

# ESL Writing Students Attitudes towards Peer Feedback Activities

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the value of peer feedback in English as a second language (ESL) writing class from the perspective of forty intermediate level students studying in a technical Saudi Arabian college, who had been extensively exposed to this type of feedback. Several research hypotheses were formulated on the basis of a comprehensive literature review of scholarship on writing and peer feedback and then tested in this research context. The study uses quantitative data derived from anonymous, semi-structured questionnaires distributed to students. The results of this study show that the majority of respondents appear to hold an overwhelmingly positive attitude regarding the employment of peer feedback activities in their writing courses.

**Keywords:** Peer feedback, ESL, English, Writing, attitude, Saudi Arabia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Peer feedback can be defined as the “... use of learners as sources of information and interact ants 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” Liu and Hansen (2002:1).

Many strategies could be adopted for the employment of this type of feedback and besides the most common formats which are 1)to assign groups of two, three, or four students and ask them to exchange their first drafts and give comments on each others’ drafts before they make their final drafts; 2) to make students read their own essays aloud, or get a colleague to read it instead, while the other students listen and provide feedback either written or oral on the work that they have just heard. An alternative strategy 3) is not to restrict it to the time after students have written their essays

because it is possible for students to use this type of feedback in the pre-writing stage by asking other students to comment on each others’ outlines or to carry out a brainstorming session Hyland (2003).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of L2 researchers believe that peer feedback is a valuable resource to improve students’ writing. Their claims have been supported by much research that can be categorized into three areas: 1) studies focusing on the effect of peer feedback activities on students’ revisions and the development of their writing; 2) studies describing the types of student interactions during peer feedback sessions; 3) studies focusing on students’ attitudes towards peer feedback (Ferris, 2003b; and Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005).

### 2.1. The Effect of Peer Feedback on Revision

This area has always been the target of many studies; Connor and Asenavage’s (1994) study for instance, traced the amount

and types of revision of eight L2 undergraduate learners on their drafts in response to peer comments and teacher comments; they found that about 5 percent of the total changes came from peer comments, while 35 percent resulted from teacher comments. Sixty percent of the revisions resulted from sources other than comments from teacher and peers. This study, which has been described by Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) as the only study that revealed "...truly discouraging findings", has been contrasted with many encouraging studies. One was conducted by Mendonça and Johnson, (1994) on twelve ESL advanced learners coming from different countries i.e. China, Spain, France, Indonesia, and Korea. Their study revealed that these students found peer feedback useful, and helped them to revise their written tasks. Their findings showed that 53% of revisions made in students' essays were as a result of comments made by their peers; which supports the idea of using peer feedback activities in L2 writing classes. Another supportive finding was reported in a study conducted by Nelson and Murphy (1993: 140), who found that their four intermediate ESL students, from Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Taiwan, do include their peers' suggestions in their subsequent drafts; however, the quantity of incorporation depended heavily on a cooperative environment within the group. They stated that "... when writers interacted with their peers in a cooperative manner, they were more likely to use the peers' suggestions in revising. When writers interacted with their peers in a defensive manner or did not interact at all, the writer was less likely to use the peers' comments".

Researchers have also investigated the role that peer feedback plays on the quality of written work; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) for instance found that the final drafts of those essays written by students who received only peer feedback resulted in higher overall scores than those of students who revised after receiving teacher feedback instead. Their findings

suggest that oral peer feedback resulted in more changes in content, vocabulary, and organization, while written teacher feedback resulted in more changes in the grammatical field. In the same area Jacobs and Zhang (1989) reported that teacher's feedback is more effective on grammatical accuracy than peer feedback and self-assessment, which had been used in this study involving 81 college level ESL students. It was also found that students seemed to prefer teacher feedback rather than the other types used. Furthermore, it was found that neither of the three types was found to have an effect on informational and rhetorical accuracy. In another comparative study Partridge (1981), as cited in Chaudron (1984), found that peer feedback brought less improvement than teacher feedback; she also claims that some doubts arose from the students' perspective concerning the credibility and accuracy of their peers' comments. This last result does not agree with Weeks and White's (1982) findings because their study, conducted on 18 fourth and 26 sixth grade students to compare the effects of teacher editing and peer editing on students' written works, showed that no significant difference was found between the group using teacher feedback and the group using peer feedback. Chaudron (1983), who compared teacher comments, peer evaluations, and English-speaking peer reformulations with his ESL college level students, found that the two different types both improved students' written work and he claimed that there is no significant difference between the amount of improvement resulting from teacher feedback and that resulting from peer feedback. The findings of Weeks and White (1982), and Chaudron (1983), were supported by Rijlaarsdam (1986) in his study conducted on Dutch secondary school students in eight different schools; he also concluded that the two different types of feedback were of equal value.

Hvitfeldt (1986) conducted a study on 118 ESL University students to see the effect of peer critiques on writing. He found that in instances where his subjects were

given specific guidelines, peer feedback led to a 'credible job' on the part of students with respect to analyzing the weaknesses and strengths of their peer's writing. Hvitfeldt whose subjects used critique forms to assess their peer's written work, suggests that ESL students are not good judges of grammaticality, word choice and mechanics, but they can develop critical abilities related to content and organization of their written tasks.

Wit beck (1976) examined four peer feedback strategies in dealing with intermediate and advanced ESL students' compositions. These strategies were: 1) *whole class correction*; where a chosen essay is discussed by the teacher and his students; 2) *Immediate Feedback and Rewriting*; the procedure of this strategy is done by collecting students' papers and redistributing them to other students working in pairs to comment on them and hand them back to the writers to rewrite them before handing them to the teacher; 3) *Problem Solving*; in this strategy errors are chosen by the teacher who assigns a pair or a group of students to detect errors; 4) *Correction of Modified and Duplicated Essays*; students in this strategy were asked at the beginning to work individually and then in groups to discuss certain problems or whether mistakes were made.

Despite all of the disadvantages associated with employing these strategies, Wit beck (1976: 325) concluded that using them instead of the conventional teacher correction strategies developed a "... greater concern for achieving accuracy in written expression in individual students and creates a better classroom atmosphere for teaching the correctional aspects of composition".

## **2.2. Students' Interactions in Peer Feedback Activities**

Many studies have also been focusing on this area; in an exploratory study conducted on 60 ESL freshmen, Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger (1992) analysed the written responses of those subjects to essays written by other ESL

students of the previous semester. Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger identified three reader stances: the interpretive, the prescriptive, and the collaborative. The majority of students in this study, according to the researchers, assumed the prescriptive stance, which suggests that their students believe that it is more important to provide correct forms than to communicate meaning. In the same year, Nelson and Murphy (1992a), in a study which lasted for six weeks examined the task dimension and social dimension of ESL writing students at the college level. Their study revealed that the social dimension was found to be less successful than the task dimension. The two researchers noticed that positive interaction enhanced the effectiveness of the feedback; they added that aggressive criticism affected the feedback leading to negative responses.

Two years later, in their task describing the negotiations practiced by ESL students, Mendonça and Johnson (1994) identified five major interaction activities from their study of 12 advanced learners enrolled on a writing course: asking questions, offering explanations, giving suggestions, restating what they have heard or read from their peers, and correcting grammatical mistakes. Mendonça and Johnson (1994) also found students used their peer comments in their essays, but at the same time were selective about which comments they incorporated.

Lockhart and Ng (1995a) have categorized reader stances that affect peer feedback into four categories: authoritarian, interpretive, probing, and collaborative. Their study which was conducted on 27 *dyads* of ESL undergraduate students, stressed the usefulness of the probing and collaborative stances as being more useful than the other two stances; in a sense they created a more productive and encouraging peer feedback environment.

These types of studies, according to Villamil and de Guerrero "... may provide important clues to why peer revision is or is not successful and ultimately may help practitioners make informed decisions as to

its classroom use. This issue is especially meaningful when it involves L2 learners, for whom the language of written and oral communication in the classroom is simultaneously the language they are trying to learn” (ibid: 52).

The importance of studying social dynamics and readers’ stances has also been asserted by Ferris (2003b: 75), who suggested that such studies may result in “... predicting the success and failure, in both practical and effective terms, of peer feedback activities”.

### **2.3. Students’ Attitudes towards Peer Feedback:**

The majority of studies conducted to tackle L2 students’ reactions to peer feedback have shown supportive findings for the use of this type of feedback. Mangelsdorf (1992), in a study carried out on 40 university freshmen ESL students in order to discover their attitudes toward this type of feedback, and which also asked five of students’ teachers about their attitudes, found that the majority of these participants found peer feedback a beneficial strategy that helped students to revise their written work. Nevertheless the complaints that some students expressed about peer feedback suggest that peer feedback sessions have to be carefully structured and organised in order to produce productive results.

Leki (1990b: 6-7) reported on a study which was conducted on 20 ESL writing students who were asked to respond to the questions: *a) how useful was it to you to read other students’ papers; and b) how useful was it to you to hear/read other students comments on your papers.* That vast majority (15 out of 17) of the comments were positive when responding to the first question. In response to the second question only 14 students reported positively, 4 students gave both negative and positive comments, and 2 students reported only negative comments.

A number of studies have pointed out that peer feedback is not always the preferred type of feedback for ESL students.

An example is the study reported by Zhang (1995) conducted on eighty one L2 college freshmen about 1) their preference between teacher feedback and non-teacher feedback (i.e. either peer feedback or self-feedback); and 2) their preference between peer feedback and self-directed feedback. For the first research question seventy six (93.8%) of the students chose teacher feedback over non-teacher feedback and concerning the second research question the majority (60.5%) of students preferred peer feedback over self-directed feedback.

Another study carried out by Curtis (1997), as cited in Jacobs et al. (1998), showed that teacher feedback was significantly preferred to peer feedback. This study incorporated the preferences of 35 ESL Hong Kong university students who were asked at the end of an introductory academic writing course to rate the usefulness of different types of feedback on a Likert scale of 1-6 (1=not useful; 6=very useful).

Although the last two findings revealed that students preferred feedback from the teacher rather than peer feedback, these studies, according to Jacobs et al. (1998: 313), suggested that students value both types of feedback. They argue that it is misleading to force students to make a choice between peer feedback and teacher feedback, because these two types should not be mutually exclusive; they prove their claim from their study which was conducted on 121 first and second year undergraduate ESL students enrolled in two universities, one in Hong Kong, and one in Taiwan, in the sense that they found that the majority (93 %) of their subjects preferred to have peer feedback as one type of feedback on their essays.

Other studies as well as those mentioned above have revealed different advantages and disadvantages related to this type of feedback; this will be the focus of the discussion in the next section.

### **2.4. Points of Strength in Peer Feedback**

According to Liu and Hansen (2002), the advantages and disadvantages of

this type of feedback can be categorised into four areas, which are: cognitive, social, linguistic, and practical. For the cognitive part; it is believed that responding to colleagues' writings could develop students' abilities to compose their own essays, and enable them to be responsible for evaluating their own essays instead of depending on the teacher as a main source of change and evaluation (Daniels and Zemelman, 1985; Hirvela, 1999; and Mendonça and Johnson, 1994). Moreover, peer feedback activities help to improve the critical skills needed to analyse and revise their own writing (Leki, 1990b; and Mittan, 1989). Furthermore, the activities involved in this type of feedback engage students in "... unrehearsed, low risk, exploratory talk that that is less feasible in classroom and teacher-student interactions" (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005:226).

In addition, this type of feedback, according to Zamel (1982: 206) "... helps develop in students the crucial ability of re-viewing their writing with the eyes of another" which helps students to develop "audience awareness" and to modify their works to "... meet the needs of their audience" (Liu, and Hansen, 2002: 8-9). An added benefit of peer feedback activities has been mentioned by London and Tornow (1998), who suggest that they enhance students' self-awareness in the sense that they receive multiple points of view from other students about their writing.

The activities involved in this type of feedback also provide advantages in the social arena; Mittan (1989), for example, believes that they help to raise students' motivation and confidence in their writing in the sense that they provide them with an opportunity to see their peers' strengths and weaknesses. He also believes that they help students to receive different points of views on their writings "from authentic readers" (ibid: 209). Such an atmosphere, according to Rollinson (2005), improves students' understanding and agreement with the feedback provided, which is not always possible with teacher feedback.

Johnson and Johnson (1987) claim that peer feedback provides a collaborative atmosphere which has more effective results in language acquisition than a competitive and individualistic atmosphere, they add that this feedback format gives the opportunity to students to co-operate, support, and encourage each other. Such co-operation can also create new friendship between colleagues (Hirvela, 1999).

Obah (1993) has indicated that using peer feedback provides students with more encouragement to talk in the classroom and it also helps them to overcome the fear of making mistakes and the fear of exposing their lack of knowledge. She also says that such activities could make class time more interesting and fun for the students.

Levine et al. (2002) state that peer feedback turns the writing process into a social construction of meaning, in a sense it enables students to exchange ideas and thoughts in relation to the content of their works and to discuss similar writing problems.

Different activities of peer feedback have been seen to offer different benefits in the linguistics field; one of them, as stated in Mendonça and Johnson (1994), is to give the chance to students to use a variety of language functions such as asking questions, offering explanations, giving suggestions, restating what their peers have said or written, and correcting grammar mistakes. Furthermore, it is also believed that peer-review discussions give students the opportunity to practice oral language skills (Liu and Hansen, 2002; Mittan, 1989; and Tang and Tithecott, 1999). Such activities will certainly result in general enhancements of the learners' second language learning (Liu and Hansen, 2002; and Mangelsdorf, 1989). Another advantage is that peer feedback activities help to build and develop communicative skills, making it a good opportunity for ESL and/or EFL learners to test and revise their L2 (Mangelsdorf, 1989). Moreover, Johnson (1990), as cited in Mangelsdorf (1992), believes that peer reviews require the

practice of politeness strategies, which are considered to be an important aspect of language acquisition. According to Liu and Hansen (2002) peer feedback activities in general will open a new window for students to explore and discover ideas and to express their own and to negotiate them with their colleagues.

It has also been found that the activities involved in this type of feedback could be of valuable benefit on the *practical* level; one example is that they can be employed at the different stages of the writing process (Connor and Asenavage, 1994). Bartels (2003) adds that since peer comments can even be reviewed after the end of the semester it could provide students with reference materials.

Using peer feedback activities increases, according to Keh (1990), the time that could be given to practicing other tasks in the classroom which makes this type of feedback a good solution when dealing with large numbers of students.

Moreover, this type of feedback is “time-efficient” (Liu, 1998; as cited in Liu and Hansen, 2002) and it could reduce teacher’s work load and provide teachers with valuable information about students’ reading and writing skills and their “knowledge about good writing” (Mittan, 1989: 212). Peer feedback provides students with much more immediate and frequent feedback than a teacher can possibly provide (Topping, 1998). Moreover, as has been found, according to Caulk (1994), peer feedback is more specific compared to that of a teacher.

## **2.5. Points of Weakness in Peer Feedback**

Researchers have talked about possible drawbacks that may appear when adopting this type of feedback; in the cognitive arena for example a problem may arise if we know that many ESL students may not accept the fact that their fellow peers could replace their teacher in evaluating their writing. This mistrust issue may result in L2 learners not responding to their peers’ comments (Nelson and Murphy, 1993; and Jacobs, 1987). This mistrust

could be attributed to cultural differences among L2 learners, some students may think that their peers are not knowledgeable enough to provide valuable and worthwhile feedback (Rollinson, 2005; Nelson and Murphy, 1993; and Allaei and Connor, 1990). This last claim agrees with Saito and Fujita’s (2004) findings that some of their Japanese college level students become satisfied with peer rating only when they receive high marks from their peers, if not they will not be enthusiastic about peer evaluation. ESL students sometimes need a great deal of work to persuade them to accept this type of feedback (Rollinson, 2005). This mistrust may affect their enthusiasm towards this type of feedback (Liu and Hansen, 2002).

In social terms, Rollinson (2005) mentions that students’ age and their inter language level may put boundaries on the extent to which peer feedback activities can be safely and productively left to students; he adds that they may find different aspects and characteristics of this type of feedback, namely the collaborative and co-operative aspects, above their levels.

Carson and Nelson (1996: 1, 11) state that their Chinese students were often reluctant to criticize their peers work, either because they wanted to “maintain group harmony” or because of their reluctance to claim authority. According to Liu and Hansen (2002: 11), students sometimes provide vague and unhelpful comments and they may provide comments that could be described as being “...hostile, sarcastic, overly critical, or unkind in their criticisms of their classmates’ writing”.

The nature of responding to peer’s work sometimes creates a feeling of uneasiness among students, according to Amores (1997), students can become defensive when their peers criticise their work; however this must be contrasted with the benefits expected from this type of feedback. This last issue was discussed by Nelson and Murphy (1993), who contended that learners may become less likely to use peer comments if the interaction between

peers is defensive because this makes students resistant to each other's suggestions.

When it comes to practicality, detractors such as Rollinson (2005) contend that the amount of time spent reading a draft, writing comments or discussing them orally with the writer will be lengthy, and according to the researcher, the time is expected to be longer if the reader has to discuss his points of view about the draft with another reader to arrive at a consensus, before handing it to the writer. Moreover, peer feedback may not be effective if students are not trained and are unprepared to engage with and use peer feedback procedures and skills, such as reaching a consensus, negotiating, questioning, evaluating, and giving suggestions and criticism (Liu, 1998; Liu and Hansen, 2002; and Rollinson, 2005).

Concerning the linguistic aspects, Obah (1993) contends that students sometimes fail to give constructive comments on another student's work; he also contends that if students are at the same levels of study they may not be able to evaluate their peers' writing because they share the same linguistic level of development. Moreover, peers sometimes provide miscorrections to their peers' writing (Jacobs, 1989; and Jacobs and Zhang 1989). Leki (1990b) claims that peer's comments are always focused on surface level mistakes, neglecting other types of mistakes; this agrees with Hvitfeldt's (1986) claims that his ESL university students cannot make good judgments on peers' correct use of grammar, mechanics, and the correct choice of words. Newkirk (1984) claims that teachers' criterion for judging good writing may differ sometimes from that of student peer-raters, which gives rise to the question of the reliability of this type of feedback.

### **3. Research Questions**

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do the participants of our study feel about the usefulness of peer

feedback activities? What are the reasons for their beliefs?

2. Do the students participating in our study think that peer feedback activities have led to an improvement in their L2 proficiency?
3. Do ESL intermediate Arabic speaking students use all of their peers' comments when revising their essays, and what are the reasons, if any, that stops them from using all of these comments?.
4. What are the advantages and the disadvantages, from the participants' points of view of peer feedback activities?

### **4. Participants**

The participants were 40 male freshmen students between 18 and 21 years old; they are currently students of the Department of General Studies (English Section) in the College of Technology of Arrass in Saudi Arabia. The students, who voluntarily participated in the study, had spent two months of study in the college when the questionnaires were distributed. Apart from the English lessons they took in their public schools and at the college, none of the participants had ever taken any other English course either in Saudi Arabia or in any other country

### **5. The Questionnaire**

The method of data gathering chosen for this study is the semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this study was divided into four major sections; the first section concentrates on finding general information about the participants; their educational backgrounds, the number of English writing courses they had taken, their familiarity with peer feedback. The second section of the questionnaire, which took the form of a 'Likert scale' from 1-5, was aimed at discovering the attitudes of the students to this type of feedback and how they felt after they experienced it. The third part of the questionnaire was employed to discover whether or not the students use their peers' comments when revising, and finding out if there were any reasons that stopped them from using the suggestions

when revising. The last part of the questionnaire was designed to give students the freedom to mention their own points of view, e.g. about the advantages and disadvantages of this type of feedback; a space was left at the end of the questionnaire for the participants to make any suggestions they had to improve this type of feedback.

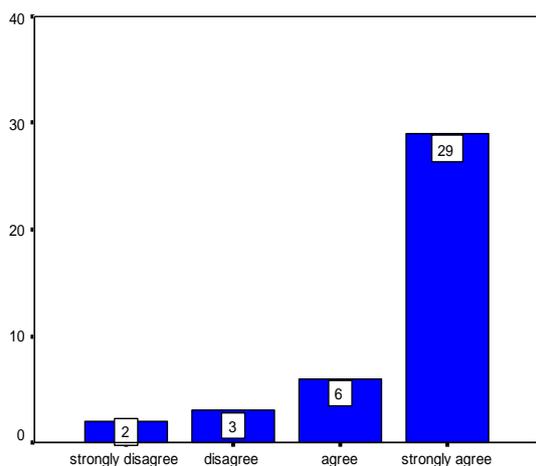
## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 6.1. The Usefulness of Peer Feedback

**Table 1: The usefulness of peer feedback (students' mean and SD. scores)**

In general peer feedback activities are useful	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	40	1.00	5.00	4.4250	1.15220

Furthermore, this claim is also supported by students' responses that show that the majority (87.5%) of them are convinced that such activities are useful for them; in fact, the vast majority of those agreeing chose 'strongly agree' for this questionnaire item (Figure1).



**Figure1: Students' attitudes towards the usefulness of peer feedback**

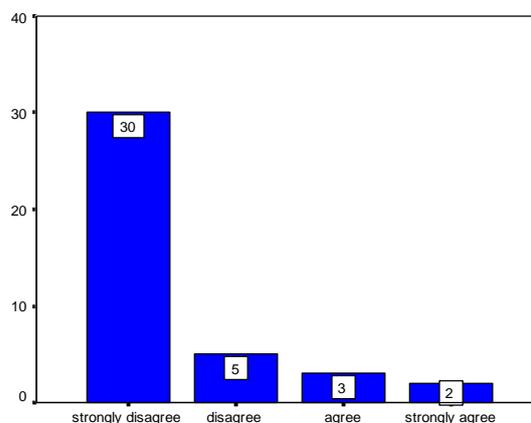
Students comments revealed that the majority ( $N=20$ ) of them were convinced that this type of feedback provided them with unique advantages that may not be possible for them to get from other feedback strategies.

As figure 1 shows this popularity from the majority of students was opposed by very few students, forming the remaining (12.5%) percent. The common feature of their comments was that they all suggest that this type of feedback from their points of view could not be considered in any way a useful technique

Analysis of students' responses shows an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards this type of feedback; this can be seen in the analysis of the questionnaire item asking students about their attitudes regarding the usefulness of peer feedback activities that reveals a very high mean of (4.42) and a low standard deviation of (1.15) (table 1).

The few negative replies received as compared to the vast majority of positive comments noted from analysing students' responses, allowed me to classify the current study as being in agreement with other studies reported by Mangelsdorf (1992), Leki (1990b), Jacobs et al. (1998), and others who found that their ESL learners found peer feedback a useful feedback strategy.

This finding is further supported by analysis of students' responses to the questionnaire item asking students whether they thought that peer feedback was a waste of time, because, the few students who thought that peer feedback activities were not useful, were exactly the same students who thought that peer feedback activities are a waste of time (figure 2).



**Figure.2 Students' attitudes towards viewing peer feedback activities as a waste of time**

Students who chose those responses generally believed that peer feedback was

not a useful strategy and adopting other feedback strategies would be a better investment.

On the other hand, from looking at the same figure we can see that the majority (87.5 %) of students are agreed that peer feedback activities have not been a waste of their time; these responses which reached, as demonstrated in table 2, the high mean of (4.45) and low standard deviation of (1.15), along with the previously mentioned

students' responses (believing in the usefulness of this type of feedback) gives us a solid answer to the first part of our first research question, which asks about how our participants feel regarding the usefulness of peer feedback activities. It is logical to conclude, therefore, that intermediate ESL Arabic speaking students do think that this type of feedback is useful to them.

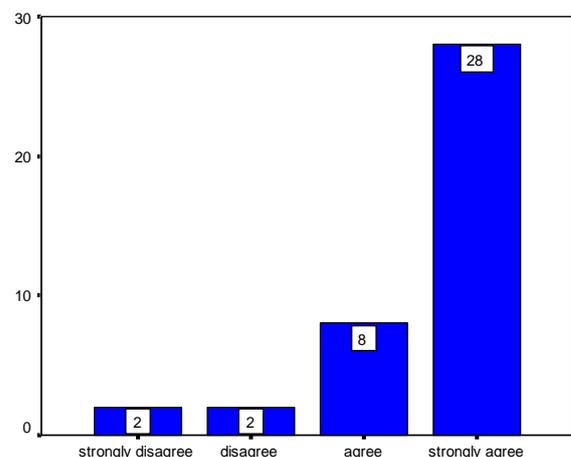
**Table2: Peer feedback as being a waste of time (students' mean and SD. scores)**

Peer feedback activities were a waste of time	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	40	1.00	5.00	4.4500	1.15359

Positive comments for this questionnaire item defend peer feedback activities against being considered a waste of time.

Further examination of student responses, supports Leki's (1990b) previously mentioned study findings, which indicated that the students appreciate both 1) looking at their colleagues essays and 2) receiving suggestions from their colleagues on their own writing. For the first point, analysis of students' responses showed that the majority of students (90%) like the idea of looking at their colleagues writing, this fact cannot be argued as we know that the majority (70%) of these responses fell into the *strongly agree* portion (Figure 3). This huge positive tendency left only 10% for the

opposing view point as can be seen in the same figure.



**Figure 3: Students' attitudes towards giving comments on their peers' essays**

**Table 3: Students' attitudes and the usefulness of giving and receiving peer feedback (mean, and SD. scores)**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I found it useful to look at my peers' essays	40	1.00	5.00	4.4500	1.08486
I found it useful to let a colleague look at my essays	40	1.00	5.00	4.0500	1.48410

The mean that we got from analysing these responses which reached (4.45), and the low standard deviation of (1.08) (Table 3) confirm this claim that ESL students do think it is useful for them to look at their colleagues essays. Analysing the mean for the next questionnaire item, asking if the students think that giving the chance to their colleagues to comment on their writing is useful, shows a high mean of (4.05) and a low standard deviation of (1.48) (Table 3). This gives the definite indication that the participating ESL

students believe in the value of the comments they get from their peers and that they value looking at colleagues' essays.

Students responses to this last questionnaire item, as figure 4 demonstrates, show that the highest population of students (75%) have a positive attitude to getting their peers to check their essays, comparable to the vast majority of students who 'strongly' believe that it is valuable to look at their peers' essays; the vast majority of students responses to this questionnaire item are 'strongly agree' with

this idea, leaving only 25% for the minority of students who do not think that there is merit in making their peers look at their essays.

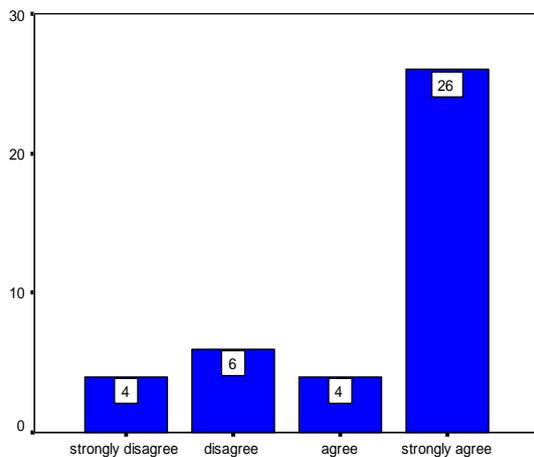


Figure 4: Students' attitudes towards the usefulness of their peers' comments

## 6.2. Peer Feedback and L2 Proficiency

The majority (90%) of students who participated in this study believe that peer feedback activities have improved their L2 proficiency. This assumption can be inferred from the students' responses to the questionnaire item asking about their attitudes regarding the effect of peer feedback activities on improving their L2 proficiency. Additionally, figure 7 shows

that the majority (77.5%) of students were found to 'strongly agree' with this idea.

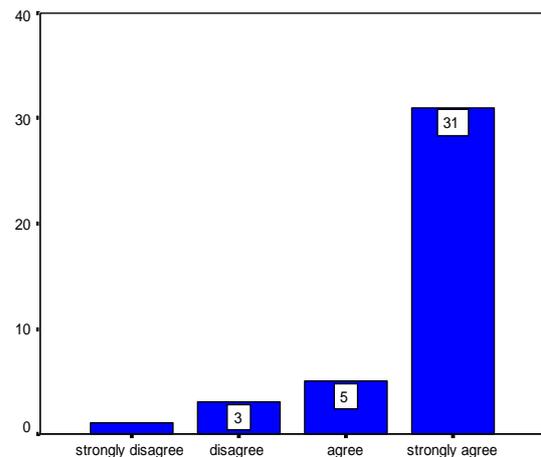


Figure 5: Peer feedback and L2 proficiency (students' reactions)

The high mean of (4.55) and low standard deviation of (1.01) in favor of this appeal (Table 4) gives further support to this claim. This positive attitude in favor of peer feedback strategy suggests an answer to the second research question asking students' points of views as to whether they think that peer feedback activities have played a role in improving their L2 proficiency, support the claim made by Liu and Hansen (2002) that employing peer feedback activities will lead to a general improvement in ESL students' L2 proficiency.

Table 4: Peer feedback and L2 proficiency (students' mean and SD. scores)

Peer feedback activities have improved my L2 proficiency	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	40	1.00	5.00	4.5500	1.01147

All the comments received from the students who agreed with the idea that peer feedback activities improved their L2 proficiency showed that they thought it gave them the opportunity to practice different language skills. In agreement with Tang and Tithecott's (1999) claim, the majority of our students, (twenty eight) have named the speaking skill as the most developed skill.

For the disagreeing students, based on the comments they provide, all of them believe that their level was still the same and peer feedback activities had not prompted their L2 proficiency.

## 6.3. Peer Feedback and Revision

Analysis of students' responses to the third section of the questionnaire, which concentrates on the revising process and the extent to which students make use of peers' comments when revising their essays, shows that the majority of students do use the comments they get from their peers in their final drafts (Figure 6). This finding allows me to argue that intermediate ESL Saudi college level students are similar to other ESL students as shown in Mendonça and Johnson (1994); and Nelson and Murphy, (1993).

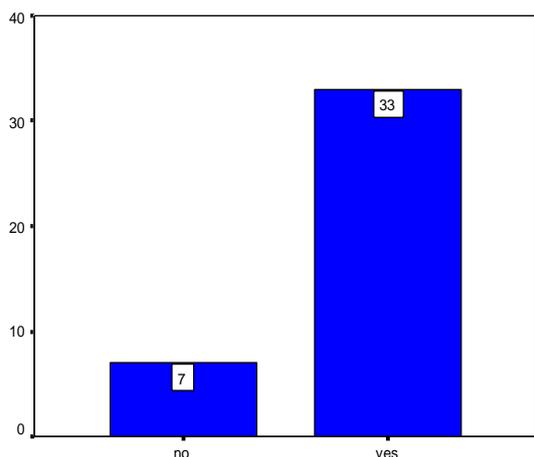


Figure 6: Students reactions towards using their peers' comments

Two reasons have come to light as a justification from the students who claim that they never make use of their peers' comments when revising their written work; the first one is that they do not trust their peers as being capable of giving reliable comments. This drawback which has already been outlined by Nelson and Murphy (1993), and Jacobs (1987), was the reason given by five students.

The remaining two of the (17.5%) minority, attributed their actions to the wrong corrections that they always get from their colleagues which eventually caused them not to trust any peer suggestions. Such a drawback, according to Partridge (1981) as mentioned in Chaudron (1984: 4), is expected to decrease in the long run because continuing to use peer feedback activities will "... contribute more to the learners' confidence in judgment and sensitivity to audience". The analysis on the responses of the thirty three students who said that they do use their peers' comments in their written work shows that only 15.2% of them claim to be using all the comments they receive from their colleagues, the majority (84.8 %) of students stated that they do not use all of the comments they receive; this tendency by the majority of our participants (Figure 7) answers the first part of our third research question, which asks whether or not they use all of the comments they received in their revised essays.

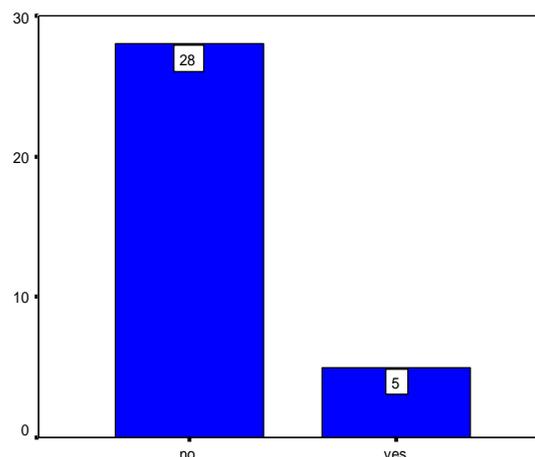


Figure 7: Students reactions towards using all the comments they receive.

Investigating our subjects responses revealed that there were two reasons reported by the students as justification for them not to use all of the suggestions they got from their peers in their essays; the first reason reported by the majority ( $N=21$ ) of students was attributed to the mistrust issue, they claimed that they sometimes did not trust some of their peers suggestions.

This justification, which was found to be similar to the excuse previously reported by the students who claimed that they never use their peers' comments, makes this mistrust issue the main reason that effect the use of peers' suggestions. This problem, similarly to the problem of wrong corrections, according to Mangelsdorf (1992), needs more time until the students' feedback abilities improve which is likely to enhance students' faith in this type of feedback. The last reason mentioned by the students, which contrasts the claim made by Rollinson (2005), is that they sometimes do not agree with some of the suggestions they receive. This disagreement has been linked by all the last seven students to the style that the writer uses.

This reason of students for not using their peers' comments besides those previously mentioned -i.e. students complaining of getting wrong corrections, and mistrusting peers' capacities to give correct feedback - answers the second part of the third research question, which asks about the reasons why students do not use the comments they get in their essays.

#### **6.4. Students' Positive Comments:**

Analysis of students' responses showed that the majority (38 out of 40) found advantages to this type of feedback. These responses were found similar to the previously mentioned advantages in the review section. Starting with the advantages in the linguistic field our survey shows that many ( $N=27$ ) of the students stated that peer feedback sessions are *golden opportunities*, as described by one of them, for them to exercise a variety of language functions such as giving suggestions, offering explanations, asking questions and trying different question formats: which gives a further support to Mendonça and Johnson's (1994) conclusions. Additionally, although some students complained about their colleagues' frequent use of Arabic during the sessions, the majority of students' comments support the claims made by Liu and Hansen (2002), Mittan (1989), and Tang and Tithcott (1999) that peer feedback sessions improved their spoken English. This improvement, according to the majority of students ( $N=34$ ), is because they always listen to new and different words and phrases and use them in the sessions; some of them attributed this development to the general practice of the language orally which is not, according to them, possible with any other types of feedback. What is more, and in agreement with Liu and Hansen (2002), and Mangelsdorf's, (1989) findings, many ( $N=35$ ) students stated that it also improved their writing. Students' responses were that they had been introduced to different writing styles and different and better ways of discussing similar topics to theirs, which had given them the opportunity to improve their styles. This last advantage lead us to the cognitive advantages that had been observed in students comments; according to some ( $N=22$ ) students the opportunity that they had been given to read and comment on their peers' essays and to receive comments on their own writing improved their abilities to revise their own essays; which supports the previous claims made by Daniels and

Zemelman (1985), Hirvela (1999), and Mendonça and Johnson (1994). Furthermore, peer feedback activities have improved according to thirty students, what has been described by Liu and Hansen (2002: 8-9) as "audience awareness", making them more knowledgeable about the demands of the readers.

This gives confirmation to Mangelsdorf's (1992); and Zamel's (1982) claims that adopting this type of feedback makes the text clear for the readers, as it is clear to the original writer of the text. This last point mentioned by this student goes along with Rollinson's (2005) claim that it makes it easier for the student to agree with the feedback provided. In the social field our survey revealed that in agreement with Johnson, and Johnson's, (1987) findings, a great deal ( $N=28$ ) of students found that peer feedback activities provided a collaborative atmosphere, which provided them with the support and encouragement needed to improve their abilities.

Furthermore, a great deal ( $N=32$ ) of students felt more confident about their abilities after peer feedback which is in agreement with Mittan's (1989) claim.

When it comes to the advantages on the practical level only one advantage was reported in some ( $N=15$ ) students' comments; which goes along with Topping's (1998) claim that peer feedback sessions provide students with clear and immediate feedback.

#### **6.5. Students' Negative Comments:**

In the linguistic area while few ( $N=4$ ) students supported Jacobs (1989), and Jacobs and Zhang's (1989) claims and complained of receiving miscorrections from their peers; the majority ( $N=32$ ) of students, in support of Obah's (1993) claim, stated that they were not able to give valuable comments on their colleagues' work.

The negative comments were associated with the cognitive field as well, this is not surprising if we know that the majority ( $N=25$ ) of complaints were about some colleagues not being knowledgeable

enough to match their teachers' comments, which gives support to the claim of Nelson, and Murphy, (1993); and Jacobs, (1987).

Furthermore, a few ( $N=8$ ) students in support of Liu and Hansen's (2002) claim, had complained about their peers' comments being sarcastic; others ( $N=9$ ) complained about other social in nature disadvantage which had been mentioned by Amores (1997) i.e. a feeling of uneasiness about receiving comments from some of their classmates.

In the practical field, and in agreement with Rollinson's (2005) claim, the majority ( $N=33$ ) of students complained about problems related to the time factor; thirty students stated that the time given during class hours was not enough for discussion, some students ( $N=25$ ) complained that they had a lot of other subjects and commenting on their peers' writing and rewriting their own work almost every week consumed a great deal of time.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the attitudes of Arabic ESL students towards peer feedback in their writing classes. The results showed that the majority of Saudi college-level ESL writing students appreciate peer feedback activities, and for the vast majority of them the comments they received from their colleagues were valuable resources for revising their essays; the majority also mentioned many advantages that should encourage the employment of this feedback strategy in other ESL contexts. Only a few participants contradicted this overwhelmingly positive attitude, but as with any pedagogical practice, peer feedback takes patience and application from both students and teachers. Adopting some of the suggestions for improvement recommended as a result of this study, students' feedback is likely to get better, along with their different language skills. Seeing the improvement and benefiting from employing this technique, will certainly result in a positive

enhancement of their belief in the efficacy of this technique.

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