



## Peer Feedback to Improve Indonesian Adult Learners' Writing Skills: A Literature Review

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### Abstract

Demonstrating good writing skills in English is considered important to master for students in tertiary level. In addition, as higher education institutions in Indonesia have been conducting teaching and learning activities online to mitigate Covid-19 viral spread, students' engagement in learning has been reported to be low due to boredom and tiresome in an online learning environment. Therefore, teachers need to plan and implement strategies to promote students' skills in writing and students' engagement in learning activities, in this case writing course. One of them is by practicing peer feedback. The purpose of this paper is to critically review peer feedback in improving Indonesian adult learners' writing skills in English course. In this literature review, 23 documents (a book chapter and peer-reviewed articles) were synthesized to find how peer feedback is relevant and beneficial in the tertiary education context. This paper argues that peer feedback is advantageous in improving adult learners' writing skills in that it facilitates meaning negotiation, it fosters critical thinking, and it promotes collaborative learning. However, teachers should anticipate possible issues emerging in peer feedback practice by providing pre-requisite training for students.

### Keywords:

*adult learners, EFL, peer feedback, tertiary education, writing*

### INTRODUCTION

Peer feedback, also known as peer assessment, peer review, peer response, and peer evaluation, has been widely used since past two decades in English as Second/ Foreign Language (ESL/ EFL) writing (Allen & Mills, 2014; Chen, 2016). In this essay, the author

will refer to peer feedback as a pedagogical methodology by which students exchange their writing draft with other students or peers and provide feedback to improve their writing outcome quality (Park, 2017). This paper will explore the advantages of peer feedback in the context of adult learners' writing class in Indonesia where English is a foreign language. The author will begin by explaining the background and the context of the study.

Writing is an important skill to learn because it enables people to share information through compositions they write. In EFL context like Indonesia, writing skill is considered as a difficult skill to develop (Sukandi & Syafar, 2018). In fact, for adult English language learners, the capability of writing is perceived as an essential skill because basically they need it to accomplish their tasks in a course they enroll, particularly English course, such as writing reports, journal, and other kinds of compositions. Adult learners in this paper refer to students who pursue their study at tertiary level.

Furthermore, during emergency online learning in Indonesia as mitigation of Covid-19 pandemic, students' engagement in teaching learning has been identified as one issue. To address the matter, teachers should find methods or strategies by which students participate actively. Teachers' and peer's feedback has been argued to be effective in enhancing learning process (Rahiem, 2021) and improving students' engagement in an online learning setting (Wahyudin, 2018).

In Indonesia tertiary education context, there have been several studies completed to investigate the implementation of peer feedback activity in writing class. Cahyono and Amrina (2016) compared groups of students in English writing class to examine whether implementing peer feedback activity affected the students' writing performance. Utilising a sheet of review guideline in the activity, they found that the group in which peer feedback was conducted showed higher performance in their writing compared to the other group who did not. Through an experimental study, Wahyudin (2018) investigated the effects of peer feedback using a popular social media platform, Facebook, on students' writing ability. Writing stages, including drafting, receiving feedback and revising, were completed on Facebook. It was suggested that the activity promoted learners' writing skills. However, the research mostly views the benefits of peer feedback activity in improving learners' writing skill with little attention to how learners benefit from it and possible challenges of practicing peer feedback activity. Hence, this paper attempts to unravel how adult learners may benefit from peer feedback in English writing class.

This study was driven by the following research question: "How does peer feedback activity impact adult learners' writing skill?"

## **METHOD**

When selecting the data, several inclusion criteria were determined. First, the data could be in a form of a book chapter or a peer reviewed journal article. Second, both empirical and conceptual study were included. Third, the data could be retrieved from several online databases which cover topics on education in general and on peer feedback in particular, such as Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), ProQuest, and Google Search. Fourth, the documents were published between the range of year 2000 until 2021 to include recent publications. Keywords used for searching the sources were: peer feedback, peer review, peer feedback benefit in writing, peer feedback adult learners, peer feedback EFL Indonesia, writing skill Indonesian learners, and peer feedback online

learning. The sources were then synthesized and categorized based on similar emerging themes in relation to the benefits of peer feedback in writing.

Adopting the method prescribed by Pardede (2021) in his review of utilizing short stories in teaching English in EFL context, the constant comparative method was applied in this review. The method consists of four stages: selecting and analyzing the first data, identifying tentative theme from its content, reading the next data selected, and identifying its theme and comparing it to the previous data. When the next data did not fall to the first emerged theme, a different theme was created. The procedure was repeatedly done to review the rest of selected data.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Research Question 1:

### **How peer feedback activity impacts adult learners' writing skills in English**

Having determined the document inclusion criteria, in this paper, 23 documents including a book chapter and peer reviewed journal articles were critically reviewed. Peer feedback has been widely considered as an effective strategy to have learners' writing skill improved theoretically and practically (Kurihara, 2017). Peer feedback can be conceptualized from Vygotsky's notion of Zone Proximal Development (ZPD) (Hansen & Liu, 2005). It is believed that learning development of learners' can be facilitated and improved by the assistance of other people through social interaction they have (Vygotsky, 1978 cited in Hansen & Liu, 2005). This is to say that interactions among students in peer feedback contribute to the development of learners' understanding. In this study, the interaction is in the form of giving and receiving feedback in writing class. For this reason, peer feedback is considered as a significant approach to improve learners' skill particularly writing proficiency.

In EFL context, peer feedback has been considered as a pedagogical method which brings significance to learners' writing skill. Embedded in peer feedback practice are interaction and participation (Park, 2017). In other words, learners are demanded to be active in order to achieve the goal of this method: improved writing quality. Moreover, this method is suitable for multi-proficiency classes which shows its flexibility (Allen & Mills, 2014; Yu & Le, 2016). Derived from the value of the interaction, participation, and flexibility of peer feedback are the benefits of peer feedback itself as the themes found in this review. They are facilitating meaning negotiation, fostering critical thinking, and encouraging collaborative learning.

#### ***Peer Feedback Facilitates Meaning Negotiation***

In peer feedback there is a process in which learners have an opportunity to negotiate meaning with their peers (Lai, 2010; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012; Zhao, Sullivan, & Mellenius, 2014). This meaning negotiation can be defined as an activity from which learners might find solutions to issues that they encounter in writing by exchanging feedback to each other (Foster & Ohta, 2015). In other words, through this meaning negotiation learners are expected to be able to tackle writing hindrances they have by means of the evaluation their partners provide which is believed to lead them to possible revision strategies (Allen & Mills, 2014). This is how meaning negotiation is essential in peer feedback. They can also ask for clarification why something is wrong.

In the process of the negotiation, learners also may develop their metacognitive skill and self-awareness (Topping et al., 2000). The development of metacognitive skill and self-awareness is supported by the negotiation learners perform in peer feedback process. This is basically because an activity which is conducted in students centered method such as peer feedback provides opportunities for learners to do self-reflection (Yusuff, 2015). This self-reflection enables learners to enhance their metacognitive skill and self-awareness (Mann et al., 2009). Metacognitive skill plays a crucial role in improving adult learners' writing ability because it helps learners to improve their soft skill in identifying mistakes they have in their writing. Besides, metacognitive skill allows learners to understand something from other people understanding. One more interesting thing about metacognitive skill is that learners will be increasingly motivated to perform better in writing. There is a tendency that learners would like to show positive image of themselves by attempting to show their progress which is good for their writing skill improvement. Therefore, it is beneficial for learners to perform negotiation through peer feedback. Meanwhile, self-awareness helps learners to avoid doing the same error when they are faced with the same issue that they have found in writing.

Nevertheless, there might be a situation which possibly hinder meaning negotiation in exchanging feedback between peers. Meaning negotiation in peer feedback cannot be performed if students are not willing to get involved in the activity. In a related study conducted by Sato (2013), it is assumed that one reason which might preclude learners from participating in peer feedback is that students show reluctance to provide responses on their partners' writing. Further, Sato (2013) supposed that learners' low proficiency in target language, in this case English, has become one factor which inhibits learners from responding to their peers' writing. Another study Yu and Lee (2016) adds that English language learners with low proficiency tend to be not confident to evaluate or provide feedback for their peers' drafts. Therefore, Yu and Lee (2016) in their study suggest that the issue mentioned can be possibly resolved by allowing learners to use their first language in exchanging feedback. Through the study, it is found that allowing students to give feedback in their first language enables students, especially those whose L2 proficiency is low, to engage actively in peer feedback activity. It is because they can assess their peers' writing confidently (Yu & Lee, 2016). Exchanging feedback in L1 may prevent students from misunderstanding as well as reviewers will be able to express their feedback with clarity that reviewees can comprehend. As the result, both students with low and high proficiency in L2 may benefit from the evaluation given by their peers.

As the conclusion, it can be said that meaning negotiation resulting from peer feedback provides learners with skills that they require in order to improve their revision of writing through self-reflection.

### ***Peer Feedback Fosters Critical Thinking***

Critical thinking is one of the skills in 21<sup>st</sup> century skills framework (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). It is crucial to be taught as it may enable learners to adapt, make decisions, and solve problems in current fast-paced world (Nikou et al., 2015). This skill can be attained by practicing giving and receiving feedback in writing class (Topping et al., 2000; McConlogue, 2005; Nikou et al., 2015). Further, McConlogue (2005) believes that in the process of peer review, learners have their own time that they can use to participate either by providing feedback or receiving feedback. Since there is a demand to provide assessment constructively, they must work hard at this stage.

In giving feedback, learners may develop their skill in critical thinking by practicing critical evaluation upon their peers' written work and providing effective feedback (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). This is beneficial for the reviewing learners as it enables them to learn autonomously to develop their reviewing skill (Kurihara, 2017). As the result, they can apply it to their own writing. In this way, they can improve their own writing revision quality. Meanwhile, in receiving feedback, learners are required to apply critical thinking as well (McConlogue, 2005). It becomes important because in order to bring improvement to their revision, the feedback that they receive must be constructive as well. Therefore, learners must be capable of choosing feedback that they need to incorporate in their draft for a better revision. Allen and Mills (2014) suggest that as reviewees, learners need to be selective in incorporating their peers' comments into their revision strategy.

The aforementioned studies are similar to what Nikou et al. (2015) concluded in their research in Iranian TEFL context whose purpose was to examine correlation between critical thinking skills and writing quality. They found that critical thinking has a linear correlation to writing quality in that having critical thinking skills (analyzing, evaluating, and inferencing) enables learners to write a high quality draft. Those skills can be taught to learners when they are engaged in peer feedback activities as well. The quality of the revision is higher if learners' ability to adopt the feedback is higher as well (Kurihara, 2017).

As an example, in a study conducted by Kurihara (2017), one student agreed that it was important to think critically if the feedback given by peers were to be used in revision or not, given the fact the student and the peers were learners, not an expert. This process provides learners with opportunities to practice their critical thinking skills. It is different when the feedback is from their teacher. There is an inclination that students would accept it without thinking. This can happen because in EFL or ESL context, teachers' assessment may be taken for granted (Kurihara, 2017). Nonetheless, a challenge might arise from this situation. The quality and validity of feedback provided may be questioned (Sato, 2013; McConlogue, 2015)

Studies suppose that the quality of the feedback provided may probably fail to support students' progress in writing and consequently discourage students' involvement in peer feedback. It is assumed that the feedback is sometimes uncritical and not specific (Lai (2010); McConlogue, 2005). According to Lai (2010), this situation can emerge due to students' reluctance to assess their peers' written work negatively. She further explains that the reason is because students are afraid to hurt their peers' feeling and disrupt their relationship by giving critique than can be perceived as negative inputs (Lai, 2010). In response to this, the reviewer is suggested to be anonymous (Liu & Sadler, 2003, as cited by Zhao et al., 2014). Nevertheless, Zhao et al. (2014) further anticipated the anonymity would inhibit learners to ask for feedback clarification. As the consequence, no meaning negotiation would occur. In worse cases, students-based feedback is even sometimes considered not more reliable than teachers-based feedback (Yu & Le, 2016). Therefore, a strategy is required to gain the effectiveness of peer feedback.

To conduct an effective peer feedback session, most of the studies which put interest in this method suggest a few prerequisite procedures to do before instructing learners to assess their peers' written work (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Sato, 2013; Huisman, et al., 2016; Yu & Le, 2016). Pre-assessment training is prerequisite in peer assessment (Sato, 2013; Yu & Le, 2016). In the training it is important to have learners build trust

among their peers and understand the purpose and advantages of peer feedback for their writing improvement (Sato, 2013). Therefore, learners are motivated to provide critical comments for their peers because their understanding of the benefits of peer feedback (Yu & Le, 2016). Likewise, learners should be told explicit instruction on how to assess other students' work to prevent them from providing misleading evaluation (Huisman et al., 2016). In addition, Lundstrom and Baker (2009) suggests providing learners with assessment form or rubric to ease them in scaling their peers' written work.

The rubric will also be helpful to keep the peer evaluation focused on the targeted area of skills that teachers would like the learners to improve. Paltridge (2018) suggested a rubric that can be incorporated in a peer review activity in a writing class. The rubric may contain several points to be completed by the reviewer: the title and the author of a draft, the summary of main ideas in written in the draft, what the reviewer learned from the draft, the strengths of the draft, how clear the argument is written, how well the draft is organized and structured, whether the author provided evidence to claims written in the draft, the reviewer's suggestion for revision, and the reviewer's name and time of reviewing (Paltridge, 2018). This opinion is relevant to what Cahyono and Amrina (2016) concluded in their study that providing a guideline in peer feedback activity in prior help learners understand what aspects of the draft they need to review and how they assess it. All these clear ground and instructions will encourage learners to engage in the activities as adult learners show a tendency to be highly motivated in learning where learning purpose and instructions are clearly presented (Cozma, 2015).

To sum up, peer feedback stimulates learners to develop their ability to think critically. Applying critical thinking assists them in both constructing useful feedback and adopting the feedback given to them selectively into their revision. Also, pre-assessment training included clear instructions provided by teachers are found to be useful and essential to lead learners to work properly and in the session. In that way, learners can contribute collaboratively to peer feedback.

### ***Peer Feedback Encourages Collaborative Learning***

Peer feedback has been correlated with collaborative learning (Kurihara, 2017; Topping, 2009). From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, peer feedback can be viewed as a contributive method in developing learners' skill, particularly in writing, from interaction happening in the process of giving and receiving feedback (Allen & Mills, 2014). It, therefore, strengthens the importance of the interaction itself.

In relation to peer feedback in adult learners' writing class, it is expected that both reviewers and reviewees gain advantages as well (Huisman et al., 2016). This collaborative study environment can be established if every student participates actively by functioning as both reviewer and reviewee. As learners play a role as reviewers, they are supposed to gain more advantages than those whose role is as reviewees (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). The interaction happens between the reviewer and the reviewee provides an opportunity to gain benefit. The reviewee may see how real readers or audiences will understand the content of his composition through the eyes of the reviewer (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Kurihara, 2017). The feedback provided may contribute to the revision process. On the other side, the reviewer can gain benefit by being exposed to others' writing to review it critically (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). By so doing, the reviewers can have a chance to compare it with their own writing and develop a deeper understanding

about skills in writing such as how to create coherent and well-organized text (Yang, 2011; Park, 2017).

Nonetheless, Topping et al. (2000) assumed peer feedback can be a time consuming activity. This may be correlated with the nature of EFL classes. In Indonesia, to be specific, writing classes are commonly big classes (Usman & Irnanda, 2016). As a consequence, time constrain might be a hindrance, not to mention the absence of learners in face-to face class also can limit the interaction of learners (Park, 2017). This situation can become a challenge to the success of peer feedback activity itself. To address the issue, several researchers attempted to expand the practice of peer feedback because no collaboration happens without interaction and participation (Zhao et al., 2014). Integrating peer feedback with technology has become an alternative to encourage learners' interaction out of face-to-face writing class.

With the current online teaching and learning conduct in Indonesia due to Covid-19 pandemic, online peer feedback is feasible to practice. Lai (2010) argued that online peer feedback is effective to be applied in big classes. Likewise, Chen (2016) argued that the presence of technology-based peer feedback allows learners to do interaction without space and time limitation. For instance, a study on the mode of technology supported peer feedback in ESL/EFL writing class conducted by Chen (2016) found that online peer feedback mode was effective to be implemented as it brought advantages for learners. Since they were not bothered anymore by limited time they had in face-to-face writing class, they could provide more focused comments and suggestions. It was also found that this online peer evaluation did not impede the interaction and participation of learners. To implement it, an online platform is required. Park (2017) introduced Classprep, a platform designed to facilitate learners in online peer feedback, and found that it maintained students' interaction and participation. Moreover, teachers still can monitor learners' activity. In another study (Wahyudin, 2018), online peer feedback was performed through a social media platform, Facebook. This experimental study shows participants' writing skill increase as they had opportunities to experience out of class collaboration by which analytical and critical skills and awareness in writing were developed.

The implementation of online peer feedback activity is highly relevant to the most current situation in the context of this study. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology decided that higher institutions would operate remotely to mitigate the spread of the virus. That being said, distance learning has been the mode of learning in higher education institutions. Given this situation, online peer feedback is feasible to be done through campus learning management system (LMS) or other possible online platforms.

In conclusion, peer feedback is found to be encouraging the atmosphere of collaborative learning, which is important for learners' development, in this case learners' writing proficiency. The interaction which occurs in the process of peer feedback is one key to initiate learners to work collaboratively by providing and receiving evaluation on their peers. As time may become a constraint on the interaction and participation of learners in face-to-face writing class, another strategy should be considered. For example, online peer feedback is thought to be useful to facilitate learners' interaction out of the class. With regard to this idea, online platform is required.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper has reviewed how peer feedback is an effective method to be implemented to improve adult learners' writing skill in Indonesia that considers English as a foreign language. It is believed that adult learners gain substantial advantages to help them perform better in writing from engaging in peer feedback. Firstly, getting involved in peer feedback enables them to experience meaning negotiation. This meaning negotiation occurs from the interaction learners have during the process of reviewing each other's work. Through meaning negotiation learners and their partner can discuss to provide revision strategy which is essential to improve the quality of their compositions. The second, peer feedback has been found effective to foster learners' critical thinking which affect their writing positively. Functioning as a reviewer, learners benefit from being exposed to other learners' text that probably give them new knowledge and insight. Also, they are required to critically read their peers' written work. It enables them to provide constructive comments. By so doing, they can also practice doing the same thing on their own written work to improve its quality. Meanwhile, as a reviewee, learners benefit from the evaluation given by their peers. The skill of critical thinking enables them to selectively choose the feedback they are provided to be incorporated in their revision because their quality of revision may be depending on their ability to adopt the feedback. The last, peer feedback encourages collaborative learning. Indeed, interaction emerging in the process of peer feedback facilitates learners to collaborate by giving and taking feedback.

By considering the profound advantages that peer feedback can contribute to learners' writing skill enhancement, the author, thus, strongly recommends peer feedback to be implemented in adult learners' writing class in Indonesia. However, as several limitations may emerge during peer feedback practice, several things are needed to be considered. Firstly, it is important to consider that allowing learners to use L1 in peer feedback is important to facilitate them to participate actively in peer feedback. The second, pre-assessment training is a precondition for peer assessment. The last, an alternative method such as online peer feedback can be taken as an alternative to maximize learners' interaction out of the class. Consequently, learners' writing skill is expected to improve.

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