

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WRITTEN PEER FEEDBACK IN WRITING CLASSES

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Abstract. Peer feedback is becoming an increasingly valuable part of EFL writing classes, especially as Vietnamese schools shift toward more student-centred approaches, since it encourages active participation, fosters learner autonomy, and helps students develop critical thinking skills. Although much has been studied in higher education settings, there is less understanding of how younger students respond to this method. This study explored the perspectives of high school students in Hanoi by analyzing both their written feedback and reflections during interviews. A qualitative method was employed, utilising semi-structured interviews and analysis of written peer feedback from eight high school students. The research found that students generally had positive views of peer feedback, noting several benefits, such as improved writing abilities, critical thinking skills, and increased confidence. Additionally, the paper highlights several challenges, including the dependability and quality of feedback.

Keywords: written peer feedback, perceptions, writing.

1. Introduction

Written peer feedback (WPF), in which students offer written comments and ideas on one another's work, is a valuable teaching method in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classes (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). It has been demonstrated in previous theoretical and empirical research that scaffolding students' writing process increases audience awareness, encourages critical thinking, facilitates collaborative learning, and ultimately aids in students' language acquisition and writing development (Rollinson, 2005; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Wu & Schunn, 2020). However, some challenges are found in the quality of peer feedback, skepticism of peers' abilities, teacher feedback preference, and cultural impacts on WPF dynamics that have been identified in several studies as detracting from its attractiveness (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Despite these problems, several instructors and course designers have utilised WPF in writing classes due to its purported benefits (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). However, students' opinions and participation in the process significantly impact the practicality of WPF (Rollison, 2005). Understanding students' perspectives and their use of WPF in writing sessions is crucial. Although WPF has been the subject of extensive university-level research, high school students remain largely unaware, particularly those in Hanoi. For this reason, this study aims to determine how high school students in Hanoi perceive and apply WPF in their EFL writing lessons.

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Peer feedback

Peer feedback is the concept that students should take on the obligation typically placed on teachers to read and remark on their classmates' writing to improve their writing skills (Rollinson, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Researchers widely acknowledge that peer feedback is a useful way for students to work together, where students give comments to each other and help one another learn and grow.

According to Hyland (2003), peer feedback may be given in various ways and incorporated into the writing process at various points. Specifically, peer feedback can be given verbally or in writing during the pre-writing, while-writing, and editing phases. In this study, however, the focus is on written peer feedback during the editing and revision stages because these stages are critical for developing learners' awareness of writing quality and fostering their ability to revise effectively.

Lei (2017) defines written peer feedback as input from a reader intended to support the writer's revision and improvement of their text. The reader's remarks, inquiries, and recommendations are included in the feedback. After that, the writer will edit their drafts by adding more details, improving the logical structure, or revising grammar and word choice. To guarantee successful peer feedback sessions, written feedback should address local and global writing components, including organisation, spelling, punctuation, grammar, and word choice, as Keh (1990) recommended.

2.1.2. Students' perceptions

As outlined by Schunk and Meece (1992), learners' perceptions, shaped by their thoughts and emotional reactions toward people, contexts, or experiences, can be classified into three main types: perceptions of the self, perceptions of others, and academic environments and activities. "Perceptions of the self" involve how students evaluate their capabilities, self-identity, goals, sense of competence, motivation, preferences, beliefs, emotional states, and personal values. "Perceptions of others," or social perceptions, encompass students' opinions about their peers' skills, self-concepts, aspirations, and perceptions of specific attributes in their teachers. Lastly, students' opinions about tasks and various classroom components may involve their thoughts on task complexity, effective learning strategies, and environmental factors that can either support or impede learning. This study's perceptions denote how students perceive, comprehend, and interpret WPF's usefulness, value, and effectiveness for enhancing their writing and facilitating language learning.

2.1.3. Peer feedback practices in EFL writing: educational and cultural perspectives

Extensive research has been conducted in this field at both the tertiary and high school levels, involving advanced students, resulting in varied outcomes. Investigations by Yang et al. (2006) conducted a comparative study involving two groups of students, one that received feedback from teachers and another from peers. Their findings revealed that although teacher feedback was regarded as more authoritative and was more frequently integrated into revisions, most of their revisions were only at a surface level, for example, correcting grammar, spelling, punctuation, or word choice errors rather than making deeper changes to content, organization, or argument development. In comparison, receiving peer feedback has increased student autonomy and communication effectiveness, leading to revisions that significantly alter meaning, such as reorganizing ideas, clarifying arguments, and expanding content to improve meaning and coherence.

Positive attitudes toward peer feedback have also been documented in Chinese university settings. For instance, Hu (2005) observed that students responded favourably to peer review

when adequate training was provided, particularly noting its usefulness in correcting errors and developing ideas. Similarly, encouraging outcomes were reported by Yang et al. (2006), who examined students' perceptions of peer feedback in comparable educational contexts. Additionally, they appreciated the chance to learn from their peers, provide advice, foster critical thinking, and understand their audience better. These studies suggest that advanced students frequently view peer feedback as valuable for improving their writing and critical thinking skills.

In a study on peer feedback practices at a Vietnamese university, Nguyen (2016) found that many students were uncertain about its effectiveness. Specifically, concerns were raised about classmates' linguistic competence, the usefulness of the feedback received, and the capacity to deliver thoughtful critique. Furthermore, additional uncertainty was noted concerning the appropriateness of the writing tasks and the function of peer feedback within the instructional setting. Similarly, Tsui and Ng (2000) examined the impact of teacher versus peer feedback on student revisions. They found that most students favoured teacher input, which resulted in more substantial changes in their second drafts. This preference was largely attributed to cultural factors among Chinese students, who seek to avoid losing face, prevent conflict among classmates, and view their teachers as the primary authority. Likewise, Stanley (1992) also found that vague or overly generic comments often fail to guide meaningful revisions. In contrast, some students may offer overly critical or sarcastic feedback, which can discourage engagement (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Taken together, these patterns, ranging from excessive politeness to harsh criticism, highlight how cultural and interpersonal dynamics shape the way students give and receive peer feedback.

Building on these perceptions are often shaped by the content and form of the peer feedback students encounter. Consequently, existing research has also examined three key components of peer feedback in second language writing: the focus of feedback, the language utilised, and the specificity and perspective of the feedback. Research has produced varying results concerning the focus of feedback. Regarding the focus, Leki (1990) discovered that second language learners frequently concentrated on minor errors while overlooking broader issues such as content and organisation. Conversely, Min (2005) demonstrated that second language students can provide insightful feedback on overarching elements of writing. In terms of language use, the research conducted by Yu and Lee (2014) revealed that EFL learners often employ both their first language and second language when offering feedback. Typically, the first language is used for discussing content and organisation, promoting a deeper understanding and communication, while the second language mainly addresses language-specific concerns.

Student responses to peer feedback in EFL writing classrooms demonstrate an appreciation for its benefits and an awareness of its ongoing challenges. While most learners acknowledge the role of peer feedback in developing writing competence and fostering collaborative engagement, factors such as discomfort, doubts regarding peer competence, and cultural attitudes toward critique can hinder students' active participation. To address these barriers, effective implementation requires structured training, consistent teacher facilitation, and a supportive classroom environment that normalises constructive peer interaction.

Students benefit most from peer feedback, but its effectiveness depends heavily on how they perceive and engage with the process (Rollinson, 2005; Harutyunyan & Poveda, 2018). For this reason, understanding learners' views and experiences of peer feedback is essential—not only for their engagement but also for more effective teaching practices. Educators attuned to students' perspectives can better tailor feedback methods to promote meaningful learning, enhance peer collaboration, and support writing development in EFL classrooms.

While a substantial body of research examines peer feedback in higher education, there is a notable lack of studies addressing peer feedback among high school students in Hanoi. This research gap is critical as secondary learners may differ significantly from university students in their needs, perceptions, and responses to peer review. Consequently, understanding high school

students' views on peer feedback in Hanoi offers important implications for refining its use in EFL writing classrooms, helping to ensure that feedback methods are suitably adjusted to foster writing proficiency and language development among younger learners.

This study aims to close the gap by exploring Vietnamese high school students' perceptions about written peer feedback and its implementation. The following two questions are specifically intended to be addressed:

1. *What is the perception of EFL students regarding the effectiveness of written peer feedback?*
2. *In what ways do EFL students engage with written peer feedback in the writing classes?*

2.2. Research method

2.2.1. Research approach

Given the study's focus on exploring students' perceptions and experiences with written peer feedback (WPF) in EFL classrooms, a qualitative approach was adopted. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of how students interpret and engage with WPF in their specific educational context (Creswell, 2014; Holliday, 2015).

2.2.2. Research design

2.2.2.1. Research setting and Participants

The research was conducted at a high school in Hanoi where English is part of the foreign language curriculum. Within this context, WPF constitutes a component of writing instruction that teachers are expected to incorporate into their pedagogical practices. This environment provides a pertinent and practical backdrop for exploring how students perceive and use WPF.

Eight Vietnamese EFL students, between the ages of 15 and 17, were chosen by convenience sampling based on their availability and willingness to participate. This sampling method enabled efficient data collection, with voluntary participation essential for obtaining meaningful insights (Dörnyei, 2007). The participants demonstrated English proficiency levels spanning elementary to intermediate, and all of them had experience participating in peer feedback activities as part of their writing classes.

2.2.2.2. Instruments

The study employed semi-structured interviews and analysed students' written peer feedback. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for gaining insight into participants' perspectives, uncovering unanticipated issues, and allowing immediate clarification and follow-up (Ary et al., 2018). In this research, the interviews aimed to explore students' perceptions of WPF's usefulness and relevance based on the dimensions of WPF outlined by Yu and Hu (2017). They also identified potential challenges they may face during WPF sessions and shed light on its practical implementation. On the other hand, document analysis can deliver a more detailed understanding of the situation (Holliday, 2015) and serve as a valuable source of data regarding individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, an examination of students' written feedback on their peers' work was conducted to offer specific examples of WPF within the educational setting and to reflect the actual feedback practices of students. Integrating these methodologies aimed to address the research questions with greater depth.

2.2.2.3. Data collection and management procedure

Each participant took part in a face-to-face interview conducted in Vietnamese after applying WPF, lasting approximately 30 minutes to facilitate clear communication. The interviews were audio-recorded and labelled as "IV_(Pseudonym)_(Date)," then transcribed word-for-word for subsequent analysis. To ensure accuracy and consistency, the transcripts were translated into English by a professional translator (Regmi et al., 2010). Participants were instructed to bring samples of the written feedback they had given to their peers on the day of the interview. These

documents were gathered and examined in conjunction with the interview transcripts. All materials were anonymised and stored to protect confidentiality and ensure data integrity.

2.2.2.4. Data analysis

This study systematically examined students' perceptions and practices related to WPF due to its flexible and accessible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998). The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model, which includes becoming acquainted with the data, developing initial codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing those themes, defining and naming them, and finally, compiling the report. The research utilised deductive and inductive analysis methods, as the deductive approach enables themes to emerge from the research questions. In contrast, the inductive approach facilitates the discovery of new and developing themes within the data, demonstrating greater consideration for the participants' subjective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Moreover, the study included an analysis of student peer feedback texts, focusing on three central dimensions of WPF outlined by Yu and Hu's (2017) framework of second language writing, which focuses on peer feedback, language features, and levels of specificity and stance. This approach and thematic analysis offered more profound insights into students' engagement with WPF practices in addressing the second research question.

2.2.3. Reliability and validity

Following Lincoln and Guba's framework (1985), the study followed the established qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis process. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data and investigator triangulation, which involves a second researcher independently checking a subset of coded data to ensure consistency in theme identification. Member checking was also conducted with select participants to authenticate the analysts' interpretations and verify their responses were correctly understood.

Dependability was addressed through an audit trail documenting analytic decisions during coding and theme development. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context, participant profiles, and peer feedback examples; this allowed readers to judge if results were transferable to other relevant settings. Lastly, confirmability was assured through reflexive journaling, in which the researcher recorded personal assumptions and possible preconceptions throughout the study, ensuring findings emerged from data rather than bias.

These procedures aimed to enhance the integrity and transparency of the research process, contributing towards the overall rigour of qualitative inquiry.

2.2.3.1. Ethical considerations

The current study addressed several ethical considerations. First, privacy is of the utmost significance (Holliday, 2015). The personal details of the participants must be kept confidential, and the gathered data should be anonymised and safely kept. Furthermore, participants were informed of their voluntary involvement in the study and their right to withdraw at any point (Dörnyei, 2007). Consent forms were designed and provided to all participants to ensure transparency and obtain informed agreement.

2.3. Findings

Research question 1: What is the perception of EFL students regarding the effectiveness of written peer feedback?

Most students who were interviewed shared favourable views about WPF. They acknowledged several advantages WPF can offer, including enhanced writing abilities, improved critical thinking skills, and a boost in confidence.

Most participants expressed that WPF significantly enhanced their grasp of writing structure,

content, organisation, and coherence. Additionally, they believed that WPF improved the quality of their compositions. As S1 stated, *"...I really appreciate when my friends help me out with my writing. They point out the mistakes I make and even correct them, which lets me edit and improve my paragraphs. Sometimes what I write can be a bit confusing, but their suggestions help me revise later on ..."* In the same view, S2 mentioned that *"...The WPF framework has improved my understanding of three important aspects of paragraph structure. Even though my teacher provided guidance, I frequently wrote without following these rules, usually lengthening my introductions and conclusions to several sentences rather than limiting them to one ..."*

Additionally, most participants stated that their critical thinking skills improved as they developed more analytical readers while assessing their peers' written pieces with established evaluation criteria, making them more critical of their writing. For instance, one student mentioned, *"...When providing feedback, engaging in careful and critical analysis of the material is crucial. This process not only enhances the ability to evaluate the work of others but also fosters a more critical approach to my own writing. Additionally, it is important to understand the expectations set by the teacher regarding effective writing practices...."* (S3).

Besides that, more than half of the interviewees said they thanked WPF since they were more confident in writing lessons, *"...WPF has significantly increased my comfort and reduced my anxiety regarding writing tasks. The opportunity to have friends review and correct my work before submission provides reassurance. Additionally, understanding my teacher's expectations enhances my confidence in the writing process...."* (S4)

The study indicated that although the benefits of WPF are recognised, various difficulties and limitations arose, resulting in unfavourable views among certain participants. A few students expressed worries about the feedback's dependability and quality, indicating a preference for instructor feedback, such as *"...My friends often provide vague feedback, such as 'OK' or 'good', and mention areas for improvement without offering specific corrections. As a result, their input is unhelpful and seems unproductive. ..."* (S5) or *"...I think that only my teacher has the ability to spot and correct my mistakes in grammar and vocabulary, since my classmates' English skills are not very strong...."* (S6). Several students also emphasized the emotional component of WPF. As the student S3 remarked, *"...Although I can address the errors made by my friends, I choose not to correct them frequently to prevent hurting their feelings or coming across as too critical..."*.

Research question 2: In what ways do EFL students engage with written peer feedback in the writing classes?

The interview responses indicated that participants generally adhered to conventional practices associated with written peer feedback. The process typically began with completing a first draft and exchanging written work among peers. Students then reviewed each other's drafts and provided written comments. Finally, the original authors used feedback to revise and refine their texts. One participant provided additional details regarding their experience with WPF as follows: *"...In our writing process, we utilise a checklist provided by our teacher, emphasising the importance of elements such as topic sentences, supporting details, concluding sentences, and grammar corrections. After completing our reviews, we share our feedback with classmates, who revise their first drafts at home based on the comments received...."* (S6)

The interviews indicated that time limitations posed a significant obstacle to integrating WPF into classrooms. These constraints obstructed students from engaging in thorough reading and delivering detailed, high-quality feedback. S7 showed this concern: *"... I believe we lack sufficient time to thoroughly review the writing and provide detailed feedback...."*

An analysis of participants' written peer feedback on three key aspects yielded the following findings. Firstly, in terms of feedback focus, most participants considered global and local writing elements, while a smaller group concentrated solely on local aspects. Secondly, in terms of language use, every student used a combination of English and Vietnamese, with a preference for

Vietnamese. Finally, regarding the level of detail and evaluative approach in peer feedback, approximately half of the participants provided specific and constructive input, including suggestions and corrections that addressed content, structure, grammar, and vocabulary. Conversely, the remaining students provided vague or generic remarks, such as “OK” or “Good,” or pointed out errors without offering revisions or explanations. In addition, a common request from most participants was for more time dedicated to giving feedback. As such, Students preferred to have additional time to reflect on the feedback they received and to engage in discussions with their peers, rather than making revisions independently at home. While they valued the initial guidance and support offered at the beginning of the academic year, many felt that, over time, WPF turned into a routine activity, leading to decreased engagement and inconsistent monitoring among peers.

2.4. Discussion

2.4.1. EFL students’ perceptions of written peer feedback

The study indicates that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students view written peer feedback positively, recognising its role in enhancing writing skills, promoting critical thinking, and building self-confidence. These findings are consistent with those of Kuyyogsuy (2019) and Ho et al. (2020), who reported that most participants valued peer feedback for its contribution to language development and creating a supportive learning environment. In addition, Hu (2005) emphasised students’ appreciation for WPF as a means of exchanging advice and identifying errors that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Despite the overall positive perceptions of WPF, the study identified two key challenges that align with findings from previous research: issues related to the credibility of peer assessments and the psychological resistance to giving critical feedback. Like Nguyen (2016), many participants in this study expressed doubt about the accuracy of the feedback they received, particularly questioning the language competence of peers with lower proficiency levels. This skepticism often led to reduced trust in peer input. Yang et al. (2006) also observed that students tended to favour teacher feedback, which they applied more readily, though often superficially, during revisions. Emotional discomfort in giving feedback was another recurring issue. Studies by Hyland (2000) and Husin and Ariffin (2008) have shown that in educational contexts like China and Malaysia, where teachers are traditionally viewed as authority figures, students often struggle to engage critically with their peers. This pattern is mirrored in the Vietnamese context, where the desire to preserve social harmony discourages direct critique, leading to vague or overly polite feedback that ultimately reduces the pedagogical value of WPF. Addressing these challenges will require more comprehensive training and consistent support from writing instructors to help students develop confidence and competence in peer evaluation.

2.4.2. Practices of WPF in EFL writing classrooms

According to participants’ self-reports, the WPF process typically involves drafting, exchanging drafts, and providing feedback with the help of checklists. As Hyland (2003) noted, this structured approach enhances the overall effectiveness of peer feedback sessions. However, responding to peer comments is often excluded due to time limitations. Rollinson (2005) highlights this stage as essential for encouraging clarification and deeper interaction. Several participants identified this omission as a shortcoming and expressed a need for more time to engage fully with peer feedback and benefit from the process.

This study's analysis of written feedback illuminated the methods participants employed in classroom environments. Contrary to Hyland’s (2003) findings, which indicated a focus on superficial elements, most participants assessed both broader and specific errors in their feedback. Additionally, similar to the findings of Yu and Lee (2014) regarding Chinese EFL students, there was a noticeable preference for using the first language over the second language when giving

feedback on content and organisation, influenced by factors such as L2 proficiency, student beliefs, and educational goals. Moreover, this study corroborates Tsui and Ng's (2000) work, noting that some students had difficulties providing detailed and precise feedback.

3. Conclusions

This research investigated how EFL students at a high school in Hanoi perceive written peer feedback in their writing instruction. Overall, the results indicate that learners view WPF as a helpful tool for developing their writing proficiency, fostering analytical thinking, and building self-assurance. However, the study also identified several obstacles, such as uncertainty regarding the credibility of peer input, emotional hesitation in delivering critiques, and time constraints that limited students' ability to engage with the feedback process fully. The research also underscored the value of ongoing training and the integration of oral feedback to improve the effectiveness of WPF. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may affect the interpretation and applicability of the findings. The small, school-specific sample restricts the generalizability of the findings, and reliance solely on interviews and document analysis may not fully capture students' experiences with WPF. Future studies should consider larger, more diverse participant groups and incorporate additional methods, such as classroom observations, video recordings of peer feedback sessions, and stimulated recall interviews, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the attitudes of EFL students toward written peer feedback and how they incorporate it into their writing practices.

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