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The effectiveness of utilizing peer feedback in Technical Writing Classes at Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Valenzuela

Abstract. *Research has thus far produced conflicting results on the usefulness of peer feedback in the writing classroom. Drawing theoretical inspiration from the Collaborative/ Cooperative Learning Theory, the Constructivist Perspective, and Written Corrective Feedback Theories, the study investigates the effectiveness of peer feedback in technical writing classes among Engineering students through a quantitative-qualitative research design. Results show that writing performances generally improved across technical documents. Specific improvements were mainly in the aspect of accuracy.*
Keywords: *peer feedback; writing instruction; collaboration*

INTRODUCTION

Second language writing instructors have long recognized the value of feedback in improving students' writing skills as it is largely considered to be a key factor in the encouragement and consolidation of learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In this sense, the academe sees the need to expose students to activities that promote the use of feedback among them. One such activity is peer feedback which has been encouraged and applied over the past four decades (Lin & Chien, 2009). Unlike that on feedback in general, however, research on peer feedback in the writing classroom has so far produced conflicting results.

Several concerns have been raised by researchers on the use of peer feedback. Wang (2009) claims that peer feedback lacks quality due to the absence of training, uncertainty on the types of feedback to provide, too much or too little focus on specific writing concerns, and surface level criticism. Other drawbacks of peer feedback include subjectivity of comments, irrelevance of insights to the task requirements, misalignment to the actual written work (Nilson, 2002), and unsuitability in non-confrontational classrooms (Rahmat, 2013). Moreover, Gielen, Tops, Dolchy, Onghena and Smeets (2010) found no significant learning gains among students who underwent peer feedback activities. Kaufman and Schunn (2011) and Liu and Carless (2006) also indicated that students had negative attitude or strong resistance to peer feedback due to perceived unfairness and peers' questionable qualifications to review.

On the other side of the debate, there are a number of researchers who have put forward the benefits of utilizing peer feedback. Zhang (2011) emphasizes that through peer feedback learners turn from passive receivers to active reviewers of learning when they write. Malaggay (2013) states that aside from helping students gain improvements in their writing peer feedback also provides the students with a chance to practice their speaking skills. Tsui and Ng (2000) claim that peer feedback enhances a sense of audience, fosters ownership of text, and encourages collaborative learning. This idea has been supported by Ghani and Ahmat (2014), Suzuki (2008), Reynolds (2009), Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Kunwongse (2013). Peer feedback also promotes a non-coercive atmosphere as demonstrated by Lin and Chien (2009), Bijami, Kashef, and Nejad (2013), and Van Gennip, Segers, and Tillema (2010).

Experiments and surveys on the use of peer feedback among learners have also generated positive results. Studies of Lu and Law (2012), Yu and Wu (2013), and Farrah (2012) demonstrated the positive impact of peer feedback as a form of intervention in writing performance. Shokrpour, Keshavarz, and Jafari (2013), Lynch (2009), Altstaedter and Doolittle (2014), and Sukumaran and Dass (2014) reported that peer feedback was generally perceived positively by learners.

Some researchers have also shown that various aspects of writing can be improved through peer feedback. Mowlaie's (2014) study uncovered that peer feedback was valuable in terms of language forms and content revision. The same was found by Ho and Savignon (2007) and Ting and Qian (2010).

Several other researchers (Khaliq & Khaliq, 2015; Jahin, 2012; Jun, 2008; Topping, 2009; Paladino, 2008; Cho & MacArthur, 2010; & Lei, 2012) have endorsed peer feedback to be incorporated in the writing process because they believe it plays a central role in improving the writing of learners.

Owing to a lack of empirical consensus on the usefulness of peer feedback as demonstrated by the inconclusive results of previous research, the present study aims to gain insights into whether peer feedback is effective in improving the writing performance of learners, contextualized within the Philippine tertiary classroom. Now that meaningful and constructive feedback has been continually demanded by higher education classrooms (Rae & Cochrane, 2008) and that a number of researchers have implicitly or explicitly recommended conducting feedback training among students, it is important to endeavor to re-examine feedback, including its nature and provider, in terms of its effects on the writing process (Nicol & Dick, 2004). Specifically, this study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between the written output scores of students before undergoing peer feedback activities (pre-test) and their written output scores after undergoing peer feedback activities (post-test)?
2. In what areas of technical writing is peer feedback most helpful?

Theoretical Framework

The present study draws theoretical inspiration from the Collaborative/ Cooperative Learning Theory, the Constructivist Learning Theory, and the Written Corrective Feedback Theories. As discussed by Johnson and Johnson (2002), the Collaborative/Cooperative Learning Theory banks on the idea that interaction patterns between and among students largely influence how they learn. This theory states that cooperative efforts and healthy relationships among students help them acquire learning more effectively. When students help one another and celebrate each other's successes in a learning environment, learning is aided.

Altstaedter and Doolittle (2014) explain that engaging in collaborative/cooperative activities allows for negotiation of meaning and construction of understanding in terms of language mechanics and discursive features, which target both local and global aspects of the language. This is also where one sees the congruence of peer feedback with the Constructivist Theory anchored on Vygotsky's elucidations. Altstaedter and Doolittle (2014) also illustrate that the constructivist perspective is applicable to writing instruction, specifically that interaction and authentic task are crucial elements in the process of writing. When learners give and receive feedback, they engage in creating their own knowledge as regards improving their peers' written outputs and those of their own. This enables them to play an active role in their own learning building (Liu & Carless, 2006) as they assess the validity of feedback, reaffirming their understanding of the constructed knowledge (Rahmat, 2013). Furthermore, Ellis (2009), in his typology of corrective feedback, espouses the idea that learners are able to revise their own composition and produce a better draft through the given written corrections as these assist them to acquire the correct target language. Direct written corrective feedback, according to Ellis (2009), can explicitly guide learners in improving their writing. Indirect written corrective feedback meanwhile can be a problem-solving practice among writers as it prompts them to reflect on linguistic forms, which may lead to long-term learning (Ellis, 2009). Finally, metalinguistic written corrective feedback encourages learners to formulate some sort of rules as to why their present writing is wrong and apply such rules in subsequent writing to avoid errors (Ellis, 2009).

Feedback Definitions

In the instructional context of writing, Narciss (2008) defines feedback as any "post-response information that is provided to learners to inform them of their actual state of learning or performance" (p.126) and the relationship of this state to certain writing goals and standards (Nicol & Dick, 2004). In the words of Graham and Perin (2007), feedback is an input received by learners about how adequate their writing has been. Brookhart (2008, in Fisher & Frey, 2009) also defined feedback as any information provided to students regarding each increment of learning that provides suggestions toward closer fulfillment of their learning goals. Feedback comes in various forms such as margin markings, underlines, encirclings, direct corrections, and detailed comments as enumerated by Hyland (1998, in Ting

& Qian, 2010). It is also implemented in a variety of ways like read-alouds, pair-offs, and/or worksheets (Ho & Savignon, 2007).

When feedback is given by a fellow learner in the writing classroom, it is categorized as peer feedback. Peers are among the most common agents who can give feedback on aspects of one's performance or understanding which helps reach learning intentions successfully (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Peer feedback refers to the act of exchanging drafts between two or among multiple peers to get revision points that may focus on global and/or local issues in oral or written form or the combination of both as stated by Chang (2016). Peer feedback medium can range from face-to-face communication to computer-mediated ones. Peer feedback can also be done asynchronously (e.g. e-mail) or synchronously (e.g. chats) as what Chang (2016) explained. The present study also recognizes the different terminologies used to refer to peer feedback such as peer review, peer response, and peer editing (Bijami, Kashef, & Nejad, 2013; & Morra & Romano, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The present study is quantitative-qualitative research conducted—with the consent of the University and the students—among one hundred and fifty four (154) second year engineering students of the Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Valenzuela (PLV) taking the course *ENG P5: Technical Writing* during the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017. For this course, eighteen (18) meetings of three-hour class periods are allotted in a semester, i.e., one three-hour meeting per week. For each two consecutive meetings, a specific type of technical writing document is targeted, for a total of nine (9) technical writing documents in the given semester. For each pair of weeks, the first week (Week A) is allotted to the instructor's lecture on the specific technical writing document and the students' initial drafting of such document while the second week (Week B) is allotted to peer feedback activities—which they have been acquainted with during their *Writing in the Discipline* class (course prerequisite for *Technical Writing*)—and revision of students' initial outputs.

For its quantitative analysis, the study conducted a *pre-test—treatment—post-test* quasi-experiment in which the initial drafts served as the *pre-test*, feedback as *treatment*, and the revised outputs as the *post-test*. This was done during each of the three pairs of weeks, corresponding to the three selected technical writing documents, i.e., application letters, reports, and project proposals. Initial drafts (pre-test) from Week A were collected by the instructor-researcher. Two teachers who served as raters in this study individually assessed the drafts based on analytic rubrics. The average of the scores was then computed by the researcher. The obtained averages served as the pre-test written output scores.

The drafts were returned to the students in Week B during which they were asked to proceed to their writing groups and conduct their peer feedback sessions. Students were then instructed to incorporate the feedback given to them and revise their drafts, and prepare their final outputs. The revised outputs (post-test) were collected, and the initial drafts (pre-test) were attached to these. These revised outputs were again assessed by the raters using the same analytic rubrics. Again, the scores from the two raters were averaged. The revision scores served as the post-test written output scores.

To test whether there had been significant improvement, these quantitative data were analyzed using paired samples one-tailed *t*-test by means of the software *IBM SPSS Statistics 20*. The pre-test total scores and the post-test total scores were paired to answer the first research question while pre-test and post-test raw scores per component were paired to address the second research question.

For the qualitative component of this investigation, the researcher and the coders—who were also the raters for the quantitative analysis—looked for evidence of improvement under each rubric component by extracting excerpts from the written outputs. They found words, phrases, clauses, or sentences in the initial drafts and revised outputs where writing improvements took place. Writing extracts from the initial drafts were coded as *Pre-test writing extracts* (***Pre-TWE***) and corresponding writing extracts from the revised outputs were coded as *Post-test writing extracts* (***Post-TWE***). A pair of a ***Pre-TWE*** and a ***Post-TWE*** was considered as one occurrence of improvement (***OI***). Occurrences of improvement (*OIs*) underwent frequency count.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the mean total scores obtained by the participants from their pre-tests and post-tests in writing application letters, reports, and

project proposals. As can be seen, all post-test mean scores were higher than their corresponding pre-test mean scores. The post-test mean score for application letter was 2.7 points higher than the pre-test mean score. The post-test mean score for report was also higher than its pre-test counterpart by 3.1 points. The same happened to project proposal which registered a 1.8-point difference between the pre-test and the post-test mean scores.

Table 1.0
Participants' Pre- and Post-Test Mean Total Scores

Technical Writing Documents	Pre-test Mean Scores	Post Test Mean Scores
Application Letter	11.6	14.3
Report	16.4	19.5
Project Proposal	19.8	21.6

Note: Perfect total score for Application Letter is 16. Perfect total score for Report and Proposal is 24. (n=154)

These mean differences are considered significant after running paired samples one-tailed t-test (α=0.05). The p-values obtained from the run were 0.025 for application letter, 0.032 for report, and 0.042 for project proposal, all of which were lower than the alpha value. This result is consistent with what Ghani and Ahmat (2014), Lu and Law (2012), and Coit (2004) found in their quasi-experiments. Their participants showed significant improvements in their essay revisions. This is also in line with the results of full experimental studies such as those of Khaliq and Khaliq (2015), Shokrpour, Keshavarz, and Jafari (2013), Farrah (2012), and Jahin (2012). All their experimental groups showed significantly higher writing improvements than their control groups.

Table 2.0
Participants' Pre- and Post-Test Mean Per Rubric Component Scores. Application Letters

Function		**Form and Content**		**Effectiveness**		**Grammar and Mechanics**	
Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test
3.3	3.6	3.2	3.5	2.8	3.5	2.3	3.7

Note: Perfect rubric component score for Application Letter is 4.

Table 2.0 shows the participants' pre-test and post-test scores per rubric component in writing application letters. As can be observed, the rubric component with the highest pre-test and post-test scores gap was Grammar and Mechanics with 1.4 mean difference (p=0.00). This means that the most improved aspect of the participants' writing of application letter after receiving peer feedback was accuracy. Since the run generated a p-value of 0.00, this improvement was considered significant. This implies that peer feedback tends to contribute more in terms of sentence construction, spelling, punctuation, among other grammatical concerns. This also suggests that peer feedback tends to be especially directed toward the formality of writing and its suitability to its context and the audience it is written for.

Table 2.1
Occurrences of Improvements (OIs) from Pre- and Post-test. Application Letters

Rubric Components (Areas of Technical Writing)	Grammar and Mechanics	Effectiveness	Function	Form and Content	**TOTAL**
Frequency	206	70	32	25	**333**

Concrete evidence for these improvements can be seen in Table 2.1 which shows the frequency count results of the Occurrences of Improvements (OIs) from the initial drafts and revised versions of the participants' application letters.

The table reveals that the highest frequency is under the area of Grammar and Mechanics comprising more than 60% of the total OIs. The following are sample writing extracts in which the underlined parts indicate improvements in spelling, punctuation, or sentence construction:

Pre-TWE 01
Dear Eng. Cruz:
Post-TWE 01
Dear Engr. Cruz:

Pre-TWE 03
If I get hired, you will never be disappointed.
Post-TWE 03
If I get hired, you will never be disappointed.

Pre-TWE 05
I want to be part of this company because of it's credibility.
Post-TWE 05

These extracts show that peer feedback has primarily targeted the area considered to be crucial in hiring decisions in the professional arena. According to Reddy (2016), standard conventions of grammar and mechanics should be followed by engineers, or any other professionals, to succeed in the field because they have to convince others of their worth in the profession. This is because good grammar gives an appearance of credibility and builds the reputation of an expert.

Table 3.0
Participants' Pre- and Post-Test Mean Per Rubric Component Scores. Reports

Purpose and Objective		Conclusion and Recommendation		Discussion		Structure and Presentation		Clarity and Conciseness		Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation		Vocabulary		Referencing	
Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test
2.4	2.5	1.9	2.4	2.0	2.0	2.4	2.5	2.0	2.5	1.4	2.8	1.8	2.3	2.5	2.5

Note: Perfect rubric component score for Report is 3.

Table 3.0 shows the participants' pre-test and post-test scores per rubric component in writing reports. Results showed that Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation had the largest mean difference (1.4) which was considered significant (p=0.02). This result was corroborated by the qualitative findings in Table 3.1 below that showed the same component comprising a little less than 70% of the total OIs.

Table 3.1
Occurrences of Improvements (OIs) from Pre- and Post-test Reports

Rubric Components (Areas of Technical Writing)	Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation	Vocabulary	Conclusions and Recommendations	Clarity and Conciseness	Purpose and Objective	Discussion	Structure	Referencing	TOTAL
Frequency	195	23	21	20	18	8	6	0	**291**

This paper's analysis showed that there were many instances of better sentence construction, proper use of punctuation, and corrected spellings in the post-test reports. The following are writing extracts under reports:

Pre-TWE 18
Laboratory experement in Physics 1
Post-TWE 18
Laboratory experiment in Physics 1

Pre-TWE 22
How to Use a Vernier Caliper?
Post-TWE 22
How to Use a Vernier Caliper:

Pre-TWE 20
Specimen: Cilinder
Post-TWE 20
Specimen: Cylinder

Table 4.0
Participants' Pre- and Post-Test Mean Per Rubric Component Scores. Project Proposals

Clarity		Scope		Graphics		Audience		Tone		Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation		Organization		References	
Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test
2.5	2.6	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.7	1.4	2.9	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.7

Note: Perfect rubric component score for Project Proposal is 3.

Meanwhile, Table 4.0 shows the results for project proposal writing performance per rubric component. As can be seen in the table, *Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation* is the area that has the largest mean score gap with a 1.5 mean difference. This is also considered significant given the p-value of 0.00.

Table 4.1
Occurrences of Improvements (OIs) from Pre- and Post-test Project Proposals

Rubric Components (Areas of Technical Writing)	Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation	Tone	Clarity	Graphics	Scope	Audience	Organization	References	TOTAL
Frequency	212	8	3	1	0	0	0	0	**224**

Table 4.1 supports the quantitative results for project proposals discussed previously. As presented, there was a high frequency of OIs under *Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation*. This was almost 95% of the total OIs. Sample writing extracts are given below the table.

Pre-TWE 36
Phase 1 and Pase 3 of the area are located...
Post-TWE 36
Phase 1 and Phase 3 of the area are located..

Pre-TWE 37
Project location is Baguio City, Philipines.
Post-TWE 37
Project location is Baguio City, Philippines.

Pre-TWE 42
The team support for electrical structures will be head by…
Post-TWE 42
The team support for electrical structures will be headed by…

As reports and project proposals are inevitably written in the workplace, especially by engineers, the importance of correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation is undeniable. The value of this area is seen in the fact that 98% of technical writers ranked grammar and mechanics the most essential component of successful writing in the field (Gerson, 2013). Moreover, the University of Utah (2007) states that technical writing should conform with the standards of English usage and grammar since they are what are observed by writers of serious scientific work. In writing scientific work, readability through syntactically well-formed writing is an absolute requirement as claimed by Spuida (2002).

All in all, given both the quantitative and qualitative results, it is safe to say that peer feedback helped improve the revised outputs of students. Across the three technical documents, the area of accuracy showed the largest and most significant mean difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores. It was also the area under which most occurrences of improvements took place. These results corroborate the findings of Mowlaie (2014) which indicated that revisions after peer feedback sessions led to improvements in accuracy, specifically in the use of prepositions and to corrections of spelling errors. Moreover, this further validates Norton's (1990) observation that peer comments are remarkably focused on surface, i.e., conventional errors. Additionally, Ting and Qian (2010) had very similar results concerning accuracy improvement. The statistical values and the actual extracts also validate the suggestion that students can do writing repairs (Cho & MacArthur, 2010).

CONCLUSION

A large portion of an engineer's field has something to do with technical writing, especially considering that industry and commerce treat technical communication as a necessity (Reddy, 2016). Engineers must not only be brilliant and creative in content but also be effective and responsible in technical communication to be able to share their knowledge, skills, and the results of their work . From the results of this study, one may conclude that peer feedback helps improve technical writing, especially in the area of accuracy. This is essential in learners' academic and professional success. Technical communication requires one to follow language rules and correct grammar which are crucial in avoiding misunderstanding and slowing down the communication process.

From a more global perspective, taking into account the students' own assessment of their learning in the composition process can be seen as an empowerment of the learners. Their roles as active participants in the language learning community are positively stressed and promoted. Collaborative activities such as peer feedback, therefore, are central in writing instruction. The academic setting where second language learning is generally situated in characteristically requires revision and multiple drafts in writing tasks. Readily-available responses may be maximized in the process, especially when proven effective and useful. In this light, peer feedback can serve as a central scaffolding element.

For directions for future research, studies on how other factors contribute to revision improvements may still be investigated since it would not be safe to say that peer feedback was the sole factor that could have helped improved the students' outputs in this investigation. Exploring concepts of motivation, self-efficacy and expectancy, feedback categorizations, and speaking environments may help in shedding light on the collaborative writing classroom.

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