

Feedback and (self-)assessment

Lena Ahlin & Maria Freij

Language teachers and researchers often stress that peer reviewing offers a more equal learning situation than the hierarchical one of teacher and student, and that it can take place in a less formal and more supportive milieu. Furthermore, it may stimulate the engagement, cognitive conflict and social activity that Agneta Svalberg claims are significant aspects of language learning (Svalberg, 2009 and 2012). Clearly, peer reviewing may have an important role to play in language learning and it fits very well into the process writing paradigm that many of us employ.

Miao, Badger and Zhen (2006) have suggested that whereas teacher feedback appears to lead to greater improvement of students' texts (for example, as regards grammar and content), peer interaction stimulates increased negotiation of meaning. They point out that if peer feedback is given before teacher feedback is provided, greater student autonomy is achieved, even for students who are not used to this kind of group activities.²

² Some researchers suggest that cross-cultural problems may occur in peer reviewing since ESL peer groups often include students from a large variety of cultural and educational backgrounds. For example, Fiona Hyland refers to Allaei and Connor (1990: 24), who observe that 'conflict or at the very least, high levels of discomfort may occur in multicultural collaborative peer response groups'; and to studies by Nelson and Murphy (1992, 1993) indicating that students from different cultures may have different expectations about basic elements of the group situation such as the roles of the members, the mechanics of the group and politeness strategies (Hyland, 2000: 36). We addressed such risks by creating a template for the peer-reviewing process, so that expectations were clear on students both in terms of their giving and receiving feedback: our group of students included participants from Sweden, Turkey, Germany, Switzerland, South Korea, and the US at different stages of their education and with significantly varying academic backgrounds. We therefore made sure that when we met in

In spring 2016, we introduced the course Creative and Critical Reading and Writing, EN250K, as an elective course in the second term of the Bachelor Programme in English. It was also open to exchange students and as an elective. Our aim was twofold: to train students' reading skills through the in-depth study of a few key texts; and to practice writing skills through the production of two creative texts: one poem and one prose piece. We also made peer feedback, and evaluation and discussion of that feedback, an essential component of the course. This article discusses how and why peer feedback can be used as a form of self-assessment, and how peer interaction and reflection on feedback can usefully inform assessment.

Active participation in class and group discussions were central learning activities of our course, and peer feedback on draft versions of students' creative work was a compulsory element. The students were asked to work in groups of three, so that each student provided feedback on two other students' texts and in turn received feedback from two students. There were two formal deadlines for submissions of drafts which were accompanied by a *Workshop critique sheet* with specific questions concerning the assignment. The workshop critique sheet gave the students a starting point in the way they responded to their peers' texts as we gave them key points to focus on; points that were integral parts of the course's learning goals:

the classroom there would be time for group discussions so that students would get to know one another and anxiety could be reduced. Peer groups were chosen by the students themselves.

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Fill out the table below. Comments should consist of 500–1000 words, depending on the length of the text. | |
| I found the most successful part of this text to be: Because: | |
| I found that form and content supported each other well/not as well as they could, because: | |
| The hardest thing for me to understand about this text was: Because: | |
| I found the text’s language was: Because: | |
| Please also comment on: | |
| Narrative perspective (including consistency) | |
| Clarity (including grammatical aspects) | |
| Sense of place | |
| Character development | |

For the submission of the final version of their texts, students were asked to reflect on the feedback they had received as well as on the feedback they had given. They were expected to motivate why they had chosen to incorporate some comments and rejected others. They were also asked to motivate their recommended edits and explain why and how these revisions would

improve the text. In the final submission of reflections on feedback, students also had to make explicit reference to the course literature to plant their practice firmly in theoretical ground (and practice the subskill of referencing material according to the MLA Style Guide). The course included a mix of on-campus and online activities: much of the written feedback work took place via the Its Learning platform, while follow-up discussions and lectures on theoretical and methodological aspects were held in the classroom.

A fundamental principle concerning students' ability to self-assess and benefit from it, is that the learner needs to understand the goal, where she stands in relation to the goal and how to get there. This can be made clear if we bring teaching and assessment closer together and familiarise the students with the assessment criteria (Lee, 2011). In our course, we provided the students with a *Workshop critique sheet* above in which the various parameters of the assignment were identified, such as narrative perspective, sense of place, character development; but there were also questions about clarity and grammar. We also made active reflection on feedback part of the assessment criteria for the course³:

³ Note that this is only the parts of the assessment criteria that relate specifically to feedback. Other criteria included knowledge of genres, theoretical concepts and approaches, linguistic register, to mention a few.

| |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| U |
| The reflection sheets do not demonstrate that the student has worked actively with own and others' texts, and the discussion of giving and receiving feedback lacks relevance and/or critical depth. |
| G |
| The student has actively taken part in peer reviews and has both provided constructive comments for other students and actively edited her/his own text in relation to feedback received. |
| VG |
| The student has actively taken part in peer reviews and has both provided constructive comments for other students and actively edited her/his own text in relation to received feedback in a manner that indicates an in-depth understanding of text analysis and construction. |

Students were not able to pass the course unless they had engaged seriously with peers' as well as their own texts. The aspect of students having to be able to demonstrate the ability for meta-reflection and -discussion was twofold: the first benefit was building into the systematic progression we have developed in the Bachelor in order to ensure transferable skills are gained and autonomy and independence increased; second, since it was the quality of the reflection itself we were assessing, the potential difference in students' abilities was made less relevant and students who peered with a less-capable student were not negatively affected by this.

In order to avoid collusion, Dana Ferris (2007: 168) suggests that teachers should give "explicit permission to students to disagree with or choose not to utilize a teacher or peer suggestion

as long as they can explain why” (emphasis added). She emphasizes that if feedback is to be truly meaningful, we need to hold students accountable for the feedback they receive (i.e. answer the question of why they did or did not use it). In the final submission accompanying sheet, we included questions relating to the writing process and asked our students to take a critical stance toward their own text as they evaluated its strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, they were asked to reflect on the feedback process:

Answer these questions for each text you submit. Discuss with reference to the course literature and include a reference list in MLA.

- How have you used the feedback you received from your peers? What did you incorporate and why? What did you reject and why?
- What are you most happy with about your text and why?
- What do you think still needs work and why?

As teachers, we are not merely concerned with students’ completion of individual tasks, but with their meta-cognition, which includes “reflection, self-knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, learning strategies, and monitoring learning” (Billing, 2007: 486). Working actively with peer feedback in writing courses is an efficient tool for achieving these aims. In addition, we suggest that the meta-cognition thereby engendered leads to greater student autonomy and transferability of skills. Specifically, the below foci encourage such independent critical thinking:

- ⇒ the instruction to justify the choices they had made when deciding what to incorporate and what to leave out of their texts calls for this kind of meta-cognition (the use of the word 'because')
- ⇒ the use of references to course literature in the justifications of their choices was a way to ensure that they were not based solely on personal opinion

In conclusion, students have worked more actively with their texts and have expressed positive responses to the guiding they have received in the process. We found excellent examples of students' weighing their feedback against the literature and against their own ideas of how the text could improve, as we shall let these three examples illustrate:

I think I could still work on the dialogue. I only inserted a short dialogue which brings the plot forth, but does not help the character's development. Probably, I rather wrote a monologue of one's character, showing Emma's thoughts, instead of a dialogue. However, according to Bulman (2007) a character is also created from thoughts.

The foot and meter of the poem [still need work]. I realize that I am horrible at finding the accented syllable. I think it is better now than it was, but it still needs work. While it was brought up in class and I've read in Boland about the stresses (2000: p160) I still have difficulties with it.

Frankly, the dialogues in my text are very limited. I described the scenery nicely, however, somehow I hesitated to include more dialogues. Bulman writes "Dialogue can contribute to the development of plot by providing information to the reader through one character telling another about something that has happened." (71). It would have had enriched my story and balanced it more, so that it was not solely a plot-driven one.

Students did, though, express a need for “direct feedback”—they were inclined to value teacher feedback over that of their peers (see also Freij & Ahlin, 2014)—but for our students to develop the necessary competencies as critical and creative writers, we argue that such feedback does nothing to increase independence. Instead, we aim to further incorporate the assessment criteria into teaching through various non-assessed exercises, on which students will get feedback also from teachers, which they are then able to transfer to their greater production. We aim to clarify, too, that the feedback process they engaged in with each other’s texts is ultimately how they need to treat their own work. We also hoped that more students would take the *Workshop critique sheet* as how we described it: a starting point, but few developed it further. An exercise we envisage as useful here is together with the students to develop an extended workshop sheet in class based on the assessment criteria. This would include students further in the teaching process, and give them agency in terms of their own learning processes. Ultimately, we hope that they would learn from this to work actively with assessment criteria autonomously in not just this particular course, but in general, and that it would encourage ownership of the learning process.

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