

# Towards a peer feedback scaffold

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## Introduction

Peer feedback has become an important part of formative assessment in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses aiming at developing the writing, speaking and collaboration skills of students (Hislop and Stracke 2017). As such, language teachers are aware of its benefits for students and learning. However, when it comes to practical recommendations as to how to set up peer feedback activities most effectively, it is generally up to individual teachers' discretion.

This project was born from the need to find a way to make the most out of peer feedback as a learning opportunity. Since peer feedback is about student autonomy, what can teachers do to empower students to provide better feedback and hence support each other's learning? What tools can we provide our students with to undertake this task effectively? My aim in this research project was to lay the foundations for a peer feedback scaffold model to support my teacher colleagues in setting up peer feedback activities to better support learning. I wanted this scaffold to also help improve students' understanding of peer feedback and develop student-friendly peer feedback tools.

## Context and participants

This research was carried out at Centre for English Teaching (CET) + The Learning Hub with students from the Direct Entry course (DEC 10). DEC 10 is a 10-week university pathway course that prepares international students for their university studies by developing their language and critical thinking skills. At the end of the course, passing students are recommended to continue their university studies at

the University of Sydney. The curriculum has been written in-house based on real-life problems (such as climate change) as well as authentic materials. Skills are highly integrated (reading/listening to write and reading/listening to speak). At Weeks 4 and 8, students take in-class writing assessments based on real university tasks. Scores for these tasks are very important towards overall assessment. Before both assessment instances, students provide and receive peer feedback on practice writing pieces using a rubric based on the one teachers use to mark the assessments. As preparation, students are provided with the rubric and a past writing sample to practise on before they provide feedback on their classmates' work.

The research was carried out in two cycles. The first cycle had 18 participants. Sixteen were receiving online instruction in their home countries, and two were receiving their course online while based in Sydney. Sixteen were Chinese, one was Thai and one was Saudi. Their ages ranged between 20 to 28 years old. There were seven female and nine male students. The second cycle included 14 participants, one of whom was based in Melbourne; the rest were receiving online instruction from their home countries. All of the participants were from mainland China and their ages ranged between 20 to 29 years old. There were eight female students and six male students.

## Research focus

This project aimed at researching these questions:

1. Can a checklist support students as a tool to provide peer feedback?
2. To what extent are students able to provide each other with practical feedback?
3. To what extent is peer feedback used for revision?

## Intervention

The intervention (scaffold) was based on training activities recommended by Berg (1999) as cited by Hislop and Stracke (2017) with some modifications relevant to the CET curriculum. The proposed peer feedback scaffold model included the following stages:

1. Creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere and trust among students through ice-breaking activities, warmers, regular check-ins and debriefs.
2. Providing specific training on the role of peer feedback in the writing process through an online peer feedback self-discovery module followed up by an in-class discussion (see Appendix 1).
3. Introducing the peer feedback checklist (Appendix 2) and modelling its use on students' practice essays (Appendix 3). Before students answered the questions in the checklist, they were asked to highlight certain writing features studied in class (topic sentences, link back sentences and voices from the experts, as well as grammar and vocabulary mistakes). Students were also requested to make comments in each instance, such as suggestions for improvement, if needed.

The modeling was done three times before students had to use the checklist themselves.

4. Undertaking the peer review of a past student writing sample using the checklist independently for the first time. This was followed up with an in-class discussion about how students approached the process, challenges and suggestions for future use of the checklist.
5. Setting up the student-guided peer feedback activity. Students were organised in pairs and assigned two anonymous essays to provide feedback on using the checklist. (It was suggested by colleagues that anonymity would encourage honesty). Students were asked to actively discuss the writing features and agree on their position before making any comments on the checklist. They were also encouraged to act on the feedback they received and to discuss with me any concerns about it.

The intervention was used with the participants in Cycle 1. Participants in Cycle 2 did not experience the whole intervention except for Stages 4 and 5, for which a rubric was used instead of the checklist. This rubric was an adapted version of that which teachers used to mark the task, and required students to choose a descriptor for five language features and provide comments at the end if they wanted to. In order to become familiar with the rubric, students had to read through it and raise any questions they might have about it in class. No modelling was done before Stage 5. Data collected in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 was subsequently compared to establish if the intervention had any effect.

## Data collection

During the peer feedback sessions in both Cycle 1 and 2 data was collected through a Google document containing:

1. A student writing sample.
2. The peer feedback checklist (Cycle 1), the peer feedback rubric (Cycle 2).
3. An 'acting on feedback' section/box.

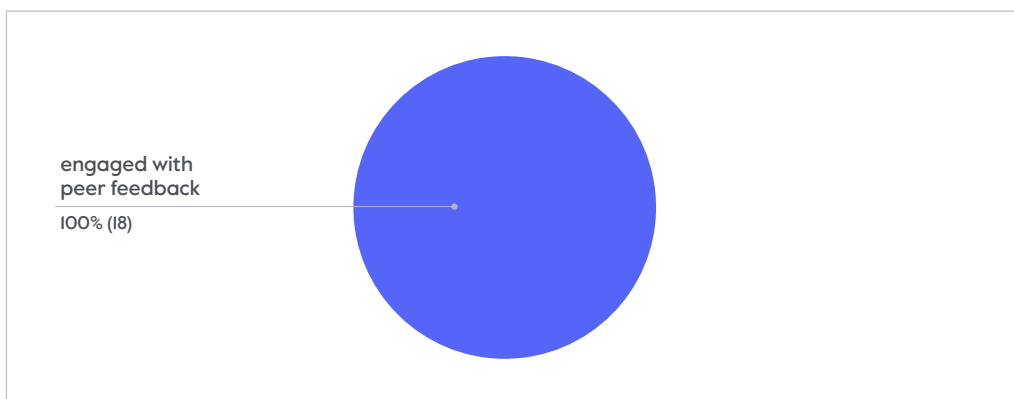
In order to determine if the peer feedback tool (checklist in Cycle 1 or rubric in Cycle 2) engaged students and was useful to approach the task, I observed whether students used the tool as well as their level of engagement with it (just ticking boxes or highlighting descriptors as opposed to also providing comprehensive comments to justify their choices). As for determining the extent to which students could provide each other with practical feedback, I went through all the forms categorising the comments students made. Comments were categorised in two ways: Did the comment provide a practical suggestion for improvement? Was the comment just an appraisal comment? The comments were also categorised considering the writing feature they addressed such as clarity of ideas, referencing, grammar etc.

To determine the extent to which feedback was used for revision, I analysed the students' 'acting on feedback' box in the Google docs. This space was allocated for

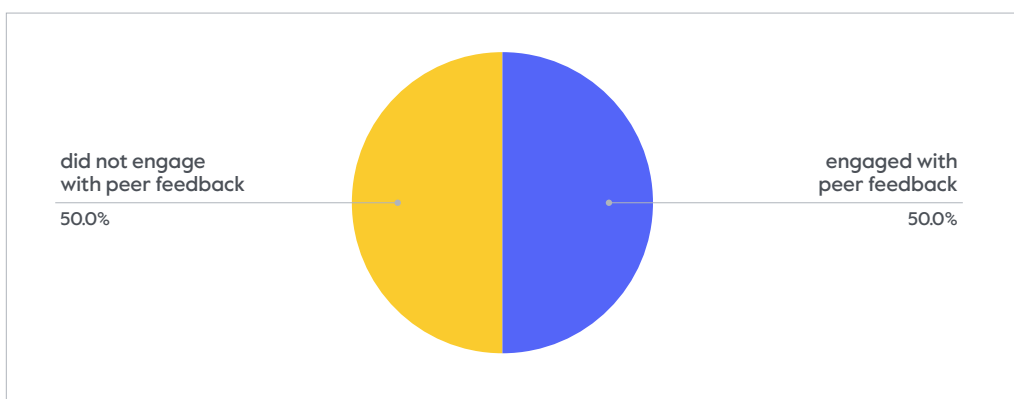
students to rewrite part of/the whole essay based on the feedback they received. Furthermore, an unstructured interview was done with students in Cycle 1 to get their views on whether or not the scaffold used as intervention maximised students' engagement with peer feedback.

## Finding

One hundred per cent of participants in Cycle 1 actively engaged in the student-guided peer feedback session using the checklist to assess their classmates' writing samples, to identify areas for improvement and to provide suggestions. They also highlighted writing features in their classmates' essays (Figure 1). As for Cycle 2, only 50% of students actively engaged with peer feedback. Half of the participants did not use the rubric or any other strategy to provide peer feedback. They read the sample and resorted to politely praising each other (Figure 2).

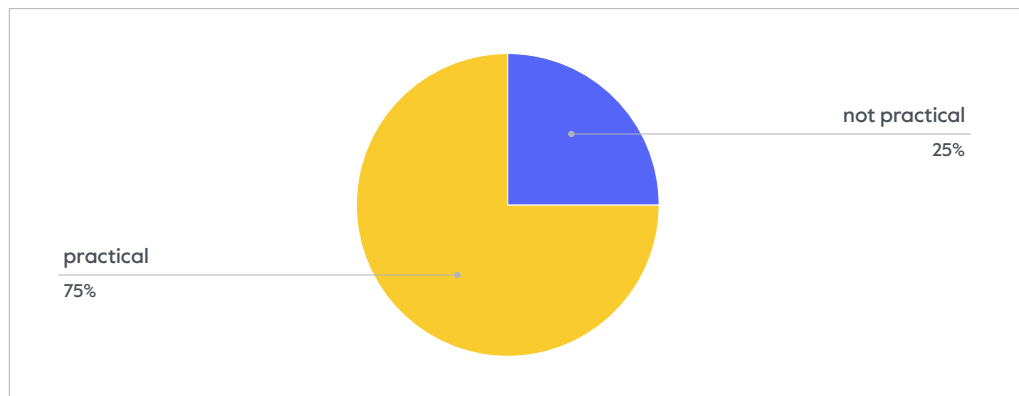


**Figure 1:** Cycle 1 engagement with peer feedback activity (checklist)

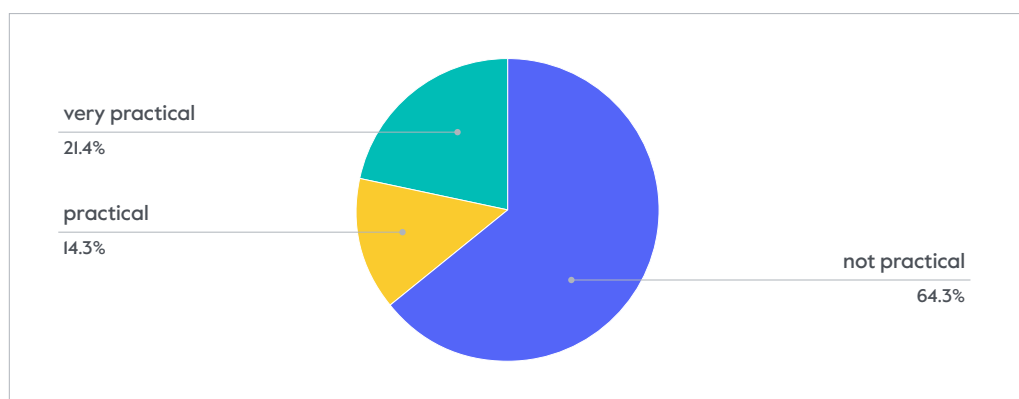


**Figure 2:** Cycle 2 engagement with peer feedback activity (rubric)

The data also revealed that 75% of students in Cycle 1 were able to provide practical feedback to their peers, that is, practical suggestions of how to improve the quality of their essays (Figure 3). These suggestions covered aspects such as improving clarity and relevance of ideas, paraphrasing sources, improving topic sentences, and correcting grammar and vocabulary mistakes. In contrast, 64.3 % of students in Cycle 2 provided feedback that was not practical, such as appraisal and polite comments about the nature of their classmates' work (Figure 4).

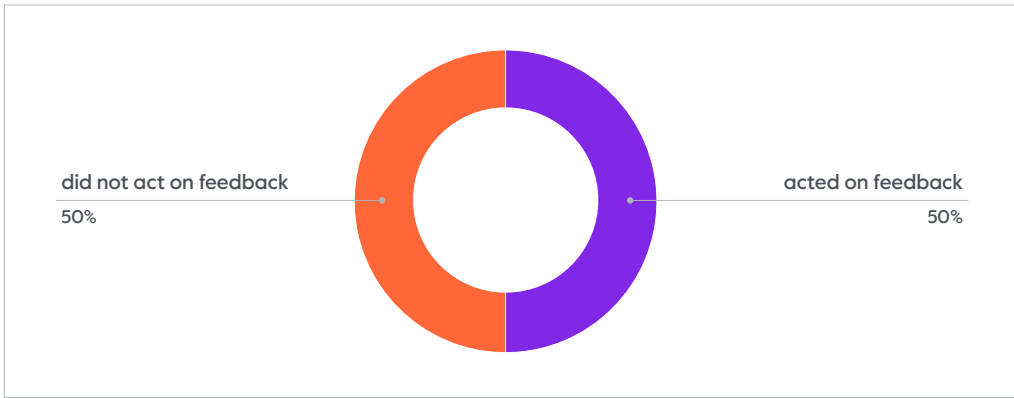


**Figure 3:** Cycle 1 type of feedback provided by students

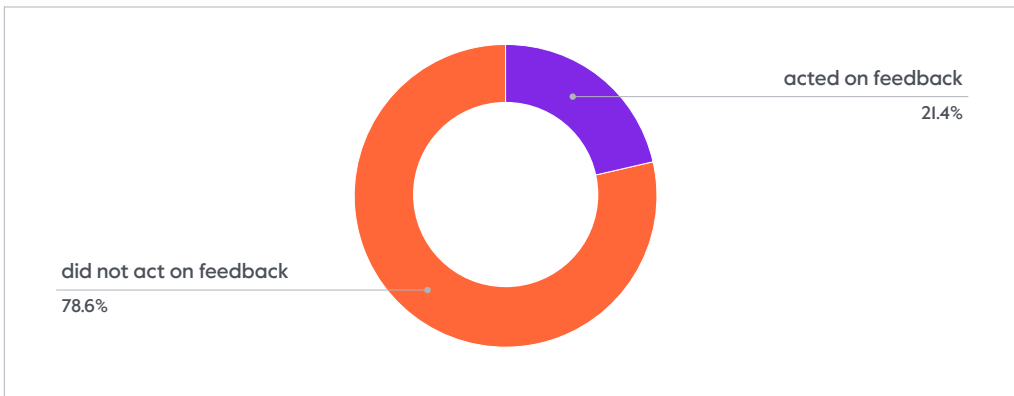


**Figure 4:** Cycle 2 type of feedback provided by students

Fifty per cent of participants in Cycle 1 acted on feedback as compared to only 21.4% of participants in Cycle 2. Out of the 50% of participants who acted on feedback on Cycle 1 (Figure 5) most participants rewrote a section/the whole essay incorporating the feedback they received. The points they acted on the most were organisation of ideas, paragraph development and referencing. As for students who acted on feedback on Cycle 2 (Figure 6), they rewrote part/whole essays and corrected grammar and vocabulary mistakes.



**Figure 5:** Acting on feedback Cycle 1



**Figure 6:** Acting on feedback Cycle 2

I also conducted interviews with participants in Cycle 1 to gauge their perceptions on the effectiveness of the intervention. These are some of the comments they made (comments are unedited to maintain authenticity):

*I like my classmates make good suggestions, good ideas for my paper. Things I did not see before or I did not think about. It's very useful. (Charlie)*

*My classmates are very respectful, I did not feel ashamed to show my paper and to read their comments. They help me write better. (Chloe)*

*The checklist is very easy to complete. The questions are clear and we can say what we want. We can also highlight things in the paper, this helps a lot. (Aaron)*

*My classmates are good writers and their comments are very useful. I think we also need some teacher comments because some classmates are not so good writers, like me. Teacher comments would help a lot. (Jenny)*

Students reported feeling comfortable openly discussing their classmates' anonymous work and knowing what to do when requested to provide peer feedback. They pointed out that having seen me use the checklist on their papers in class helped them identify writing features in both their own and classmates' writing. In contrast, some students pointed out they did not feel as confident providing feedback although they were happy to receive as many comments as possible from their classmates. This is because they perceived their writing skills were not equal to

some of their classmates. Most students commented on how peer feedback should be supported by teacher feedback or how it is useful to have the opportunity to further discuss feedback with their teacher (privately) when they do not agree with a comment or suggestion.

## Conclusion and reflections

In order for peer feedback to be effective, students need to learn how to provide it and how to participate in it. To this purpose, it is important for teachers to re-adjust their expectations of the peer feedback skills students might have and train them in three key areas:

1. To effectively read and respond to someone else's writing.
2. To constructively react to a response to their own writing from a peer.
3. To revise their texts based on the peer response activity (Berg, as cited in Hislop and Stracke 2017).

Students also benefit from learning about etiquette as well as basic procedures and language for commenting on each other's work. The intervention applied in Cycle 1 addressed all these aspects with the online self-discovery module, the modelling exercises and the in-class discussion about feedback. However, I feel that more could be done to provide students with more varied language tools to provide feedback. In future, the self-discovery module will be redesigned to incorporate more on feedback etiquette, do's and don'ts, and appropriate, practical language.

A comfortable classroom atmosphere is another key to guarantee an effective peer feedback session. It is important to invest time building trust with the class. One of the biggest challenges I met was opening space in the busy curriculum to allow for trust building and exploring the importance of peer feedback. An integrated curriculum can be very prescriptive and not allow for flexibility to find opportunities to explicitly teach about peer feedback. The high levels of interconnection between activities make it hard to allocate time to 'unscripted' activities.

Through this research, I have also reaffirmed my belief that peer feedback tools should be clear and accessible to students. The tool should use language that is not open to subjective interpretations but most importantly, language that is within students' grasp. Peer-feedback tools should be designed considering what students can do and not what we think they should be able to do. Not only should the purpose of peer feedback be clearly taught and stated in class but students should also be given ample chances to observe how the tool is used before they use it themselves.

I was pleasantly surprised by the amount and quality of 'acting on feedback' entries from Cycle 1. Students were more inclined to use the feedback for improvement in this cycle and I believe that was connected to the quality of feedback they received. It can also be attributed to the modelling part of the intervention effectively providing students with the tools they needed to provide quality feedback. Conversely, as for the low rates of 'acting on feedback' in Cycle 2,

it could be that students lacked the skills needed to provide effective feedback and struggled to find errors in their classmates' work, explain them properly and make suggestions for improvement. This further supports the view that students need to be trained in peer feedback skills.

## References

Hislop, J and Stracke, E (2017) ESL students in peer review: An action research study in a university English for Academic Purposes course, *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL* 12, 9–44.

Please click the following link to view the author's presentation at the 2021 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Colloquium: <https://youtu.be/YFRymDUBESA>

### Appendix I: Online peer feedback discovery module

## Initial thoughts and feelings

To complete this discovery module, you will need a pen and notebook/ notepad to take notes.

### Peer-feedback

**What is it?**

Peer feedback involves students giving and receiving constructive comments about their written or spoken performance in an activity in order to improve it.

Students can feel nervous about participating in peer-feedback activities. They can also feel insecure or afraid of being rude to their classmates. Nobody wants to disrespect other people's work.

All those feelings are normal. Whether you have participated in peer-feedback activities or not before, let's take a closer look at how we feel about giving and providing peer-feedback.

Look at the sentences below. How would you complete them?

Type your answer in the field. Then click the blue arrow to export the document. Save the export in your device We will revisit it at the end of this module.

Initial thoughts and feelings

Initial thoughts and feelings

I think peer feedback is (say why)


Document Export

When the teacher asks me to give my classmates feedback on their work

## Understanding 'peer-feedback'

Use your notes to answer the following questions.

1. Why is peer-feedback important?
2. When is peer feedback particularly effective?
3. What are the Benefits of peer feedback for the reviewer?
4. What does the research by De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) illustrate?
5. What is the author's purpose for writing the text?





## Appendix 2: Checklist (Cycle I)

Synthesis task			
Content/Relevance	Yes	No	Comments
1. Does the text answer the question/fully effectively?			
2. Are all ideas included relevant/connected to the question?			
3. Are ideas well explained and easy to understand?			
4. Are ideas from all the relevant sources synthesised?			
Use of sources			
5. Are the sources referenced well? (Surname and year)			
6. Has all the information from the sources been paraphrased?			
Connection of ideas			
7. Are the topic sentences in both paragraphs clear?			
8. Are the sentences within the paragraphs connected to each other?			
9. Are both paragraphs connected to each other?			
10. Are the link back sentences in both paragraphs connected to the question?			
Grammar and vocabulary			
11. Is vocabulary formal?			

## Appendix 3: Modelling the use of the checklist

