

The Use of Feedback Strategies Implemented by Teacher and Peer Involvement in Developing Writing Proficiency among ESL Learners: An Action Research

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Abstract

This study endeavours to explore the effectiveness of teacher-monitored peer feedback in enhancing proficiency in writing paragraphs among secondary-level English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Sri Lanka. Over a period of two months, focusing on paragraph writing activities carried out with 20 ESL students from a semi-government school, the study experimented with a set of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, preplanned classroom observations, and reflective teacher references. There, peer feedback was guided by a rubric, while the teacher's verbal feedback was aligned with the routine instructional practices. The thematic analysis revealed that both feedback strategies enhanced students' engagement, confidence, and motivation in carrying out paragraph writing exercises. It was noticed that peer feedback helped encourage collaboration and critical thinking among the subjects, while teacher feedback provided them with clarity and direction. The reflective teacher references ensured improvement in student participation and independence. Challenges such as discomfort with peer evaluation and concerns about peer accuracy could be mitigated through structured guidance provided as and when required. The study thus concluded that integrating peer and teacher feedback helps foster a supportive, interactive environment for ESL writing development by establishing learner autonomy in ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Peer feedback; Verbal feedback; ESL writing; Paragraph writing proficiency

Introduction

Feedback is essential in ESL education for promoting self-assessment, reflection, and improvement, with various types supporting learner autonomy and motivation. The exam-oriented education system in Sri Lanka shapes feedback practices to remain teacher-centred and exam-focused, requiring a shift toward formative, student-centered feedback to improve writing proficiency (Jayawardena, 2021). While the NIE (National Institute of Education) (2017) guide emphasizes general feedback aligned with ongoing assessments, this approach limits developmental feedback, with Perera (2010) noting that exam pressure prioritizes corrective over formative feedback. Peer feedback is seen as effective but varies based on students' ability to give and receive constructive input (Topping, 1998), while verbal feedback effectiveness can also be inconsistent due to factors like clarity and learning styles (Kang, 2010;

Wijesuriya & Dissanayake, 2021). In this context, the present study investigates the effectiveness of peer feedback and teacher verbal feedback in improving ESL students' paragraph writing skills.

Several previous studies have examined feedback in ESL writing. Ferries (2003) synthesized research on feedback types, highlighting that a combination of corrective and formative feedback enhances writing accuracy over time. Bitchener & Knoch (2008) found that explicit corrective feedback significantly improves grammatical accuracy in ESL writing. Regarding peer feedback, Trang & Anh (2022) conducted a quasi-experimental study showing that students using structured peer feedback performed better in writing tasks. Liu & Carless (2006) found that peer feedback fosters critical thinking, though its quality varies depending on students' confidence and experience. Cui et al. (2022) demonstrated that trained peer reviewers provided more meaningful content-based feedback than untrained peers, improving writing structure and clarity. For verbal feedback, Ellis (2009) found that it enhances sentence structure and cohesion. Hyland & Hyland (2006) highlighted that students perceive verbal feedback as interactive and constructive, allowing immediate clarification. Yang et al. (2006) compared peer and teacher feedback, finding that while teacher feedback provided structured guidance, peer feedback promoted autonomy and self-regulation. Accordingly, existing research underscores the importance of feedback in ESL writing.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed an action research design to examine the impact of peer and verbal feedback on Grade 9 ESL learners' paragraph writing skills, as the cyclical and reflective nature of this approach would assist in identifying problems, implementing interventions, and refining teaching practices in real-time within the classroom (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Lewin, 1946). While experimental research could test cause- and - effect relationships, action research was more suitable as it allowed the teacher-researcher to reflect on practice, assess impact, and adjust methods, enabling practical improvements and bridging theory and practice (Burns, 2010). This approach aligns with the emphasis on critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and personal values in professional development within educational settings (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

Methods and Instruments

This research was based on qualitative data and involved 20 female Grade 9 ESL students from a semi-government school in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka. The students, all under 15, were selected through convenience sampling as they were part of the researcher's assigned class. Their writing skills were below standard as per their mid-term exam results for English, particularly in paragraph writing, prompting the need for a feedback-based intervention. All students participated regardless of proficiency level. Ethical clearance was obtained from students, parents, and school authorities, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. This group represented was representative of typical secondary- level ESL learners in Sri Lanka, making the findings relevant to similar contexts.

The rubric for peer and verbal feedback was both aligned with IELTS (International English Language Testing System) (2021) standards to ensure consistency in evaluation and support student understanding. IELTS is a globally recognized test assessing English proficiency in listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Using its validated rubric ensures consistent, objective feedback aligned with international standards, strengthening the reliability of the study's evaluation and helping students clearly understand their performance.

The action plan began with a lesson on paragraph writing for the participants. To provide students with an understanding of peer evaluation, the same lesson was taught to another Grade 9 class, and their written paragraph samples were distributed anonymously among the study participants. of the study, and the participants were instructed to give feedback in pairs using the provided rubric. Accordingly,

the students received training on how to assess peer work effectively prior to the evaluation process. Thirdly, students were instructed to write another paragraph and received peer feedback based on the same rubric. Each student evaluated a peer's work. Next, the teacher provided individual verbal feedback, addressing organization, cohesion, grammar, and clarity. These steps were repeated in three writing tasks to help students identify and correct mistakes. To gain comprehensive insights into the teaching and learning processes, classroom observations were conducted carried out throughout the intervention to gain comprehensive insights into the teaching and learning processes. At the end of the process, the researcher conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with all 20 participating students in the classroom setting to understand their experiences with the feedback strategies, challenges encountered, and overall perceptions of their usefulness. Teacher reflections were also collected to examine the instructional strategies used and their perceived impact on student learning. The interviews mainly included open-ended questions, along with a few close-ended questions to clarify specific aspects. All qualitative data from the interviews, teacher reflections, and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes related to feedback effectiveness, student engagement, and educational practices. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was used for the thematic analysis as it provides a clear, flexible guide for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The steps of this framework include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview questions used during the study are as follows.

Table 1: Interview Questions

Peer feedback	Verbal feedback	Overall feedback strategies
How did you feel about giving feedback to your peers? Was it easy or difficult?	How did you feel about receiving verbal feedback from your teacher?	Did you use the feedback you received (peer or verbal) to improve your writing? If so, how?
How did you feel about receiving feedback from your peers?	Do you think verbal feedback from your teacher helped you improve your writing?	How would you describe your overall experience with the two feedback strategies used in the classroom?
Did you find peer feedback useful? Why or why not?	What specific areas of writing were you able to improve with verbal feedback from your teacher?	Do you have any suggestions for improving the way feedback is provided in the classroom?
Do you think giving feedback to your peers helped you improve your own paragraph writing? How? What specific areas of your writing do you feel have improved because of peer feedback?	Do you think verbal feedback is more or less effective than peer feedback? Why?	
Is there any other type of feedback you think would have helped you more than peer feedback?	How did you feel about receiving verbal feedback from your teacher?	

Results

The responses obtained from the interview process were transcribed and categorized into significant and recurring themes. Through a detailed review of the qualitative data, a total of nine themes emerged: six positive and three negative. The positive themes reflect the benefits and strengths of the intervention, while the negative themes highlight the challenges and limitations. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. After coding and grouping similar codes, themes were identified, refined, and categorized as positive or negative based on their content.

Table 2: Themes Identified by Thematic Analysis

Positive themes	Negative themes
1) Improved quality of writing (improved paragraph writing skills ex, organization, topic sentence, supporting details, conclusions etc.).	1) Perceived judgment from peer feedback (worrying that they will be judged through their writings)
2) Improved confidence and motivation to write paragraphs.	2) Lack of trust in peer abilities (Doubting peers' confidence, some students feel that their peers are not qualified or skilled enough to provide meaningful feedback)
3) Opportunity to correct their common mistakes (Capitalization, punctuation, use of transitional words)	3) Lack of confidence to provide feedback (because of their different levels of understanding and trust in their own abilities, they tend to seek the help of the teacher to provide peer feedback)
4) Effective combined feedback (A Combination of the two feedback strategies is helpful)	
5) Supportive teacher feedback (Teacher feedback is more supportive)	
6) Development of self-editing skills	

Student interviews revealed that the peer and verbal feedback significantly improved writing skills, enhancing students' confidence and motivation. For example, Student 1 shared that verbal feedback felt "personal and constructive," boosting confidence, while Student 5 noted that peer feedback reduced her fear of making mistakes and motivated her to improve. Additionally, students valued opportunities to correct technical errors, such as capitalization and punctuation, with Student 15 highlighting how peer feedback helped with capitalization, and Student 5 noting learning new transitional words through peer review. The combination of peer and verbal feedback was also highly effective, with students appreciating the multiple perspectives. Student 18 emphasized how peer feedback helped catch small mistakes missed by the teacher, while verbal feedback clarified broader writing issues like paragraph structure and organization. This combined feedback allowed students to address both macro (structure) and micro (grammar, word choice) elements of writing, fostering a more comprehensive learning experience. Students also developed self-editing skills, as many began recognizing and correcting repeated errors independently. Student 13 shared how peer feedback helped her identify grammar mistakes, leading her to review her work more critically. Moreover, improved quality of writing was evident, with students better able to organize their ideas, provide supporting details, and write effective conclusions. Student 10, for example, highlighted how teacher feedback helped her improve the structure of the paragraphs by providing better supporting details.

Finally, supportive teacher feedback emerged as a crucial factor. While students appreciated peer feedback, many preferred the detailed and constructive nature of verbal feedback from their teacher. Students felt that teacher feedback provided more explicit guidance and emotional support, which helped them feel more confident in making changes to their writing. Student 7 stated, "With my teacher's feedback, I felt more confident making changes," highlighting the importance of expert, emotionally supportive feedback in fostering students' growth as writers.

These themes collectively suggest that peer and teacher feedback significantly enhanced students' writing proficiency, confidence, and self-editing skills.

The negative themes from the interviews reveal several challenges students faced with peer feedback. One common issue was the perceived judgment from peer feedback. Some students expressed anxiety about being judged by their peers, which affected their comfort and participation. Student 12 shared, "If I share my work, I was worried that my classmates would think I'm not good at writing." This concern led to a lack of focus during the feedback process, highlighting the need for a more supportive, non-critical atmosphere to encourage full participation in peer feedback.

Another significant issue was the lack of trust in peer abilities. Some students were sceptical about the quality of feedback provided by their peers, as they felt that their classmates might not be able to catch all the errors. Student 7 mentioned, "I felt like I didn't get useful feedback from my peers since there were some unnoticed errors." Additionally, some students admitted to giving vague feedback to avoid hurting others' feelings, with Student 4 saying, "I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so I just gave general feedback." This suggests that students may need more training in constructive feedback while maintaining trust.

The lack of confidence to provide peer feedback was also a recurring theme. Many students doubted their ability to give effective feedback, often relying on the teacher for confirmation. Student 18 remarked, "I was not sure about my advice, and that's why I asked the teacher." This dependency on the teacher's support limited students' engagement in the feedback process, making them hesitant to contribute their opinions.

To address these issues, teachers could train students to give effective feedback. Providing workshops on feedback principles and using structured tools like checklists or rubrics can help build students' confidence. Encouraging a collaborative classroom culture that values development over judgment can alleviate students' fears and promote more active participation. Pairing students with varying skill levels for feedback activities could also enhance peer learning, allowing stronger students to model effective feedback strategies. Regular teacher check-ins would provide reassurance, ensuring students feel supported in the feedback process.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that peer feedback fostered collaborative learning, improving students' sentence structure and paragraph organization. In contrast, the teacher's verbal feedback encouraged self-reflection and helped address grammatical errors, resulting in overall progress in writing proficiency. Learners showed significant improvement in paragraph organization, using clearer topic sentences and supporting details, while developing self-editing skills to correct errors like capitalization and punctuation. The combined use of peer and verbal feedback enhanced confidence and motivation, with teacher feedback providing essential guidance that complemented peer feedback to strengthen technical and attitudinal aspects of ESL writing proficiency.

However, challenges were noted, including students' fear of judgment, lack of trust in peers' abilities, and low confidence in evaluating others' work, leading to inconsistent feedback quality and reliance on teacher intervention. These challenges highlight the need for structured training to improve confidence and competence in peer feedback. Future studies could expand sample sizes, conduct longitudinal research, and explore digital tools in feedback facilitation, with further research into teacher and student perspectives to enhance trust and effectiveness in peer and verbal feedback processes. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that peer and verbal feedback strategies significantly enhance the writing proficiency of secondary-level ESL learners in Sri Lanka. The findings contribute valuable insights into

ESL education, offering a foundation for future research and practical improvements in writing instruction.

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