

Integrating students' peer feedback strategy into the EFL writing classes: Practices and orientations



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ABSTRACT

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Several studies have investigated the impact of students' peer assessment and feedback on learners' progress in EFL writing classes. However, few have explored students' perceptions of it. This paper addresses this gap by exploring student peer assessment and feedback using rubrics to enhance classroom writing practices. The study employed action research to explore students' attitudes and practices towards the process-oriented approach to writing, examine the role of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in the learning process, students' attitudes toward peer feedback, and the challenges associated with peer assessment and feedback in EFL writing classes. A qualitative research design was adopted in this study utilizing a writing rubric and a classroom observation checklist. Additional data were gathered using structured interviews and students' reflective reports. In the findings, the participants often avoided applying the process-oriented approach due to time constraints. However, applying the Zone of Proximal Development supported meaningful learning experiences and deepened peer-to-peer engagement although most students appreciated peer review and feedback; they faced difficulties due to limited background knowledge, low confidence, and limited understanding of how to evaluate peers' work. The findings identify a need for further support and scaffolding to enhance peer-to-peer assessment in EFL writing classes.

Contribution/ Originality: The author recognized a lack of research on students' practices and responses to peer assessment and feedback in EFL classrooms. To address this gap, action research was conducted, focusing on peer feedback, the process-oriented writing approach, and the role of ZPD while examining students' reactions, behaviors and related challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global emphasis on writing skills had a meaningful influence on the learning process in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Indeed, acknowledging writing skills as critical for academic and professional success has led to a greater focus on developing strong writing abilities. However, writing is the most challenging to master because writing requires capability, knowledge, and creativity beyond linguistic competence compared to other EFL language skills. In addition, in the teaching and learning writing skills, the traditional teacher-centered approach remains the dominant paradigm, where the focus is on the writing product rather than the writing *process*. In this approach, students submit their assignments to their teachers who provide them with corrective feedback.

Despite the fact, approaching writing through the lens of a teacher-centered framework can be a daunting process, particularly in large class sizes. As the sole source of feedback, the teacher often cannot pay adequate attention to the learners' assignments. Furthermore, this approach means that they tend to be unfamiliar with peer evaluation

and feedback in writing classes although learners may take part in dialogue, presentations, and group discussions. One result of using a traditional teaching style is that the target knowledge may not be applied successfully in the real world. We need to give more consideration to how peer assessment and feedback may help learners develop their writing skills.

Van Zundert, Sluijsmans, and Van Merriënboer (2010) define peer assessment “as a process whereby students evaluate, or are evaluated by their peers” (p. 270). Accordingly, Hu (2005) defines it as “a collaborative activity involving students reading, critiquing, and providing feedback on each other’s writing” (p. 321). However, getting learners to review and comment on each other’s writing requires experience, effort, and time to deliver effective and constructive results. This raises several questions. Firstly, how can students appreciate the value of giving and receiving feedback? Secondly, how can effective approaches to facilitating peer feedback be devised and implemented? Finally, how can students act on the feedback to improve their writing once it is given?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *The Process Approach to Teaching Writing*

Most learners experience difficulties when presenting their writing. Consequently, many writing classes focus on the product approach rather than the process approach to simplify the learning process. While the former approach focuses the writer to concentrate on producing a piece of writing, the latter focuses on the different steps that a writer follows in writing that piece of work, such as prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). Keh (1990) describes this approach as a “multiple draft process” (p. 294). According to Melgarejo's (2010) reports, it is important to guide and support learners during the steps of the writing process in this lengthy and time-consuming endeavor. In this regard, Mendoza López (2005) mentions that “a process-oriented approach to L2 writing instruction can be successfully introduced to L2 learners” (p. 28).

The process approach guides learners through several stages of producing writing. This method enables language learners to think, plan, organize, and effectively express their ideas, incorporating the giving and receiving of feedback from teachers and peers. According to Keh (1990), peer feedback is known by various terms, such as peer response, peer editing, peer critiquing, and peer evaluation (p. 295). Lowe, Cummins, Clark, Porter, and Spitz (2022) argue that peer review is an approach used by students to provide and receive constructive feedback. This component of the writing process falls under “revision.” During revision, students are given the opportunity to receive feedback from their teachers or peers. Peer review and feedback are essential elements of the process writing approach (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Kangni, 2015; Keh, 1990; Khalil, 2018).

2.2. *Peer Feedback and Academic Achievement*

One of the main goals of education is to facilitate learner autonomy. Autonomy is defined by Holec (1981) cited in Shi and Han (2019), as the ability to take responsibility for one’s learning. Therefore, autonomy involves a deliberate intention to increase the student’s role and minimize the teacher’s role in the classroom. Accordingly, there is a notable shift from the teacher-centered approach to the student-centered approach, and the responsibility for learning shifts from the teacher to the students. One positive effect of this shift is promoting learners' practices inside classrooms. The role of teachers is fundamental in developing and enhancing this as they take on multiple roles within the classroom. Voller (1997) cited in Sadaghian and Marandi (2021) notes different roles for a teacher: as a facilitator, as a counselor, and as a resource. In these roles, teachers work collaboratively with students and offer opportunities for them to provide useful feedback to each other.

Applying peer assessment and feedback is widely considered one of the most efficient approaches to teaching and learning writing skills. It is an opportunity to motivate learners to actively interact with their classmates and to express their ability to work both independently and cooperatively. This approach reinforces the notion of learning through assessment. Hansen & Liu, (2005) note that “peer response is supported by several theoretical frameworks,

including process writing, collaborative learning theory, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and interaction and second language acquisition" (p. 31).

Much interest has been shown in the application of peer feedback to language teaching and learning in writing courses (e.g., Agus & Nurhayati, 2022; Min, 2005; Quynh, 2021; Zhang, 2022). There are several benefits to conducting this approach in the context of developing learners' writing skills. Firstly, implementing student peer assessment and feedback encourages them to do their best when submitting their early drafts since their classmates will evaluate their work and provide feedback on the initial effort, forcing learners to assume responsibility for reflecting on their writing from in this early stage of the writing process (Cho & Schunn, 2007; Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010; Keh, 1990). In addition, Bijami, Kashef, and Nejad (2013) noted that "using peer feedback can lead to less writing apprehension and more confidence as well as establish a social context for writing." (p. 94). Moreover, this method enables students to develop and refine such transferable skills as teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Lowe et al., 2022; Topping, 2017). Such strategies also reinforce active learning, ensuring learners are actively involved in the learning process (Liu & Carless, 2006). Finally, there is also a benefit for teachers as peer assessment helps them more effectively manage their class time and give their students faster and more concentrated feedback (Agus and Nurhayati, 2022).

However, giving effective peer feedback and using it can be challenging. (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Xiang, Yuan, & Yu, 2022; Zhang, 1995). For example, Rollinson (2005) notes that student peer review is time-consuming. Another factor affecting the quality of peer assessment is skepticism on the part of the learners with some not easily willing to accept their peers' feedback as serious or worthy of attention (this is especially the case in classes with large differences in ability/level in the target language). Consequently, when receiving feedback, some student writers reject their peers' criticisms and submit their future drafts without making any amendments based on that feedback. Conversely, Muamaroh and Pratiwi (2022) point out that some students may be insecure about giving feedback because they are unsure about their ability to do so. These issues reflect a long-standing and deep-seated preference for teacher feedback over that of peers (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Zhang, 1995).

A significant challenge is how to facilitate students providing constructive feedback. One theory that might help overcome this challenge is Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is a kind of scaffolding process in which students are provided with support that develops their skills through social interactions as the basis for learning. Students learn by communicating with those around them, including their peers. Vygotsky (1978) himself defines the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86, cited in Chaiklin, 2011).

Drawing on the ZPD, Nazerian, Abbasian, and Mohseni (2021) note that learning is a social process that occurs in a social context and hence social communication is essential for the cognitive improvement of students. The ZPD stresses social interactions and the need for assistance in the learning process, and this guidance can come in the form of support from teachers and competent peers (Chaiklin, 2011).

2.3. Applying the ZPD in the EFL Writing Classroom

In classroom learning, the ZPD is associated with concepts such as scaffolding, collaboration, activation, and peer learning. Students are motivated to move from their current levels to other potential ones that would be difficult to reach independently through such concepts. The theory highlights the difference between what learners can do without assistance and what they can accomplish with the support of others. Learning writing skills takes place when learners are working within their ZPD because it enables teachers to appreciate the actual zone and evaluate the learners' abilities. Furthermore, it illustrates how learners develop and activate their background knowledge. Teachers can provide students with useful tools to assist and engage them in different collaborative tasks. The ZPD presupposes an interaction on a task between a more competent person and a less competent person, such that the

less competent person becomes independently proficient at what was initially a jointly accomplished task (Chaiklin, 2011).

A teacher would first assess the current level of the students to identify their prior knowledge to apply the ZPD in the writing classroom. Next, the teacher scaffolds the learners by supporting and assisting them in learning new information by providing them with a writing rubric as a framework, generating discussions, assessing, and observing. The writing rubric assists student writers and reviewers in completing the task and guides them while offering support. Assistance is gradually removed when the learners master what is required for successful completion of the task. Afterwards, the teacher can monitor and evaluate student progress and facilitate peer learning by engaging more competent learners in the collaborative process. This cooperative learning enables students to transfer their personal skills from one to another.

Writing activities are completed with assistance and guidance from both the teacher and more capable peers, moving through the ZPD who help and guide learners as a collective unit until they can do the given tasks independently. In this way, the ZPD bridges the gap between what learners can accomplish independently before and after assistance and guidance through their communications with others by using different forms, such as a writing rubric, a checklist sheet, feedback, and classroom discussions. Peer assessment and feedback within the ZPD improve learners' writing confidence and their performance.

Peer evaluation and feedback promote self-regulated learning successfully. Topping (2017) reports that “peer assessment is capable of engaging students much more effectively in self-regulation and developing other skills relevant to lifelong learning and work” (p. 13). For Boekaerts and Corno (2005), self-regulation is “a process and the effects of interventions to improve students’ self-regulatory capacity” (p. 200). Students' self-regulation is considered more effective in conjunction with the support of others. The journey to autonomous learning entails the students being provided with a model to observe and practice using the assistance of their peers and under the general guidance of the teacher whose job is to monitor and observe proceedings.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, action research was conducted at Al-Qunfudhah University College. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), action research focuses on different areas of teaching and learning processes, such as developing teaching skills, shifting from traditional to modern approaches, and evaluating and encouraging positive attitudes. Action research allows the researcher to fully understand students' preferences and practices as he or she seeks answers to set research questions. Figure 1 shows the process of this study’s framework for action research.

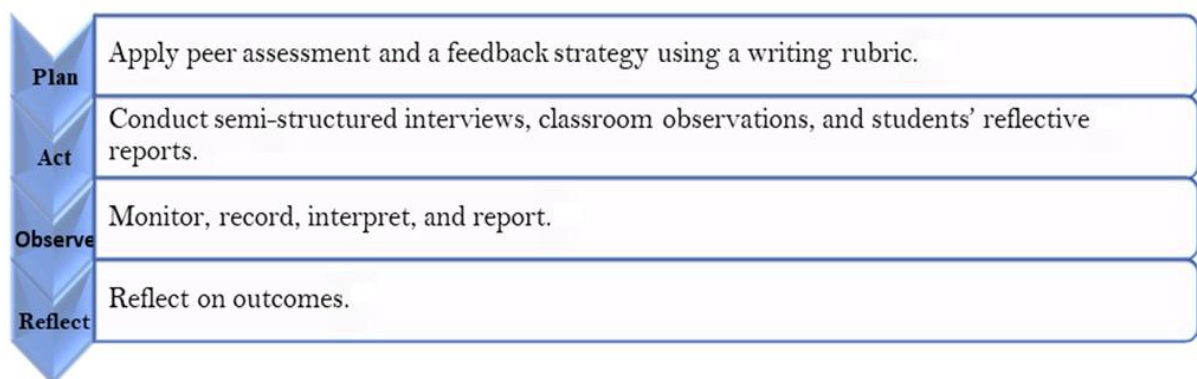


Figure 1. The study’s framework for action research

3.1. Participants and Setting

25 undergraduate students majoring in engineering at Al-Qunfudhah University College, Saudi Arabia, and enrolled in a required English course participated in this study. The data collection went through three phases: 1). a

pilot study was conducted using a writing rubric and a classroom observation checklist. 2) Five of the participants were interviewed. 3) The participants' reflective reports were analyzed. The participants had no previous knowledge of or experience with peer assessment and feedback in writing classes and attended two workshop sessions to raise their awareness regarding how to review peer assignments and give comments.

3.2. Statement of the Problem

Recently, the teachers on the course have expressed some concerns about their students' poor writing skills. Although Saudi students learn EFL for more than ten years at school, their writing competency is generally very low. At university, they go on to face difficulties with their writing skills.

3.3. Significance of the Study

This study will help teachers observe and understand their students' behavior in writing classes as well as how they respond to peer input. The study will identify students' misunderstandings about writing classes, which have a significant impact on their learning achievement. Furthermore, it will correct some common misconceptions about writing in the process boosting students' knowledge and providing a better understanding of how to use peer feedback in higher education writing classes.

3.4. Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do students respond to the writing process approach?
2. To what extent does the ZPD facilitate the learning process?
3. What are students' attitudes towards the practice of peer feedback when using a rubric as an assessment tool?
4. What factors hinder the integration of peer feedback into EFL writing classes?

3.5. Pilot Study

The participants attended one writing class, two hours per week for ten weeks during the first term. As they were unfamiliar with being both an assessor and an assessed student, the participants were given two workshop sessions on peer assessment and feedback to develop the quality of their feedback. Additionally, they were provided with a rubric and a writing checklist as a framework based on course objectives to improve their awareness of this strategy. The rubric and checklist were reviewed by two experts to confirm their validity.

The student participants in this study were actively engaged in using rubrics and writing checklists to evaluate their peers' work and provide feedback based on a set of evaluation criteria. They were provided with a detailed rubric that included a set of performance criteria covering mechanics, organization, and content. Moreover, the rubric illustrated how feedback is given through commentaries on assignments. This tool can be useful for enabling students to present their writing and give effective feedback. The students were encouraged to use the statements from the rubric and checklist which included a set of statements and questions to address questions like does the topic sentence have clear controlling ideas? Are the ideas expressed clearly?

The rubric is a road map to guide the students to improve the quality of their feedback. Furthermore, it allows student writers to see where they are and identify where they should be by following given prompts. This is significant since one of the challenges students face knows how to apply assessment criteria. Additionally, it provides students with ideas for how to improve their future assignments and feedback commentary. Furthermore, it reinforces interactions among students in the classroom and encourages them to learn from their peers and work collaboratively. As a result, such classroom interactions improve students' abilities to work independently and confidently. Another benefit is that the rubric explains how teachers assess students' writing, i.e., it gives them insights into how a teacher evaluates a piece of writing, showing them that the process of assessment and feedback is not random but is based on

specific criteria. The rubric was based on course objectives to ensure the benefits of a writing rubric and to provide the necessary scaffolding.

However, the rubric excluded grading for three reasons. Firstly, the main goal of the study is to discover how students behave and react to peer feedback. Thus, grading was deemed unnecessary. Secondly, relying on grades would reduce the relevance of peer feedback when provided by student reviewers (Liu & Carless, 2006). Similarly, Sluijsmans, Moerkerke, Van Merriënboer, and Dochy (2001) cited in Liu and Carless (2006) note that students prefer giving feedback on writing to giving actual marks. Thus, the aim of engaging students in peer review is to enable them to help each other identify areas of improvement instead of grading and offering criticism (Lowe et al., 2022). Finally, using grades to assess assignments could provoke negative reactions and undermine the students' attitudes toward tasks.

3.6. Data Collection Procedures

3.6.1. Classroom Observations

Classroom observations play a vital role in observing learners' attitudes and reactions in the classroom (Waxman & Pardon, 2004). This study's action research plan enabled the researcher to compare the key findings from the interviews with the students' reflective reports which were handed in at the end of the semester. Unstructured classroom observations were implemented to cover different elements related to attitudes, challenges, and misconceptions in fostering peer feedback as a learning approach.

There were three phases in the classroom observations. The first phase assessed the writing skills and background of the students. In the first week, the students were given a topic to write about as a diagnostic assessment to determine their existing writing skills and areas that needed improvement. The second phase prepared the students for writing and reviewing. In this phase (i.e., week 2), the students attended two workshop sessions that trained them in how to structure their essays and how to review and give feedback. The third phase was about working on assignments and giving feedback. The researcher gave the students two writing tasks to complete within six weeks (three weeks for each assignment) in the process of which they were to produce multiple drafts and review them. The participants were informed that they needed to use the criteria in the rubric to comment on each other's work. The researcher assessed the reviewers' feedback to observe their comments to correct potential misdirection. In this phase, the researcher also tracked the final draft submission, checking student reactions to their peers' comments.

3.6.2. Interviews

The researcher interviewed five undergraduate students face-to-face in the college library of Al-Qunfudhah University College. Each interview lasted 30-35 minutes. The data were then transcribed and printed out to make brief notes. Then, the researcher categorized them into themes and key findings based on the data given for analysis.

3.6.3. Students' Reflective Reports

The students wrote reflective reports, which were specifically designed to encourage them to reflect on the learning experience and to express their views on learning through peer assessment. The students were asked to write their comments about peer feedback, consider any challenges they faced, and note what they learned from assessing peers and being assessed by peers.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Multiple ethical factors were taken into consideration to ensure that no harm or risk was posed to the participants. They were as follows:

1. Participants' information was at all times kept anonymous and was protected.
2. All oral and written feedback remained confidential.

3. No physical, psychological, or emotional harm came during the data collection process.
4. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study anytime without any justification.
5. The participants were asked to sign a consent form.
6. The participants were provided with a copy of the information sheet.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Classroom Observations

The data collected were grouped into four main themes. [Table 1](#) reflects and summarizes the key themes and findings.

Table 1. Key findings based on classroom observations

No.	Main themes	Key findings
1	Attitudes and reactions to the writing process approach and peer feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students followed the productive approach rather than the process approach. • Most students had a positive attitude to peer evaluation and feedback. Others did not like it. • Some of the reluctant students ignored peer comments. • Most students lack certain skills, such as communication and taking notes.
2	Challenges faced by student reviewers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of motivation. • Insufficient knowledge of language and content. • Lack of certain skills related to reviewing and giving feedback.
3	Using a rubric as a reviewing tool.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretically, the students had positive attitudes, but practically, some faced one challenge, understanding and interpreting the rubric.
4	Misconceptions in relation to reviewing and giving feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing peer assignments to correct errors. • Prioritizing scores over constructive feedback. • Concentrate on the correctness of grammar and spelling errors.

Theme 1 was about the students' attitudes and reactions to the process approach and peer feedback. Concerning the process approach, the results indicate that they started writing directly without following this approach to writing. Some students started their paragraphs directly without following the prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing stages of the method despite their initially positive attitude towards this approach. Some saw it as time-consuming and impractical, and they feared losing marks. Others said that although it was easy to imitate using model texts, implementing the process approach requires additional guidance and effort.

Regarding peer feedback, there was no consensus. Most students believed that applying this strategy was a good opportunity to encourage and motivate them to actively interact with their peers. They also mentioned that peer feedback helped them to develop their work. Nonetheless, others preferred their work to be assessed by a teacher. Some of them rejected the comments given due to a lack of clear and useful instructions. Additionally, there was a noticeable lack of key skills among students, such as communication, discussion, and note-taking. During peer interactions, some students did not take notes as they discussed their assignments with their partners while some avoided discussions with peers altogether.

The results also showed that the reviewers faced some challenges (theme 2). They focused mostly on grammatical and spelling errors and ignored other points related to organization, connecting ideas, and text cohesion and coherence. Another challenge was a lack of skills when giving feedback, such as recognizing strengths and weaknesses and giving constructive feedback. These challenges undermined the quality of the feedback given.

Regarding theme 3, using rubrics, the results illustrated that the observed students had positive attitudes towards using a rubric as a model for reviewing and giving comments. However, some students did not understand the application of the rubric criteria concerning how to assess their peers' assignments. Subsequently, they treated it as a checklist rather than a guide for improvement, checking off the criteria separately; for example, they checked whether the essay included an introduction, main body, and conclusion without any emphasis on the writing quality in the paragraphs. Consequently, the emphasis was more on completing a review of their peers' assignments than on the actual quality of the writing.

Finally, theme 4 concerned misconceptions about peer review and giving feedback. Three issues were identified which are as follows: Firstly, there was a focus on correcting errors rather than giving feedback. Giving feedback goes beyond correcting errors to include areas where improvement is needed. Second, some participants prioritized grades over constructive feedback. Finally, some students thought reviewing and giving feedback was limited to correcting grammar and spelling errors.

4.1.2. Interviews

Based on the results of the interviews, two themes were identified: student attitudes towards peer review and feedback and using rubrics to review peers' work. The results showed that some students had positive attitudes about peer feedback. They stated that feedback helped them recognize some errors and see their work from their peers' viewpoints. Others did not prefer this strategy. However, they had insufficient knowledge to do it effectively or to a degree that would benefit their peers. Others were not interested in reviewing and giving feedback, preferring teacher feedback over peer feedback. Some excerpts from the interviews were as follows:

Interviewee 1: Receiving comments helped me identify some grammatical and spelling errors and revise my work at different times.

Interviewee 2: In my opinion, peer feedback is valuable and trustworthy.

Interviewee 3: I do not have enough confidence to take part in peer feedback.

Interviewee 4: I am not interested in reviewing my classmates' work. I do that only to get marks.

Interviewee 5: Sometimes, I follow comments, but if the comments are not clear, I do not make revisions. Therefore, I prefer the teacher's feedback because he uses clear language and focuses on ideas and content.

Concerning the second theme, using rubrics, the interviewees appreciated this tool. They stated that following the rubric enabled them to organize their ideas and thoughts because it included criteria they could follow; it helped them to review and give feedback more confidently. However, two students said they need extra training on how to use a rubric more effectively. Some excerpts from the interviews were as follows:

Interviewee 1: The writing rubric and checklist helped us feel more confident.

Interviewee 2: Reviewing peers' assignments highlighting using the rubric enabled me to know what to focus on.

Interviewee 3: Using a rubric helped us organize our thoughts and ideas.

4.1.3. Students' Reflective Reports

The data collected from the students' reports were categorized into two themes: preferences about the writing approach, and peer feedback. Most students had positive attitudes toward the writing process approach. Nevertheless, although using this approach they broke their work into constituent parts such as content, organization, grammar, and style and produced the tasks in multiple drafts, they feared losing marks. Hence, some of them were inattentive to this approach and focused on imitating model texts instead. Some excerpts from the students' reflective reports were as follows:

"I prefer the writing process method because it helped me to write and refine my work before I submitted it to my teacher. Moreover, it enabled me to work with my classmates and generate discussions" (student 1).

"Following writing stages helped me write my essay step-by-step. Hence, I prefer this approach. But there is no time to do that. Due to time constraints, I prefer to imitate a guide text that provides a clear framework to follow" (student 5).

"I am worried about losing marks on final exams, so I prefer to get a model text from the teacher and practice with it. This saves time and effort. Following this helps me write directly without several drafts. Furthermore, another point is that writing stages require extra resources and guidance" (student 6).

"When my teacher gives us a paragraph, I practice on it as it is. This is easier for me to learn how to structure the paragraph" (student 13).

"I think it is better to copy a well-structured essay because this can teach me how to organize my essay and ideas more effectively" (student 20).

Regarding attitudes to giving feedback, the results indicated that most students generally had positive views about reviewing their peers' work. Furthermore, they considered this strategy a way of learning through practice. However, there were some concerns related to this strategy, including a lack of confidence, insufficient knowledge, and anxiety. Some students felt confident about their capacity to give effective feedback that met the rubric. Some excerpts from their reports were as follows:

"This is the first time I have reviewed my classmate's essay. It helped me to become more independent" (student 8).

"I think that giving feedback will help me understand what our teacher expects from us in assignments" (student 13).

"Giving feedback makes me feel more confident" (student 15).

"I do not like to write comments on others' writing. I feel nervous" (student 2).

"Still, I need more practice reviewing my classmates' essays" (student 9).

Regarding students' attitudes towards receiving feedback from peers, the results showed no agreement among students. Some students had positive views but others had negative ones. Here are some excerpts from their reports which are as follows:

"I received useful comments from my classmates regarding the structure of the essay. One peer stated that my introduction was good but recommended that I need to provide more details to support my body paragraphs. Another partner commented that my paragraphs were clear and easy to track. It would be better to use signposts to link ideas together and to move from one point to another" (student 1).

"From peer feedback, I learnt how to structure my essay and how to strengthen it by providing supporting details such as explanations and examples" (student 3).

"In my opinion, the comments were constructive, but I also think that some recommendations need more clarity and examples to refine my ideas and strengthen my work" (student 4).

"I appreciate how this feedback supported me in some areas, but some comments, for example, 'You are disorganized.' 'You are not clear what you want to say sound like a judgment of me rather than my assignment' (student 7).

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. How Do Students Respond to the Writing Process Approach?

Based on the results, most participants acknowledged the advantages of the writing process approach, believing that this approach has long-term benefits, such as helping them write critically and analytically in their future work. Similarly, they believed this approach allowed them to plan and think about what they wrote. However, most were familiar with this approach theoretically (if not practically). The results revealed a gap between the students' knowledge and their practice. They identified the stages of writing but did not follow these stages. Some even skipped some of the stages. Moreover, they did not produce multiple drafts before submitting the final piece of work.

There may be multiple reasons for this gap. Firstly, the process approach demands that students go through different stages and write multiple drafts. This requires time and effort. Tangpermpoon's (2008) study found that the process approach to writing was more time-consuming, especially for particular writing tasks. A second reason may be lack of experience and practice. The students in this study are usually prepared for final exams in their EFL writing classes, and hence they tend to focus more on writing outcomes rather than the writing process. They believe that the written products reduce their anxiety and save them time when they prepare for their exams.

Another notable point is that the participating students focused on lexical items and grammatical rules rather than content and language. Hyland (2016) also reports that "in many schools, writing classes are grammar classes in disguise, and students are asked to write simply to demonstrate their knowledge of syntactic rules" (p. 146). However, Keh (1990) notes that peer editing, such as grammar and punctuation should be the last stage of drafting. The focus on grammar and lexical items decreases students' motivation and interest. Moreover, it lowers their confidence. Consequently, the participants in this study did not pay attention to the writing process itself. The final reason is that some students misunderstood the main function of the process approach; believing that their essays should be perfect from the first draft, they did not focus on how the step-by-step process is a means to improve their writing.

4.2.2. To What Extent Does the ZPD Facilitate the Learning Process?

The findings revealed that the process approach was appreciated by the participating students. The interactions that occurred between them during the activities supported their understanding of the importance of cooperative and active learning. The results illustrated that the ZPD helped them in many ways. Firstly, it focuses on key concepts such as interaction, scaffolding, and active and collaborative learning. Such concepts improve learners' personal skills and cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-regulation. Secondly, the ZPD highlighted the gap between the students' actual performance and the desired one by getting them to consider their background knowledge and needs.

In addition, the ZPD sharpened the participants' understandings of how to move from limited knowledge to deeper understanding by using techniques such as assessment, active and cooperative learning, and looking for helping tools like a rubric. Furthermore, it raised the learners' awareness of the importance of learning through social interaction in which they can collaborate with teachers and their peers to enhance their cognitive abilities. Such engagement enables students to benefit mutually because it provides them with valuable opportunities to practice explaining their ideas, negotiating, justifying their views and creating a pedagogical environment conducive to facilitating self-reflection and self-improvement.

The ZPD is effective at promoting learners' levels and skills in giving and receiving feedback. However, this study was limited to one ten-week semester, identifying a learner's precise target level within the ZPD, especially within a short time could prove more challenging. Another potential drawback is that it could be argued that the ZPD can lead to dependency and is time-consuming, especially in large classes. Teachers need to create appropriate tasks to actively involve students to reduce these potentially negative aspects. Similarly, they could engage students in pair and group discussions. Additionally, teachers need to provide clear instructions and monitor students' performance in the classroom.

4.2.3. What are Students' Attitudes towards the Practice of Peer Feedback When Using a Rubric as an Assessment Tool?

According to the findings, most of the study's participants had positive attitudes towards using peer review and feedback. This finding concurs with those in Kuyyogsuy (2019), Khalil (2018) and Kamimura (2006). The students generally thought that the strategy helped them provide and receive comments on given assignments. They held that this approach allowed them to remind their peers of assignment criteria, goals, and deadlines, keeping them on track and focused. However, the classroom observations reflected a gap between the students' knowledge and practice. This gap can be attributed to the fact that this approach requires skills in communication, negotiation, and giving feedback

that some students have yet to master. This issue could be related to wide inequalities among students in terms of awareness of the value of feedback, motivation, prior negative opinions of peer input, and the difficulty of applying this technique. Another possible reason could be the lack of practice which can be attributed to the prevalence of the teacher-centered approach in Saudi classrooms. [Choi \(2013\)](#) reports that “in L2 writing classes, teacher corrective feedback (CF) is the most common instructional practice” (p. 190).

Most of the feedback received from the student assessors, either verbal or non-verbal, focused on areas requiring improvement, such as grammatical errors, punctuation, and the use of linking words like so, and, and but. [Villamil and Guerrero \(1998\)](#) similarly found that “grammar was the most revised aspect, whereas organization was the least attended to” (p. 508). [Hansen and Liu \(2005\)](#) report that peer review “usually goes beyond giving feedback on grammar or stylistic concerns” (p. 31). Recommendations like “check grammar, spelling, and punctuation” should come after writing multiple drafts. This suggests two key points: first, the students were familiar with the product approach and did not apply the process approach. Second, student reviewers lack sufficient knowledge of content and language. Relatedly, [Keh \(1990\)](#) presents two concepts concerning peer feedback: lower-order concerns related to mechanical errors (such as grammar), and higher-order concerns related to content and language (such as development of ideas and organization). When students are providing feedback to one another, they absolutely must focus on constructive, specific, and actionable comments. Therefore, they need guidance on types of feedback [Reinholz, 2016](#).

The findings also revealed that some students valued teacher feedback more than that of their classmates. These findings support the results in studies by [Rushton, Ramsey, and Rada \(1993\)](#), [Zhang \(1995\)](#), [Nelson and Carson \(1998\)](#), [Topping, Smith, Swanson, and Elliot \(2000\)](#) and [\(Choi, 2013\)](#). The more reluctant students showed certain dissatisfaction with this strategy for different reasons. Firstly, they questioned both their own and their peers' capacity to provide useful feedback due to a perceived lack of knowledge and inability to identify errors. [Choi \(2013\)](#) and [Kangni \(2015\)](#) mention that students are hesitant to comment on their peers' assignments which discourages them from considering their peers' comments on their drafts. They declared that their peers could not provide comments as useful as those their teacher could give, especially when it came to the quality of peer feedback, including spelling and grammatical errors. [Kaufman and Schunn \(2011\)](#) cited in [Wu and Schunn \(2020\)](#) note that students are doubtful about their peers' competence in providing useful comments based on the perception that they lack sufficient knowledge. Relatedly, [Wu and Schunn \(2020\)](#) find that “some students specifically complained about the negative effects of spelling errors in peer feedback” (p. 3).

Secondly, written and oral feedback by peers was often misunderstood simply because of how it was communicated. When students' communications are not clear and delivered inadequately, misunderstandings can arise as a result. Thirdly, fear of peer criticism was another reason given with some students considering some of their peers' feedback frustrating and destructive, which deflated their confidence. [Topping \(2017\)](#) recommends starting with positive feedback to establish a more supportive environment and reduce anxiety. Consequently, students will be more likely to be open to the constructive criticism that follows, thereby reducing their defensiveness or discouragement. Fourthly, some participants had fears concerning peer assessment and feedback because they thought it would affect their marks.

The last possible reason concerning a cultural issue is that some students felt that criticizing their peers' work was inappropriate or impolite. Accordingly, they avoided evaluating others' work (or at least did not engage in critical commentary) to prevent embarrassment. [Topping \(2017\)](#) states that cultural background can significantly influence how students perceive peer assessment. Subsequently, the reluctant students expected their teachers to comment on their essays rather than their peers.

Although the students were provided with rubrics and checklist criteria to guide their reviews, their feedback was still general and unclear. For instance, one student commented, “Your assignment is good.” Another's feedback was “Your work needs to focus on some aspects.” Such feedback does not help their peers' writing. Possible factors

that affected the quality of student peer review comments include a lack of motivation in this method. Some students were uninterested in this approach. This might have affected the quality of their comments. Others felt there were no immediate tangible benefits from the peer review process. They likely did not see the direct impact of their comments nor did they feel that such comments contributed positively to their own learning.

Other students believed reviewing their peers' work wasted their time, preferring to focus on their final exams and leave feedback to the teacher. Furthermore, because of self-doubt, some students felt incapable of reviewing and giving constructive comments. Therefore, they avoided pointing out the weak areas and focused on writing style and format. Another factor was a lack of reviewing skills which made them feel unqualified to comment in a constructive and respectful manner. Relatedly, [Ahmed \(2021\)](#) mentioned three challenges based on his findings: lack of confidence, lack of appreciation of peer comments, and reluctance to provide critical feedback.

This study's participants valued using a rubric as a writing and assessment guide because it reflected the key components of both based on specific criteria. Thus, rubrics can play a vital role in facilitating the delivery and appreciation of useful feedback. Some students mentioned that using a rubric raised their awareness of writing style and assessment criteria. Nevertheless, asking students to follow a given rubric to give comments is seen as a common obstacle in writing for various reasons. This point raises two questions which are as follows: How do students apply theoretical knowledge in practical situations? Does a writing rubric improve the way students understand writing skills? In this study, the rubric provided clear and specific criteria for what was expected in the writing assignments. Moreover, it enabled the students to see exactly what areas they should focus on. However, despite the rubric breaking down into constituent parts the components of writing (such as structure and organization, coherence, and cohesion, etc.), some students overlooked criteria, such as a clear thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting evidence, and writer's voice. This was likely due to a lack of understanding of the writing rubric and a lack of practice, which clearly reduces the opportunities of learning through assessment.

The results also showed that students had some prior misconceptions related to reviewing and giving feedback, likely resulting negatively in their learning outcomes. [Van der Pol, Van den Berg, Admiraal, and Simons \(2008\)](#) and [Kaufman and Schunn \(2011\)](#) cited in [He and Gao \(2023\)](#) note that the way students respond to and use feedback may be affected by various elements, including how they perceive the feedback itself. Thus, having precise and sufficient prior knowledge is necessary to increase students' awareness and correct their unfavorable preconceptions and prejudices. Given the strong relationship between adequate prior knowledge and learning outcomes, a lack of awareness could lead to adverse results in the classroom.

Regarding student reviewers' misconceptions, most students in this study viewed peer feedback as merely correcting errors, prioritizing mistakes over strengths and constructive feedback. This tendency reinforces a marks-driven mindset. Others saw assessment as judgment rather than a tool for growth—issues that rubrics can help by promoting clarity and fairness. Moreover, they prioritized scores rather than constructive comments because grades are tangible and seen as a reflection of success or failure. Some students also believed giving feedback is limited to easily identifiable errors such as grammar and spelling.

4.2.4. What Factors Hinder the Integration of Peer Feedback into EFL Writing Classes?

The participants faced several challenges in implementing peer review and feedback. Most provided comments without first trying to understand the writer's intended meaning, and some gave feedback without reading the entire essay. Additionally, certain comments, such as "This paragraph did not make any sense, your essay is full of grammatical and spelling errors and you did not write well discouraged and frustrated the students."

Other factors also reduce the use of peer review in the EFL writing classroom. The difficulties in assessing and providing feedback stem from different reasons. First, a lack of motivation among student assessors is the key factor for peer assessment hindrance with students unwilling to effectively contribute. This leads to a lack of practice and a consequential erosion of self-confidence. [Pereira, Heitink, Schildkamp, and Veldkamp \(2025\)](#) state that "when students

lack motivation, they may not participate in the peer feedback activity adequately” (p. 1). It is also vital to remember that peer assessors' poor knowledge of evaluation and feedback hinders the implementation of this strategy. Another challenge to using peer review is underestimating the role of peer feedback in the development of both language skills and critical thinking in EFL writing classrooms.

These obstacles might be minimized by following several measures to create constructive and effective feedback:

1. Introducing rubrics to students to explain how to review and give feedback.
2. Providing constructive language use in feedback in a way that encourages student growth and improvement.
3. Providing training in peer feedback.
4. Modelling effective feedback to show how to give useful comments.
5. Practicing with guided exercises to help students understand the peer review process.

5. CONCLUSION

The results indicate that the participating students had generally positive attitudes toward using the process writing approach. The research also identified ways to integrate peer assessment and feedback into the writing classroom. A significant determinant of the effectiveness of peer feedback is the quality of the feedback given by reviewers. Peer feedback creates a collaborative learning atmosphere, allowing learners to share their knowledge and generate more critical discussions. However, there are challenges to be overcome when feedback is provided by L2 learners, including motivation, confidence, and comprehension. Therefore, assessing and being assessed requires sufficient knowledge, competence, and the necessary skills to reduce possible challenges. Moreover, using a rubric as a learning tool is critically important for students' learning and guidance, helping them become more aware of what they are writing and how to provide feedback to others. Additionally, the results indicated that appreciating the ZPD framework is crucial for developing learning experiences and encouraging social engagement that leads to improved learning outcomes.

Peer feedback can be either a powerful tool for growth or it can have negative consequences, such as demotivation and misunderstanding, depending on its clarity and how this strategy is delivered and perceived by student reviewers and writers. Hence, the results of this study suggest that although it is beneficial for teachers to involve students in peer evaluation, students themselves must first understand why they are doing it and how it should be done.

Students should be trained in how to be good reviewers and how to be receptive to peer feedback in workshops in which teachers demonstrate constructive and destructive feedback and how to provide the former effectively. Furthermore, students should be provided with clear and specific prompts. Assessment should be based on relevant objectives and criteria. Moreover, students need to be encouraged to share their experiences and knowledge with their peers, making the given tasks more interesting. An ongoing investigation into the causes of what prevents students from using peer feedback should be carried out.

This study has two main limitations. Firstly, it was limited to the English Department of only one higher education institution, namely Al-Qunfudhah University College. Secondly, it was limited to only one semester. Considering these limitations, future studies could compare and contrast several institutions of higher education over longer time periods. Researchers would investigate more comprehensively the relationship between misconceptions, negative prior knowledge, and students' attitudes toward peer feedback.

The outcomes of this study contribute positively to this area of research in several ways. Firstly, the study encourages other researchers to further explore the usefulness and effectiveness of peer feedback. Secondly, the results can encourage teachers and students to shift the focus of writing education from product-based to process-based writing. Thirdly, the findings could help educators prepare students for writing and reviewing scientific papers in different disciplines in the future. Fourthly, the outcomes give a clear picture of students' misconceptions about peer review and feedback, helping stakeholders understand the causes and reasons behind these issues. Fifthly, outcomes might also inspire students to develop interpersonal and metacognitive skills that are valuable not only in academic settings but also in professional environments. Finally, it is hoped that the results might encourage curriculum

designers to embed peer review and feedback activities alongside existing classroom activities to improve students' writing and communication skills.

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