five meaning "extremely useful", 80% of the respondents (n=8) claimed that teacher feedback was extremely useful in the writing process while 70% (n=7) considered peer feedback equally extremely useful for their writing. When requested to provide a reason for their choices in the two previous questions, the doctoral students highlighted mainly the fact that teacher feedback provides expert input on language and academic style so required in research writing, and there was one mention to the identification of strengths, not only weaknesses, by expert teachers which could help students focus on what they do well writing-wise (see table 1). As for peer feedback, the high level of answers pointing to its usefulness for research writing seems to be associated to the fact that it mainly helped improve reader-friendliness,

i.e., it provided input on how to make their texts more understandable and easy to follow for all readers (see table 2). Nevertheless, in the student answers, there were at least three mentions to how any feedback is welcome regardless of who it comes from, revealing a potential indifference regarding receiving expert or non-expert feedback. Also mentioned in these students' answers is the importance of acknowledging other people's points of view on their writing in order to grow as writers, especially when it comes to content, with a mention to the importance of having their texts read my people in the same field to help detect content inconsistencies. Only one mention was made as to how peer feedback may help improve general foreign language (English) abilities. From these answers, it becomes clear that, as Lee (2017)[8] stated, usually the teacher is regarded as the language expert and peers as reader-friendliness resource individuals.

Table 1. Answers to the question on why teacher feedback was useful

Q2.1 - Why? *Teacher feedback was useful because…*	Number of times mentioned in answers
It helped spot grammatical inconsistencies.	5
It provided expert input on academic style.	5
It helped me understand my own weaknesses and strengths as a writer.	1

Table 2. Answers to the question on why peer feedback was useful

Q1.1 - Why? *Peer feedback was useful because...*	Number of times mentioned in answers
It improved my text's reader-friendliness	6
Any feedback is useful	3
I became more open to others' perspectives	2
Other students in my field detected inconsistencies	1
It helped with general English skills	1

After the two questions related to the usefulness of both feedbacks, we enquired the doctoral students on which one they considered the most important for the improvement of their general research writing skills. Challenging Liu & Wu's (2019)[12] overview of results with undergraduate students, 50% of our doctoral students believed teacher feedback was the most useful and the remaining 50% claimed both types of feedback were beneficial. No student selected peer feedback as the most helpful.

As for the reasons revealed for the preference, those who preferred teacher feedback mentioned two main reasons. The first one was related to a point mentioned before which is that the teacher is the expert in language and writing; therefore, it is preferable to obtain input that will actually have a substantial impact on their writing abilities rather than receiving superficial feedback that may not advance the composition process (see table 3). Along with these opinions, there was also one mention to how teacher feedback is more professional and constructive. One student said his/her preference for teacher feedback comes from his/her feeling that "[the teacher] really knows what he/she is talking about", and another one wrote "the teacher has expertise in writing academic texts". These two student remarks substantiate the idea that the teacher is still viewed as the expert and the one who will contribute the most for advancing writing skills even for doctoral students.

Table 3. Answers to the question on why teacher feedback was the most useful of both

Q3.1 - Why? *Teacher feedback was the most useful for my writing because...*	Number of times mentioned in answers
The teacher is an expert in language and writing	4
This feedback is more professional and constructive	1

Regarding the students who preferred a combination of both feedbacks, two main points were made in relation to this. The first one has to do with the possibility of having "the best of both worlds", i.e., according to the students, peers and teachers usually targeted different writing aspects in their feedback, so the more input the better (see table 4). Three out of the five doctoral students went into more detail, mentioning that they would receive the most helpful feedback from peers when it came to technical language while they could be better guided on language by the teachers, as mentioned several times before.

Table 4. Answers to the question on why teacher feedback and peer feedback combined were the most useful

Q3.1 - Why? *Both feedbacks combined were the most useful for my writing because...*	Number of times mentioned in answers
Teacher and peers focused on different things	2
Teacher focused on English; peers focused on technical language	3

Finally, it was our goal to grasp whether the preparation of peer feedback could have had an impact on doctoral students' own writing. Ninety percent (n=9) of the students confirmed some sort of effect on their writing with only one student stating that no influence was

noticed. As expressed in Patchan & Schunn (2016),[17] the effects described by these students seem to validate the idea that preparing revisions improves your own revision skills. While peer reviewing, some students claimed that they enjoyed the opportunity to practice what they had learned about academic writing and apply the knowledge (see table 5). Also, some students saw peer feedback as a chance to gather a bank of errors that they, themselves, should avoid in their own writing. A few students also accounted for the possibility of experiencing different writing styles that could develop their own writing approach. A few doctoral students voiced that peer reviewing their colleagues' texts fostered their ability to identify their weaknesses and learn from others' strengths.

Table 5. Answers to the question on whether preparing peer feedback had an impact on their own writing

Q4.1 - Why? *Preparing peer feedback helped with my own writing because...*	Number of times mentioned in answers
It helped me practice what I learned.	3
It gave me a chance to learn from other writing styles.	2
It helped me work on my weaknesses by learning about other students' strengths.	2
It gave me an idea of what errors to avoid myself.	3

6. Conclusion

The goal of this research study was to gather opinions from doctoral students on the usefulness of peer and teacher feedback for their writing as well as to understand the specific effects of engaging in peer feedback on their own writing abilities. Based on the answers to the survey questions presented, we can draw some main conclusions that will help us answer our research questions.

To begin with, an analysis of the student perceptions on the usefulness of teacher feedback in graduate writing indicates that teacher feedback was regarded by the majority of these students as extremely useful, especially as it represented expert input with focus on language and academic writing skills. This was also stated by Lee (2017)[8] which seems to imply that doctoral students, as undergraduate ones, also recognize teacher feedback as favorable to their writing despite their, supposedly, broader writing background. Regarding peer feedback, the greatest part of the students also considered this type of feedback extremely helpful and the reasons presented pointed to the possibility to receive feedback on reader-friendliness and text flow. This seems to indicate that students draw a clear distinguishment between the purposes and impacts of peer and teacher feedback which

is comparable to undergraduate students' perspectives described in this article. However, unlike other students in general (Liu & Wu, 2019),[12] these doctoral students seemed much more open to peer feedback stating very clear and well-informed reasons on its usefulness.

When requested to focus on only one of the feedbacks as the most useful for their writing, the students were divided, choosing either only teacher feedback or a combination of both. Since 50% of the students preferred a combination of both kinds of feedback, this seems to indicate that peer feedback is respected and valued which could be liaised to Landry, Jacobs & Newton's (2015)[7] perspective that at graduate level, peer input can be considered more relevant given the public nature of most of the work produced by graduate students. Indeed, the students involved in this study were mostly focused on producing written output that would become their PhD dissertation or pre-dissertation articles, both of which would most probably be published in a public platform. It was also mentioned by these doctoral students that peer feedback usually puts emphasis on field-related technical language which can be crucial for a well-laid out research article or quality doctoral dissertation, public or not.

The afore-mentioned results seem to answer our first research question related to the usefulness of both types of feedback, indicating that the doctoral students involved in this study, despite being more experienced writers than undergraduate students, acknowledged the usefulness of both types of feedback even though they considered that each one had its very specific applicabilities and practicalities as mentioned above. It is also understood from these doctoral candidates' answers that their openness to peer feedback is evident and does not create discomfort.

The other research question we proposed when carrying out this research study had to do with the impact of peer feedback on these doctoral students' own writing. The great majority confirmed some sort of effect on their composition abilities, which corroborates with previous studies (e.g. Patchan & Schunn, 2016).[17] The main benefits reported are learning to avoid the same mistakes detected in their peers' writing and practising academic writing skills that can be applicable in their own writing.

The assumption that doctoral students are usually more experienced and knowledgeable writers set the tone for this research. It was presumed that these students would potentially not require as much assistance and feedback in their writing as undergraduate students do. However, at least for the students surveyed in this study, that does not seem to be the case. They considered both feedbacks advantageous either for linguistic and writing skills

development or for field-related language correctness and reader-friendliness advancement. It becomes clear that research writing for doctoral candidates in this particular setting, writing in a foreign language, will benefit from a balanced combination of teacher and peer feedback that fosters opportunities for open discussions on mainly language use and reader-friendliness. Furthermore, it seems safe to state that the peer feedback practice described in this article was positive and constructive because training was provided and students became more aware of the appropriate approach to apply in the process of giving feedback. This agrees with Philippakos's (2017) [18] idea that training can reduce the reluctance to receive peer feedback. It is also possible that, given the maturity of these students and the open discussion setup of peer feedback provision in this study, giving and receiving feedback became a much more pleasant and satisfying experience for the students involved.

In brief, it can be said that in general teacher and peer feedback were well-accepted and deemed fruitful for these doctoral students.

7. Limitations

This research study was carried out with only 10 students in a Finnish university, meaning that it had a very limited sample; therefore, its results are quite context-specific and could not be extrapolated to other educational settings. Also, once the questionnaire answers were gathered for analysis, it became obvious that interviews with these students could have brought deeper insights into the reasons presented for the level of acceptability of both types of feedback for doctoral students.

Given the above-mentioned limitations, it would be advisable to design a similar study that would include a larger student sample and would be complemented with interviews for a better understanding of the usefulness of both types of feedback in graduate studies and, in specific, "the long-term impact of peer feedback" (Lou et al., 2016, p. 93)[13] in foreign language writing.

Annex 1

1- How useful was TEACHER feedback for your writing?

Not useful at all   1 2 3 4 5 Extremely useful

1.1 Why?

2- How useful was PEER feedback for your writing?

Not useful at all   1 2 3 4 5 Extremely useful

2.1 Why?

3- Which feedback do you consider most useful for your writing?

Teacher Feedback

Peer Feedback

Both

None

3.1 Why?

4- Did the preparation of feedback on your colleagues' texts help with your own writing?

Yes

No

4.1- If so, how did the preparation of feedback on your colleagues' texts help with your own writing?

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