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Joe Garner
International Christian University

Oliver Hadingham
Rikkyo University

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Anonymizing the Peer Response Process: An Effective Way to Increase Proposed Revisions?

Joe Garner

International Christian University

Oliver Hadingham

Rikkyo University

An important drawback of peer response in L2 writing classes is a reluctance to be sufficiently critical of a classmate's writing, particularly with students from cultures that value group harmony. Anonymization of peer response is commonly proposed as a means of overcoming this problem. The current action research project examined the effect of anonymizing the peer response process on the number of proposed revisions made by students from eight undergraduate writing classes at a private university in Tokyo. It also examined the students' attitudes towards the peer response process. The findings revealed that the anonymization of the process had significant impact on the less proficient students' propensity to recommend revision; however, this was not the case for students of a higher proficiency level. Students at both levels felt more comfortable with the peer response process when it was anonymized. The pedagogical implications of anonymizing the peer response process are discussed.

Keywords: anonymous, peer feedback, revisions

Introduction

The exchange of essays among students, who then read and respond to each other's writing, is a common part of L2 writing classes. The peer response process is seen to help students learn to be less reliant on instructor feedback (Tsui & Ng, 2000) as it aids the development of evaluative skills (Berg, 1999). As such, the peer response process can play a part in nurturing "self-reliant writers, who are both self-critical and who have the skills to self-edit and revise their own writing" (Rollinson, 2005, p. 29). In order to develop these evaluative skills, students must provide feedback on their peers' written work. This feedback may result in both negative and positive comments, which Hyland and Hyland (2001) categorize as "praise," "criticism," or "suggestion"—the difference between the latter two categories being that a "suggestion" contains "an explicit recommendation for remediation" (p. 186). Yet there is a tendency among students to view feedback that identifies problems as more beneficial in enabling the writer to improve their essay (Nelson & Carson, 1998). This chimes with Ferris's (2003) opinion that one of the key benefits of peer response is that students are able to "receive feedback from nonexpert readers on ways in which their texts are unclear as to ideas and language" (p. 70). It is clear, therefore, that for the peer response process to be effective students in developing the evaluative skills that students need, the students must be willing to identify weaknesses in the work which they review. Yet there are a number of reasons why this does not always occur.

Level of English proficiency and cultural background influence the willingness of students to identify weaknesses in their peers' work. Research has indicated that less proficient students question their ability to give effective feedback (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Linden-Martin, 1997). Crucially, however, as proficiency levels rise, students become more comfortable with the process (Amores, 1997), and the quality of the feedback improves (Li, Liu, & Steckelberg, 2010). This indicates that the traditional approach to peer response may be less beneficial to lower-level students. In addition, peer response may be particularly problematic in certain educational settings. Various studies have identified that students from East Asian cultures, which tend to value group harmony, view identifying problems in a peer's essay as promoting tension; such students favor giving praise over criticism as it affirms and reinforces group harmony

(Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Connor & Asenavage 1994; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Hu, 2005; Nelson & Carson, 1998). There are obvious dangers of cultural stereotyping, especially as problems with peer response have been highlighted in studies that did not target East Asian students (Amores, 1997), and some studies involving East Asian students have shown the suitability of its use (Hu & Lam, 2010). Yet ignoring this cultural aspect would be closing off an area of pedagogical research that Hyland and Hyland (2006) contend requires further investigation. As Nelson and Carson (2006) note, the pitfalls of sweeping generalizations should be balanced “against the benefits of assessing possible culture-related behaviors that need to be taken into account when we design classroom activities” (p. 53). How the peer response process can be modified to allow students, particularly those from East Asian cultures, to feel more confident and willing to identify problems in their peers’ work is therefore an important issue that teachers who work with students from these cultures need to investigate. If the peer response process can in some way be modified to yield more comments, particularly those identifying weaknesses with a peer’s essay, the process can become more meaningful pedagogically.

One possible modification of the peer response process is to make it anonymous. Anonymizing the peer response process makes it less threatening to students reluctant to criticize their peers’ work (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011). Anonymity lessens the constraints that the reviewer may feel when commenting on their peer’s writing (Lu & Bol, 2007) and reduces loss of face “by not exposing mistakes publicly and by not criticizing directly” (Cheng & Warren, 1997, p. 238). Guardado and Shi (2007) provide further support for the approach, noting that Japanese EFL students “embrace[d] [it] as a chance to review their peers’ writing critically” (p. 457).

However, a significant drawback of anonymizing the peer response process is that it limits the interactions between writer and reviewer. Such interactions aid acquisition as they allow the students’ knowledge and understanding of what constitutes good writing to be shared and tested (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Peer response is also a means of encouraging a negotiation of meaning between writer and reviewer—essential to the development of writing competency (Liu, Lin, Chiu, & Yuan, 2001). Therefore, before teachers move to an anonymized peer response process, an examination of its effectiveness is necessary.

Action Research

This research project was instigated in accordance with Norton's (2009) assertion that the goal of pedagogical action research is "to improve some aspect of the student learning experience" (p. xv). Peer feedback was a key element of the writing course which the authors of this paper were teaching, but we both felt that the way that it was generally being conducted, with the essay's writer knowing the identity of the reviewer, was not resulting in students providing sufficient suggestions as to how their peers' work could be revised. Consequently, we felt it was important to examine whether anonymizing the process affected the number of revisions proposed (a "suggestion" in Hyland and Hyland's [2001] categorization). As we generally felt that weaker students were more reluctant to propose revisions, we were also interested in the effect of the students' English proficiency on their willingness to propose revisions, as this could indicate whether the use of anonymous peer response should be restricted to classes of certain proficiency levels. In addition to examining the effect of anonymizing the peer response process on the rate of proposed revisions, we also wanted to find out how the students viewed identifiable and anonymous peer response, as we believe that creating an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable is important for teaching to be effective. Therefore, this teaching paper seeks to answer three questions:

- Does the anonymization of the peer response process lead to an increase in students' propensity to recommend revision?
- Is the effect of the anonymization of the peer response process on students' propensity to recommend revision affected by the proficiency level of the student?
- Does the anonymization of peer response make students feel more comfortable with the process?

Context

The research project involved 90 students from eight undergraduate writing classes at a private university in Tokyo. The authors of this paper were the teachers of these classes. The majority of the students in the classes were Japanese, but there were also a number of students from China and South Korea. Four of the classes were intermediate-level classes ($N = 46$), four were advanced level classes ($N = 44$). Students were assigned to class levels by either (a) taking a TOEFL ITP, in combination with a faculty-assessed independent writing task (TOEFL score 450–549 assigned to the intermediate level; 550 or over assigned to the advanced level); or (b) successfully completing a lower level EAP writing course (existing university students that had passed the basic level EAP writing course were placed in the intermediate classes, and those who had passed the intermediate level were placed in the advanced level). The students took one 90-minute class per week for 15 weeks. As a course requirement, all of the students had to write two argumentative essays of 600–800 words. For each essay, the students submitted a first draft and received initial feedback from a peer and then from the teacher. The students were expected to act on the feedback in their final drafts.

Method

Every student was required to submit a digital copy of the first draft of their essay prior to each peer response class; these were printed out by the teachers so that they could be distributed in class. Each class had one lesson in which peer response was conducted anonymously and one traditional peer response class in which the reviewer was identifiable. So that the results were not affected by the order in which the students gave anonymous or identifiable feedback, two of the classes in each level were instructed to provide identifiable feedback on the first essay and anonymous feedback on the second essay; this was reversed for the other two classes in each level. In all of the sessions, the students were given approximately 20 minutes to read and provide feedback on parts of their partner's essay.

To guide the type of feedback that the students provided, each student was given a checklist, similar to the one suggested by Berg (1999), which contained questions related to seven key structural aspects of the essays that had been previously taught (see Appendix). This checklist also enabled the teachers to calculate the number of revisions proposed in each of the peer response sessions. All questions were interrogative and required a “Yes” or “No” response on the checklist. The questions were written so that a “No” response would indicate that the essay needed improving in that area. If “No” was written, the students were instructed to write a suggestion as to how the essay could be improved on the essay itself; consequently a “No” would indicate that student’s response could be categorized as a “suggestion” rather than a “criticism” (Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

For the anonymous feedback sessions, the students’ names were removed from the first drafts and distributed randomly. The students were instructed that if they wrote “No” on the checklist, they would need to provide detailed comments on the essay itself, as they would not have the opportunity to discuss their feedback with the essay’s writer. As a result, the students were made aware that the feedback they gave would not be attributable. Having completed the checklist and written any necessary comments on the essay itself, the checklists and essays were collected and given to the writer of each essay. For the identifiable feedback sessions, the students were instructed to sit in dyads. Each student was then given their partner’s first draft and the checklist. The students were given the same instructions as in the anonymized sessions; in addition, they were instructed to remain silent as they worked through the checklist. However, they were told that they would have the opportunity to explain their feedback to the essay’s writer once the checklist was finished. Consequently, the students were aware that their feedback would be attributable. At the end of the class, the teachers collected the checklists so that the number of proposed revisions could be calculated.

To analyze the frequency with which students suggested revision, each checklist was assigned a suggested revisions score. To obtain this, the sum of “No” responses per checklist was calculated; as such, a checklist with all seven questions responded to negatively would be assigned a score of seven. Although the students had been instructed to respond with

either “Yes” or “No,” some students wrote responses such as “Yes, but . . .” followed by a suggested revision. These were considered to be negative responses, as the students seemed to be identifying a problem with the writing but using communication strategies to avoid offending the writer.

Propensity to Propose Revision

Question 1: Does the anonymization of the peer response process lead to an increase in students’ propensity to recommend revision? Table 1 shows that there was an increase in the mean number of proposed revisions between identifiable (1.77) and anonymized (2.30) feedback. Moreover, the data indicate that within this study anonymizing the peer response process does significantly increase the amount of proposed revisions ($p = .032$).

Table 1

Propensity to Recommend Revision

Student type	All feedback		Identifiable		Anonymized		<i>p</i>
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	
All students			1.77	1.484	2.30	1.795	.032
Intermediate	1.95	1.500	1.48	1.110	2.41	1.694	.003
Advanced	2.13	1.825	2.07	1.757	2.18	1.908	.770

Question 2: Is the effect of the anonymization of the peer response process on students’ propensity to recommend revision affected by the proficiency level of the student? Table 1 also shows that the proficiency of the student has a significant bearing on the propensity to propose revisions when peer response process was anonymized. The descriptive data

indicate that the students in the intermediate classes suggested more revisions when the process was anonymous ($M = 2.41$) than when it was identifiable ($M = 1.48$); moreover, this difference is statistically significant ($p = .003$). In contrast, the advanced students' rate was not appreciably different (anonymous, 2.18; identifiable, 2.07) or statistically significant ($p = .770$). This indicates that for those students researched, the intermediate-level students had a higher tendency to suggest revisions when the method was anonymized, while the advanced-level students' tendency to propose revisions was largely unchanged. This would appear to be in line with Guardado and Shi's (2007) finding that students of lower L2 proficiency levels are less confident in their ability to suggest useful revisions when reviewing their partner's written work; therefore perhaps they were more reluctant to suggest revisions when they knew that they would have to justify them to the essay's writer.

Students' Attitudes

We also believed that it was important to gauge our students' attitudes to the identifiable versus anonymous peer response processes. Therefore, in the final class of the semester the students were instructed to provide anonymous responses to the statements below using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

- Statement 1: I felt comfortable giving anonymous feedback on my classmate's essay.
- Statement 2: I felt comfortable giving identifiable feedback on my classmate's essay.

The responses were coded as follows: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree, and the mean scores were calculated. Table 2 reveals that overall, the students investigated were more comfortable when the peer feedback process was anonymized (3.98) than when it was identifiable (3.23). Moreover, this difference was significant ($p < .001$). Breaking the data down by level of proficiency, the difference was significant among both intermediate (anonymous = 4.13; identifiable = 3.28; $p < .001$) and

advanced (anonymous = 3.98; identifiable = 3.18; $p = .003$) level students. As such, the findings appear to concur with those of Miyazoe and Anderson's (2011), which indicated that anonymous interactions in writing classes can lead to "less stress and fear for foreign language learners" (p. 184).

Table 2

Attitudes to Peer Response Process

Student type	Identifiable		Anonymized		<i>p</i>
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	
Intermediate	3.28	1.026	4.13	0.806	.000
Advanced	3.18	0.995	3.82	0.922	.003
Overall	3.23	1.006	3.98	0.874	.000

Pedagogical Implications

Peer response has become a central feature of L2 academic writing classes as it reinforces the idea of academic writing as a process involving many stages and that giving and receiving feedback can lead to more effective academic writing for both the reviewer and writer of the essay (Berg, 1999; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000); therefore, teachers should consider how to utilize it most effectively.

As first in Berg's (1999) checklist of considerations for preparing students to participate in peer response is to create a "comfortable classroom and trust among students" (p. 238), creating an environment in which students do not feel stressed seems important if peer response is to be effective. Students at both the levels of proficiency examined in this action research project were more comfortable providing peer feedback when the process was anonymized, so it would seem that in classrooms in which the majority of students have an East Asian cultural background, when possible, peer response should be conducted anonymously. However, as

noted earlier, students' evaluative skills are developed more effectively when interaction between the essay's writer and the reviewer is possible. Therefore, the weakness of anonymous peer response as it was carried out in this study is that it does not allow for this interaction. Consequently, teachers need to consider the contexts in which the benefits of conducting peer response anonymously outweigh its drawbacks.

The results showed that for the less proficient students, anonymizing the peer response process led to a significant increase in the number of proposed revisions. This may be due to the fact that such students tend to lack confidence in their ability to provide appropriate feedback (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Linden-Martin, 1997). As they are not sure if their feedback is correct, less proficient students may be reluctant to propose a revision when they know that they will have to explain it to the writer of the essay. As a result, the effect of anonymizing the peer response process is that it may allow the students to propose suggestions even when they are not sure of their appropriateness.

The results of the project also indicated that although the more advanced L2 writers felt more comfortable with the peer response process when it was anonymized, this did not result in them proposing significantly more revisions than when the feedback was identifiable. One possible explanation for this may be that the essays of the more proficient students may have contained fewer areas in need of review, thus limiting the possible number of proposed revisions. Consequently, there were fewer opportunities for the advanced students to propose revisions even when they felt more comfortable during the anonymous feedback sessions. Another possible explanation is that these types of students are more likely to have more experience in providing peer feedback in L2 writing classes. Therefore, they have a greater understanding of the importance of proposing suggestions. Moreover, as Li et al. (2010) noted, such students are more able to provide effective feedback. Consequently, although they feel more comfortable when the process is anonymized, this does not affect their propensity to propose revisions as they are confident enough in their ability to propose effective revisions.

Therefore, the most appropriate use of anonymous peer response would appear to be with students of lower proficiency levels, moving to the identifiable approach as students become more proficient. Alternatively, similar to Moore's (1986) use of anonymous essays from other classes, anonymous peer response could be utilized when students are first introduced to the peer feedback process, and then as students become more familiar with the process and more confident in their ability to provide appropriate feedback, identifiable peer response should be used as it allows students opportunities to interact with each other.

However, this need to modify the approach to feedback to suit the proficiency level of the student may become unnecessary. As an increasing number of L2 writing classes are conducted in environments where students are using computers, it may become possible for peer feedback to be provided anonymously while also allowing for interaction between the writer of the essay and the reviewer. In such classes, the peer response process could be anonymized by the use of pseudonyms in class (see Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011) and using real time editing through web-based software. This would allow an interactive and anonymous peer response process in which meaning could be negotiated and ideas about effective writing could be tested.

Limitations

In accordance with Norton's (2009) action research cycle of "reflection, planning, acting, observing, reflecting" (p. 55), the authors designed the study in response to a specific problem they believed was reducing the effectiveness of peer response in the classes that we they taught, namely the insufficient number of proposed revisions to a peer's work. In addressing this specific issue, the data collected focused on the quantity of proposed revisions; we chose not to examine the appropriateness of the proposed revisions, or whether the proposed revisions were adopted by the writer of the essay. While this narrow focus limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the data, it does provide teachers with a clear measure of the effect of anonymizing the peer response process. This represents a useful starting point toward a deeper appreciation of a common L2 writing classroom practice, while also providing avenues for further investigation.

Another potential limitation of this study was that the "anonymity" of the peer response was restricted in that, although the actual identity of the writer and the reviewer was unknown, the students did know that they

were responding to the written work of a classmate. One reason why students are reluctant to identify weaknesses in their peers' work is to maintain harmony within the group (Carson & Nelson, 1994). A wish to maintain class harmony may still influence the peer response process. Therefore, it would be useful to examine whether enhancing the anonymous aspect of the study (for example, by conducting it between students in different classes) has a greater effect on the propensity to suggest revision. Another potential weakness of the study was that instructing students to write detailed comments on the essay itself may have discouraged them from proposing revision; this was particularly important when the process was anonymized as the students knew that they would not have an opportunity to verbally explain their feedback to the essay's writer. This may have resulted in them proposing fewer revisions when providing anonymous feedback. Therefore, it would be useful to investigate whether students' propensity to identify problems in their peers' work is higher if only instructed, as per Hyland and Hyland's (2001) categorization, to provide criticism, (i.e., simply write "No" on the checklist) rather than to make a suggestion.

Conclusion

Peer response has become a central feature of L2 academic writing classes. One of its key benefits is that it allows students to develop the evaluative skills that are needed for them to become less dependent on their teachers. However, in order for peer response to be effective, students must be willing to propose revisions to their peers' work. This study examined the effect of anonymizing the process. The results showed that, irrespective of proficiency level, the students were more comfortable with the peer response process when it was anonymized. As such, the study appears to provide support for other findings in the field, which have indicated that anonymizing the peer response process allows East Asian students to feel more at ease. The study also provides evidence that less proficient students are significantly more likely to propose revision when the process is anonymous than when it is identifiable. However, no such significant difference was identified among the more advanced students. As interaction between students during the peer response process leads to greater pedagogical gains, this would seem to indicate that L2 writing teachers should consider anonymizing the peer response process with less proficient students, but that this is not needed with more proficient students.

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Appendix

Writing Task First Draft Peer Evaluation

Read the introductory paragraph, first body paragraph, and concluding paragraph of your classmate's essay.

Only focus on the key components in the table below.

If you write "No" in any of the boxes, write suggestions how to improve the essay on the essay itself.

Key Components	Yes/No
Is there an effective hook?	
Do the building sentences give background to the topic of the essay?	
Does the thesis statement clearly show the essay topic, writer's position and main ideas of each body paragraph?	
Does the topic sentence of the first body paragraph allow you to predict the content of the paragraph?	
In the first body paragraph, do supporting sentences logically link to the main idea of the paragraph?	
Does the concluding paragraph restate the thesis and summarize all the main points?	
Does the concluding paragraph end with an effective final thought?	

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