ESL students in peer review: An action research study in a university English for Academic Purposes course

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of an action research study undertaken in a first-year English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a New Zealand university. The project focused on ESL learners' beliefs about peer review and involved learners providing feedback on a peer's draft essay and receiving that peer's feedback. Students noted this activity in an entry in their language learning diary, and that entry became the main source of data collected. The research aimed to explore learners' beliefs about peer review: how they felt about giving and receiving feedback, having peers read their writing, and the usefulness of peer review. Despite peer review becoming a frequently-used activity in university ESL/EFL writing classes, it is often unpopular with ESL students. This study describes the benefits and challenges of first-year students in providing and receiving feedback. It raises issues such as plagiarism and the effects of language proficiency levels on types of feedback. It discusses the value of conducting research from two perspectives: both the student reviewer and the writer receiving feedback. The analysis revealed that these

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students held strong beliefs about peer review. It also indicated that training students to participate in such an activity can deliver a richer experience leading to positive beliefs about peer review.

INTRODUCTION

Peer review (PR) has become a common activity in university ESL/EFL writing classes, and is an established component of the 'process writing' approach. Liu and Hansen (2002) define PR as (p.1):

…the use of learners as sources of information, and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing.

The process writing approach involves a series of recursive and overlapping stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. These stages emphasise the writing process rather than the final product (Elbow, 1981; Murray, 1984; Zhao, 2011). PR is often included in EAP courses to develop the writing skills of students along with collaborative skills between students.

This study began with the concerns that emerged when the first author, Jane, introduced PR to international English language students. These students were enrolled in a first-year, credit-bearing EAP course taught through the Linguistics Department at a New Zealand university, and were already studying in their university discipline. It was Jane's first year of coordinating and teaching the course at this university, and she took on twin roles as teacher and action-researcher by conducting this study. To explore students' perceptions of their language learning experiences, Jane had them keep a weekly reflective learning diary. Students were not prompted about what to write in it; they could write about any aspect of their language learning experience. Although Jane did not ask students directly about PR experiences, this became a common thread in their diary entries. Those entries showed that students struggled to accept feedback from peers and did not see the benefits of PR. Because of this, Jane decided to investigate these beliefs further in the next

semester's course. She provided students with prompts in one diary entry, asking them directly about the PR activity. Action research (AR) was chosen as the framework for the study due to its reflective nature and the research focus on exploring solutions to pedagogical challenges. This study is part of Jane's PhD research for which the second author, Elke, was the primary supervisor. The data that we analysed in this paper are, therefore, part of a larger project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As an important component of the process writing approach and a common activity in ESL/EFL writing classrooms, PR has gained increasing attention over the past few decades. This literature review briefly sketches PR in the context of the benefits and drawbacks of feedback, and then outlines the factors needed to make feedback effective.

Benefits and drawbacks of PR

Many studies have found that PR is an effective activity with many benefits for the ESL/EFL writing student (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Rollinson, 2005). Some studies have found that PR helps learners develop greater self-awareness as they become more conscious of the gap between how they and other students view their writing (Saito & Fujita, 2004). Lundstrom and Baker (2009) argue that PR can be equally if not more beneficial for the student providing the feedback (the reviewer) as for the student receiving the feedback. Tsui and Ng (2000) also found that students benefited more from reading their peers' writing than from receiving the feedback. The reviewer's writing may develop more than the writer's, since the reviewer will decide which aspects of writing to target. Also, the suggestions and advice they later give are likely to be at a similar level of proficiency to that of their peer, rather than their teacher. If the writer's English skills are at a different level of written proficiency in English required for this specific task compared to that of the reviewer, then the feedback they receive may not support learning (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). Lundstrom and Baker also point out the need for more research to be conducted on the benefits of PR for the reviewer in the field of L2 writing and this belief is

supported by Rouhi and Azizian (2013) who also argue that there has been little research conducted on the benefits for the reviewer. Further, a need exists for more research into the perceived and actual proficiency level of peers (Allen & Katayama, 2016).

However, research has found that students may respond unfavourably to PR (Mangelsdorf, 1992; Rollinson, 2005). Some students may not believe PR is as effective as feedback provided by their teacher, and may not be aware of its benefits. Further, students may be reluctant to participate in PR because they are not confident about their writing ability and are anxious about a peer reading and commenting on their draft work. Rollinson (2005) maintains that students may not understand the value of receiving feedback from a peer since the peer is a language learner of a similar level, and may consider the quality of peer feedback as inferior to that of the professional teacher. Rollinson also argues that students may be unaware of the affective benefits of PR, and may not realise that PR can be "less threatening, less authoritarian, friendlier, more supportive, and so on" (2005, p.24) than teacher feedback. Another disadvantage of PR is the quality of feedback from the reader to the writer. Some studies have found that ESL students may lack the skills needed to provide effective feedback, and can experience difficulties finding and articulating errors (Hyland, 2000; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1993).

Factors needed for PR to be effective

The main factors needed for PR to be effective are for students to learn how to do PR and be held accountable for the feedback they give to their peers (Berg, 1999a, 1999b; Min, 2006; Rollinson, 2005). In addition, students need to have clear goals and guidelines before they do the PR. They also need to understand that PR can lead to improvements in their writing (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989). Rollinson (2005) also argues that students may not wish to participate in PR because they are unaware of its purpose and benefits.

For PR to be successful, students need to learn how to participate in it (Berg, 1999a, 1999b; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Hu, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lam, 2010; Min, 2006; Rahimi, 2013; Rollinson, 2005).

Berg's (1999a) training of students was developed over some years. Besides being based on her classroom experience of PR, it was informed by the recommendations of writing researchers and research into the problems encountered with the activity. Berg's (1999b) study compared four classes of ESL writing students studying at a US university: two groups received training in PR, while two groups did not. The findings showed that students who received the PR training made more 'meaning-type' revisions (see the Method section for an elaboration of Berg's (1999a) training). The PR training seemed to lead to better-quality second drafts for that group compared with those of students who received no training. Similarly, Min (2006) discovered that peer feedback improved among university students receiving training in PR in an EFL one-year writing course in Taiwan. These students subsequently provided feedback that was more specific and relevant to their peers. Min's training consisted of a four-hour, in-class demonstration in which the writing instructor used the think-aloud method to show how to clarify the writer's intention, identify and understand problems, and give possible suggestions. Training also included a one-hour student-teacher conference with each of the 18 students.

Rollinson (2005) also points out that students may still find the collaborative nature of PR difficult to deal with despite having received some training. However, he does argue that training in PR should reduce many problems associated with the approach. Berg (1999b) also emphasises the importance of training students in three key areas of PR if the activity is to succeed, and that teachers should not expect students to already have these three skills: "effectively read and respond to someone else's writing; constructively react to a response to their own writing from a peer; and, based on the peer response activity, successfully revise their texts" (Berg, 1999b, p.216). Rollinson (2005) agrees that the aims of training should cover three main areas (p.27):

> *… awareness raising (the principles and objectives of peer response); productive group interaction (collaboration, supportiveness, tact, etiquette); and productive response and revision (basic procedures, effective commenting, reader-writer dialogue, effective revision).*

In terms of the first area of training, awareness raising, researchers have suggested discussing students' prior experiences with PR (Hansen & Liu, 2005) and making them aware of its benefits and drawbacks (Hu, 2005). Berg (1999a) also argues that students must know the benefits of PR and its role in process writing. Some researchers have found that this is particularly relevant for learners from different educational and cultural backgrounds whose previous learning experiences and backgrounds may cause them to have negative attitudes towards PR (Carson & Nelson, 1994; Hu, 2005; Nelson & Murphy, 1993). Hu's AR study found that PR was not successful when students had received inadequate training. She revised her study to include a wider range of training activities aimed at awareness raising, demonstration, practice, reflection and instruction, and explanation of procedures. This made the PR process more successful. For the second area of training, group interaction, researchers have recommended creating a comfortable environment that allows trust to develop among peers (Berg, 1999a; Hansen & Liu, 2005). Allen and Katayama (2016) found that students could provide honest feedback because they were familar with each other, having been in the same class. This supports the argument that a comfortable classroom atmosphere is important for PR to be successful. It also highlights the social nature of PR, an area which has received little attention in L2 writing research (Chang, 2015). Wang (2014) found that one of the factors that affected some students' perceived usefulness of PR was the limited amount of time available for oral discussion which was regarded by students as being valuable in understanding the intended meaning of the feedback. Chang's (2015) study showed how ESL Taiwanese college students were trained through teacher-modelling of social affective functions to compliment and identify problems in their peers' essay draft. In addition, students were engaged in small groups in which they practiced giving feedback on sample drafts. Chang believes such training improved affectivity and promoted a community of learning in the writing classroom. Finally, for the third area of training, productive response and revision, researchers have suggested utilising peer feedback sheets that clearly show the purpose of the PR (Hansen & Liu, 2005), modelling the PR process (Hansen & Liu,

2005; Hu, 2005; Min, 2006), teaching students appropriate linguistic expressions (Hansen & Liu, 2005), and teaching students how to ask appropriate questions (Hansen & Liu, 2005). In Wang's (2014) study, students were provided with a training manual and six annotated writing samples to gain an understanding of how to use a rubric when providing feedback.

To sum up, researchers agree that training students in PR is essential for it to be successful (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Min, 2006; Zhao, 2011). To further support this argument, Hyland and Hyland's (2006) research attributed unsuccessful PR to a lack of effective training. Zhao (2011) states that training students is necessary, but explicitly did not provide students with any training in order to give them the opportunity to discover for themselves how to provide feedback. It is important to point out here that studies on PR do not always directly examine the issue of training students in PR. Rather, they focus more on the quality of peer feedback (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Paulus, 1999; Ruegg, 2015). This means that although these studies indicate some training took place, they may not always note the range or depth of training. Caulk's (1994) study on peer revision found that students provided useful feedback to their peers, but Caulk did not note in the published study whether the students had received training. So, although research indicates that students benefit from extensive training in PR, it also appears that PR can achieve some positive results with students who receive less extensive training.

This AR study aims to improve ESL students' experiences of PR by comparing the beliefs of students who have received some targeted training in the activity with those who have received none. We see PR as a valuable activity for students, but it was evident that not all students on the EAP course which was the focus of this study shared that view. We researched students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of the activity and considered their suggestions for improving PR implementation. This research underpins our insights into what the students value and what they fear about PR. A better understanding of PR from the students'

perspectives allows, ultimately, for a better learning experience for students in the university EAP environment.

METHOD

In this section, we first provide details of the participants who took part in this study. Then we present the research questions. The next sub-section details the data collection process that took place over two cycles of AR. Finally, we describe our data analysis method.

Participants

All participants (students) in both cycles were non-native English speakers who had enrolled in a one-semester, 13-week EAP course. All participants had attained either a score of 550 or above on TOEFL, or a minimum of 6.0 on IELTS, in line with the university's requirements for minimum level of language proficiency. While every student had a similar level of English, some students had weaker writing skills. Cycle 1 had 42 participants; Cycle 2 had 14 participants. The participants across the two cycles represent 16 nationalities, with most coming from China.

Tables 1 and 2 provide details about the participants' gender and nationality for each research cycle. All students had recently completed secondary school, except for Haruko (a mature student who had been working in New Zealand for eight years before enrolling as a full-time student at the university).

After obtaining ethical approval from the university ethics committee at the start of each cycle, we invited all students enrolled in the EAP course at the time to participate in our study. While participation was voluntary, most students enrolled in the course when the first cycle began decided to take part; all students enrolled in the course in the second cycle took part. The teacher-researcher (Jane) was teaching the course that consisted of an hour lecture twice a week and one 2-hour tutorial each week. Jane taught the lecture and took one tutorial group in Cycle 1. A fellow PhD student took the other tutorial groups. In Cycle 2, the smaller study was limited to students enrolled in Jane's tutorial group.

TABLE 1

Participants in Cycle 1

Home Country	Male	Female	Total
China	7	11	18
South Korea	2	3	5
Japan	1	3	4
Thailand	3	0	3
Sweden	1	2	3
Taiwan	0	1	1
Vietnam	0	1	1
Afghanistan	0	1	1
Iran	0	1	1
Maldives	1	0	1
Sudan	1	0	1
Mexico	0	1	1
Czech Republic	0	1	1
Samoa	0	1	1
Total	**16**	**26**	**42**

TABLE 2

Participants in Cycle 2

Home Country	Male	Female	Total
China	5	3	8
Japan	2	0	2
Thailand	1	1	2
Brunei	0	1	1
Spain	0	1	1
Total	**8**	**6**	**14**

Research questions

The research questions were designed to discover whether students benefited from receiving some targeted training in PR as both the reviewer giving feedback and the writer receiving feedback. The researchers also wanted to investigate how students perceived peer feedback compared with teacher feedback.

1. What are learners' beliefs about the benefits and disadvantages of PR when they have/have not received targeted training?

2. What are learners' beliefs about participation during PR?

3. What are learners' beliefs about their peers' contribution to their learning during PR?

4. What are learners' beliefs about their own contribution to their peers' learning during PR?

Action research cycles

AR is small scale and localised; it is evaluative and reflective; it can be collaborative in nature; and data gathering provides the impetus for change (Burns, 2010; Crookes, 1993). The present research was conducted within a specific situation, an EAP course at one university, and involved only participants enrolled in that course. Jane identified an issue in that specific context and later investigated it in that context. AR is cyclical in its nature and involves a continual process of evaluation and reflection, with changes and modifications to teaching practice being made throughout the AR process based on the findings of the data (Burns, 2010; Crookes, 1993). This study consisted of two research cycles.

Data were collected from one single diary entry for each student, which focused on PR and that students completed after participating in the PR session. Cycle 1 received 40 diary entries; Cycle 2 received 14 diary entries. Students in both cycles were required to respond to the following prompts:
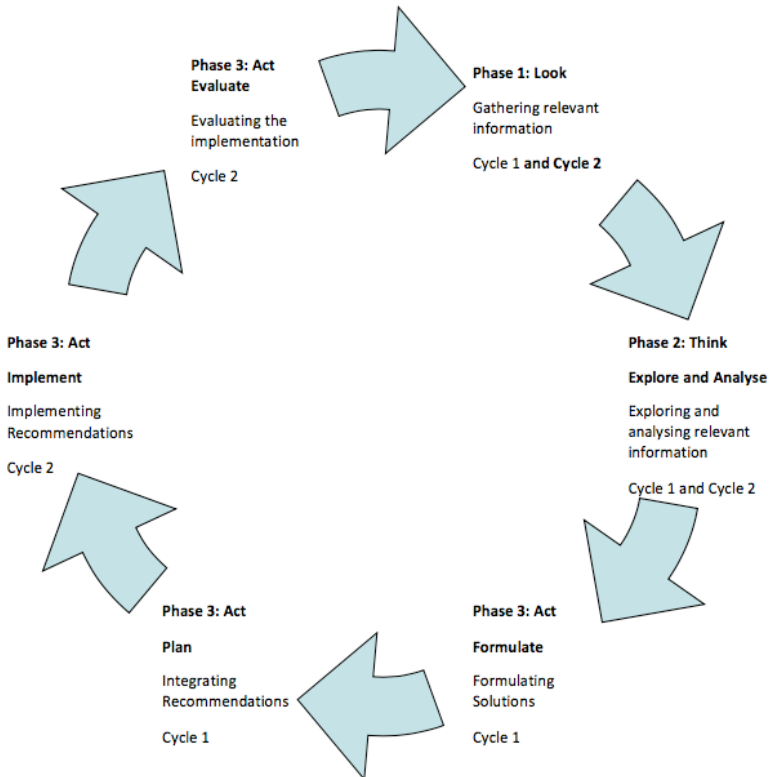
- How did you feel about reading your classmate('s/s') essay draft?

- How did you feel about writing a response to your classmate('s/s') essay draft?

- How did you feel about having your classmate(s) read your essay draft and give suggestions for revision?

- What kind of suggestions did you receive from your classmate(s)?

- What kinds of suggestions are most helpful to you?

- In general, did you find the PR activity helpful?

Figure 1 shows that this AR project was conducted in two cycles and was planned around Stringer's (1996) model of AR. We chose this model because it adequately reflected how the teacher-researcher had observed a puzzling issue in her teaching and wanted to extend her understanding of the nature of the challenge and then find solutions to it. In the following section, we discuss how we conceptualised this project and implemented the research within Stringer's model that consists of three main phases: Look, Think, Act. The 'Act' phase is broken down into additional three steps: Plan; Implement, and Evaluate.

Cycle 1 comprised Phases 1-3 and ended with the planning step where we formulated recommendations. Cycle 2 concluded the project by implementing the recommendations, a second Look and Think phase, and a final evaluation.

FIGURE 1

The research phases for Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 in the AR framework

Phase 3: Act
Evaluate

Evaluating the
implementation

Cycle 2

Phase 1: Look

Gathering relevant
information

Cycle 1 **and Cycle 2**

Phase 3: Act

Implement

Implementing
Recommendations

Cycle 2

Phase 2: Think

Explore and Analyse

Exploring and
analysing relevant
information

Cycle 1 and Cycle 2

Phase 3: Act

Plan

Integrating
Recommendations

Cycle 1

Phase 3: Act

Formulate

Formulating
Solutions

Cycle 1

Cycle 1: Look, Think, Act, and Plan

Look: researchers *define and describe* the problem to be investigated and the general context within which it is set (Stringer, 1996). In this study, Jane first became aware of the problem through reading her students' learner diary entries after they had experienced PR in their tutorials. Jane noticed that students appeared to have conflicting beliefs about PR and believed that a deeper understanding of these

beliefs could lead to improvements in how these activities would be implemented in future courses. The following year, she decided to ask students to use one diary entry to note their beliefs about PR. This data constituted Cycle 1.

Think: participants *analyse and interpret* the situation to extend their understanding of the nature and context of the problem (Stringer, 1996). We analysed the diary data from Cycle 1. The findings provided us with a greater understanding of the students' experiences of PR from their perspectives (see Data Analysis below for details).

Act: participants formulate *solutions* to the problem (Stringer, 1996). The findings of the analysis of the diary data from Cycle 1 revealed rich insights into students' beliefs about PR. The students suggested in their diary entry ways to implement PR more successfully. After we finished the data analysis, we formulated solutions to some of the students' problems and considered their suggestions for improvements. One student suggested that, rather than completing the PR in pairs (as they had done), students should be able to decide whether to do the activity in pairs or in small groups. In the following, we describe the additional three steps that are part of the Act phase.

Plan: participants design their plan of action (Stringer, 1996). In this step we planned in more detail how to successfully implement and integrate the students' recommendations into the course for the next year. While analysing the diary data from Cycle 1, we realised the need for in-class training in PR, and that students would benefit from receiving targeted training in giving feedback. We decided to base this training on those of Berg's (1999a) recommendations that seemed the most promising to provide the support, knowledge and practice that the participants in the first cycle had not received. We chose the following six activities, parts of which we adapted or excluded.

Create a comfortable classroom atmosphere and trust among students

The teacher-researcher includes a small number of activities in class at the start of the course to allow students to get to know each other. This activity is useful because students will participate in pair work and group activities throughout the course in addition to the PR.

Explain the role of peer review in the writing process

The teacher-researcher explains that writing is a process that includes pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing. They ask the students to brainstorm in groups the potential benefits of peer feedback. Following this activity, they discuss with students the purpose and benefits of having peers, instead of only teachers, respond to the students' writing.

Undertake the peer review of a writing sample in class

The teacher-researcher gives students a paragraph from a former (anonymous) student in a previous writing course and asks them to provide written feedback in groups. The paragraph has a clear thesis statement and some robust, clear, supporting ideas and details, but also some obvious flaws in organisation, support, unity, grammar and spelling. Students are asked to provide both positive and critical feedback. The class then discusses appropriate revisions, emphasising the importance of revising to make the meaning clearer.

Introduce appropriate vocabulary and expressions

The teacher-researcher introduces students to vocabulary and expressions required to provide appropriate feedback, focusing on language to use when responding to someone's writing. As examples, they compare inappropriate comments, such as "Your writing is really bad", with more suitable expressions, such as "It would be great if you gave an example here". In this study Jane followed the recommendations made by Berg (1999a) and added expressions based on the needs of the students.

Next, the teacher-researcher teaches the students how to provide specific feedback. The class then compares any feedback that is vague and too general with feedback that is specific and clear.

The teacher-researcher also explains to students that they are providing and receiving feedback on one particular student's impression (and opinion) of a peer's writing, rather than a fact.

Introduce or use a Peer Response Sheet for each student's first essay draft

The teacher-researcher provides each student with a Peer Response Sheet (Appendix A) in which each student reviewer gives their peer written feedback in addition to in-text comments and verbal feedback. This also provides a student with more time to consider their peer's writing and helps them focus on some important areas of the writing assignment. The Peer Response Sheet requires each student to:

- explain what they like about their peer's draft essay
- explain what they do not like about their peer's draft essay
- identify the thesis statement in the introduction and the topic sentence in each paragraph
- identify the supporting ideas and evidence given to support their main idea
- comment on the effectiveness of the introduction and the conclusion

Facilitate conversations among writers, reviewers, and the teacher-researcher

The teacher-researcher repeats the activity in the PR of a writing sample in class (third activity above) so that students can practise providing feedback using the Peer Response Sheet on an anonymous ESL student's paper. The teacher-researcher also reviews the language students learned in Activity 4 above (learning the vocabulary and expressions required to provide appropriate feedback). The teacher-researcher talks about the PR with each group and the revisions they have made. They then encourage the students to ask questions and express concerns. The activity ends with a discussion involving the whole class, looking at difficulties

students face when judging their peers' comments, and students' lack of confidence in their ability to review their peers' work.

Cycle 2: Implement, Look, Think, Evaluate

The formulation of the six activities concluded Cycle 1. Cycle 2 then included the following phases: Implement (Act), Look, Think, and Evaluate (Act).

Implement: When preparing for Cycle 2, Jane (the teacher-researcher) revised the course to include these six training activities in the PR component of the course. She also included the students' suggestion for students to have the option to complete the activity in small groups. The next year Jane taught the course and implemented the targeted training in PR. She gave students the same diary prompt to respond to what she had given them in Cycle 1. These data constituted Cycle 2.

Look: We collected data from one diary entry using the same prompt we had used for Cycle 1.

Think: At the end of the course in Cycle 2, we analysed the diary data and evaluated the changes made to the course and the success of the targeted training.

Evaluate: Based on our interpretation of the data, we formulated recommendations for future implementation of PR in ESL writing classes and implications of the research.

The following section provides detailed information on how we analysed the diary data that we collected in both cycles of the project.

Data Analysis

In both cycles, PR was carried out in the tutorial groups. In Cycle 1, students across all tutorial groups received no training in PR (Jane instructed the co-tutor to conduct the PR with no given training). The smaller study in Cycle 2 was limited to the students enrolled in Jane's tutorial group who received the PR training. In Cycle 1, students emailed their diary entry to their tutor and to Jane if they

were not in her tutorial group. In Cycle 2 they emailed their diary entry to Jane, as they were all enrolled in her tutorial group. Using emails meant that we received all the data in electronic format. To protect the participants' identity, we used pseudonyms when we began the data analysis. These pseudonyms are used in this paper. We have presented the quotations from the diary entries as originally written, without correcting spelling or grammatical errors, so as to provide trustworthy data.

We used inductive and deductive approaches to analyse the diary data (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). We discovered some themes inductively through constant review and comparison of the diary entries by coding the data based on what emerged from the data. Inductive coding is particularly relevant to AR as teacher-researchers may have their own preconceived ideas at the start of the research project. We developed other themes deductively based on the research questions that framed this study. We revised the research questions several times throughout the study as the research project evolved.

The process of data analysis was carried out manually in four steps. First, we did a surface reading ('open coding') of the diary entry and then re-read each entry. We underlined words and phrases that expressed some form of behaviour or thought. Second, we cut the codes manually and pasted them on to index cards. We labelled each card with the student's pseudonym and the number of the unit of meaning. Third, we identified patterns between the codes and placed each set of codes under a category. One example code was "To begin with, I felt really happy about reading my peer's essay draft. That is because I felt that I might be able to help him someway". This code was placed under the category of "desire to help others". Fourth, we organised these categories into a higher order of classification or themes: the category "desire to help others" then became the theme "benefits for the writer". This final level of analysis yielded the themes presented in the Findings section below. Our findings present the four dominant themes that emerged from Cycle 1, and the three dominant themes from Cycle 2. In the later Discussion section, we return to the research questions.

FINDINGS

The findings of the analysis of the diary entries are presented separately for each AR cycle.

Cycle 1

In Cycle 1, when students had received no targeted training in PR, four dominant themes emerged from our analysis of the diary entries: benefits for the writer; benefits for the reviewer; challenges for the writer; and challenges for the reviewer.

Benefits for the writer

This theme focuses on the benefits that the writer of the essay received from the PR activity. Although students had not received any targeted training in PR, students in this first cycle had taken a responsible approach to the PR session and shared the belief that it was their 'ethical duty' or responsibility to help their peer by providing useful feedback: "As a result, I see that I would really benefit my peer with my own experience" [Takeo] and "my duty and responsibility was supporting my peer, introduction of new concepts, skill development" [Jiao]. Another student wrote that "we have our responsibility and need to help my peer. Peer review did encourage me to help and support my peer. I increased his vocabulary and helped correct grammar" [Lien]. The data clearly show that students did want their peer to benefit from their feedback.

Benefits for the reviewer

The second theme explores the benefits of PR from the perspective of the reviewer who was reading and providing a written response to their peer's essay draft. In addition to the benefits the writer received as a result of their peer's responsibility in providing feedback, the reviewer also received satisfaction from the activity, knowing that their partner would benefit from this feedback: "If my suggestion could improve his essay better, I would be so appreciated" [Yan Yan]. In addition to the satisfaction reviewers gained by providing useful feedback, they also shared the belief that the PR session was useful because it gave them the opportunity to learn new ideas and to view

ideas from different perspectives. Some students referred to this as 'refreshing', and wrote in their entry that they would not have thought of addressing the essay topic in the same way as their partner. Some students also found an opportunity to develop their own writing skills through their role as the reviewer. One student wrote insightfully that "during the process of making suggestions, I realised that I was making them not only for the writer but also for myself" [Ho-Sook]. Through the experience of giving feedback to her classmate, Ho-Sook realised that she needed to develop her writing skills, especially in expanding her vocabulary and learning how to "deliver my thoughts and expressions without demeaning them" [Ho-Sook]. It became clear that the process of providing peer feedback made students more aware of their own writing weaknesses.

Challenges for the writer

Although the students, as writers, held some positive beliefs about PR, they also held some negative beliefs about it and experienced challenges. Some students believed that sharing ideas during the PR exercise could adversely affect them because their peer would read their essay draft and perhaps gain ideas from their writing. These students were very aware of plagiarism and what it meant for them. However, the potential for accidental plagiarism was the major challenge that students faced during the PR activity. Comments about this were fairly common: "We have the same topic and I was afraid of sharing out our ideas and opinions" [Jamal] (referring here to the student writer sharing their ideas with the peer reviewer). Some students did not believe such plagiarism would be deliberate. Rather, they believed that the reviewer could accidentally remember ideas or sentences/phrases from a draft essay, which could lead to plagiarism.

Some students were also concerned about the embarrassment they would feel if they made grammatical or lexical mistakes in their draft essay, and if their peers pointed out their mistakes. The following concerns were typical:

Moreover, I was worried of the spelling mistakes that could be there or the grammar mistakes, because I am not good on these things. Also, I will be really embarrassed if he pointed the to me. [Jamal]

However, no student wrote that they were embarrassed when they read the feedback from their peer. Their embarrassment occurred before and during the PR, not after it. Before students had completed the activity, many wrote about their discomfort at having to complete the exercise. Students often used words such as "uncomfortable", "bothered", "ashamed", "nervous", "anxious" and "scared" to express their feelings about the impending PR. It was clear, as is shown in the words of the following student, that previous classroom experiences sometimes influenced them:

I am kind of prudency about letting a classmate read my draft. Teacher won't make fun with me because of my writing, but my experience tell me, classmates always do. [Shen]

Students shared a reluctance to give their work to another student while still in draft form. Haruko did not want to give her essay to another student, "especially to ones who I knew, as it was still draft and I needed to work on it more to make it better". Haruko concluded the entry by suggesting the PR could be better implemented if it was a blind review, "because we could be critically tougher since we would not have to worry about our friends feeling. Then we could have more useful suggestions".

Although most students had responded in a very responsible manner to the PR and had carefully considered the feedback they had given to their peer, some students wrote that their peer had not taken the PR seriously. Some students reported that they did not think their peer was interested in giving a response, and had consequently provided vague, inadequate feedback:

My partner only said that my body part of essay was not proper and I should rewrite whole body section. I felt like that he read roughly and considered evaluation annoying. [Yimin]

Challenges for the reviewer

The first theme described how the reviewers had taken their role seriously and how this had benefited the reviewer. In contrast, the beliefs explored under this theme demonstrate the difficulties that reviewers faced when giving feedback to their peers. The reviewer did not find the task easy, and many students agonised over how to present their feedback. In the following excerpt, one student explains her process of thinking when considering her response, demonstrating again the reflectiveness and diligence of many participants:

> *When I wrote him a response about his essay, I thought about a lot of things. What I was doing is a response to one of my classmates, I was very careful to estimate his work, or he could have been disappointed by my response. I needed to think about how to put my comment nicely so as not to upset him. Choosing the vocabulary without irritating him bewildered me. However, complementing on his good things was comfortable for me because people like to be praised, usually. [Yue Wan]*

Other students also did not feel comfortable in their role as reviewer, as they did not want their peer to think of them as a 'corrector'. Ho-Sook said she was anxious when giving feedback about her peer's essay draft: "I was not too comfortable with it because I thought I might upset her by giving her the impression that I was trying to correct her". Clearly, Ho-Sook was anxious about taking on the role of 'reviewer', and it was evident that she took this new role seriously. She continued by explaining that she:

> *[s]truggled in choosing my words, trying not to sound too harsh. I knew that this feedback was more important than instant feelings and it was for her benefit, yet I was reluctant to make any direct comment. As a result, when I gave her the suggestions, they turned out quite weak and diminished from their original meanings. I think they were not as honest as when I first came up with them. [Ho-Sook]*

In the above extract, Ho-Sook appeared to have some regret about how she had given feedback to her peer. This conflict was a common theme throughout the diary entries written by other students. For example, Sahar wrote about the difficulty of giving feedback on her peer's essay. Although she had identified strengths in her partner's essay, Sahar struggled when she came to write her comments addressing the weaknesses of the draft: "I felt a little guilty as I knew she had worked hard on her essay and shouldn't really receive any negative remarks". She wrote that she would prefer to give feedback verbally since she did not want her partner to think she had been "unfair" or that she was more "knowledgeable than them". She ended the entry by writing that she had decided to write what she had done well in the essay, and then focus on one main weakness rather than address several weaknesses.

Similar to the fear of accidental plagiarism that the writers experienced, the reviewers believed that reading and reviewing a peer's draft essay could cause them to accidentally plagiarise that peer's work. Students were curious about what their peers had written, but were reluctant to read those peers' essays due to the fear of plagiarism. Many students shared the following belief: "I though it is impolite and improper to look their writings before deadline due to the possibility of imitation" [Lien]. One student was more concerned that the plagiarism would be deliberate. "What if the person reading my material had the same essay topic and used my ideas as their own?" [Vega]. Vega did not seem concerned with the issue of accidental plagiarism, but rather the problem of another student deliberately copying her work. The diary entries of some students appear to support this concern. They tended to use the PR as an opportunity to take short cuts with their own research by using the ideas from their peer's essay: "I collect their thinking for my topic and then put them in my final essay" [Yue Wan].

To sum up, the findings for Cycle 1 data show that although students saw some value in PR, they clearly faced some significant challenges while participating in the activity. Students would find some further training on PR beneficial.

Cycle 2

Similarly to the students in Cycle 1, each participant in Cycle 2 had also considered their responses carefully and taken a responsible approach to providing feedback to their peer. However, the analysis of the diary entries from students in the second cycle showed a more positive response to the PR. In Cycle 1, students had worked in pairs to complete the PR, while students in Cycle 2 were given the choice of working together either in pairs or in small groups. Jane had noticed during the *'Peer review of a writing sample in class',* one of the training activities mentioned above in Berg's guidelines, that students appeared to be actively engaged during the process of providing feedback in small groups. She decided to implement students' suggestions to allow them to do the PR in small groups if they preferred. Students in Cycle 2 were also given a Peer Response Sheet (Appendix A) on which to record part of their feedback. It was evident from their diary entries that each student had thought carefully about the feedback they had given to their peer before completing the Peer Response Sheet. In their diary entries, each student gave a detailed description of the type of feedback given about their peer's draft essay. The feedback had tended to focus on global errors such as text coherence and cohesion, development of introduction, main and subordinate ideas, organisation and logical flow of ideas, and clear thesis statement and topic sentences. Student reviewers had also given some advice on local errors, but this advice had mainly focused on vocabulary and punctuation rather than aspects of grammar.

In Cycle 2, three dominant themes emerged about learners' beliefs: benefits for the writer; benefits for the reviewer; and challenges for the reviewer.

Benefits for the writer

Compared with those in Cycle 1, students in Cycle 2 wrote more about the benefits of receiving peer feedback and the contribution it made to their own learning. It was clear that each student in Cycle 2 valued the feedback from their peer. They also described that feedback in greater detail than had participants in Cycle 1. Cycle 2

participants wrote that they had benefited from receiving both 'good' and 'bad' feedback from their peers. Receiving compliments from their peers gave them confidence in the quality of their writing. The criticism each student received helped them to realise the weaknesses in their own draft essay, and what they needed to do to improve it. In addition, students wrote that they were going to incorporate some of their peer's suggestions into their next draft. This showed that the students had carefully considered all the peer feedback, and selected parts to incorporate.

Students also appreciated it when their peer reviewer was considered to be a good writer, as this student pointed out:

I feel it was good for me to read my draft essay by her because she could give me good suggestions. Since a good writer for essay is able to become a good reader of it and then can give us good advice. [Kenjiro]

Kenjiro was particularly insightful as he realised that a student who can write an effective essay can also be a skilled reader, and so a competent peer reviewer.

Benefits for the reviewer

Students in both cycles wrote about the benefits they had received by taking on the role of reviewer. Students genuinely wanted to help their peers and gained satisfaction from helping them. They wrote about how good it felt to be able to provide feedback on their peers' drafts. Students at all levels believed that they were able to contribute to their peers' learning:

To begin with, I felt really happy about reading my peer's essay draft. That is because I felt that I might be able to help him someway. However, reasons for that may be that I am a better English speaker than he is. Furthermore, I have been taught how to write proper Academic writing before. As a result, I see that I would really benefit my peer with my own experience. On the other hand, that doesn't mean that I am perfect. That only means that I might be aware of such knowledge that he is probably not aware of. [Seiji]

Some students believed strongly that they had benefited from reading their peer's draft essay. They especially appreciated reading a complete, well-written draft because some believed they could expect to learn from that peer. Students wrote that reading their peers' drafts was beneficial because it gave them the opportunity to:

- read an essay written from a different perspective

- find mistakes and inappropriate language or style of writing

- read well-written essays with coherent sentences

- read logically connected paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting sentences.

Students in Cycle 2 provided more detailed accounts of the language and writing style used in their peers' draft essays compared with those in Cycle 1.

Students in Cycle 2 also enjoyed the opportunity to do the PR in groups, which meant they were able to read more than one essay and experience different styles of writing. One student wrote that "all of my group mates had some beautiful sentence structure which I have never seen before" [Xia]. Another student who had participated in a peer response group wrote that:

I think taking part in a group can be very helpful for the success in English. The reason is because participating as a group could encourage students to share and express their ideas. And after they get to know more about each other, they are likely to share more ideas because there are fewer barriers between them. The new ideas I gained from reading their essays I consider them as valuable as gold, because sometimes I myself cannot learn those things from books. [Wencheng]

Wencheng clearly valued the social nature of his PR group and benefited from reading his peers' essays.

Challenges for the reviewer

Those students who wrote about the challenges for the reviewer often did so from their peer's viewpoint. They expressed their

concern for the peer who was reading their draft, and wrote openly about the difficulties that student would have had while reviewing their draft. This contrasts with the Cycle 1 participants who were more preoccupied with how their peer would receive their feedback and how they would be perceived by their peers based on the feedback they had provided. Some students believed that their draft did not yet meet the required standard of an academic first-year essay and apologised in their diary entry for the trouble that this may have caused their peer: "I must apologise and say honestly, my draft was unorganised...so, really, it was very hard to read for my partner" [Feng].

The analysis of the data from the diary entry of students in the two cycles provided rich insights into students' beliefs about PR. Overall, students in both cycles approached the exercise seriously and carefully considered the feedback they provided and received. However, students in Cycle 2 provided more details about the type of feedback they received. It appears that students in this cycle received more feedback on global errors than on local errors compared with students in Cycle 1. Further, students in Cycle 1 were more concerned about providing feedback that would not hurt their peer's feelings and about how their peer would perceive them. In Cycle 2, challenges for the reviewer focused on the perceived difficulties of peers when providing feedback on their draft. Whereas a dominant theme in Cycle 1 was the challenges each writer faced, in Cycle 2 this theme was not strong enough to become part of the findings. It appears that the six training activities recommended by Berg (1999a) and the option to complete the PR in small groups (recommended by some of the students) may have influenced the more positive experiences of students in Cycle 2.

DISCUSSION

The Discussion is organised around the research questions presented earlier in the paper. It focuses on the benefits and disadvantages of PR:

1. What are learners' beliefs about the benefits and disadvantages of peer review when they have/have not received targeted training?

Students in both cycles wrote about the social/affective benefits and disadvantages of PR. Regardless of whether they had received any training, students showed a genuine desire to help their peers, despite some initial reluctance in Cycle 1. Students in Cycle 1 worried that their peers would laugh at their mistakes and make them feel embarrassed. It is interesting to note that this concern was not warranted, because a serious concern of students in Cycle 1 was how to provide feedback that did not offend or hurt their peer. This supports the findings of previous research which concluded that, through their experience, students developed a sense of audience that they show in this study in their ability to view an issue from other students' perspectives (Chang, 2015; Zhu, 2001). Allen and Katayama's (2016) study of six undergraduate Japanese EFL learners enrolled in an academic writing course demonstrates the significance of language proficiency, with higher-level students providing more language-related feedback compared with lower-level students who tended to focus on issues related to meaning. Further, their study found that perceived levels of language proficiency also influenced the type of feedback given and received. In one dyad, the more confident learner provided a large amount of language-related feedback compared with their peer. The confident learner was also perceived by his peer as having stronger English skills, while the less-forthcoming peer was perceived as having weaker language skills. That peer gave a small amount of meaning-related feedback despite both students sharing a similar level of writing ability when tested. This reinforces the view that a student's awareness of their own level of proficiency and that of their peers appears to affect the type of feedback they give to their peers. This, in turn, shows the first student's growing ability to view issues from their peer's perspective.

This study has provided an insight into how students can worry unnecessarily about particular classroom activities. Students in Cycle 1 wanted to participate in PR, but worried about the potentially threatening aspect of it. The study has therefore found a need for students to receive some training in PR. Although students in Cycle 2 were not asked directly about the training they had received, it would appear that students benefited from being taught:

- phrases used in providing feedback;

- activities that focused on the advantages and disadvantages of PR; and

- activities that emphasised the social aspect of PR.

These findings support those of recent studies on the social nature of PR, emphasising that it is a collaborative, social activity (Chang, 20015; Wang, 2014). Chang (2015) believes that PR is an opportunity for students to develop interpersonal skills while engaged in an authentic writing situation. In Chang's study, students were explicitly trained in providing phrases that were non-threatening and this appeared to promote affectivity. Wang's study included oral discussion of feedback, though students complained of the limited amount of time available.

2. What are learners' beliefs about participation during peer review?

Students in Cycle 1 focused on the task of reading and reviewing their peer's draft. With no peer group process, communication between peers was minimal. Communication between students in Cycle 2 was far greater, with students in peer groups also appreciating the opportunity to work with more than one peer. These students also wrote in greater detail about the language and writing styles of their peers. These findings support findings from other studies that PR which is well planned and implemented offers students opportunities to improve communication with students from different cultures and gives them a sense of group cohesion (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Min, 2006). These findings are also consistent with research that has found that PR encourages greater student autonomy (Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006). Our study confirms that PR is a highly social activity and

supports research findings that PR develops collaboration skills (Hyland, 2000; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994).

3. What are learners' beliefs about their peers' contribution to their learning during peer review?

In terms of their peers' contribution to their own learning, students in both cycles believed that they had benefited academically from PR. All students valued the opportunity to read an essay from another perspective, gain ideas from their peers, and practise and develop their language skills. Students in Cycle 2 wrote in detail about the type of feedback they had received, and were more likely to use this feedback when revising their draft essay. These findings do not support some previous studies which found students were less likely to consider their peers' suggestions when revising their drafts (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Zhao, 2011).

4. What are learners' beliefs about their own contribution to their peers' learning during peer review?

Students in both cycles felt a responsibility towards their peers and considered it their 'ethical duty' to provide useful feedback. In addition, all students had a genuine desire to help their peers. This finding is consistent with previous research that suggests students take PR seriously (Hu, 2005). Students in Cycle 1 worried about how to present their feedback to their peer without offending them, while students in Cycle 2 did not express this concern. They were more concerned for their peer who had to read a draft that was not of a very high standard.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations in this study are worth noting. First, data were collected from learner diary entries that were also assessed and counted towards each student's final course grade. The summative nature of the task could have influenced what students wrote in their diary entries. Students may have written what they believed the teacher-researcher wanted them to write, rather than writing what they actually believed about the PR.

To minimise this risk, we decided a discussion between the students and their tutor was necessary. That discussion would focus on the benefits of the student writing honestly about their PR experience. Those benefits would lead to:

- honest reflections on classroom activities and experiences, that could benefit each student's language learning; and

- improvements in how PR is implemented in future courses.

In addition, students were required to write their diary entry in English rather than in their first language. This may have affected how much they could accurately and effectively communicate their ideas. However, we decided that it would not be practical to have students write in their first language because of the diverse range of first languages among the students and the large amount of diary data that would eventuate if we required translations. The same diary prompt was used for both cycles, so students were never asked directly to respond to the training they had received in Cycle 2, or which aspects of the training had been most effective or useful.

AR must be context-specific in order to inform practice that has direct benefits for teaching and learning, so readers will need to assess whether they can apply any of the study's findings to their own teaching context. The study was conducted in one EAP course at one university and included only two groups of ESL students, with a much reduced sample in Cycle 2. In addition, we only collected data from one diary entry, which we analysed using descriptive and interpretive methods.

CONCLUSION and IMPLICATIONS

This AR study has shown the value of providing students with targeted training in PR, and it supports research that advocates student training in PR (Berg, 1999a, 1999b; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Hu, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lam, 2010; Min, 2006; Rahimi, 2013; Rollinson, 2005). By creating a comfortable class atmosphere and teaching students how to provide feedback, students can develop more positive beliefs about their PR experience. However, the study has also shown that such training does not need to be extensive or

time-consuming. Some activities can take as little time as five or ten minutes at the start of a class, while longer activities (such as the PR of a writing sample in class) can be incorporated into any writing class that follows a process writing approach.

The AR framework used in this study revealed the insightfulness of first-year university students. It also gave them an opportunity to reflect on their experience with PR and use the qualitative nature of their diary entries to share their beliefs with the teacher-researcher.

The study shows that students hold strong beliefs about their twin roles as the writer receiving feedback and as the reviewer providing feedback. The study also highlights the need for more research in the under-examined area of PR from the perspective of the student reviewer (Lundstrum & Baker, 2009).

The study contributes to research focusing on the perceived proficiency levels of students during the PR, another area that has received little attention (Allen & Katayama, 2016). The project showed that students are very aware of their own level of proficiency and that of their peers and that this awareness appears to affect the type of feedback they give to their peers.

This study was conducted in an EAP course in New Zealand in which students were required to write one essay. However, the research also has pedagogical implications for other TESOL contexts. Training in PR can be integrated into L2 writing classes at a very early stage of an EAP course, and can be used regularly throughout a process writing approach. In this study, students reviewed a completed draft essay; however, PR could be used at any stage of the writing process, for example when students are developing their thesis statement, when students are focusing on developing their supporting ideas, and when students have written their draft essay. PR can also be used to promote writing development in general English classes. In such classes, students are often required to complete short writing exercises such as a short non-fiction paragraph, a quiz or a piece of creative writing, all of which provide students with the opportunity to practise PR. It can also help to improve communication skills in activities such as individual or group

presentations. Students who have been trained in PR have learned valuable social interaction and collaboration skills that are an essential part of university and professional life. By learning how to give constructive feedback in a thoughtful and respectful manner, make suggestions, give compliments, respond to advice, and develop a sense of audience, students are being exposed to skills and strategies that can help them in a range of classroom activities and in building their social skills.

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APPENDIX A: PEER RESPONSE SHEET

Author _____

Reviewer _____

Please answer the following questions, keeping in mind that the purpose of peer review is to help each other write better.

1) Can you find a thesis statement?

   ___ Yes   ___ No   ___ I don't know

2) If you think you can find a thesis statement, please underline it.

3) Does each body paragraph have a clear topic sentence?

   ___ Yes   ___ No   ___ I don't know

   Please explain your answer.

4) Underline the supporting ideas and evidence given to support the main idea of each body paragraph.

5) Read the essay carefully, underline anything you do not understand.

6) Read the Introduction. How effective do you think it is?

7) Read the Conclusion. How effective do you think it is?

8) What do you like the best about this essay?

9) What questions, comments and/or suggestions do you have for the author?

After you have answered these questions, discuss them and the essay with the author. Remember that you are writing for each other, so it is important that you understand each other's writing. Please tell the author what you think about his/her essay because it can help him/her write an improved second draft.

Adapted from Berg (1999a)