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AN ACTION RESEARCH ON PEER FEEDBACK IN THE CROATIAN PRIMARY EFL SCHOOL CONTEXT

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This paper presents an action research whose aim was to implement the peer feedback activity in EFL writing in primary school contexts in Croatia. The study follows the methodology of action research conducted in five stages. The study aims to answer the following research questions: 1. Can the activity of peer feedback in writing be tailored to primary school students? 2. Can peer feedback activity be successfully implemented in primary educational contexts? The action research provided valuable insights into the complex area of teaching writing in the context of EFL, proving that its successful implementation will largely depend on the willingness of teachers to re-think their feedback-giving practice and embrace peer feedback as a part of their teaching routine.

Keywords: *peer feedback; written teacher feedback; EFL; teaching writing; action research.*

1. Introduction

In our work with students at tertiary-level education, writing instruction in English as a foreign language (EFL) has been one of the main focuses in the courses we teach as well as the research area that has aroused our interest. Over the past ten years, we have dedicated significant attention to various methods that could help our students understand the writing process better, primarily because writing has been recognized as a particularly important, almost indispensable, skill to students of social sciences and humanities. Lately, we have directed our teaching towards student-centred learning specifically within the area of writing instruction, which resulted in experimenting and finally implementing the practice of peer feedback in writing. The benefits of peer feedback in EFL writing have been seen and confirmed in our practice with students, as well as in the results of previous research (Štulina & Oštarić, 2023). The discussions with colleagues from the primary school context inspired us to take into consideration the possibility of tailoring the activity for lower-level students and to attempt to implement it in the primary school context hoping both teachers and students would find it useful.

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2. Initial study observations and suggestions

At the beginning of our research preparations, collaboration was established with one primary school teacher with more than twenty years of experience in teaching English to primary school students. To get a better insight into EFL primary school context and the issue of writing instruction, this matter has been discussed on several occasions and the teacher provided us with her graded school writing assignments which included a short composition on the topic of healthy lifestyle (Grade 6). These were used for initial analysis in our research.

In these initial discussions and analysis, we identified the following relevant issues in connection to writing instruction and our study: a) lack of time that could be spent on developing writing skills, b) process writing was not part of the writing instruction, c) approach to writing was a support to learning the language, i.e. an opportunity to practice and reinforce targeted structures and new vocabulary, which is part of the traditional approach to teaching language (Cushing Weigle, 2002, p.12) and still very frequent, especially at lower levels of language learning, and d. if feedback was practiced then it was teacher feedback exclusively.

Most of the teacher comments indicated that the type of feedback provided was direct corrective feedback, mainly done as part of the "tradition" of the teacher-centred approach which is still prevalent in the Croatian educational context where knowledge is expected to come from the teacher (Martinović & Mifka Profozić, 2020, p. 112). However, there is evidence that this simplistic way of using explicit teacher feedback is not particularly effective for L2 learning (Coyle & de Larios, 2020, p.2; Cindrić & Kos Kolobarić, 2020, p.76) as students rarely pay attention to these written corrections (Bardine et al., 2000, p.98).

This indicates the need for teachers to reflect on their feedback and instruction practices in general, which would be beneficial both to students as well as teachers (Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Providing feedback is indispensable in writing instruction and teachers need to be aware of its role as well as its complex nature as a "multidimensional phenomenon" (Coyle & de Larios, 2020. p.2).

The importance of feedback in second-language writing extends beyond its mere use and incorporates factors such as focus, form, and context, and particular emphasis needs to be placed on tailoring the feedback to each student's script and abilities (Hyland & Hyland, 2010). Taking into consideration time management issues frequently reported within the school context (Leki, 2001; Ruecker et al., 2014; Harward et al., 2014) it is reasonable not to expect teachers to dedicate the required amount of attention to this issue to effectively maximise student learning. A valuable alternative is peer feedback that should be mentioned in connection to feedback in writing. It could be seen as a possibility to move away from a teacher-centred toward a more student-centred approach (Huang 2015, p.3) and obtain positive results (Wang, 2014). The reality is that teacher feedback is still largely favoured over peer feedback among students in language learning (Miao et al., 2006; Hyland, 2006; Zhao, 2010) for various reasons, such as feeling hesitant or inept to offer constructive criticism and opting for positive comments only. These are likely to be the reasons why some teachers seem to avoid these activities in class, generally concerned with the quality of peer feedback.

However, there are other solutions teachers can resort to that are also aligned with the recommended learner-centred approach in teaching EFL. There is a suggestion that offering a model text as a whole class activity could be a time-saving activity as it would replace written teacher feedback but still offer aid to students' writing (Coyle & de Larios, 2020, p.12). It

was this idea of a model text that was already integrated within the peer feedback activity used in our courses at the university level which we wanted to use in this action research. Within this activity students are offered model texts not only as an example to be imitated but also as an example that needs to be improved. Teachers use a model text to create teacher feedback while including all students in this process. So, in fact, with the suggested activity the teacher feedback would not be completely omitted from the writing instruction, but it would be combined with peer feedback training which are two "critical components" for writing improvement (Woo, et al., 2013, p.281). It is also substantially important to mention the aspect of self-feedback that is offered by the same activity. In fact, self-feedback could be regarded as even more important within this activity, particularly in the early stages of training when students are still not competent to act as individual reviewers. The focus is placed on students applying the newly gained knowledge to their writing, instead of sharing comments with their peers. Thus, by acknowledging the shortcomings of an analysed text, commenting in class, and optionally writing comments, they benefit themselves as feedback givers and writers as evidenced in various studies (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Nicol et al., 2014; Baker, 2016; Yu & Lee, 2016; Rouhi et al., 2020).

3. The study

3.1. Research questions

The research has been initiated to tailor the peer feedback activity for lower-level students and implement it within the primary school context, hoping to see improvement in students' writing. At very early stages in our research, it became evident that successful implementation did not imply only improvement in students' writing but also a positive teachers' reaction and willingness to adopt the activity as a part of their standard instruction (or change of practice). This is mainly because most benefits of this peer feedback activity could come after a long-term process of re-using the activity in writing instruction (Rahimi, 2013, p.87), and not as a one-off activity. In addition, it was necessary to take into consideration the instructional context which is also likely to affect the efficiency of this activity, but so far has been rarely done in previous research in connection to feedback (Coyle & de Larios, 2020, p.2). For that reason, in our research we have identified teachers as the first element that influences the success of the peer feedback activity and recognised the need for both objective and subjective views in connection to the success of the implementation (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 2002, p.31). Finally, two research questions were defined in this study:

Can the activity of peer feedback in writing be tailored to primary school students?

Can this peer feedback activity be successfully implemented in a primary educational context?

3.2. Methodology & participants

When deciding on the appropriate methodology for our research, we opted for an action research design which offered multiple and systematic attempts (Mills, 2014, p.8) and allowed us to "work out dilemmas" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 122) during the process of research. Also, it enabled collaboration across educational contexts and between practitioners and

researchers (Dickens & Watkins, 1999, p. 131.). The action research reported here follows the pattern of cycles (planning, acting, observing and reflecting), but not always as neatly as planned as it frequently happens with action research projects (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 2002, p.21; Mills, 2014, p.4).

The research included two researchers, acting also as instructors in the first three stages of the research and as facilitators in the fourth stage. In the first three stages, a small group of four students (referred to as Study group 1 hereafter) participated in the preparation of the activity that was to be implemented in the primary school context. Study group 1 consisted of 4 primary student volunteers (grade 7) in whose classes we were planning to implement the activity. Other collaborators included two primary school teachers, and three primary school classes (grade 7 – a total of 60 students). Prior to initiating the implementation process in schools, the necessary permissions had been obtained from the headmasters of the schools, as well as the parents of the students who participated in the study.

3.3. Data collection & analysis

Data was collected from all the research stages and included joint researchers' journal entries (with observation during and after the sessions) that were entered by both researchers. We initiated this action research by adhering to the guidelines of an open inquiry as an integral part of qualitative research (Friedman, 2012, p.181) Therefore, we had to be receptive to embracing changes in our research, allowing for the focus to unfold throughout the process of data collection and analysis. In Stages 1, 2, and 3 the data was collected from audio recordings of the peer-feedback sessions, elicited feedback interviews with the students, and their written scripts. Interviews with the students were conducted in form of a group discussion that followed Stage 1 and 2. The students were asked to reflect and comment on the activity that was conducted (their remarks, perception, level of difficulty, use of handout etc.). In Stages 4, 5, and 6 the data consisted of the teachers' responses to the three questionnaires (pre-intervention, post-intervention, and implementation monitoring), and students' written scripts. Questionnaires included open-ended questions regarding teachers' experience with writing instruction, and their reflection of the process of the implementation. Finally, data analysis is mainly based on researchers' judgments of the evidence they have collected in each stage (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p.82).

4. Action research stages

The activity that was to be tailored and implemented into the primary school context included peer feedback as a whole group work on authentic model texts written by students. Students participated as a group in analysing the text according to the set assessment criteria as a variant of the fishbowl technique[3] (Garrison & Kraemer Munday, 2012; Ferris, 2003). This activity could be regarded as peer feedback training and as such, as previously stated, aimed at developing students' reflective skills and assisting them in becoming competent reviewers and writers.

[3] The origins of the fishbowl technique, rooted in Kurt Lewin's T-group movement of the late 1940s, laid the groundwork for its later application in fostering collaboration among students (Garrison & Kraemer Munday, 2012). In the context of peer feedback training 'fishbowl demonstrations' refer to a role-play of a "peer evaluation session as students read from their own copies of the draft under discussion." (Ferris, 2003, p. 169.)

4.1. Stage 1 (December 2021)

The initial stage of the research aimed to establish how primary school students (grade 7) responded to the peer feedback activity, how the activity should be tailored, and whether it would produce the expected effect. The two researchers acted as instructors in this stage and worked separately with two students each (Study group 1). Before the peer feedback session, students were assigned a writing task chosen from an English textbook. They were asked to describe their friend using 80-100 words. Once the students wrote their compositions, instructors photocopied and exchanged the texts with the two students in the other group. During the peer feedback session, the students were initially guided in compiling the assessment criteria table (task completion, coherence and cohesion, vocabulary and grammar) for this task. Next, they were given the compositions written by the other two students which they needed to analyse according to the assessment criteria table. Finally, they were asked to rewrite their own composition and try to improve it after the peer feedback session. No time limit was set for this stage.

The analysis of data from this stage revealed the length of the session to be long due to eliciting of the assessment criteria. More positive observations from participants' comments revealed an example of the reflection process that was expected to be achieved within this activity as it is seen as quite important for the writing process (Golparvar & Khafi, 2021, p.1.) (example 1). This resulted in a composition that was more in line with the requirements of the task and the organization of the paragraphs.

(example 1) Student 2: "...while I was reading, I simultaneously compared with what I had written and what the task asked me to do."[4]

Finally, we concluded that it was essential to reduce the duration of the activity to 45 minutes, fitting within the school lesson structure. Also, instead of eliciting the assessment criteria from students, we agreed to provide the students with tailored assessment criteria which was compiled in line with the observations from Stage 1.

4.2. Stage 2 (February 2022)

The students from Study group 1 were asked to write a description of their dream in no more than 100 words as a part of their homework and bring their compositions to class, where we gathered all four students to work as a group. University classrooms were used for this purpose. After familiarising students with the previously set assessment criteria provided in the form of a table, the students swapped their compositions and analysed their peers' work according to the criteria. They wrote down their comments and awarded points in each rubric of the assessment sheet. The students were then asked to rewrite their compositions according to the received peer feedback. Finally, the activity and the comments they received were discussed with students at the end of the lesson which was recorded.

The journal entries indicated that the researchers managed to resolve time issues by carrying out the activity within a 45-minute lesson. Pre-set assessment criteria proved to be a

[4] The interaction with the students was conducted in English and Croatian. Here, the comments in Croatian are translated into English by the authors.

more effective strategy in this regard. Additionally, the students regarded the assessment table as more useful than the comments they received, as it assisted them in understanding the assignment and producing their text. This is in line with the rationale behind the activity, in connection to self-feedback as previously stated. The observations of this stage directed our attention towards further tailoring the assessment criteria table, which should be adapted with each new task. The following stage was to be a mock implementation session (within 45 min) that would be suggested to the two teachers in primary school.

4.3. Stage 3 (April 2022)

A mock implementation activity with Study group 1 was conducted in the university classroom. One researcher acted as the instructor while the other acted as the critical friend taking notes. The activity included three model texts (compositions of 70-80 words on healthy life) and a tailored assessment criteria table as a peer feedback handout. The three model texts were taken from the pool of scripts provided by one teacher to ensure the texts were at the students' level (authentic texts written by their peers). They targeted common mistakes encountered in their written scripts. Throughout the activity, the assessment criteria table was used as a reference guide in analysing the two model texts (a weaker and stronger version), and peer feedback comments were elicited from students with questioning techniques and joint discussion. Students were then allowed time to comment individually (in writing) on the third model text and asked to share their comments (orally) with the class. Finally, the students were asked to write their compositions, but this was done as a part of the additional 45-minute class immediately after the peer feedback session. The joint work of this stage was audio-recorded.

The analysis of audio recordings revealed benefits of the suggested activity when contrasted with written feedback. While eliciting correct versions of incorrectly written part of the text, instead of simply correcting the mistakes, which is usually done when giving feedback on written assignments, the teacher offered additional explanations (example 2) which contributed to understanding of the type of mistakes made. In other instances, peer interaction directed students' attention to diverse elements, such as cohesion, context and the audience (example 3).

(example 2) Teacher: "I'm eating nutritious meals throughout the day. Is it ok? Would you say it differently or would you also say: I'm eating?"
Student 1: "I eat!"
Teacher: "You would probably say: I eat, right? During the day I pay attention to....so this is a regular activity, and it would be correct to say: I eat."

(example 3) Student 3: "Maybe it's not suitable as an ending to this text, but it's fine."
Teacher: "Maybe it just doesn't resemble the standard way of ending a text."
Student 1: "It depends on who we are writing to. Maybe if this person posts this on the internet it's okay, but if it is a school assignment it might not go that well."

The examples above direct our attention to the potential of the activity in terms of scaffolding within this activity, i.e. the potential of the activity to increase learning through interaction of both teachers and peers while analysing the texts and giving comments. In conclusion of

this stage, it was decided to suggest it to primary school teachers as a part of the preparation for the written assignment, along with the previously prepared peer feedback handout.

4.4. Stage 4 (May / June 2022)

Two primary school teachers agreed to participate and implement the activity in three classes (grade 7), with a total of 60 students. The peer feedback activity was planned to be conducted within the first 45 minutes as the preparation for the writing assignment which the students were writing in class as a school-graded assignment. Both teachers were given a pre-activity implementation questionnaire to fill out, along with the peer feedback handout (from Stage 3) for the activity's implementation. In collaboration with the teachers, we translated the peer feedback handout in Croatian as suggested by one of the teachers. The texts within the peer feedback handout were written by Study group 1 students as the central idea of this activity was that students work on authentic materials written by their peers. It was planned for the researchers not to attend these lessons to avoid the effect of the observer's paradox (Mackey & Gass, 2012, p. 187) and the teachers and students to feel comfortable, which would increase the chances of collecting more reliable data. Therefore, we decided to rely on teachers' observations and their reports in the post-activity questionnaire.

From the teachers' responses in the pre-questionnaire, we learnt that both teachers implement some form of peer feedback activity in various tasks, in both oral and written form, and they both share positive experiences with peer feedback. As far as the difficulties experienced when teaching writing skills are concerned, they stated that not all students do homework tasks, and they are not aware of the importance of pre-writing activities. Similar problems were reported regarding the use of formative assessment in terms of lack of time they can dedicate to it, and students' preference for summative assessment while formative is not considered as important.

In their post-questionnaire responses, both teachers expressed their satisfaction with the activity. Nonetheless, they singled out students' need for more clarification and support in the elements of task completion, and coherence and cohesion while grading essays. They saw their students motivated and engaged throughout the entire implementation process. They did not suggest any modifications to the activity.

4.5. Stage 5 (March / April 2023)

As a part of the monitoring process, the teachers were given a short questionnaire consisting of five questions in which they were asked whether they had conducted the activity or any of its segments in the following school year after the peer feedback intervention and to describe the process and/or modifications. They were also asked to specify the reason/reasons why they hadn't conducted the activity and again to express their willingness to repeat the activity.

The answers from the questionnaire indicate that both teachers repeated the same or similar type of peer feedback activity in one or more other classes they taught within the school year. One teacher used it with written assignments and the other teacher with oral assignments

(presentations). Finally, they expressed their willingness to implement peer feedback activity in their teaching process (whether as school activity or homework assignments).

5. Conclusion

Writing in a foreign language is undoubtedly an essential and complex language skill to be mastered. Development of writing skills within the area of writing instruction has recently become the focus of our professional life and work with students, which resulted in experimenting with the activity of peer feedback in writing and implementing it into our classes. It is for this reason that we initiated this action research as a way of implementing a similar activity in the primary school context. In close collaboration with teachers, this action research provided us with valuable insights into the complex area of teaching writing.

In connection with our research questions, we can conclude that the peer feedback activity can be tailored to suit the needs of both teachers and students. Due to its adaptability, we believe that the activity itself leaves enough space for teachers to choose which segment of the assessment criteria table they would like to accentuate. In that way teachers are given freedom and autonomy to use individually tailored peer feedback activities, which could bring out the best in their students. In addition, it is important to point out that the implementation of the peer feedback activity is a complex and demanding task, mainly because of the constraints of contextual factors. Also, its successful implementation will largely depend on the willingness of teachers to re-consider their feedback-giving practice and embrace the peer feedback activity as a part of their teaching routine (Lee et al. 2016). We can consider our intervention successful as the two teachers who collaborated with us expressed their satisfaction with the activity and decided to repeat it in their future practice. It would be beneficial to repeat this activity in the future with a larger number of collaborators and include quantitative analysis of students' scripts as well as questionnaires with students' perceptions. To conclude, any change of practice in education is a long-lasting process and it requires not only the readiness and adaptability of schoolteachers but also thoughtful collaboration of all the stakeholders in the process (Bognar, 2006, p. 177).

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Sažetak

AKCIJSKO ISTRAŽIVANJE NA TEMU PISANE VRŠNJAČKE POVRATNE INFORMACIJE U ENGLESKOM KAO STRANOM JEZIKU U OSNOVNOJ ŠKOLI U HRVATSKOJ

Ovaj rad predstavlja akcijsko istraživanje s ciljem implementacije aktivnosti pisane vršnjačke povratne informacije u engleskom kao stranom jeziku u osnovnoj školi. Istraživanje prati metodologiju akcijskog istraživanja i provedeno je u pet faza. Ovo istraživanje ima za cilj odgovoriti na sljedeća istraživačka pitanja: 1. Može li se aktivnost pisane vršnjačke povratne informacije prilagoditi učenicima osnovnih škola? 2. Može li se aktivnost pisane vršnjačke povratne informacije uspješno implementirati u osnovnoškolskom obrazovnom kontekstu? Akcijsko istraživanje pružilo je vrijedan uvid u složeno područje poučavanja pisanja u kontekstu poučavanja engleskog kao stranog jezika, čija će uspješna provedba u velikoj mjeri ovisiti o spremnosti nastavnika da preispitaju svoju praksu davanja povratnih informacija i prihvate aktivnost pisane vršnjačke povratne informacije kao dio svoje nastavne rutine.

Ključne riječi: *vršnjačka povratna informacija; pisana nastavnička povratna informacija; engleski kao strani jezik; poučavanje pisanja; akcijsko istraživanje.*