Teaching ESL Writing in Saudi Arabia: A Case for the Integration of Peer Feedback

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ABSTRACT

Writing is the most difficult of all language skills and the one learned last. This is true regardless of L1 or L2 but, for many reasons, it is especially true when it comes to learning to write in a second or foreign language. Furthermore, available data shows that English as a Second Language (ESL) Saudi students are among the lowest-scoring in the world, especially when it comes to writing. In this project, we investigate deploying alternative sources of feedback in ESL writing classes, including peer feedback, with the aim of improving writing. We also investigate Saudi students' perception of peer feedback. Data was collected using a questionnaire and pre- and post-test written exams involving control and experimental groups. Descriptive statistics from both methods were generated and presented accordingly. It was found that peer feedback provided an additional source of constructive feedback and fostered autonomous learning.

Keywords: ESL Writing, Peer Feedback, Writing Problems.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Literature and the statistics available from language testing organisations all suggest that writing is the most difficult of all language skills. The fact that traditional teaching methods are common in countries such as Saudi Arabia where teachers are the centre of attention and students are usually passive recipients of knowledge, does not help either. Among other factors, outdated teaching and learning methods contribute to the less-than-satisfactory performance by Saudi students in standardised English proficiency tests, as the following section reveals. Not unsurprisingly, teacher feedback with regard to ESL writing - or any skill for that matter - is typically viewed as the most reliable source of information in the language classroom. This can stem from the students' deep-rooted belief in their teachers as superiors and reliable sources of knowledge or - in many traditional contexts such as that of Saudi Arabia - because it is the *only* source of knowledge. However, teachers have their limits and as some classes get bigger and the tasks get larger, teachers cannot realistically respond to each and every error, and comment on all particulars of written tasks. We therefore propose peer feedback as an alternative source of feedback that does not replace as much as complement teacher feedback. Peer feedback should also encourage students to take responsibility for their own work. In this sense, peer feedback addresses many of the shortcomings of traditional, teacher-focused approaches, in addition to acting as a potential useful source of knowledge.

In this article, we will first discuss why ESL writing is particularly difficult, and introduce the concepts of teacher feedback and peer feedback. We then ask the research questions in the methodology section. The participants, data collection tools and data analysis will be explained in the same section. This will then be followed by presenting the findings and discussing the results. We conclude the article by offering recommendations with regard to both the ESL teaching process and further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. ESL Writing

When we say that writing is difficult, we are not exaggerating or making the topic look more dramatic than it really is. Rather, we are actually reporting on the literature and on proficiency test results. Previous studies have, in fact, touched on the difficulties faced by writers, regardless of what language they are writing in. For example, one famous study by Flowers and Hayes (1980) describes the complex nature of writing and the intricate, interrelated processes involved. They (ibid: 31) believe that:

"n order to write, people must perform a number of mental operations: they must plan, generate knowledge, translate it into speech, and edit what they have written. A writer caught in the act looks much more like a very busy switchboard operator to juggle a number of demands on her attention and constraints on what she can do".

This is not a unique view as others such as Nunan (2000) and Hyland (2003) also call writing the most difficult skill for all language learners. Again, the complexities involved in writing were the reasons for making it particularly difficult for learners.

One can only imagine what the situation would possibly be for ESL learners. If writing is demanding even for L1 learners not already struggling with limited linguistic competence and who usually have a good command of the prevailing writing conventions, then it would be remarkably difficult for learners of other languages not gifted with '..in possession of ..' either. For example, Bhatti, Hussain, Azim and Gulfam (2020) mention that students' proficiency was a real problem in ESL writing. They also mention the complexities involved in writing, including careful thinking, concentration and discipline. Students also showed weaknesses in terms of grammar, punctuation, paragraphing and sentence construction. Similarly, Mubarak (2017) focused on 9 problematic areas of ESL writing including consistency, expressions, plurals, and irregular verbs. Ien, Yunus, and Embi (2017), on the other hand, noticed that many problems stemmed from students' struggle with cognitive and linguistic strategies. They also noticed that anxiety and uncertainty played a role in making ESL writing difficult. Other issues include the inability to generate ideas, choosing the correct vocabulary, and lack of facilities, especially in rural areas. In addition, Moses and Mohamad (2019) also commented on the complexity and interrelated tasks involved in writing, including the need for a comprehensive knowledge of grammar, the suitable choice of words or phrases, writing mechanics, organizational skills and writing styles. Many of these issues are also mentioned in Akthar *et al*. (2019). Akthar *et al*. (ibid) '..These researchers ..' also focused on teachers' reporting on their students' lack of motivation and '..the problem associated with ..' placing students of different levels in the same classroom. Furthermore, teachers' lack of practice and expertise can further complicate matters.

The previous studies were mainly carried out in Asian countries such as Malaysia and Pakistan. In this article we are more concerned with Arab ESL writers and - to be even more specific - Saudi Arabian university students who are our research population as described in the methodology section. Luckily for us, there is a reliable indicator with regard to Saudi ESL students' linguistic performance, or that of any other nationality for that matter, in the form of the averages in terms of standardized English tests for non-native speakers of English such as TOEFL and IELTS. These actually make for an interesting read, as Table (1) shows:

TABLE I: IELTS TEST TAKER PERFORMANCE 2019 (SAUDI TEST RESULTS COMPARED TO SELECTED COUNTRIES)

Nationality	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking	Overall
Bangladesh	6.0	6.4	5.7	6.3	6.2
China	6.2	5.9	5.5	5.4	5.8
Egypt	6.4	6.8	5.8	6.5	6.4
India	5.9	6.5	5.8	6.0	6.1
Indonesia	6.7	6.8	5.8	6.3	6.5
Iran	6.1	6.4	5.8	6.4	6.2
Iraq	5.4	5.5	5.2	5.8	5.6
Jordan	6.1	6.4	5.6	6.5	6.2
Kuwait	5.2	5.6	5.1	5.9	5.5
Malaysia	7.1	7.4	6.1	6.8	6.9
Oman	5.0	5.1	5.1	5.5	5.2
Pakistan	6.1	6.6	5.8	6.4	6.3
Qatar	5.1	5.6	5.0	5.8	5.4
Saudi Arabia	**5.2**	**5.4**	**5.0**	**5.8**	**5.4**
Turkey	6.5	6.6	5.7	6.2	6.3
UAE	4.8	5.0	4.7	5.4	5.1

Table I shows the IELTS results for 2019 test takers for academic purposes (we assume the 2020 entry was missing from the database due to the pandemic). It divides language skills into four categories for testing purposes, and then sums up the overall result in scores between 0 - 9 where 9 means as fluent as a student gets '..indicates a perfect score.'

One immediate observation that corroborates our previous assumptions regarding the relative difficulty

of demonstrating linguistic skills is that writing is the consistently the skill with the lowest average among test takers, regardless of their nationality. It is always lower than the overall average and the lowest of all the four categories in any nation. This is very strong evidence that writing is indeed the most difficult of all language skills, regardless of where the learners come from.

Another very interesting observation is that the three lowest scoring nations are (in ascending order) the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. All scored considerably lower than the global average and all scored particularly poorly in writing.

Judging by the IELTS results, we can safely assume that there is indeed a problem with regard to Saudi ESL students' writing. Therefore, the rationale for undertaking this project is clear from these results.

B. Teacher and Peer Feedback

Autonomous learning and peer feedback stand opposite to the antiquated traditional view of a language classroom with the teacher at the centre of action and the one and only source of knowledge.

We propose this form of feedback as a possible solution to addressing the shortcomings of the '..traditional ..' teaching practices usually employed in Saudi ESL writing classes.

Many researchers believe that teaching ESL in Saudi Arabia (including ESL writing) is very traditional indeed. In many accounts, the grammar translation method is the only method used in public schools (Eissa, 2016; Assalahi, 2013; Grami, 2010). Naturally, this form of teaching is also reflected in the type of feedback students have come to expect from their language classes, which in this case is teacher feedback only. It is no exaggeration that many students may not even have heard of autonomous or collaborative learning, and this, in turn, means that peer feedback may be a novel concept for many ESL learners in Saudi Arabia.

Teacher Feedback

As the name suggests, teacher feedback is the feedback students receive from their teachers. This can take the form of praise, requests for clarification, or corrections.

Zacharias (2007) reports that students prefer teacher feedback when it comes to revising their writing as compared to other forms of feedback. The same finding is shared by Paulus (1999) and Zhao (2010). Mubarak (2017) investigated 15 BA graduation projects written in English to highlight issues in students' writing.

Peer Feedback

Ien *et al*. (2017) believe that many ESL students are passive learners, by which they mean that students are not engaged in the learning process '..other than as recipients ..' and the teacher is the only one making decisions. This is a problematic area in larger classes in particular, in that teachers cannot realistically respond to each and every student in a satisfactory manner. There are many ways to compensate for the lack of adequate teacher feedback, including autonomous learning and the use of technology. However, in this article, we focus particularly on peer feedback.

Many studies have favourably suggested peer feedback as a valid source of correction for ESL writers (Zhang, 1995; Rollinson, 2005; Grami, 2010). However, despite peer feedback being approved by researchers and practitioners in the ESL classroom, Rollinson (2005) noticed that teachers and students may be reluctant to implement it because they are not convinced of its usefulness.

C. Recommendations to Improve ESL Writing

The literature offers various solutions to respond to ESL students' difficulties when it comes to writing. Mubarak (2017), for example, recommends familiarization with punctuation use, improving students' motivation, and improving students' paraphrasing abilities. Ien *et al*. (2017) recommend more practice in ESL writing, contextualizing the learning process, improving teaching materials, being explorative, and creating an interactive learning environment.

Additionally, Akthar *et al*. (2019), and Moses and Mohamad (2019) recommend that teachers use a multi-strategy approach, and that school management facilitates the learning process. Bhatti *et al*. (2020) also recommend that teachers train students to avoid L1 interference, especially in syntax, provide more practice regarding genre and process, and also more information about irregular spellings.

Our approach is slightly different from those of the previous studies. We are particularly concerned about the chances of students actually receiving feedback on their ESL writing, and we recommend exploring peer feedback in addition to traditional teacher feedback.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

Having reviewed the literature and identified the rationale for our study, the research questions we attempt to address are as follows:

1. What are Saudi students' perceptions of peer feedback in the ESL Writing classroom?

2. Can peer feedback provide help improve Saudi students' ESL writing?

B. Participants

All English language students engaged in any writing course in both King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Jeddah and Umm Alqura University (UQU) in Makkah were approached as possible participants for the study. In total 73 students responded to the questionnaire described in the following section. All were male students and registered on an ESL writing course. The ages of the majority (93.2%) varied from 19 to 22 years, averaging 20.5 years. Only 7 students were aged above 22. As for their year of study, most were in their second or third year (61.6%), 31.5% were in the fourth year, and five students were beyond the fourth.

As for the subsequent writing experiment, 25 students from KAU were selected, divided between two writing courses in the English Department to act as experimental and control groups.

C. Data Collection Tools

Previous comparable studies used a variety of collection tools to gather data. Bhatti *et al.* (ibid) sampled the views of 240 12th grade students from six private and public colleges. Additionally, 60 teachers were also included in the study, and their opinions were investigated. Moses and Mohamad (2019) employed a pre- and post-test method involving 16, year-5 students. In this study however, we have only focused on university students and have used a questionnaire and an experiment involving pre- and post-testing with regard to writing tasks.

The Questionnaire

The 73 students from both English Departments in KAU and UQU participated in the first phase of the study by responding to a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided into three main parts. The first investigates students' general demographics including age, educational background, courses they have taken, and their reasons for choosing English as their major. The second section asks more specific questions about their teachers' written feedback. The third section asks similar questions to the previous section, but with regard to peer feedback. The last two sections should reveal students' attitudes towards different types of feedback, which is the subject of investigation in this research project. As the main purpose of the questionnaire is to investigate students' beliefs with regard to writing, most questions are in Likert scale format which, according to Cohen *et al*. (2000 & 2007), is helpful in terms of helping combine the opportunity for a flexible response with the ability to determine frequencies, correlations, and other forms of quantitative analysis. In other words, these rating scale items offer the possibility of measurement with regard to opinion, quantity, and quality, and therefore are very suitable in terms of collecting data for this research project.

The Writing Tasks

The second phase of the study involved a field experiment. Students were divided into two groups - experimental (both teacher and peer feedback) and control (teacher feedback only). The participants' essays were evaluated before and after the experiment (using entry and exit tests). The evaluated written tasks consisted of new writing tasks rather than text revisions, especially important in the case of the exit test. Content, organisation, cohesion, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics were evaluated when grading students' writing, as shown in the following section.
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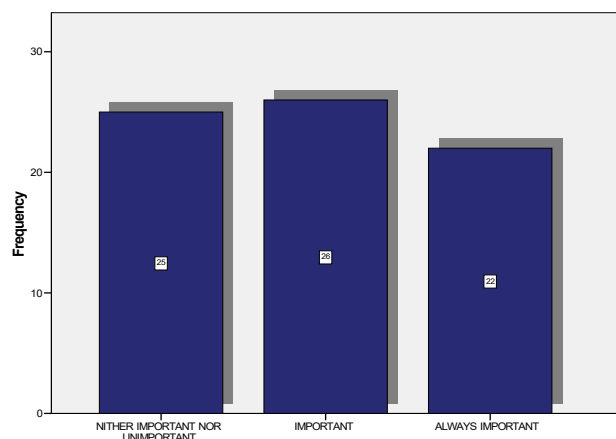## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Questionnaire

Fig. 1. Students' beliefs regarding the importance of teachers' comments.

Comments or feedback are important tools that help students improve. Fig. 1 shows the frequency in terms of how students feel about teachers' feedback in writing courses. The results were mostly positive. When students were asked about their perception of teachers' feedback, 48 out of 73 believed that this type of feedback is either important or always important. This result seems to confirm the prevailing view in the literature including that of Zhao (2010), Zacharias (2007), and Paulus (1999), which suggests that students in our survey do indeed prefer teacher feedback over other types. The only interesting result is that, as can be seen in Table II, 25 students (36 percent of the participants) were 'not sure' about teacher feedback, which is much higher than we anticipated. Unfortunately, this cannot be further investigated in this study but can be looked at in a forthcoming follow-up project.

TABLE II STUDENTS BELIEFS REGARDING USEFULNESS OF PEER FEEDBACK

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative
Valid	*very useless*	11	15.1	15.7	15.7
	useless	16	21.9	22.9	38.6
	not sure	25	34.2	35.7	74.3
	useful	15	20.5	21.4	95.7
	very useful	3	4.1	4.3	100.0
	Total	70	95.9	100.0	
Mis.		3	4.1		
Total		73	100.0		

Table II shows that about 22 percent of the students saw peer feedback as being useless, while about the same percentage saw it as being useful. About 36 per cent of the students did not view peer feedback as being either important or unimportant, which is much higher than we anticipated. Unfortunately, this cannot be further investigated in this study but can be looked at in an forthcoming follow-up project. While 4 percent of the students believed that it is very important, about 16 per cent of the students did not see it that way.
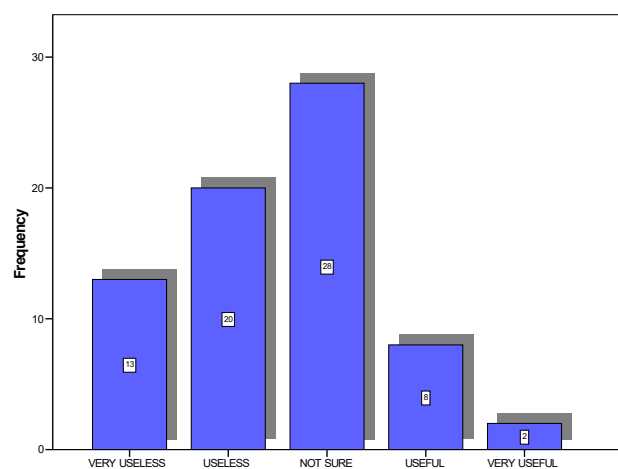

Fig. 2. Students' perception of peer feedback.

As Fig. 2 shows, as expected, students were mostly unsure or unconvinced with regard to its usefulness, a finding that perfectly mirrors that of Rolinson (2005). Only 10 students believed it to be useful or very useful. We believe that students' lack of familiarity with peer feedback is a major contributor to this result since they are commenting on a hypothetical question rather than on a situation they have experienced and tried. We also believe that their perception would positively change once they had engaged in actual peer feedback exercises. However, we have not conducted a follow-up questionnaire or a reflection for students but this could be a topic for future study.

B. The Written Tasks

As mentioned earlier, there are two sets of written tasks - one at the beginning of the experiment (an entry test) and one at the end of the experiment (an exit test). We will begin by discussing the former.

Entry Test

TABLE III: ERRORS IN THE ENTRY TEST (PER TEXT)

	N	Min	Max	Sum	Avg	SD
SPELLING	35	0	12	98	2.80	3.85
GRAMMAR	35	0	15	204	5.83	3.585
PUNCTUATION	35	0	13	109	3.11	2.709
RUN-ON SENTENCES	35	0	4	31	.89	1.078

Table III shows the grammatical and sentence-level errors recorded per written exam in four areas. Grammatical errors were the most common, averaging 5.8 per paper, while run-on sentences were the least common at only 0.89.

TABLE IV: ERRORS PER 100 WORDS (ENTRY TEST)

TYPE OF ERROR	PER 100 WORDS
GRAMMATICAL	12.8
PUNCTUATION	6.84
SPELLING	6.15
RUN-ON SENTENCES	1.94
TOTAL	27.4

However, we are aware that longer pieces of writing may naturally contain more errors. We therefore devised another test which shows the number of errors per 100 words. Again, grammatical errors were the most common while run-on sentences were the least common, confirming our earlier findings.

Regardless of which test we use, teachers are expected to determine how to respond to these errors, and provide students with appropriate feedback. This is a monumental task in view of this number of errors and students.

Exit Test

As mentioned in the methodology section, the exit test involves the two groups - experimental peer feedback (PF) and a control group.

TABLE V: PF GROUP LOCAL ERRORS (PER TEXT)

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
WORD-COUNT	11	63	144	97.45	24.246
SPELLING	11	0	13	2.27	3.797
GRAMMATICAL	11	0	14	5.64	5.334
PUNCTUATION	11	0	4	0.91	1.375
RUN-ON SENTENCES	11	0	1	0.09	0.302
OVERALL SCORE	11	3	5	4.00	0.775

TABLE VI: ERRORS PER 100 WORDS (PF GROUP EXIT TEST)

TYPE OF ERROR	PER 100 WORDS
GRAMMATICAL	5.78
PUNCTUATION	0.93
SPELLING	2.33
RUN-ON	0.09
TOTAL	9.13

Tables V and VI show the results with regard to the PF group. Similar to the entry test, grammatical mistakes were the most common, and the run-on sentences were the least. Table (5) also gives us more information about the length of the written tasks.

TABLE VII: CONTROL GROUP LOCAL ERRORS (PER TEXT)

	N	Min	Max	Avg.	SD
WORD-COUNT	14	81	150	109.22	23.48
SPELLING ERRORS	14	1	7	3.29	2.367
GRAMMATICAL ERRORS	14	4	25	9.43	7.165
PUNCTUATION ERRORS	14	1	14	4.71	4.921
RUN-ON SENTENCES	14	0	1	.14	.3633
OVERALL SCORE	14	2	5	3.64	1.082

TABLE VIII: ERRORS PER 100 WORDS (CONTROL GROUP EXIT TEST)

TYPE OF ERROR	PER 100 WORDS
GRAMMATICAL	8.61
PUNCTUATION	4.30
SPELLING	3.00
RUN-ON	0.09
TOTAL	16.01

Tables VII and VIII respectively show the results of the control group which received only teacher feedback. Again, the grammatical errors are the most common, and run-on sentences are the least.

When comparing the results of both groups against that of the entry test, we can see that writing, at least in terms of the four areas we have investigated, has improved significantly in terms of both the overall number of errors and the errors per 100 words.

However, when comparing the results of the two groups there are some interesting differences. The PF group have made significantly fewer errors. Since both groups were treated equally with the exception of the PF group receiving additional peer feedback, we can attribute this improvement to the use of peer feedback in actual ESL writing classes. Students can be made aware of each other's errors and can comment on them, as well as suggesting corrections. This finding further supports those of Grami (2010), Rollinson (2005) and Zhang (1995), all of whom agreed on the usefulness of peer feedback.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of the current study seem to be in line with the findings reported in the literature, which suggest that teacher feedback is preferable to other forms of feedback, but peer feedback when administered correctly, can improve students' writing. The findings do suggest that the majority of the participants believe in the effectiveness of teacher feedback, but that there was a significant percentage who were not sure about it, a topic that is worth further investigation. Unsurprisingly, as for peer feedback, the results show that the participants were either unsure or had negative attitudes. However, as students engage in actual peer feedback, it becomes evident that more feedback does reflect in better writing.

Of course, as is the case with regard to previous studies, there is still a gap to be filled in terms of fully investigating the impact of peer feedback on specific writing skills. There is also a need to investigate students' attitudes shifts, positively or otherwise, with regard to peer feedback when they have engaged in classes that actually practiced it.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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