

# An Evaluation of the Effect of Peer Scaffolding on a Pre-intermediate Korean Student's Learning to Write in English as a Second Language

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## ABSTRACT

The study seeks to evaluate the impact of peer scaffolding on a student learning to write in English as a second language. A student participated in the study. The data was collected through an interview. The findings showed that the students benefited from peer revision in learning new structures. However, several factors cause peer editing to hinder the student's learning through receiving incorrect peer feedback, feeling discomfort giving feedback, the differences in proficiency level, students' preferences for teacher guidance and the explanations of the peers' feedback. The paper ends with a discussion of the implementation of peer feedback in the Omani EFL writing class.

**Keywords:** peer scaffolding, writing, feedback, impact, editing

## INTRODUCTION

Socio-cultural theory is recognized as a leading theory that has a view on second language acquisition. It was initiated by Vygotsky who emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction (1978). Learning occurs through the negotiation of knowledge of language in collaborative talk (Swain, 2000). Central to the entire discipline of socio-cultural theoretical aspect is the concept of scaffolding which highlights that learner's needs should be supported with help in order to progress in learning the language and attain further than their current level (Woods et al. 1976).

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the role of peer scaffolding in learning to write in a second language. A large amount of literature has offered comparable conclusions about the beneficial outcomes of collaborative dialogue (Donato, 2000) on second learners writing either through collaborative writing (Storch, 2002) or peer editing (Diab, 2010). Even though much is currently acknowledged about the effect of peer editing on learning to write in a second language, the issues of the variances in proficiency among learners have not been clearly established. Apart from Crinon and Marin (2010), Lundstrom and Baker (2009) and, Rouhi and Azizaian (2013), there is a lack of investigation into whether learners gain more knowledge during giving or receiving feedback in peer editing.

This paper will give an account of the role of peer scaffolding in learning English as a second language. It is going to provide a review of recent research in this aspect. It attempts to defend the view that although peer scaffolding is a constructive means of learning, it has several issues that seem to prevent complete learning from taking place. Therefore, this study aims to shine a new light on these debates through an examination of peer editing in learning English as a second language of a Korean learner at an intermediate level in the UK. The paper takes the form of a mini qualitative work in which an interview is conducted to discover how

peer scaffolding helped or hindered the interviewee's learning.

This paper's structure takes the form of three sections. It starts with a brief overview of the recent body of research regarding the theoretical orientations of peer scaffolding. Although a range of explanations of the term scaffolding has been advocated, this paper will use Loewen and Reinders' definition (2011 p.152) who saw it as

“It is the help that an expert language user provides to a novice. This scaffolding can help the L2 learner gain further control over the language. Novices can also scaffold each other, so that working in pairs or in groups, the language production of the group is greater than that which any one of the students could have produced on his or her own.”

In this article, the acronym ZPD will be used to refer to “the distance between actual development level of potential development as determined through adult guidance in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978 p.63).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Peer Scaffolding

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the social-cultural theory claims that interaction that situates learners in a dialogue can serve as a basis of learning since the language knowledge is created (Swain, 2000). Donato (1994) commends the role of collaboration as a way of constructing language and through this process of scaffolding (Wood et al, 1976). Numerous studies have attempted to explain the role of scaffolding in language learning. Through scaffolding, learners can notice the differences between their existing language level and what they are expected to achieve (Swain, 1995). It has conclusively been shown that mediation between learners can solve problems related to communication (Pica, 1994) or negotiate form (Ellis, 2001).

Vygotsky (1978) argued that the help offered to the learner should be within his/her ZPD. Second-language researchers have tried to apply Vygotsky's theories to the field. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) went on to say that it is obligatory for effective scaffolding to be between a learner and an expert who can identify the learner's ZPD. Nonetheless, there is an inconsistency in their argument therefore it was found that novices' ZPD is determined by each other when working together (Donato, 2000 and Ohta, 2000). It has been shown that there are two situations in which negotiated interaction leads to learning (Donato, 2000 and Ohta, 2000). Both emphasize helping learners when they require it and with the appropriate amount of support (Donato, 2000 and Ohta, 2000).

### B. Peer Editing

Recently, studies have documented that peer editing has a positive effect on learning (Beach and Friedrich, 2006, Behin et al, 2011, De Guerrero and Villamil, 1996; Graham and Perin, 2007; 1998, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1992; Diab, 2010; Nelson and Murphy, 1993; Suzuki, 2008; Sahle et al., 2023; Sun, 2022 and Yong et al., 2021). Mediation tends to be longer throughout peer editing (Suzuki, 2008). Learning occurs through questioning, clarifying, advising, repeating what others say and error correction (Mendonça and E. Johnson, 1994, Jiao 2007, Kamimura, 2006). Learning is not only aided by valuable comments, but through the questions that are raised during peer editing as well (King et al, 1998 and Pasaribu et al, 2023). Progress in learners' composition has been identified and accordingly more self-regulation has resulted (De Guerrero and Villamil, 2000 and Nugroho, 2021).

1) *The Impacts of peer editing:* In terms of the composition features, positive outcomes of peer editing were

found (Berg, 1999, Min, 2006). Furthermore, there are developments in terms of ideas, writing structure and accuracy that have been identified leading to development in the writing features (Diab, 2009 and Rahimi, 2013). As far as language proficiency is concerned, peer editing is established to achieve a decrease in linguistic mistakes (Ferries and Robert, 2001, Chandler, 2003, Khuwaileh, 2001). However, Ferries and Robert (2001) have overlooked the development in a long period; however, the development in the reduction of language errors was considerably traced over a long period due to peer review (Diab, 2009). In addition to developing language proficiency, peer feedback is recognized to foster audience's awareness (Rollinson, 2005; Sun et al., 2023). It allows the writer to experience the audience's responses (Schriver, 1992). Likewise, it enables learners to critically read their own written composition (Schriver, 1992).

2) *The Impacts of peer editing*: In 2008, Suzuki published a paper in which he compares self-editing with peer editing of university learners and he draws several conclusions. Compared to self-editing where learners only focus on revising vocabulary, peer editing has more mediation and focus on themes and techniques of editing writing (Suzuki, 2008). It is suggested to get feedback from more than one peer, thus, learners can be given more valued reflections (Hollaway and McCutchen, 2004). Correspondingly, erroneous revisions can be improved by several peers and more opportunity for several errors to be spotted (Miyake, 1986). Scaffolding that matches the learner's need is provided in peer editing (Lantolf, 2000). However, self-editing has no negotiation which prevents the chance to gain new information (Svalberg, 2009).

3) *Teacher feedback as opposed to peer feedback*: Whereas feedback from a teacher is more favorable from the students' point of view, it has been powerfully disputed by Connor and Asenavage (1994), who argue that peer feedback is more detailed compared to teacher's feedback. Furthermore, teacher's comments cause written modifications while peer comments result in learner's independence (Yang et al, 2006). In addition, learners have a preference for peer review's atmosphere as it stimulates collaboration and negotiation while the teacher's feedback is strict and might not be able to be negotiated (Rollinson, 2005).

4) *Feedback from trained peers*: Much research compares trainer versus untrained peer feedback and positively indicates the positive impact of the former (Min, 2005, 2006, Diab, 2009, Berg, 1999, McGroaty and Zhu, 1997, 2001). Furthermore, peer feedback content is not purely directed to the error but also to the producers used to solve it (Strijbos et al, 2010). In her comprehensive investigation of training students for peer editing, Min (2005) concludes that feedback provided by a trained peer, in contrast to an untrained peer, was enhanced in terms of value, amount, applicability and specificity.

5) *Students' perceptions of peer editing*: Concerning students' views about peer editing, Carless (2012) points out the importance of getting students' voices which reflect the reality of the editing process but might be hidden from researchers. Diab (2009) has conducted her study in a university context. Although her learners found some weaknesses regarding the unbending remarks acknowledged by their peers, they perceived working collaboratively as superior to individually. In addition, it was shown that learners' self-independence over their learning has been stimulated by peer review as it enables them to reflect on others' writing; hence, they understand and develop new strategies based on others' problems (MacArthur, 2007, Diab, 2009). Their findings mirror those of the former research that has explained the way collaboration promotes individual writing skills (Swain, 2000, Donato, 2000; de Guerrero and Villamil, 2000). The observation and recognition of the variances between students' existing level and what they should attain can make them learn new knowledge (Toccali-Beller and Swain, 2005; Chen et al, 2023; He and Gao, 2023). The review limits the time for the reason that the peer editing process has several stages which are analyzing the compositions, editing and discussing them with the writer (Rollinson, 2005). Wang (2014) investigates the learners' view about obstructions associated with peer revisions including content knowledge, linguistic knowledge, learners' beliefs, time limits and learners' relationships. Any lack of knowledge about themes or errors can impede providing in-depth feedback (Wang, 2014). A significant

analysis and discussion on the learner's perceptions is presented by Lili and Li (2018) who found that students favored oral feedback over negative written feedback.

6) *Limitation of peer editing*: Students hypothesize that their level of proficiency is comparable to their peers which makes them doubt their peers' revision (Carson and Nelson, 1996, Tahir, 2012). There is a tendency among peer comments to concentrate on the clearest mistakes (Carson and Murphy, 1992). Ambiguous explanations are provided as well (Liu and Sadler, 2003). Several learners are not capable of recognizing their peer's errors during editing (Allaei and Connor, 1990). Not being able to provide correct revision is attributable to the inadequate expertise of peers (Tsui and Ng, 2000). Several drawbacks in the literature should be identified. Most studies in peer editing have only been carried out using a small number of participants and lacking the use of a control group (De Guerrero and Villamil, 1996, Carnson et, al. 1996, Ohta, 2000). Similarly, several studies have not taken actual writing after revision to see the modification (Zhang, 1995, Cheung, 2011). The specific level of learners in Carson and Nelson (1998) is not accurate for the reader.

## METHODOLOGY

### A. The Participant

A Korean learner of English has been interviewed. The reason for choosing the specified learner is because she has experience in learning three languages and she has experience regarding peer scaffolding. The second reason is being interested to know how this theory might enhance learning in the Omani context which has limited opportunities for peer scaffolding. Thus, finding how peer scaffolding works in one context can help to apply it in another context. So based on the results, an implication on the Omani context will be suggested. The participant is a pre-intermediate learner (IELTS: 5.5). She studied English in a private institution after graduation from high school in Korea.

### B. The Context

The Korean context has been examined in this study. It is exam-based instruction. It is also teacher-centered but there are occasions for some collaborative work in writing and peer editing as well.

### C. The Data Collection

In this paper, a semi-structured approach was selected. Based on the participant's request, she has been informed about the main ideas of the interview. The interview was recorded and transcribed. The interview consists of several questions regarding the learners' experience with peer scaffolding.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The learner holds the view that peers' editing is useful in learning to write. It helped her to learn new knowledge and she *'learned a lot from others.. I could realize specific language features that I didn't know before'*. This was consistent with the previous studies (Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1992, Diab, 2010, 2011, Nelson and Murphy, 1992, 1993 and Suzuki, 2008). One criticism of the literature on the efficiency of peer editing is that it focused on the positive impact of peer editing on learning but it failed to explain how inaccurate peer editing can impede learning a second language. The learner had an experience of being given incorrect comments *'I realized.. I got some wrong feedback from my partner'* which could have led to fossilization. It seems to raise learners' awareness of the effectiveness of the peer's suggestions in the future.

One major shortcoming of peer editing is that students do not usually integrate their peer comments into

their writing. This corresponds with Nelson and M. Murphy (1993) who indicate some factors of collaboration while editing. However, their explanation tends to overlook the fact that the main factor is the learners' perception of the feedback giver's level of proficiency. The learner describes that feedback provided by lower students can be doubtful *'I started to doubt (laughing) if the peer correction is useful.. effective ..or not'* It seems to be learner's view of their peer's feedback influences their intent to make use of it as she *'sometimes I accept it and not accept other parts'*. This drives her to *'make sure that the peer feedback was correct or not.. and I just accept it in class and then check it later'*. Correspondingly, some learners overlook their peers' comments because it does not match with their view of how the task should be accomplished (Bandura, 1986).

Bruner (1985 cited in Mercer, 1996 p. 360) argues that scaffolding needs a more proficient peer. This corresponds with the learner's attitude in the interview since she wanted to improve her skills for the exam thus she requires accurate language skills and linguistics knowledge so she thinks *'I wanted to get explicit feedback from my teacher.. not peer'*. However, there is a conflict with this argument meaning that a peer who's at the same level can scaffold each other (Donato, 1994). Although learners are at equal levels, nonetheless, they can have diverse strengths in different aspects of writing for instance, some students can be better in grammar whereas others may know more about organization or content. Furthermore, learners can edit each other's writing and at the same time provide each other with useful tips in writing. Moreover, peers sometimes may be given feedback from the expert so they can transfer this knowledge to their peers during peer editing.

Further criticism may be directed toward learners' concern that scaffolding from more competent peers is required. It was found that peers' comments are easier to understand compared to teachers' comments (Connor and Asenavage, 1994 and Yang et al, 2006). The learner mentions that comments from non-native speaker's peers are clearer than the teachers. This can be interpreted in terms of the level of explanation because learners at the same level can use easier words compared to the teacher.

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether the feedback giver learns more than the feedback receiver. Although the interview shows that the learner learned through giving and receiving feedback, it seems that the learner learns more when giving feedback to peers. Compared to the feedback receiver, the feedback giver tends to tutor others using numerous methods that require the giver to understand the content before explaining it. The feedback giver is not only instructing but also he/she is possibly enhancing his/her recognition of the content and has a noticeable progress in learning (Crinon and Marin, 2010, Lundstrom and Baker 2009 and Rouhi and Azizaian, 2013). Learners use the comments they gave to others in their writing (Crinon and Marin, 2010). The interview specifies that although the feedback giver may not be familiar with the specific language feature during scaffolding, she tends to read about it. It is another way of learning which directly raises the learner's awareness to learn new knowledge.

Although several studies conclude that during peer revision, learners concentrate on surface errors. The key problem with this explanation is that students focus on grammatical errors which correspond with Khuwaileh's findings (2001). To illustrate more, second learners usually find it easy to spot errors in the language while it can be harder to grasp clarity of writing due to the differences from L1. The type of error edited can correspondingly depend on the learners' aims. For example, in the Korean context, learners are targeted to the exam so they tend to focus on accuracy as the learner was *'Focusing on accuracy, grammatical mistakes.... and the structure of the assignment'*. Similarly, the teacher has a role in learners' editing focus.

The peer comments are usually understandable. Nonetheless, the quality can be questionable. The results of the interview indicate that the absence of explicit explanations from peers seems to stop learning in terms of leaving learners hesitant in peers' comments. The learner showed *'I like discussing with them.. and..'*

*negotiating the issue*'. Therefore, peers' comments should not only highlight the error but also more clarification and assistance can enhance learning.

It is worth mentioning that culture has a significant role in learners' confidence to edit other's work (Nelson and Murphy, 1992). It is the same case in the interview. The learner feels '*uncomfortable ..to give.. some ideas or feedbacks to others*' or edit others' writing because '*it can harm others feeling*' and '*they can be discouraged by my feedback*'. Therefore, she emphasizes the use of '*the affective filter*' in learning.

## IMPLICATIONS

It was argued that teaching writing in a second language classroom needs to stimulate language acquisition (Reichert, 1999p. 195). An implication of this is the integration of peer revision into the course being taught which can consequently improve students' language (Cho et al, 2010, Lin et al, 2013 and Paulus, 1999). The Omani teachers can combine some revision to the writing sessions as a major component which seems to develop good learning habits. The editing skills are crucial for example for proofreading assignments in future studies.

This result has vital implications for developing learners' consciousness toward the valuable impacts of peer editing in their learning and recommends they revise their peer's writing to explore the process deeply (Diab, 2009). Several learners might negatively perceive peer editing, however, motivating them to use it can change their attitudes. Motivation can be verbal or through grading the feedback giver if he/she gives valuable and comprehensible comments (Diab, 2009, Hu, 2005; and Min, 2006).

To be confident in revising appropriately, it is suggested that teachers should prepare their students to the producers of good revision (Stanley, 1992). They can demonstrate the process by teaching them how to give feedback and use an example of an editing form to help students revise appropriately (Ferris, 2003). The use of form can organize the editing process and avoid surface correction. It might be useful to relate the content of the editing to the type of composition which makes students focus on writing, language and meaning as well.

Although Cho et al, (2010) advocate that working with more than one peer at a time can enhance the quality of feedback, students should be allowed to decide whether they prefer to work with the same peer or different peers (Diab, 2009). They will feel comfortable in the atmosphere they like to work in. Accordingly, this helps them perform and learn better.

Another implication suggests that Omani teachers can organize the editing process in stages to arrange the time. After the draft is written, the feedback giver can take the draft and revise it outside the lesson time subsequently the time of the lesson can be used to scaffold and exchange knowledge with the feedback receiver (Wang, 2014).

Although the Korean student felt uncomfortable giving others feedback, Omani students might not have the same situation. It is expected that they will feel content while giving feedback.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the role of peer scaffolding in learning a second language which is one of the core theories in second language acquisition. The main goal of the current paper was to investigate how scaffolding helps or hinders the learning of a Korean learner who is learning English as a second language specifically through peer revision. One obvious finding to arise from this study is the efficiency of peer editing in learning to write. Another key finding highlighted several constraints that hindered learning

including inaccurate comments.

The scope of this study was limited in terms of the data collection and analysis. In addition, this study is limited to a participant and the selection of the participant. A further study could assess the long-term effectiveness of peer editing on university students. Further research should be carried out to establish the impact of students writing performance.

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