LEARNERS' L2 PROFICIENCY AND PEER FEEDBACK IN ACADEMIC WRITING: PAST STUDIES' LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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Abstract

Writing has been demonstrated to be the skill that English language learners struggle with the most. This is due to the insufficient and sporadic feedback they receive from teachers, who have trouble examining student writing due to time constraints and large-sized classes. Consequently, research on peer feedback has been performed to assist teachers and students in overcoming this issue. However, the majority of studies focused on the question of whether learners benefit from peer feedback; few, even with mixed findings, concentrated on L2 proficiency and peer feedback. In addition, the works analyzed in such research were not subjected to a plagiarism check, which casts doubt on their originality and may have influenced the results. This paper provided a comprehensive overview of previous research on peer feedback and L2 proficiency, along with their limitations. Following this, recommendations for future research and suggestions for peer feedback procedure were provided as premises for researchers, teachers, and institutional leaders to address the existing issues more appropriately.

Keywords: peer feedback, language proficiency, academic writing, ESL, EFL.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a lingua franca, English is not only essential to daily communication for more than one billion people worldwide (Crystal, 2008), but also plays an integral part in academic and higher education (Dang et al., 2013). Therefore, training students to use this language skillfully has been the major focus of most schools in

many non-English-speaking countries, particularly Vietnam (Dang et al., 2013). Despite government and educators' endeavors, English learners still find writing skills, especially academic ones, very challenging (Phakiti & Li, 2011). In fact, the 2019 global report of IELTS (International English Language Testing System) showed that the academic writing score (M=5.65, out of 9.0) was lower than the score for speaking (M=5.90,

out of 9.0), reading (M=6.14, out of 9.0), and listening (M=6.29, out of 9.0) (Test taker performance 2019). There are various reasons why students have been struggling with academic writing, one of which could be attributed to teachers' insufficient feedback on students' writing (Bilal et al., 2013). A study conducted by Lee (2003) showed that it was highly time-consuming for teachers to correct writing for every student. This situation even gets aggravated at schools where classes are often large-sized, such as those in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2014).

In response to this problem, a growing number of studies on involving students in giving feedback on their friends' writing, which is referred to as peer feedback, have been carried out to examine the effects of this activity on

students' writing performances (e.g., Uymaz, 2019; Susanto & Hidayati, 2020; Ruru & Sulistyo, 2020; Tusino, 2013; Dewi, 2019). Despite a few drawbacks, such as time constraints (Rollinson, 2005) and subjectivity (Bostock, 2000; Mok, 2011; Brown, 2004), peer feedback has been proved to be beneficial to students in many ways: being more effective than teacher feedback (Zhao, 2010) or self-feedback (Diab, 2011), creating an environment for social support and scaffolding (Hu & Lam, 2010), developing students' linguistic and writing skills (Bruffe, 1984; Liu & Hansen, 2002), and promoting learner autonomy (Hu, 2005; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Many aspects of peer feedback have been explored including cultural issues (Nelson

& Carson, 2006; Yu, Lee & Mak, 2016), peer and group interaction (Yang & Wu, 2011;

Crossman &   Kite, 2012; learners' attitudes

(Zhu & Michell, 2012; Wakabayashi, 2013; Yu & Lee, 2016b), feedback training (Crinon, 2012; Rahimi, 2013), computer-mediate peer feedback (Chen,2012; Chan, 2013). Only a small number of studies examined the effects of reviewers' writing proficiency on the numbers and accuracy of their comments as well as on the quality of authors' writing performance

(e.g., Chong, 2016; Yu & Lee, 2016b; Allen & Mills, 2014) or investigated how learners make use of their peers' comments (e.g., Kamimura, 2006; Yu & Hu, 2016). Yet, these studies provided very mixed findings. For example, while Allen and Mills (2014) found that high-level students gave more feedback than low-level ones, Hentasmaka and Cahyono (2021) concluded that there were no differences in the number of comments given by two types of learners. Another instance was in the finding of Leeser (2004), which showed that competent students might not gain much from their less competent peers; this was opposite to Yu and Hu's research (2016), which indicated that high-proficiency students gave more comments and gained more improvements. One more limitation of these studies is that most researchers let students write at home, without any control or without any reports of plagiarism check, which casts doubt on the reliability of the findings and the originality of the analyzed paragraphs or essays.

Further, little research has provided a systematic overview of works on peer feedback and L2 proficiency. Consequently, this paper aims to review past studies on peer feedback and learners' L2 proficiency, from which research gaps are highlighted. It also proposes a peer feedback procedure premised on the analysis of previous studies as well as recommends aspects on which future researchers need to concentrate.

Hence, this paper is significant as it brings a number of possible benefits to different parties. First, it contributes to the literature of writing peer feedback by highlighting the aforementioned issues and thus drawing more attention to the settlement of the controversy. Second, teachers may be able to utilize peer feedback activities in a systematic and organized way. This helps to reduce the workload of having to correct a great number of essays, giving teachers more time to focus on improving students' edited versions which contain fewer errors. Third, students may feel more motivated when writing essays as they can write better and help their peers to write better. Fourth, educational institutions, particularly those in Vietnam, can make best use of mixed-ability classes, which are prevalent in the country, in enhancing students' academic writing performance. Finally, the review leads to a research path related to the relation between students' L2 proficiency and other task-based activities.

2.   Past research on peer feedback

2.1. Definition of peer feedback

Peer feedback is a kind of assessment that requires students' active involvement in commenting on each other's writing (Mok, 2011; Omelicheva, 2005). Learners not only respond to what the essays are about but also think about how they are conveyed (Mangelsdorf, 1992). In addition, students give feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of peers' essays as well as suggestions to help each other improve their writing skills (Graves, 1994). This task-based activity is considered as

a type of formative assessment which is vital to learning in higher education (Yu & Hu, 2016).

In this paper, the term "peer feedback" refers to the entire process of learners evaluating their peers' writing, while "peer comments" are conceptualized as the detailed information or specific suggestions learners give to their friends' essays. The two terms have been widely used in previous research (e.g., Hentasmaka & Cahyono, 2021; Strijbos, 2010; Kamimura, 2006). Besides, the word "authors" should be regarded as the students who write essays, whereas "reviewers" are those who give feedback to the authors' writings. As for the language level discussed, it is students' L2 (English) writing proficiency.

2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of peer feedback

There are a great number of advantages of peer feedback to students as both writers and reviewers. First of all, Topping (2003), Brown (2004), and Jahin (2012) claimed that students feel more motivated to participate in classroom activities via peer feedback. This is because they are involved in a stress-free learning environment without having to worry about the grades given by the teacher (Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006). Second, they have the opportunity to recognize their peers' mistakes and improve their writing quality by avoiding these (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Yatch, Vitale & Ford, 2019). Tusino (2013) shed light on this by analyzing that all aspects of students' writing can be improved via peer feedback, with content and vocabulary enhanced the most, yet grammar and organization only showing slight developments. Third, via reviewing peers' writing, students are able to expand their knowledge and think more critically (Ghanbari, 2015). Finally, peer feedback can play a more critical role than feedback from teachers. In fact, Paulus (1999) emphasized that while teachers' feedback significantly impacts students' use of grammar, peer feedback generates more helpful comments on the content, vocabulary, and organization of an essay. The study of Polisda (2017) added that peer feedback even has better

effects on improving students' argumentative essay writing than teacher feedback does.

However, some possible drawbacks of peer feedback have been highlighted by several researchers. For one thing, peers' feedback is subjective and inaccurate due to students' low L2 abilities and different mindsets (Braine, 2003). This statement is well supported by Kaufman and Schunn (2011) when they argued that learners developed a negative attitude towards their peers owing to a lack of trust. Moreover, a study conducted by Rollinson's (2005) represents that peer feedback can be lengthy and repetitive, which may discourage students if employed repeatedly.

Even though there are more benefits of peer feedback to L2 learning gains, the disadvantages should also be taken into careful consideration for a more robust research design.

2.3. Students' perceptions of peer feedback

Learners' perceptions are of paramount importance to learning outcomes (Biggs, Kember & Leung, 2001), yet only a few studies have explored this aspect of peer feedback (e.g., Zhu & Mitchell, 2012; Yu & Lee, 2015; Ahmed, 2020). Research has shown that students develop a mixture of attitudes towards peer feedback, both positively and negatively. On the one hand, they feel more immersed and motivated to do this kind of work in order to help their friends and even themselves develop writing skills (Diem, 2017). Ahmed (2020) supported this finding and concluded that students are "appreciative of peer feedback". On the other hand, some learners have difficulty trusting their peers' L2 abilities as well as feedback accuracy (Kaufman & Schunn, 2011; Bostock, 2000; Brown, 2004; Mok, 2011). These results indicate that if students' L2 writing proficiency and feedback quality are well addressed, they will probably adopt a more positive attitude towards this activity, which is the central focus of this project.

Past research explored what students thought about peers' comments using instruments such as feedback sheets, surveys,

and interviews. In Kamimura's study (2006), he required the participants to complete a sheet with information on what comments they chose to implement or not to implement in their revised versions. This way could be helpful, yet it would be hard for the researcher to obtain insightful information. Yu and Hu (2016), as well as Yu and Lee (2016b), employed interviews to comprehend learners' attitudes. However, as the number of participants was limited (with only 3 people), the findings' significance was also minimal. Another example was in Wakabayashi (2013)'s research in which survey questionnaires including 4-point Likert scale items and open-ended questions were used. The findings, nevertheless, could have been more significant if interviews had been employed, as these could provide the researcher the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to better understand participants' thoughts. Also, in these past studies, the researchers only relied on participants' memory recall to answer the questions as the participants were not provided with peer feedback for reference. This, together with a lack of qualitative verification, could have led to inaccurate data as it depended solely on learners' memory.

2.4. Strategies for teachers conducting peer feedback

As learners' perceptions play a pivotal role in the success of peer feedback, it is crucial that teachers and researchers pay close attention to what or how learners think when conducting this task-based activity. Previous research suggests that scores should not be given during peer feedback since students might be pressured and anxious to evaluate peers' writing (Omelicheva, 2005). This is even more obvious in Asian countries, where learners traditionally are kind to their classmates (Lee, 1997; Lu & Law, 2012). However, in case score giving is needed, teachers are recommended to moderate the ones given by students to raise the reliability because students usually give higher scores to their peers' writing (Cole, Coffey, & Goldman, 1999; Kaufman, Felder & Fuller, 1999; Ross, Rolheiser & Hogaboam-Gray, 2000). Another noteworthy point is that teachers are advised to

provide students with necessary input prior to the feedback stage, including ways to evaluate one's writing (modeling) and feedback sheets on which evaluations are based (scaffolding) (Falchikov, 2007).

Additionally, learners should not be restricted to which language should be used for giving feedback; in other words, either L1 or L2 should be accepted. This is because L1 has been proved as a facilitative factor in promoting communication and ideas from students (Yu & Hu, 2016). Finally, when assigning students to give feedback to peers, writing levels should be made unknown. This means anonymity should be the norm; students need not know the writers' or reviewers' names or language proficiency to avoid possible subjectivity (Gielen et al., 2010).

3.   Past studies on learners' L2 proficiency and peer feedback

One of the major controversial issues regarding peer feedback is related to how students with varying L2 proficiency should be grouped. Three different types of suggestions were made from previous research: homogeneous grouping, heterogeneous grouping, and any kind of grouping.

Homogeneous grouping refers to the practice of putting students of similar L2 levels to work together. This way was claimed to be beneficial to learners' socio-cognitive gains (King, 1999). Another argument for same-ability grouping is to avoid the situation that low-level students become passive and easily accept feedback from high-level peers (Strijbos, Narciss & Dünnebier, 2010) or that high-level students do not feel motivated when receiving comments from less competent classmates (Hu & Lam, 2010). In addition, Allen and Mills (2014) recommended that the optimal grouping is the employment of homogeneity as both writers and reviewers receive equal gains. By contrast, some researchers support heterogeneous grouping, high-level students working with low-level ones, for it benefits both kinds of learners. Studies showed that high-proficiency students could learn from the feedback of low-

proficiency peers and vice versa (Yu & Hu, 2016; Yu & Lee, 2016b). The third suggestion is via any kind of grouping because it makes no significant difference. In fact, Patchan, Hawk, Stevens, and Schunn (2013) argued that either more or less competent students could receive and incorporate feedback from reviewers of any level into their revised writings. Supporting this finding, other researchers (Hentasmaka & Canyono, 2021; Trinh & Cao, 2013; Strijbos et al., 2010) claimed that there were no direct effects of learners' language abilities on their feedback or writing performance.

As there has been a lot of controversy over the relation between L2 abilities and learning gains from peer feedback activity, it is essential that previous studies' limitations be analyzed so that further research can be more appropriately conducted. One early article was written by Kamimura (2006) about the impact of feedback from students with different levels of English on peers' writing quality. In the study, he divided 24 Japanese first-year students majoring in English into two classes: high and low proficiency, using a pretest and post-test design. The participants then worked with a same-level partner for oral feedback on the writing. The writers were required to revise their writing based on their partners' feedback, and the reviewers were asked to complete a form on which peer comments they implemented and which they did not. The finding showed that students in both classes improved their writing and that all students accepted and incorporated most comments from friends. However, what might have skewed the study is that the writing topics in the pretest and post-test were quite different. Also, the scores in these tests were not reported to be normally distributed or not, which can affect the kind of test used to analyze them.

In addition, he only examined the homogeneous grouping, which means the effect of heterogenous grouping remains unclear. Another study by Huisman, Saab, Van Driel, and Van Den Broek (2017) focused on the same topic with two kinds of grouping. His research was performed using the quasi-experimental design, with the participation of 94 undergraduates in the Netherlands. The

students were asked to write academic essays, review their partners' and then revise their own writing; everything was on an anonymous basis. The results showed that there was no significant impact of L2 abilities on peer feedback and writing performance. Nonetheless, the drawback of his research is that the researcher let the participants revise their essays at home, which might have affected the writing quality as someone else might have interfered with the revision. In addition, the original and revised papers were marked by research and teaching assistants whose qualifications were not clearly presented, which casts doubt on the reliability of their scores.

Working on a similar topic, Allen and Mills (2014) put 54 undergraduates, who were learning research writing, into four groups depending on their L2 proficiency: high-high, low-low (homogeneous), high-low, and low-high (heterogeneous). The students' first and revised writing assignments were marked for comparison. After the analysis stage using the generalized linear mixed models in R, the results indicated that high-level students gave more comments and gained more from the feedback activity. In contrast, low-level ones showed less and thus earned less. An additional finding is that those in homogeneous groups produced similar numbers of comments and therefore gained equal benefits. However, the research could have made more reliable results if a qualitative approach had been employed to determine why low-level students gained little from the collaboration with high-level students. Investigating this issue even further, Yu and Hu (2016) carried out a study on how competent learners gained from peer feedback. Yu and Hu assigned 12 Chinese students, non-English majors, into two groups with different L2 levels. Via the qualitative approach (case study) using video recordings of students' discussions, stimulated calls, interviews, and draft essays, the researchers explored students' implementation of peers' comments as well as compared the original and the revised writing. The findings demonstrated that participants in both groups could benefit from peer feedback, irrespective of their L2 abilities. Following this,

Yu and Lee (2016b) performed a similar study on whether low-level learners could contribute anything to their high-level partners. Using the same methodology, they concluded that low-level learners could help their high-level partners improve writing performance in the condition that L1 was the language for discussion. The two studies had the same limitations: a minimal number of participants (3 high or low proficiency people per group), making the results hard to generalizable to other contexts. Additionally, there were no homogeneous groups with which students' improvements in heterogeneous groups could be compared and contrasted. This rendered the findings not as meaningful as they could have been.

Chong (2016) conducted a study on the effect of students' L2 abilities on their feedback's relevance and accuracy with the participation of 16 secondary students. They were asked to write a short diary which was then analyzed based on two criteria, ideas and linguistic aspects. The high-, average- and low-level groups were used for level classification. One student in each group received a diary from another in a different group and was required to give feedback on the writing. The finding represented those higher-ability students gave more accurate comments and posed more meaningful content queries. Nonetheless, the study was carried out on young learners who might not fully develop their mental health yet, which probably affected the results. Another point is that the researcher focused on informal writing (diary) rather than academic writing, making the context very different from others.

A recent study by Hentasmaka and Cayono (2021) is about how L2 proficiency affected the implementation of peer comments in students' revised writing versions. Thirty-five undergraduates in Indonesia participated in the research and were asked to write an introductory paragraph on a given topic. Then they exchanged their paragraphs with same-level partners for feedback. After that, they wrote the body together with the conclusion paragraphs and exchanged these writings with

differences in the number or the implementation of peer comments among students, regardless of their levels. However, as students worked with different partners on separate parts of the essay, not the complete version, the comparisons became irrelevant.

In the context of Vietnam, there have been several studies on peer feedback, such as those of Pham-Ho and Usaha (2011), Pham-Ho and Nguyen (2014), and Diem (2017). However, these papers mainly focused on the benefits or students' perceptions of peer feedback. Research on L2 proficiency and peer feedback is scarce. One study by Trinh and Cao (2013) examined two aspects of this topic: whether feedback giving could help improve writing performance and whether more competent and less competent learners gave similar numbers and types of comments. The research was conducted with 24 EFL students, whose demographics were not specified, equally divided into two groups: control (12 students) and experimental (6 competent and 6 less competent). Both groups went through 6 weeks of argumentative paragraph training; the only difference was that while the experimental group received feedback training in week 6, the control group did not. The researchers found that there were no significant differences between the two groups in writing performance or feedback types and quantities. The insignificances were probably owing to the flaw in the design. First, the two groups had 5 weeks of similar treatments and only 1 week with a different treatment which might not be enough to make a difference. Second, there were no post-tests or revised writing to measure students' improvements in writing performance. Finally, to measure language abilities and peer feedback, there should be 2 main groups, homogeneity and heterogeneity as in the research of Allen and Mills (2014).

One critical common drawback of almost all previous studies lied in the originality of students' writings. The participants were allowed to write and revise their paragraphs or essays at home, yet there were no reports of whether students' writings were not influenced

different-level peers for review. The results implied that there were no significant by others or not. Also, no single studies presented information about plagiarism check

of students' writings, which is a critical issue in academic writing and research. These problems raised the questions over the reliability and validity of such studies.

All the limitations analyzed above make it highly necessary for further research to be conducted to clarify the doubts. Consequently, by taking all of these into consideration and avoiding such flaws, future researchers can come up with optimal methodologies for addressing peer feedback and L2 proficiency.

4. Academic writing: Argumentative essays

Essays are "at the heart of education" for a variety of academic levels (Warburton, 2006, p.7). One of which is argumentative that aims to convince readers to believe in the writer's point of view (Harmer, 2004a). This kind of writing requires solid arguments and evidence (Coffin et al., 2003), giving students opportunities to discuss real-life situations (Crowhurst, 1988). (However, they can be challenging to many learners (Valero Haro, Noroozi, Biemans & Mulder, 2019a), even those whose first language is English (Crowhurst, 1988). These are the features why this kind of essay is mainly used in tertiary education, especially in academic fields, and why students need frequent support to improve the quality of their writing.

Research that aims to evaluate students' academic writing can utilize either of the rubrics as they are well-established from prestigious educational organizations. The structure and rubrics of the argumentative essay often include four main parts, including ideas, organization, grammar, and vocabulary. An example can be found in the IELTS Task 2 Writing band descriptors, Academic Module, public version (n.d.); however, the terms used are quite different: task response (ideas), cohesion and coherence (organization), lexical resource (vocabulary), grammatical range and accuracy (grammar). These descriptors are also used for other kinds of essays, such as causes and solutions, advantages and disadvantages, or both-view discussions. Another instance is the argumentative essay assessment designed by Yale Macmillan Center (n.d.) with five criteria: introduction and conclusion (ideas), main points (ideas), organization, works cited (references), and mechanics (grammar and vocab).

5. Recommendations

5.1. A proposed procedure for peer feedback

From the detailed analysis of previous studies, it can be inferred that certain steps are vital to the successful implementation of peer feedback. As a result, the following procedure is proposed to give insights into the organization of this task-based activity:

Table 1. A summary of the peer feedback procedure

Stage	Activity	Explanation
1	Training stage	This step is the core factor determining the success of the activity. Only when learners comprehend how to review their peers' writing are they able to do the task effectively. Training can be given in either L1 or L2, even with a demonstration from teachers. The aim is to assure that students know what to do and how to do it correctly. All of the marking criteria, rubrics or requirements need to be provided, and students' questions must also be answered in a thorough way.
2	Practice stage	In order to make sure that students can review their friends' writing appropriately, they need to be given the opportunity to practice. In this step, teachers can assign them essays written by others and ask them to give

		feedback as instructed in Stage 1. After that, teachers show them how correct their feedback is and what can be done to make it even more informative.
3	Pairing stage	This is also a pivotal step that requires close attention. As previous studies showed mixed findings of different pairing techniques, teachers can assign pairs in various ways, both homogeneously and heterogeneously, to examine if there are significant differences among the pairing types.
4	Feedback stage	Prior to this stage, all writing sheets must be checked against plagiarism to assure that students' works are orginial. Moreover, their writings should be performed in class under the supervision of teachers to avoid the case that other people may interfere with their essays. In previous research, students worked in pairs and discussed the feedback; however, this way had a downside: the competent learner may dominate and strongly affect the less competent one. Therefore, it is recommended that students work alone in class, still under teachers' control. If possible, names of authors and reviewers should be anonymous to prevent students from being affected by their assumptions of their peers' L2 proficiency, which may deter them from giving honest opinions. During this stage, peer feedback in the form of L1 or L2 should also be accepted as long as the reviewers share their thoughts in a comfortable way. Whether the use of dictionaries or other materials should be granted depends on the purpose of the activity. For teachers, the goal is often to boost students' critical thinking and reflection, so dictionaries or technological tools can be allowed to help them discover more information. For researchers who wish to test whether different pairings based on L2 proficiency may have any significant disparities, external materials should be restricted so that students have to rely on their own abilities to give feedback.
5	Reflection Stage	Previous research did not address this stage at all, just culminating in the feedback stage. However, students need to know whether their feedback is appreciated or accurate, from which they can also learn new knowledge or bridge the knowledge gaps. Therefore, teachers should show them how their feedback works and what they need to be vigilant in. Once students are more skilled in giving feedback and can produce more accurate comments, teachers' workloads can be reduced, and high-quality writing is more likely to be made.

5.2.   Directions for future research

In order to address the aforementioned gaps in previous studies, future researchers need to consider the following elements when designing their works:

1.   Learners' essays must be free of plagiarism and be original, not the by-products of other people's ideas.

2.   Learners should not be permitted to use external materials such as dictionaries or technological tools, which is to assure their abilities are truly presented.

3.   Learners should be allowed to use either L1 or L2 in their feedback giving as long as they can express their opinions accurately.

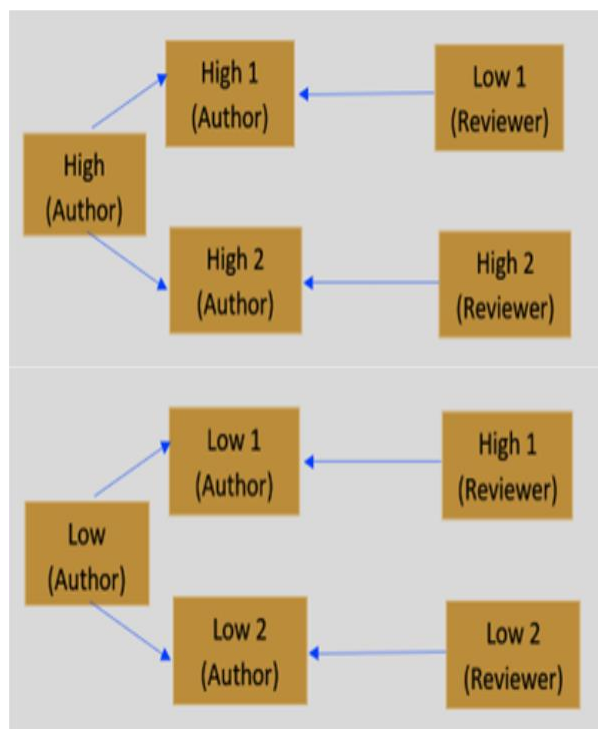4.   Various pairing types based on L2 proficiency should be adopted as follows:

Figure 1. The pairing patterns

5.   Multiple research methods should be employed, especially interviews and parametric tests, to generate highly valid and reliable data.

6.   The sample size should be at least 60, with 30 members in each group (high and low levels) to assure data validity.

7.   If possible, students' peer feedback should be repeatedly measured to obtain consistent results.

6.   Conclusion

This study provides a summary of recent research on peer feedback in general and peer feedback coupled with L2 proficiency. In addition, it identifies various deficiencies that must be addressed in order to organize peer feedback pairs properly. This includes a small sample size, a lack of control during the writing and feedback stages, the absence of an originality report, a single measurement, and the use of limited research methods. Also problematic are the contradictory findings of previous studies, which make it difficult for teachers to match learners depending on their levels. These concerns necessitate additional research to determine which type of pairing is optimal. A recommended technique for conducting peer feedback is also offered, comprising five basic stages: instruction, practice, pairing, feedback, and reflection. Teachers who seek to implement peer feedback in their writing classrooms should explore these suggestions. Peer feedback can, as demonstrated, bring numerous merits to both teachers and students if it is skillfully handled.

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