

Literature review

PF is considered by Chong (2010: 53) as a form of “collaborative writing approach” in which students benefit from the feedback and the diversity of input of their peers. Richards and Schmidt (2010) view it as the counterpart of peer review and peer response in which students receive feedback on their writing from peers. Charoenchang (2013) considers these terms as similar in the process of implementation since they serve as a means to promote independent writing. In addition, Liu and Hansen (2002) argue that PF refers to the

use of learners as sources of information, and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other’s drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing. (p. 1)

Students can, for example, see how to draft a topic sentence when they see how it is written by fellow students. PF therefore fosters student collaboration, which in turn enables them to construct and share knowledge (von Glasersfeld, 2005). Charoenchang (2013: 3) also believes that PF “brings about more classroom interaction as learners ask, explain and give comments to each other. Such interactions help to enhance their learning because in doing so, both writers and editors focus on meaning as well as form of language”. Von Glasersfeld (2005) finds that boosting student independence and interdependence underlies a constructivist ontology which appreciates student agency in language classes and encourages their cooperation with others for constructing knowledge. Knowledge is being viewed as the “outcome of experience mediated by one’s own prior knowledge and the experience of others” (Philips, 2003: 232). One way of enhancing student independence and autonomy is PF. It is praised for reducing student reliance on language teachers and for creating a wider learning environment in which students benefit from the feedback and diversity of input produced by peers (Stubbe, 2013).

PE has been proposed as a valuable technique in academic and technical writing courses. Richards and Schmidt (2010) consider it a form of the writing process approach which relies on the gradual and independent improvement of writing skills. Chong (2010: 55) calls it a small portion of the writing process approach. It enhances student composition processes and allows them to share ideas while planning, drafting, and revising writing forms. It enables students of low linguistic ability to benefit from the experience and feedback of higher achieving students. As a means of providing constructive critique on written work, PF not only benefits recipients of the edits, but also the editors themselves who acquire the skill to assess and provide justifiable comments (Stubbe, 2013). Phillipson (2007), in addition, finds that PF widens the scope and thinking patterns of students when they compose a piece of writing. It encourages them to write for a broader audience, such as peers, rather than simply writing directly for their direct teachers. This entails using a readable style in terms of clarity, directness, and conciseness that can be understood by students of different linguistic levels (Houp et al, 2009).

For Charoenchang (2013), PF promotes student awareness of metacognitive strategies and enhances self-reliance. Acquisition of these strategies fosters autonomy and enables them to identify how to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning (Wenden, 1999). It enables low achieving students to scaffold new concepts and associate existing knowledge with new input in situations when they are guided by higher achieving students to fix existing errors. It reduces student anxiety and creates a less threatening learning atmosphere simply because any common flaws in students’ written work will indicate a shared gap in their understanding rather than an individual weakness (Rollinson, 2005).

PF nevertheless has some pitfalls outlined by Phillipson (2007). Unless the aspects of PF are explicitly signalled from the beginning, students may focus on the relatively trivial emendations like spelling and

grammar deformations and neglect the overall content and organisation of a document. Awareness of the perspectives of PF not only permits givers of the edits to provide comprehensive evaluation of a document, but also enables receivers of the edits to evaluate the levels of input they receive from their partners. Occasionally, misinterpretation of an editor's feedback exists particularly when he suggests a correction that may weaken a paper. Hence, students should neither be highly defensive nor overly tolerant in accepting the feedback suggested by peers (Phillipson, 2007). One way to make student feedback more productive is to allow them to read samples of works reviewed by teachers or experienced students to identify how written work should be edited and the aspects they should monitor while reviewing.

Another drawback of PF is that some students are not competent enough to provide constructive feedback on the written work of their peers. Sometimes they are too awkward to provide valuable input that improves the original work of distinguished students. This issue is addressed in this study. Phillipson (2007), moreover, emphasises cultural constraints, considering them very effective while reviewing a peer's work. Some students are too polite to critique others' work unless some mistakes are prominent and correcting them will not embarrass the writer. Otherwise, they consider focusing on the flaws in others' works an offending act. These cultural traits are heavily embedded in Arab culture (Atkine, 2004). Atkine goes further as he postulates that the term "criticism" is not widely used in Arab culture and "when it is voiced, it is usually in terms of a condemnation of Arab acceptance of some aspect of Western culture" (ibid, 47). This argument suggests that many Arabs do not mind criticising some aspects of the Western culture that conflict with their local traditions rather than criticising each other's work. My current study aims to further that understanding and to explain the impact of the Arab culture on student practice and attitudes towards PF.

Among the studies that addressed PF in non-Arab contexts was that of Chong (2010) in Hong Kong, who concluded that some students explicitly supported PF; however, others were quite reserved, either due to the distrust in their abilities as editors, or distrust in the abilities of other students to guide and review their work. Another study for Stubbe (2013) at James Madison University in Virginia revealed that PF was not highly beneficial to students' writing due to a lack of student confidence in the process, thereby creating "going through the motions" (ibid, 3) types of corrections. These studies bolster the belief that PF becomes more favourable when students appreciate the bilateral cooperation and feedback of others. In Arab settings, it seems there is a lack of significant research addressing PF at both school and tertiary levels except for the two studies of Azaza and Aloud. Azaza (2013) conducted a study on PF with school students in the UAE. He concluded that PF improved the writing mechanics of students; however, he also found that PF alone remains insufficient unless complemented with teacher feedback and self-feedback. Another study, by Aloud (2013), with undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia revealed that online PF increased students' enthusiasm and collaboration and developed their writing abilities. In a rather different context, my current study aims at examining how PF is implemented, practised, and perceived by a group of undergraduate students at Abu Dhabi University in the UAE.

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted with 150 undergraduate students in five sections at Abu Dhabi University in the academic year 2012-2013. They were enrolled in a variety of majors but had to study English for Business and Technical Communications writing course (ENG-201) as a part of the university requirements. The female participants made up 53% and the males made up 47% of the sample. They

ranged in age from 18 to 22, with a median age of 20. The native language of 85% of the students was Arabic; however, 15% were Indians, Nigerians, and various European nationalities. Unlike academic writing courses, ENG-201 introduces students to the basic principles and skills necessary to construct technical and business letters, with emphasis on writing for the workplace. It also reinforces the basic research tools to help them prepare workplace documents and enhance their writing skills (Houp et al, 2009).

Stages of implementing peer feedback

Different approaches to conducting PF in language classes are suggested by researchers. For instance, Kroll (2001) argues that peer feedback can be expressed verbally through mutual discussion between the peer editor and partner or through producing written comments. The two modes can even be combined consecutively in which an oral discussion can follow suggested written corrections. I favoured combining both written and oral feedback to provide students with an opportunity to elaborate on the suggested corrections. This was implemented through a three-stage process which I call APT, standing for *Awareness - Peer-feedback - Talk*. The three APT stages were practised by students four times representing the number of assignments they did in class. Providing feedback on the hardcopies submitted by partner students was followed by close discussion for about ten to fifteen minutes between the editor and the composer of the written work. These three stages are interlinked and work in concordance with each other. Application of each stage facilitates the development of the other stages. For instance, the awareness stage aims at increasing student knowledge of what the feedback process includes and the level of input they anticipate from peers. It provides them with both theoretical and practical experience prior to getting engaged in the actual review process. It also enables students to comprehend and identify the main parts of a business letter (appendix one). This covers the "Opening" that explains the purpose, the "Focus" that provides enough details on the topic, the "Action" that states what the writer plans to do, and the "Closing" that shows the writer's positive attitude and strong rapport. This stage also involves providing samples of edited documents (appendix two) with minor changes and simple emendations. Other documents have major corrections related to the overall layout.

In the editing stage, both producers and receivers of the edits were encouraged to use pseudonyms to make their identities anonymous during the time of editing at least. This arrangement offers both sides greater freedom and reduces embarrassment that may arise as a result of the reciprocal editing process. The role of the instructor at this stage was to remind student editors to check for the content and organisation as well as superficial mistakes. In the post-editing stage, closed peer discussions were encouraged, in which students engaged in conversations discussing the editor's feedback and the writer's view. Open discussion was also conducted to clarify any controversial comments suggested by editors. The instructor's role meanwhile was to monitor discussions and intervene to verify or provoke discussion on corrections suggested by partner peers. The rationale of this activity was to allow the whole class students to identify the very common mistakes they had in their written work.

Student questionnaire

Administering the questionnaire was done after the students finished doing the regular course assignments and applied the three "APT" stages with the four assignments. This did not require formal ethical approval from the university since it falls within the learning process of the course. Students were not compelled to do the questionnaire; rather they found it opportunity to express their views on the merits and/or demerits of PF. The questionnaire used in this study (appendix three) consists of

seven focused items; six of them are designed on the Likert-type template ranging from level five “strongly agree” to level one “strongly disagree” with level three “not sure”. This format allows to answer research questions systematically and to examine student attitudes in a structured and disciplined way. This simple and reliable format gives participants the chance to shift smoothly from positive to negative and to choose the figure that most closely expresses their views. A final open-ended question “What other advantages / disadvantages of peer feedback do you see?” was added to allow students to reflect on the ideas they find relevant, yet were not covered in the other items of the scale. In order to check clarity of the questionnaire items, it was piloted with twenty students beforehand to modify any confusing words. This number was necessary to validate the questionnaire and verify its psychometric features in terms of the internal consistency and correlation between its items. An item analysis was also conducted, and the Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient was measured showing it was 79.3%, a good ratio as argued by Dörnyei (2003):

Sometimes lower Cronbach Alpha coefficients are to be expected, but even with short scales of 3-4 items we should aim at reliability coefficients in excess of 0.70; if the Cronbach Alpha of a scale does not reach 0.60, this should sound warning bells (Dörnyei, 2003: 112).

Based on student responses, factor analysis and descriptive statistics were applied to understand the trend of student attitudes in relation to this topic.

Analysis of results

Peer feedback on students’ written work

In the technical writing course, students write technical documents like enquiry, reference, and condolence letters, etc. The analysis of their feedback shows different levels of input. As shown in the samples of appendix four, the editor of the enquiry letter (sample one) suggested minor corrections related to spelling and grammar mistakes. Some words were underlined for their incorrect spelling such as: “deffirant (different), inquaries (inquiries), peaces (pieces), notised (noticed), castomar (customer), convenice (convenience), clearify (clarify), and delevary (delivery)”. This is in addition to picking out two grammar mistakes in which the copula “is” was replaced by “are”. The editor did not provide feedback on the overall organisation of the letter, but it seems s/he was uncomfortable with the level of writing and hence graded the student with a score of three out of five. This form of input was selective rather than informative and did not provide sufficient hints and helpful suggestions on how the whole letter could be enriched and improved.

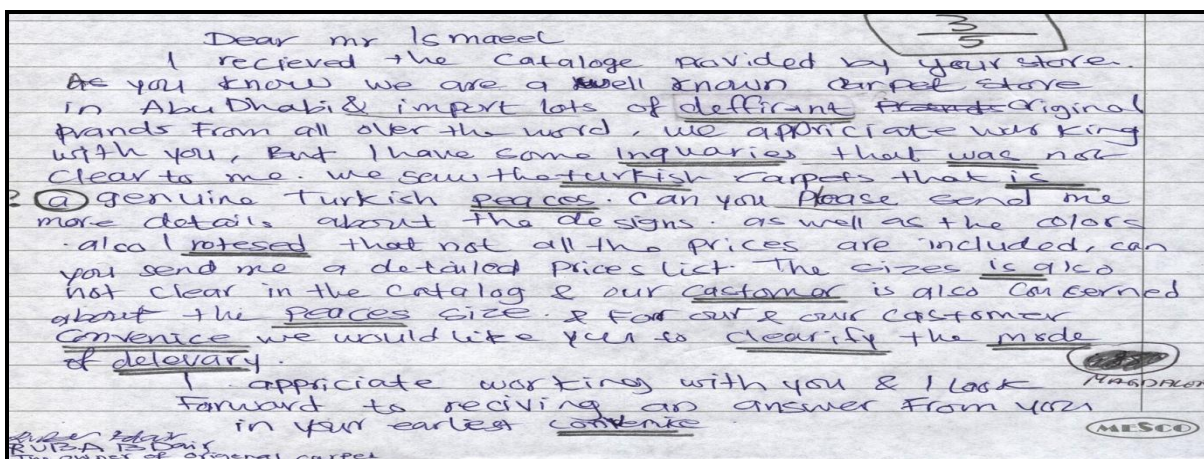


Figure 1: Sample writing (a).

