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## EXPLORING THE VALUE OF PEER FEEDBACK IN AN ESL WRITING CLASS

Noryani Neni Ahmad Jamain<sup>1\*</sup>, Sazuliana Sanif<sup>2</sup>, Asliaty Atim<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Linguistics, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia  
Email: noryani@uthm.edu.my

<sup>2</sup> Department of English Language and Linguistics, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia  
Email: zuliana@uthm.edu.my

<sup>3</sup> Department of English Language and Linguistics, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia  
Email: asliaty@uthm.edu.my

\* Corresponding Author

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### Abstract:

The study of peer feedback in enhancing learning has been evident in the literature. Notably, its value has left marked improvement in language learning. Although there have been critics about its significance, it undeniably has significant traces in learning. This study looked into the practice of peer feedback implemented during a writing course program that took four weeks to complete. The study aimed to explore learners' perceptions about the practice and the challenges they faced while engaging in peer feedback practices. The study adopted a qualitative approach in which data were obtained from 10 participants' reflective writings collected at the completion of the writing programme. The results indicated that learners found they had a positive experience with the practice because the feedback from peers complemented feedback received from the teacher. Furthermore, the practice provided more opportunities for class interaction between peers, thus making English class more meaningful. However, setbacks like time constraints and students' acceptance of peer comments are challenges that need to be addressed in the future. Nevertheless, peer feedback in ESL classrooms, particularly in writing class, is worth considering in enhancing English language learning experience.

### Keywords:

Peer Feedback, Peer Review, ESL Writing

### Introduction

Learning a second language requires a learner to learn all four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Although learners face different challenges in mastering all the

skills, writing has mainly gained many research interests. Writing has been a long and challenging task for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). Although learners have been exposed to learning English continuously right at the start of early education up until tertiary levels, writing skills are identified as one of the language skills that are difficult to grasp. A typical ESL learning in Malaysia would have students learning English for approximately 14 years, consisting of 6 years in primary, 5 years in secondary, and 3 years at the university level.

Often, ESL teachers are frustrated when assessing students writing, although a considerable number of inputs have been given to support their writing. The dedicated teaching and learning hours, considered ample, seem not to reflect the actual students' language attainment. Respectively, students at primary levels are given 300 mins of contact hours, while students at the secondary level learn English in the classroom for 10 minutes per week. Meanwhile, this teaching and learning of English can continue up to the tertiary level with contact hours of 180 minutes per week, which can last for three consecutive semesters. In responding to the situation, various researches had been conducted in Malaysian ESL setting to address the situation, for example, written corrective feedback (Ganapathy et al., 2020; Iksan & Halim, 2018; Osman, 2019), sentence variety checklist (Abdullah et al., 2019), writing strategies instruction (Mastan et al., 2017). Nevertheless, writing again is seen as a daunting task, even for skilled writers. Writing indeed does not solely depend on one's language proficiency; other factors like idea generation may impact writing strategies and performance, among others. Regardless of its complexity, L2 writers may face challenges that can only be addressed by best pedagogical practices and other skills like critical thinking skills (Jalaluddin, 2019).

Writing is an important skill that needs to be acquired for learners to communicate their ideas or even feelings to readers more effectively. However, doing so can become a hassle because, in the writing process, learners need to work on organizing their thoughts into cohesive structure while simultaneously considering good grammatical aspects of the language. Not only is it a must-have skill to survive in tertiary students' academic engagements, but it is also necessary for a graduate to have reasonably good skills in writing. There is much evidence that good writing skill is essential for career advancement (Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Yusuf et al., 2018). Contrary to the findings generated from Cambridge Baseline Study conducted in 2013, writing was found as the strongest skill among Malaysian high-stakes test-takers compared to other skills, and it was proven in students' achievement in the major examination. However, in reality, the challenges to grasping writing skills are still persistent at the tertiary level (Pek et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2017). Teaching writing skills can also be a challenge for experienced teachers. Besides, there is also no specific method for drafting a piece of writing or editing a written piece. What are available are only approaches or teaching which were experimented with learners in which those approaches have been successful and put forward as best practices in approaching writing skills. In the context of the Malaysian ESL setting, several studies concerning how best to teach writing to English as a Second Language (ESL) had been done, which indicates how each approach worked for certain groups of learners to a certain extent. One of the approaches is using peer feedback to support English writing. Contextually, although it is not a new practice in language learning, the pedagogy has been gaining a lot of attention since there has been a growing shift from summative assessment to formative assessment in which peer feedback sounds more relevant for integration in the learning process.

## Literature Review

Feedback, in general, is paramount in L2 assessment, primarily when it aims to improve students learning by giving them more authority while promoting self-regulated and autonomous learning. Peer feedback is also commonly known as peer response, peer review, peer evaluation, peer editing, and peer assessment. In this paper, peer feedback is the common term being used referring to the practice, in this context; it is defined as information that is provided by an agent in this sense, a peer of an equal status which relates to performance and understanding of learning materials (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). When giving feedback, peers would provide options for improvising a task. Feedback hence is a result of a performance that is produced from a learning experience.

Although the topic has been discussed for decades, as in Chaudron (1984) that compared the improvement in students' essay revision in response to teacher and peer feedback, the result indicated that neither teacher nor peer feedback was superior in promoting improvements in revised essays. Similarly, Coit (2004) found that the act of students correcting their peers' articles in an environment that encourages students' autonomy is undoubtedly a practical approach that presented gains in students writing. It stands on the ground that when students are given the authority to switch roles as the editor involved in making suggestions and amendments to the writing piece, they become more motivated with their learning, hence the improvement.

Although, in some settings, teacher feedback is preferable, providing peer feedback is equally valuable as it can engage students with deep thinking on the task at hand while matching them with success criteria. This resonated with a research conducted by Lynch et al. (2012) that indicated peer feedback incorporated along with self-assessment resulted in a better quality of learning while enhancing critical thinking skills simultaneously. In a conventional learning environment, students rely on teacher feedback to meet the learning purpose. Therefore, teacher feedback in certain environments is considered superior to other forms of feedback i.e., peer feedback. Nevertheless, classroom research has shown evidence that peer feedback can be complementary to teacher feedback, and students could also improve from both types of feedback (Cui et al., 2021).

Indeed teacher feedback has traditionally been a useful pedagogical tool in improving learners' writing. However, the value of peer feedback can come in handy in complementing teacher feedback. The proposition echoes Flower & Hayes (1981) that when students review a text, crucial activities central to language learning emerge, for example, error detection and analysis, which will later move students to revise their errors. Thus, it can be said that the practice of peer feedback allows students to become more engaged with learning and take more responsibility for achieving the learning outcomes. Often in the classroom, students are hesitant about showing their work to a counterpart who has a better proficiency; however, research indicated that better writers could benefit from peer feedback not only by responding to peer feedback in their text but also by detecting and communicating flaws from peer writing as well (Fan & Xu, 2020). In addition, the practice also gives students room to explain their ideas as they respond to their peers' comments. It also gives students more time to prepare for their writing as it prevents students from last-minute drafting and also saves time in revision because it cuts down the number of errors. Another benefit of peer feedback is that it can expose learners to some sense of professional writing which they will encounter more often at the workplace, whereby writing will get feedback from co-workers and superiors before reaching its real

audience. In this sense, it advocates that this practice shows a practical application in the real world.

Heavily supported by the sociocultural theory that holds the notion that learners' acquisition of a second language goes beyond mastering the linguistic structures of the targeted language. Acquiring a language also entails interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction, which eventually, such interactions are pivotal in enhancing one's comprehension and ability to execute linguistics phenomena that fit their functional values. In this context, peer feedback is seen as closely associated with the said theory, where it provides students with scaffolding opportunities so that they can make advancements in their zones of proximal development. (Vygotsky, 1978) defined the ZPD as ;

“the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”

At different levels, peer feedback also allows students to experience switching roles from writers to the audience, negotiating messages and the features necessary to achieve the communication goal.

### **Research Question.**

This research aims to study the affordance of adopting peer feedback in ESL writing class, particularly on the writing of the argumentative essay. This study hence aimed to address the following research question:

1. What are students' perceptions towards the practice of peer feedback in an ESL writing class?

### **Method**

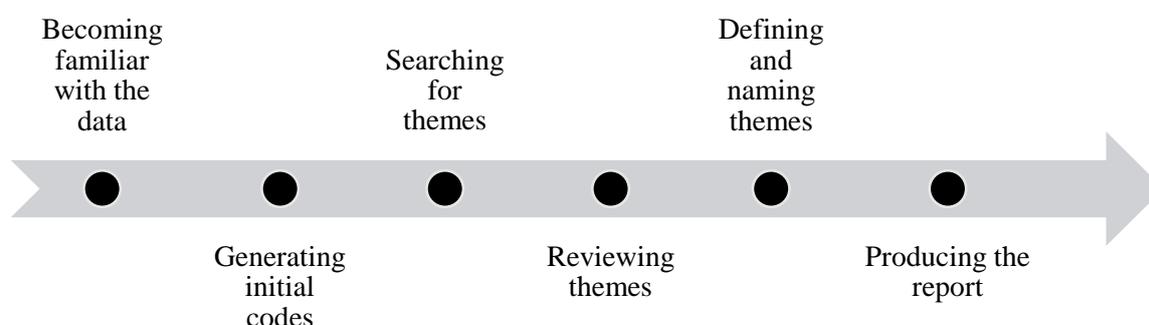
#### ***Research Design***

The study employed a qualitative approach in which data were collected through students' reflective writing. At the end of the 4-week engagement with the writing module, the students were asked to draw on their experience of how peer feedback was undertaken. Since peer feedback or review was somewhat new to the students, the teacher explained how the review could be employed at the beginning of the writing module. A simpler version of the marking rubric for the argumentative essay was given to guide students through the process. The rubrics highlighted the language and organization and aspects of mechanics of writing that need to be focused on while reviewing a text. The teacher also explained the purpose, the importance of collaboration, and the value of active participation in peer feedback. It was deemed essential to explain the purpose of giving feedback, for it was the study's intention to seek whether it is affordable to integrate peer feedback into the curriculum. Students' perception of the practice would determine the success of future implementation. If they do not see the value, they will be reluctant to embrace it as a tool that can help them with their ESL writing acquisition.

The teacher also demonstrated how to carry out the feedback-giving process by focusing on the higher-order concern in the writing that comprised focus, audience and purpose, organization, and essay development. While language accuracy is equally important in

achieving essay clarity, students were told to give feedback on this aspect of lower order concern the last. Students were also reminded that they do not necessarily have to accept their peers' ideas if they are not sensible to their judgment.

Data were generated through reflective writing produced by students who participated in the study. The data were then coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Despite arguments that thematic analysis (TA) poses disadvantages, like its flexibility that can lead to inconsistency and lack of coherence, especially in developing themes (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Nonetheless, the advantages of TA outnumbered its shortcoming as the approach is highly flexible in that it can be modified to address the needs of many studies to generate rich and detailed data. Furthermore, it is suitable for early career researchers because it offers a more accessible form of data analysis that is easy to acquire. The present study investigated students' perceptions of the implementation of peer feedback; therefore, TA helps examine the perspectives of different research participants. In implementing data analysis, the following framework was adopted:



**Figure 1: Braun & Clarke's Thematic Analysis Framework.**

### ***Participants***

Participants were ten students of a public university in Malaysia. Predominantly all the participants use Malay as their first language (L1), while English is used mainly in the academic domain. Although they use English in the academic domain, it is restricted to writing assignments and answering questions in the examination. The study was carried out for 4-week with 3 hours of meeting each time. The course is English academic proficiency (English 2) for year 2 university students with a writing module integrated with other skills, namely, speaking, listening, and reading. The participants who participated in the study had mixed language abilities ranging from Band 2 to Band 3, which were assessed through MUET (Malaysian University English Test). The awarded bands described them as limited and modest users of English, respectively. Since English 2 was the second paper they took as a progression from English 1, it was implied that they had sufficient English writing ability to give feedback through peer review.

### ***Procedure***

Students were taught how to write an argumentative essay during the writing module. At the beginning of the lesson, they were shown an exemplar, and together with the teacher, the exemplar was analysed for schematic and linguistic structures. For the whole writing lesson,

the phases followed Teaching and Learning Cycles (Rothery, 1994), which design aimed at providing students with explicit and organisational structures for writing. In this context, the Rothery's Teaching and Learning Cycle was used because the stages of learning are visible and accessible for the students to follow.

The lesson then moved to the next stage, in which the teacher and participants worked on a new topic of the same essay, whereby both, jointly constructed an essay. At this stage, all ideas were welcomed while the teacher mediated those ideas. From this stage, the participants would slowly gain confidence and understanding of how the essay should be constructed, and at the same time, when they suggested their ideas to be scribed, peers were also encouraged to build on the ideas. Lastly, the session moved to independent construction, where the participants proceeded to write their essays independently. Before they handed the final version of the essay to the teacher for grading, they were asked to exchange the essays with peers and seek feedback. After receiving feedback, they were asked to consider the suggestions and make improvements based on them.

The students were asked to give written feedback on their peers' essays. It was chosen based on the justification that students would feel less pressured if they were allowed more time to think of their responses. Oral feedback was also encouraged right after the written feedback for further clarification of what had been written. Before the start of the practice, students were explained how the written feedback could be conducted; for that reason, students were supported with essay rubrics to serve as a guiding document in giving feedback

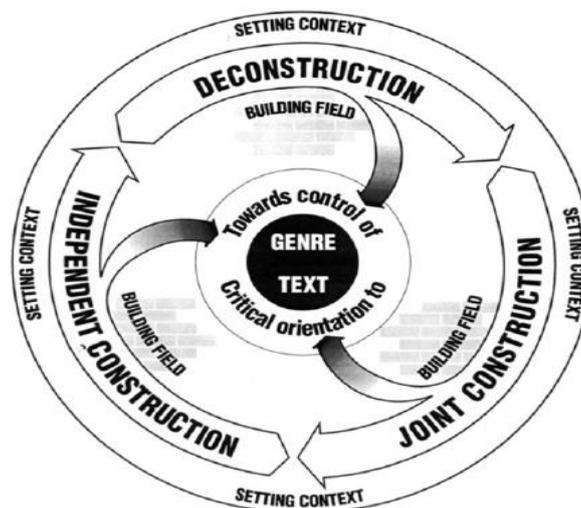


Figure 2: Rothery's Teaching and Learning Cycle

### **Grouping**

At the start of the practice, students were set in pairs; however, it was found that sometimes students were struck silent because they did not know what to say about each other work. In the subsequent sessions, they were set up in a group of 3 to 4 so that they had options to turn to other people when such a situation occurred. Putting students in a group was helpful for the teacher to do better monitoring when time was a primary constraint. The students chose their

group members so that they could work comfortably. This is coherent with findings from Yu & Lee (2016) that if the classroom remained liberal in letting students choose their peers throughout the process, students would become more motivated and thus contribute more significantly to the feedback process, with language proficiency becoming a secondary factor.

## Results and Discussion

In order to elicit findings from the students who participated in the study, data were collected through reflective writing. Reflective writing was chosen over interviews to ensure students felt free to express their narratives about peer feedback. The writing did not require students to identify themselves, making it even easier for them to express their experiences. The step was taken to make the students share their thoughts at ease, thus limiting them to probably writing things they thought the teacher wanted to read. A set of guiding questions were provided before writing the reflection. Significant themes that emerged from the students writing are as discussed below:

### *Peer Texts as a Model Essay*

While engaging in peer feedback, students were asked to read their peers' essays. Students' responses in the reflective writing indicated that although they did not necessarily give comments on their counterparts' essays, they somehow learned new knowledge through reading peers' essays:

*"I got the chance to be paired with a partner whose English is better than me, all my comment to his essay were mostly positive because through reading his essay I could learn how to improve my own writing."*

*"My partner did not quite do well in writing, I was not confident with my writing neither, through the feedbacks giving session I could point out to her how she could do better by showing her how I did my writing"*

In the above reflections, it could be implied that students learn how to structure their essays regardless of the quality of their partners' essays. It could be noted that even though the peer essay was relatively not good, students took the chance to learn what should not be done when writing an essay. The significance of writing through a model essay has immensely contributed to learning, as evident in Swales (1990), a model essay could serve as a practical learning tool that enables students to acquire writing skills by learning through good examples. In this case, even the students' essays were not as good as the model texts that teachers usually use; however, reading their peers' essays gave students awareness on aspects of writing. Despite the criticism and non-conclusive finding of the use of model essay in L2 learning, its usage in the acquisition of L2 has greatly assisted learners in giving the sense of how to write according to genre and is particularly practical in improving lexis, essay content, and organization (Alireza, 2016; Kang, 2020).

### *A Sense of Readership*

In the sense of readership, students found that they saw writing as more purposeful because, realizing that someone would read their writing (in this context, their peers), they had the agency to put more effort into writing their essays more clearly. Upon knowing this, they felt it was crucial to structure their essay as clearly as possible so that their peers would not have any lingering questions while reading their essays.

*"Now that I am aware of who my readers are, I am more careful in structuring and organizing my ideas so that my writing reads coherently."*

*"I found more purpose in writing since I know there are other people who could enjoy my writing other than for the purpose of academic grading."*

This is supported by Liu and Edwards (2018) that by giving and receiving peer feedback, students inculcated a sense of readership, thus building an understanding of how to address the audience clearly through all aspects of writing, namely, content, organization, and language accuracy.

### ***Getting New Idea***

The practice of giving feedback was not only happened in one session; instead, students were encouraged to give and receive feedback while writing took place. Hence there was an instance when a student wrote:

*"While engaging in it (peer feedback) I could improve my writing because during that time I picked up new ideas as I discussed mine with my partner".*

*"I built new ideas from reading my partner's essay as we were in the process of developing the essay, it also happened while we were brainstorming the ideas in the form of mind map."*

According to Flower and Hayes (1981) the interaction that takes place during the process of giving and receiving feedback contributes to improved writing quality. Furthermore, writing is an active process that is materialized through the writer's understanding of the writing and the extending support of readers; in this regard, the peers who work on a similar task. As it is, peer feedback is seen as another example of collaborative writing in which, in the process, peers support each other by using scaffolding. In this context, scaffolding was very useful, where students shared the resources to help them advance further in their language learning endeavors.

### ***Noticing Errors***

As an ESL learner, maneuvering through the rules of the target language can be challenging. In the current context, students were not taught about English grammar per se. Regardless, students were able to notice if there were language errors even though there was no specific slot of teaching dedicated to the teaching of grammar;

*"I am not good at English grammar, but when I read other people work I could sense or notice that the grammar is off, sometimes I did not know how to suggest improvements, when we were stuck at this part we would resort to getting assistance from the teacher."*

*"When I write I did not quite realize if there were errors in my writing, however when I spotted errors on my friends writing, it reminded me that I also did the same error hence took the chance to rectify my writing as well."*

At a glance, it can be noted that apart from focusing on higher order concern, which aims at looking at elements like audience, organization and idea development, students were also able

to fixate their attention on lower order concerns, which is related to sentence structure and grammar.

### ***Specific Request of Feedbacks***

It is interesting to note that a student who participated in the study appreciated the presence of peers in the learning process and even sought specific feedback on his/her writing. In this case, the student asked the peers to highlight grammatical mistakes in the essay.

*"I know that I am very weak in terms of conforming to the correct grammar, I have lots of interesting ideas and know how to organize them but when I write the idea does not sound how I intended. Because of that I asked my peer to pay specific attention to my sentence structures so that I can write more accurately."*

This generally demonstrated that self-feedback could motivate students to seek peer feedback. Going forward, it is also an indication that self-feedback and peer feedback, if implemented hand in hand, have the potential to improve language learning.

### ***Meaningful Interaction***

While the teacher did not restrict the students from using L1 in the class, the students, to their best effort, kept using English to interact with their peers. It should be noted that some of the students in the class were not proficient in English; therefore, some would use L1 as a mediating strategy to achieve their learning goals to accomplish writing an essay.

*"Previously during writing session the class would be so quiet because all students were too focus into finishing the writing within the time frame, however this time the writing class had been more interactive because we had the chance to exchange our ideas with friends."*

*"Outside of the classroom I rarely speak English, however through the 3 hours of English class I had the chance to use English through the exchanges of feedback with friends and teacher"*

Without a doubt, interaction is central to language learning. Peer feedback can be seen as a meaning-making process. In this case, students' interaction would include responding, negotiating, arguing, adding, or offering alternatives to their writing pieces. Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the significance of peer interaction that could support learning as learning is not only about getting new knowledge, but more profoundly, it creates an environment whereby the learners assimilate into a learning community. In addition to that, it is also assumed that the learners' attainment of new knowledge does not solely happen from getting the knowledge from the teacher; instead, peers' contributions, namely of those who are more knowledgeable, assisted the learner in moving from a lower level of understanding to higher level of thinking.

Quantitatively positive perceptions otherwise outnumbered students' negative feelings over the practice. The reflections that students wrote, among others, recorded the following:

### ***Time-Consuming Activity***

Based on students writing, some of them reflected how the activity interfered with their writing time. Indeed, it was quite a lengthy process where students had to spend more time reading drafts and collaborating with other students before submitting the final version of their essays.

They felt that because of the activity, they lost the time that otherwise should have been dedicated more to developing their essays. As in the following instances:

*"I am anxious if I am not able to finish the essay on time, as I think it might disappoint the teacher, sometimes I see giving and receiving feedback can be an interruption to me for completing my task on time."*

Students were allowed to conduct the peer feedback activity while engaging with their writing task. This means the feedback did not only occur when they finished the whole essay. Due to that, there was one instance in which a student commented that the activity did pose some interruption in his/her cognitive activity, which happened mid-writing.

*"When doing my writing I do not like to be interrupted for it will disturb my thinking activities while I was writing the essay. I had friends pausing me to ask matters related to the essay interrupting me from developing my ideas about the essay. I think it's best if feedback is exchanged when we finish writing the essay"*

Indeed, it took a lot of effort from the students since it was a lengthy process where learners had to spend much time reading drafts while collaborating with other students.

### ***Effectiveness of Peer Comments***

Conventionally, students were so used to getting teacher feedback; hence there were some hesitations when receiving peer feedback. Therefore, during the sessions, students often consulted the teacher to verify their peer feedback.

*"Sometimes I had doubts about the feedback that my friend gave me, however I was glad that she was very open when I argued about why I could not integrate her feedback into my writing."*

Besides that, there were also comments from peers that were presumably too general for the students to use for their essays. Ideally, when the feedback practices take place, students could negotiate their feedback with one another; however, in this case, the students did not comment on whether or not the feedback was further discussed.

*"Comments that my partner gave me were too general, I could not pinpoint hence I did not really make any improvement because the feedback were not clear at all."*

In reflection, it shows that the constructiveness of feedback is important, leading to the fact that it would have some effects on writing improvement (Gielen et al., 2010). In this case, constructive feedback shall have the following qualities; helpful, practical, productive, useful, and valuable. Essentially, feedback here is described as a set of information containing information about the students' performance that intends to improve the students learning; therefore, it is nothing less than significant that constructive feedback will result in successful learning (Ovando, 1994). While the efficacy of feedback towards language learning has been very optimistic in arrays of research, learners' concerns in trusting peers' comments similarly emerged, as pointed out by Mahvelati (2021), regardless of the apprehension, the research however, indicated that peer feedback affected language development more than teacher feedback.

### ***Hesitancies in Giving Feedback***

It also occurred that during the practice that there were reticences in giving honest feedback to peers' essays. It is worth noting that these students only met the group members once a week and that they came from different majors hence the comments like:

*"When I am not close to someone I tend not to be very honest with my opinion, therefore I hesitated to give my actual comment about the essay. I ended saying that the essay was good when it was actually not."*

*"At times we discussed with three or more people about our writing, when in a larger group I felt uncomfortable to really pinpoint mistakes or make overall comment about someone's essay because I felt that my honest comment could demotivate him/her from making more progression on their writing."*

The above also corroborates with Cao et al. (2019) that students who experienced peer feedback resisted giving honest comments for the reason of saving face and maintaining group cohesion. The situation is ascribed to the local culture, which predominantly appreciates the act of face-saving. Similarly, the situation also emerged in Nelson and Carson (1998) whereby students avoided giving honest and critical feedback as they thought it sounded as though they did not appreciate their peers' hard work therefore, they were reluctant to disagree.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed at exploring the affordance of adopting peer feedback in ESL writing class, particularly where learners have a disadvantaged background in English language proficiency. Conventionally, students involved in the study had been so accustomed to receiving teacher feedback mainly in content and form. Additionally, the teacher feedback had been, thus far, the primary source of improving students' writing. However, the instances in the study revealed that despite the positive outcomes of peer feedback in assisting students in improving their language literacy, mainly in their writing skills, it would be instrumental if proper training could be given to the students prior to the practice. Essentially training could be helpful for the dynamics of the practice since peer feedback is not an established component of ESL learning in the institution where the study took place. The training also could provide more insights for the students as to why the practice could significantly improve their language learning journey. Apart from that, the training can demystify the perception that having peer feedback could ease the teacher's burden in checking students' texts. Research has shown that teachers and peer feedback can complement each other to provide a more enriching learning experience. Future studies can engage in the effectiveness of peer feedback by looking at the pre and post-test achievement in students' essays. Face-saving strategy is another cultural factor that hinders students from giving constructive feedback. Therefore, if a similar practice were to be repeated, the teacher could consider peer exchanges to be done anonymously. It is a way forward for future engagement in peer feedback practice as students would have felt more liberty in giving valid comments on their peers' essays. Since teacher feedback is the more popular avenue in language learning, especially in the study context, it would be more useful to conduct a study on the sustaining effects of peer feedback in the future. Since writing occurs in stages, the different effects that peer feedback may have on writing is another possible aspect that language practitioners and researchers can explore. In hindsight, when researching a new practice in the existing context, researchers may be inclined to prove how it can facilitate

language learning, in this case, how peer feedback improves writing; future research may also consider if there is a possibility that the practice may impede learners L2 writing.

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