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| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

ENG Students' Attitude towards Peer Review

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| **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the action research carried out in the ENG 207 course at the American University of Sharjah. The action research was conducted to find out the students' attitudes toward using external, non-corrected samples in review training sessions and computer-mediated peer review to enhance their experience as reviewers. The findings revealed positive attitudes from the students regarding the training session and computer-mediated peer review; however, some suggestions were provided for improvements.

1. Introduction

Students are accustomed to getting detailed criticism from their teachers, whether through the product approach or the process approach, which makes them think that teachers are the only people who should be reading their work. However, more recent research has provided alternative methods of getting feedback, allowing students to show their written work to peers as well as teachers. According to Rollinson (2004), the latter procedure is referred to as the peer review process.

Students exchange written works for helpful, non-threatening criticism from one another during the peer review process. They then use the input they receive for the redrafting and revision stage (Rollinson, 2004). Through the use of an interactive writing process, students can preserve their independence, self-assurance, and fluency while being encouraged to openly express their opinions when creating a text (Shokrpour, Keshavarz, & Jafari, 2013).

Furthermore, according to Shokrpour, Keshavarz, and Jafari (2013), the corrective approach empowers students as they edit each other's written work and improves collaborative English language teaching and learning in ESL writing instruction situations.

For the following reasons, though, not every student may be in favor of this strategy: (1) Students may not feel comfortable making one-on-one comments on each other's work throughout the review process (Ho & Savignon, 2007). (2) Since all students are at the same level of learning, it may be difficult for them to trust the responses from their peers (Ho & Savignon, 2007). (3) Students may view peer review as a threat to their confidence because their proficiency levels vary; those with lower proficiency levels may be reluctant to provide peer feedback to peers with higher proficiency levels in order to prevent themselves from losing face (Ho & Savignon, 2007).

Peer review offers substantial benefits when it comes to teaching ESL writing skills based on the literature on language teaching and learning processes. According to Sengup (2000), peer review first enhances students' critical thinking skills by providing them with comments or ideas from their peers on how to advance their work. Second, peers can provide students with a variety of ideas that they can use to improve or shape their work (Van Steendam, Rijlaarsdam, Sercu & Van den Bergh, 2010). Peer review also helps students become more aware of the specific writing assignment and relieves teachers of some of the burden of grading

students' completed work. Accordingly, "it is crucial to get students ready for peer response activities" (Tuzi, 2004, p. 219). Van Steendam et al. (2010) assert that until teachers give students clear instructions on how to conduct peer review, students won't be able to offer more comprehensive feedback on their peers' writing. This will cause instructors' accountability for students' writing to progressively decrease and eventually transfer to the students' peers and, ultimately, to the students themselves (Van Steendam et al., 2010).

2. Research Questions

Would adequate training offered by the teacher using an external, non-corrected sample help improve the targeted ENG 207 students' attitudes towards the peer review task?

Would enabling students to conduct their peer reviews online enhance their overall experience of the peer review assignment?

3. Literature Review

Although teaching language involves focusing on four skills, Dempsey, Pytlikzillig, and Burning (2009) pointed out that writing skills have been given the least attention for a long period of time; accordingly, students have been taught in a traditional manner. Therefore, the feedback that they receive from the teacher on their writing leads to meaningless, insufficient, and unproductive results (Rollinson, 2004). Studies have found that most students are accustomed to receiving certain instructions from teachers, which leads them to write for the teacher as their only audience instead of writing for the other audiences (Rollinson, 2004). However, recent studies have demonstrated that introducing an interactive writing approach led students to maintain their self-confidence, autonomy, and fluency and encouraged them to express their own voices during the process of text production; this process is called peer review (Shokrpour, Keshavarz, & Jafari, 2013). Peer review has been addressed by other relevant terms in the literature, such as formative peer assessment, peer evaluation, peer response, and peer editing. Peer review is considered a significant tool that has recently been utilized in writing classrooms to enhance collaborative English language teaching and learning. It also empowers students by introducing them to error correction techniques that can be applied when they are correcting each other's writing errors.

The role of peer review in language teaching and learning process has drawn attention among researchers and educators. According to the literature, ESL educators have reported several advantages to having students review each other's work. First, it enhances students' critical thinking when they receive external feedback on their writing and suggestions on how to improve their work (Sengup, 2000). Second, the consequence of processing and analyzing the work of a peer is a great opportunity for the students to gather ideas for improving their own work (Van Steendam, Rijlaarsdam, Sercu, & Van den Bergh, 2010). Furthermore, teachers who utilize peer review are gradually moving the responsibility to peers and eventually to students themselves (Sengup, 2000). Generally, peer review improves students' level of awareness toward the task, which, in the long run, lifts the burden off the teacher in terms of formatively assessing students' work. Therefore, "it is important to prepare students to participate in peer response activities" (Tuzi, 2004, p. 219). Van Steendam et al. (2010) believe that students should receive explicit instructions from their teachers on their peer review performance "to learn how to give more global feedback on peers' writing" (p. 317) and to become better revisers.

Despite the aforementioned advantages of peer review, students may not favor being reviewed by their peers for various reasons. First, students might not feel comfortable doing face-to-face reviews, as they will be commenting on each other's writing during the review process (Ho & Savignon, 2007). Second, students might not trust their peers' feedback, as they are all at the same academic level and writing proficiency (Ho & Savignon, 2007). In addition, students might perceive peer review as a threat to their self-esteem and respond to it as a process that makes them lose face (Ho & Savignon, 2007). This explains why students might prefer receiving feedback from their teachers rather than peers, as well as why some teachers have found that practicing only face-to-face peer review for feedback purposes inside their classrooms might be insufficient.

Although face-to-face peer review has proven its efficiency in creating a collaborative and interactive community inside the classroom, not every learner might favor this approach. Therefore, the tendency of practicing face-to-face peer review has shifted in the field of ESL writing to become computer-based. In literature, the process of peer feedback using the computer is known as computer-mediated peer review (CMPR). It incorporates writing activities that engage learners in using computers to provide each other with feedback (Ho & Savignon, 2007). Through the process of CMPR, students can review their peer drafts online anywhere at any time, exchange drafts and feedback through email, and use interactive software programs to communicate with one another. This may help in reducing the psychological pressure on learners who do not favor face-to-face peer review. CMPR could be utilized periodically during class time, or remotely, however it is convenient to the learners.

4. Methodology

4.1 Action Research

Action research is a comprehensive research approach that employs diverse evaluative, investigative, and analytical tools to identify problems or deficiencies in educational environments and promptly devise effective solutions to resolve them. Action research is

a philosophy and research approach commonly used in the social sciences. It aims to bring about revolutionary change by combining action and study, which are connected through critical reflection (George, 2023). Action research is a methodology that focuses on addressing problems, prioritizing the needs of the client, and emphasizing taking action. It entails actively engaging the client system in a process that includes diagnosing, actively learning, identifying problems, and finding solutions. The procedure is commonly carried out by educators operating inside a school or district to enhance educational practices and programs. Kurt Lewin, a German-American social psychologist, is largely credited for coining the term "action research" in the 1940s, establishing himself as the field's pioneer (Clark et al., 2020).

4.2 The Context

The study was conducted during the summer of 2014 at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in an ENG 207 (English for Engineering) section. The study was completed over two weeks, which is equivalent to a total of 10 sessions. The class had 20 students from different majors in the field of engineering, and they also were from different cultural backgrounds. The class met for an hour and 30 minutes daily from 8:00 to 9:30 am for five weeks, which was the duration of the summer of 2014 term.

The syllabus, which was made available to the students through the AUS online learning platform I-learn, stated that the purpose of the course was to develop engineering students' English, teamwork, and professional communication skills relevant to the fields in which they will work. Therefore, one of the frequent tasks that the teacher applied in the targeted ENG 207 section to achieve the goals stated in the course syllabus was peer review. As stated in the assignment section in the ENG 207 course syllabus, the students were required to review each other's writing drafts in pairs. The peer review in-class tasks weighed a total of 5% of the students' final grade, as mentioned in the course syllabus.

4.3 Research Focus

To complete the intended action research project, I observed an ENG 207 section at AUS for two weeks and consulted the teacher for further assistance and possible suggestions whenever needed. To learn more about the course schedule during the two weeks of observation, the teacher reported that the students would be mainly writing resumes and applications, which involved frequent implementation of peer review.

During my first two observations in the first week, I did not recognize a clear issue with either the students' performance or the teaching practices on which to base my action research. The class was running smoothly, as the teacher requested all students to complete a non-anonymous yet random one-to-one peer review to avoid the interference of students' emotions and tension that could possibly appear when they reviewed each other's written drafts. The peer review was completed following a rubric, which included evaluation criteria designed by the course teacher to help the students provide each other with valuable feedback. The rubric included evaluation criteria in areas such as formatting and outlining the paper, writing a clear, objective sentence, and correcting mechanical errors.

Starting from my third observation during the first week, I noticed that the students were completing the peer review task with minimal interest and in a systematic manner by following the provided rubric exactly. However, they were not able to tackle any writing issues in their peers' papers other than those listed in the provided rubric. In my opinion, the systematic behavior, as well as the lack of interest observed in the ENG 207 students when completing the peer review task, could be due to the practice of providing them with a resume or application that was clear as a sample to follow when drafting their own resumes or applications. As an attempt to resolve the abovementioned identified issues in the targeted ENG 207 section, the course teacher could first provide his students with adequate training on how to conduct a peer review using the rubric criteria and then apply it to an external, non-corrected sample. Second, the students' attitude and level of motivation when completing the peer review tasks could improve if the course teacher offered an online peer review instead of a paper-based one.

To gather multiple viewpoints about the issues reported about the peer review approach practiced in the targeted ENG 207 section, the researchers observed six non-consecutive sessions during two weeks, interviewed five students registered in the targeted section, and consulted and interviewed the course teacher.

The researchers started with the observation of the targeted class to identify a classroom problem on which to base my action research plan. During the initial observations, the researchers noticed that the peer review was applied by the teacher randomly redistributing the previously submitted resumes, for example, back to his students during class time and then asking them to provide feedback on each other's resumes following a rubric. In fact, the adopted peer review practice, in my opinion, did not feel problematic to me; however, the researchers realized that the students were applying it systematically and with minimum interest. Therefore, to improve the students' attitude towards practicing peer-review, the researchers needed first to consult the course teacher about our observation and then obtain his approval to interview the students in his ENG 207 section. The teacher agreed to the identified issue with the students' attitude towards peer review, and consequently, we were given the approval to interview the students before suggesting a treatment plan. The interview was completed during the first week of the observation process

using questions we prepared (see Appendix A). The data obtained from the pre-treatment interviews with the ENG 207 students were analyzed qualitatively.

The suggested treatment plan was designed based on the data obtained from the pre-treatment interviews to improve the students' motivation and attitude towards implementing peer review. Thus, the treatment plan involved two steps: first, training the students on how to identify errors in a non-corrected sample of some written work related to an ENG 207 topic, such as writing resumes or job applications. Second, introduce the students to the approach of conducting peer review using online tools instead of a face-to-face approach. As agreed with the course teacher, the training took place on Wednesday of the first week and lasted for 20 minutes, including introducing the students to the idea of a non-corrected sample of some written work about an ENG 207 topic. On Thursday of the first week, the teacher assigned the students homework to write their first draft of the job application during the weekend, and on Sunday, the first day of the second week, all students were expected to complete the peer review on each other's submitted job applications anonymously on I-learn.

Post the implementation of the suggested treatment plan, we needed to interview the students (see Appendix B) one more time to learn about their feedback on the treatment and whether it contributed to improving their attitude towards peer review or not. Towards the end of the second week, and before reporting on the findings of the second interviews with the ENG 207 students, we also interviewed the course teacher (see Appendix C) to discuss with him his feedback about the implemented treatment and its effect on his students' attitude towards peer review post the treatment.

5. Findings
To simplify referring to student participants in this action research study and to maintain anonymity, we have given each student participant a name code followed by a numeric number such as St1, St2, etc.

5.1 Findings of Pre-Interview with ENG 207 Students
The interview questions designed to learn more about ENG 207 students' attitudes towards peer review revealed information related to different aspects, such as whether they support the practice of peer review or not and if it contributed to enhancing their writing accuracy as well as their writing content.

The majority of the students agreed on the benefits of the peer review practice and admitted that they gained the most from being exposed to their friends' style of writing and learning from it rather than providing each other with feedback following the provided rubric by the teacher. For example, St2 stated that peer review improved her performance by looking at different classmates' drafts, comparing both drafts and then editing hers before the final submission. ENG 207 students also stated that the more they practiced peer review, the better final grades they received on their produced written work.

Despite the positive feedback received from the ENG 207 interviewed students about the general practice of peer review in ENG 207, nonetheless, the students had issues with the peer review being non-anonymous and not receiving adequate training on how to review each other's work. In regards to the non-anonymity, the students reported a lack of transparent feedback even when following the provided rubric, particularly when reviewing their friends' written work. St4 said, "Random method is not enough since we know each other in the classroom. I prefer not knowing whom I am reviewing and who my reviewer is for more efficient feedback."

The students also expressed the need for more proper training on how to implement peer review to their friends' written work in ENG 207 for two main reasons. First, although all ENG 207 students are at the same English academic level, their writing skills differ, and consequently will, their evaluation and feedback on each other's written work. Second, they believe that the training on how to implement peer review will help achieve more sufficient feedback. Taking into consideration the information gathered from the interviewees, the aforementioned treatment plan was designed and implemented.

5.2 Findings of Post-Interview with ENG 207 Students
The post-interview questions were designed to learn about ENG 207 students' attitudes toward the short duration of training provided and the practice of computer-mediated peer review. Unfortunately, in the post-interview, I could not reach the two students whom I interviewed in the pre-treatment. Therefore, I settled for three students (St1, St4, and St5) to serve in compiling the findings of this study.

5.3 Training
The teacher and I agreed on providing the students with some training on how to review and provide feedback on each other's written work using a non-corrected sample. Although the training was a major part of the suggested treatment plan, due to other course duties on behalf of the teacher as well as the students, the teacher was only able to conduct a twenty minute training session on Wednesday of the first week of my observation. To best serve the study, I interviewed the students to investigate whether the provided training was beneficial and helped improve their peer review practice. St1, St4 and St5 stated that the training was beneficial, as the teacher required the entire class to review a single non-corrected draft and to open a class-discussion

accordingly in order to share each other's views during the training session. However, St5 argued that although the provided training was beneficial, twenty minutes were not enough to achieve a better and more accurate peer review practice.

5.4 Online I-learn peer review
Based on the students' preferences to review each other anonymously, we decided, the teacher and I, to replace the in-class face-to-face peer review with a computer-mediated one. The students' feedback about the computer-mediated peer review practice was positive in general. They said that the computer mediated peer review gave them the chance to review each other's written drafts as transparently as possible without considering each other's feelings and emotions.

The feedback received from the students about the computer-mediated peer review treatment was not problem-free either. St1, for instance, explained that the time factor was her greatest challenge when conducting an online peer review due to the conflict that she encountered in the schedule between the deadlines for submitting the reviewed draft and her obligation toward other classes. On the other hand, the students encountered technical problems with I-learn during the opened time frame to complete the new approach of computer mediated peer review. For instance, I-learn failed to send the draft of St4 to his peer, which forced St4 to communicate with his peer via email to send him his draft, and this defeated the factor of anonymity. Finally, when compared to the original face-to-face peer review practice, St5 expressed that computer-mediated peer review did not give her the chance to discuss the feedback provided, whether by her to her peer or vice versa with her peer. Accordingly, she suggested initiating a discussion space on I-learn, which allows the students to discuss the provided feedback with their peers.

5.5 Findings of Post-Interview with ENG 207 Course Teacher
The teacher's interview was conducted to obtain his feedback on the implemented treatment plan based on his observation. Regarding the peer review training session, the teacher started by clarifying that the purpose of the training session was to show the students how the reviewing process works, and rather than students receiving direct input from the teacher, they should focus and comment on the problematic areas in the adopted non-corrected samples. He also noticed that using non-corrected samples to train the students on peer review led to positive effects and improvement on the students' writing product, which was an Application letter during the training session. The course teacher added that if the time during the summer 2014 semester had been longer, maybe more proper and adequate training sessions on how to implement peer review using non-corrected samples could have been provided to the students.

Throughout the interview, the teacher was asked whether he observed any resistance from students toward the computer-mediated peer review method. As he observed, the students did not express any antipathy toward the targeted method; instead, they were asking for more details to be explained regarding the process of the online peer review method. He also mentioned that the online peer review method that he utilized was random and anonymous in distributing the drafts to reviewers. He explained that the purpose of this technique was to make the reviewers concentrate on the draft without worrying about identifying the writers or triggering their emotional conflicts. He wrapped up the interview by expressing his preference to implement what he has done this semester in his future courses. He reported that he would conduct the first review in the classroom so that the students could raise any issue with peer review, and he could provide them with explicit explanations regarding any area of concern. After achieving the latter, he would be utilizing the online peer review as it places more responsibility on both the writers and the reviewers. In addition, it would help students critically review others' written work in order to improve their own work in accordance with the criteria provided.

6. Conclusion
The results indicated that the students had favorable opinions towards both the training session and the computer-mediated peer review. Therefore, training sessions and computer-mediated peer review should be utilized to gain deeper insights to enhance and facilitate the learning process at higher academic institutions in the Gulf region. Training is crucial for the efficacy of computer-mediated peer review. It can result in enhanced quality of student revisions and heightened enthusiasm for improving writing skills. Furthermore, computer-mediated peer review is effective in promoting collaborative writing and enhancing cognitive processing, thus making it a viable tool for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing.

6.1 Limitation
Time was the biggest obstacle to the implementation of this project. For instance, the course teacher had to rush through the suggested training on how to implement peer review efficiently using a non-corrected sample. He completed the training within 20 minutes during the beginning of one of the course sessions in week one of the study. The teacher was forced to do so, although he was very supportive of the training idea because he needed to commit to the ENG 207 summer 2014 course schedule and finish the course requirements on time.

Additionally, completing the project of action research within two weeks out of a five weeks summer school semester was extremely challenging and inadequate. The suggested treatment plan, for example, was completed in one session, which made it really

difficult for me to test and report on the outcomes of the implementation of the suggested treatment plan. Finally, due to students' commitment to other coursework during this short summer 2014 semester, only five students out of 19 students registered in the targeted ENG 207 section agreed to be interviewed before the implementation of the treatment plan. Moreover, after the implementation of the treatment plan, I was able to interview three students out of the five who agreed to be interviewed originally, while two students were not able to meet with me for the second interview.

On another level, taking into consideration that I am not the course teacher, I was not able to get an insider's perspective on how the online peer review task was prepared and how it was implemented by the targeted ENG 207 students on I-learn. Additionally, the drop in the total number of interviewees post treatment was mainly due to the deep involvement of both the course teacher and the students in the preparation for the Multiple-Disciplinary Presentation day, which made obtaining more information about the online peer review experience even more difficult.

6.2 Implications
It is difficult to deny the advantages of peer review in English academic writing classrooms; nonetheless, to improve the implementation of peer review in the ENG 207 section, the subject of this action research, the following is recommended:

• Teachers need to prepare more sessions to train students to peer review by assigning frequent mock reviews for the entire class after introducing the rubric's criteria of the assigned written work. The draft can be either written by the instructor or by a student from a previous semester, and the selection of the draft needs to be based on the types of concerns that the instructor is willing the students to identify.

• The online peer review was very fruitful; however, it is recommended to open a space on I-learn for the students to be able to discuss each other's feedback after completing the online peer review.

Statements and Declarations
Funding: This research received no external funding.
Conflict of Interest: The authors declare non-conflict of interest.
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Appendix A: Students' Pre-treatment Interview
ENG 207 Students' Attitude towards Peer Review

1.   What is your attitude toward peer review?

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2.   Did peer review help improve you language accuracy and appropriateness?

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3.   How did peer review help in identifying the content that was omitted or considered inappropriate?

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4.   What did you think of the random method that is utilized in class of selecting a reviewer?

Appendix B: Students' Post- treatment Interview
ENG 207 Students' Attitude towards Peer Review

1.   Did you find the review training method helpful?

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2.   What is you attitude toward online peer review?

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3.   Did the online peer review help in distributing you anonymously?

Appendix C: Teacher Interview
ENG 207 Students' Attitude towards Peer Review

1.   Did you find providing students with review training method helpful?

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2.   Did you receive any resistance from ENG 207 students toward computer-mediated peer review?

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3.   Did the online peer review help in distributing you anonymously?

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4.   What is your attitude toward online peer review?