

# 6 Open and anonymous peer review in a digital online environment compared in academic writing context

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## Abstract

This study compares the impact of ‘open’ and ‘anonymous’ peer feedback as an adjunct to teacher-mediated feedback in a digital online environment utilising data gathered on an academic writing course at a Turkish university. Students were divided into two groups with similar writing proficiencies. Students peer reviewed papers either anonymously or openly, then resubmitted them. The lecturer provided feedback and students again resubmitted their assignments. Finally, students submitted a reflection paper on how or whether they benefited from both peer and teacher-mediated feedback. Findings provide evidence for the positive contribution of multiple anonymous peer feedback in a digital online environment towards improved academic writing skills.

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**Keywords:** academic writing, anonymous peer review, digital peer review, English for academic purposes, EAP, plagiarism detectors.

## 1. Introduction

Peer review may allow learners to overcome problems they encounter in Foreign Language (FL) learning since they receive assistance and feedback

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(Hanjani & Li, 2014), and the literature provides evidence for the effectiveness of peer review (e.g. Hu, 2005; Hu & Lam, 2010; Zhao, 2014). However, measuring the impact of such an implementation is not easy (Kleijn et al., 2013). The concept dates back to Vygotsky's (1978) *Zone of Proximal Development* in which students learn from each other by interacting. Such interaction is also observable in the process called *scaffolding* (Weissberg, 2006), where one peer may draw another peer's attention to problematic aspects of a paper that had been overlooked (Ruecker, 2010). The expectation of the FL lecturer is to observe an improvement in the students' writing skills, since this is assumed to be beneficial for both authors and reviewers (Aghae & Hansson, 2013).

Despite the theoretical benefits of peer review, lecturers need to be cautious of potential drawbacks. Feedback provided by students with limited FL proficiency may be misleading and result in students not trusting 'weak' peers' feedback (Paulus, 1999; Rinehart & Chen, 2012; Rollinson, 2005; Ruecker, 2010; Saito & Fujita, 2004). In this case, a balanced distribution of *asymmetrical feedback*, from a proficient student to a less proficient one, and *symmetrical feedback*, between learners of almost equal skills, should be provided (Hanjani & Li, 2014).

Distribution of student papers is the key element in applying the peer review process. Nowadays, digital technology is a tool at the disposal of writing instructors that not only enables several distribution options but also provides more effective feedback. Going beyond its original aim, *Turnitin*, a plagiarism detector, incorporated the *PeerMark* facility through which students are able to review each other's papers. Since digital peer feedback is a new phenomenon, there is no consensus yet on the superiority of online feedback over traditional modes (Elwood & Bode, 2014).

*Digital feedback* enables several features not possible in traditional practice. In particular, digital technology can remove student identification for anonymous peer review and provide review tools to students. Thereby, a lecturer can create more effective peer feedback opportunities by eliminating the social constraint

of face-to-face feedback (Ho & Savignon, 2007). In the literature, the only study regarding anonymity in a non-digital setting (Robinson, 2002) warns that anonymous peer review may not provide effective feedback if the process is not planned carefully.

## 2. The study

As a plagiarism detector, *Turnitin* was successful in reducing the ratio of plagiarism incidents on an academic writing course (Razi, 2014) taught by the researcher of this study. A related study revealed that students were unaware of their real problems since self-reported difficulties did not reflect their actual problems (Razi, 2015). The basic assumption in this study, that of retaining anonymity in the peer review process, is underpinned by Liou and Peng's (2009) study where students were reluctant to highlight their friends' errors. By enabling a balanced distribution of asymmetrical and symmetrical feedback, anonymity may enhance student participation and collaboration in EFL academic writing, leading to the exchange of more effective feedback, and contribute to improved writing skills. The research questions were as follows:

- RQ1: does the digital peer review process work effectively?
- RQ2: should lecturers manage the peer review process openly or anonymously?
- RQ3: should lecturer-feedback precede or follow peer-feedback?

### 2.1. Setting and participants

The study was conducted in the English Language Teaching (ELT) department of Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University (COMU), Turkey, in the fall term of 2014. Fifty-nine trainee teacher students who attended the academic writing skills course regularly in three intact classes taught by the researcher were

included in the study. They were assigned either to the experimental or control group, based on scores from their first assignment. There were 30 participants ( $n_{\text{male}}=9$ ,  $n_{\text{female}}=21$ ) in the experimental group (anonymous peer review) and 29 participants ( $n_{\text{male}}=9$ ,  $n_{\text{female}}=20$ ) in the control group (open peer review). Independent samples t test did not indicate significant differences between the two groups' mean values on the first assignment. The participants' mean age was 19.

## 2.2. Materials

As a digital environment, *Turnitin* was used for three basic reasons. Firstly, COMU had an institutional *Turnitin* license, secondly *Turnitin* was superior in detecting plagiarism (Hill & Page, 2009), and thirdly, it enabled peer review facilities.

## 2.3. Procedures

During the semester, students submitted three different written assignments, each of approximately 500 words. Assignment 1 was used for setting up groups and familiarizing students with the digital peer review process.

In Assignment 2, before matching students, they were grouped into three; namely, 'good', 'moderate', and 'weak', with reference to their scores in Assignment 1. Then, each student received feedback from a 'good', 'moderate', and 'weak' peer; and provided feedback to a 'good', 'moderate', and 'weak' paper.

The students were aware of this categorization but did not know into which category they were placed. They revised their papers and submitted second drafts on which they received lecturer feedback. Then they submitted the final version.

A similar procedure was followed in Assignment 3 with a change. They received lecturer feedback before peer feedback. Following this, they handed in a reflection paper outlining how or if they had benefited from the digital feedback.

### **3. Findings and discussion**

#### **3.1. RQ1: does the digital peer review process work effectively?**

The digital peer review facility can be said to work effectively in a digital online environment where lecturers and students are both familiar with the digital tools involved. However, to facilitate the process, *Turnitin* should enable the grouping of students according to writing proficiency and then provide multiple matching from each group since matching students manually is a very complicated task for the lecturer.

#### **3.2. RQ2: should lecturers manage the peer review process openly or anonymously?**

Independent samples *t*-test results did not indicate significant differences between the experimental and control group's mean scores on either the second or third assignments. However, data from reflection papers revealed that students preferred digital feedback in comparison to manual. In addition, the participants indicated their preference for feedback from multiple peers, not just a single person. This is invaluable both for the author and reviewer (Aghae & Hansson, 2013). Good students in particular indicated they did not benefit from single-peer reviews. Regarding open peer review, they emphasised that they avoided criticizing their peers since it felt like giving feedback to a friend. However, when it came to anonymous peer review, they felt like a teacher giving feedback to a student. Thus, students' relations with their classmates have an impact on the quality of feedback in open peer review. Giving feedback also contributes to the classroom management skills of these trainee teachers.

#### **3.3. RQ3: should lecturer-feedback precede or follow peer-feedback?**

Data from reflection papers highlighted that students preferred lecturer feedback after peer feedback, not before it. Such a preference emphasises the dominant

role of the lecturer, as students prefer final responsibility to be with someone in authority rather than a friend. Students also mentioned that receiving lecturer-feedback helped them appreciate peer-feedback.

#### **4. Conclusion and implications**

Firstly, the digital environment used (*Turnitin*) facilitates the management of exchanging feedback. Considering the first-year undergraduates' inexperience in academic writing, enabling multiple digital feedback would be beneficial.

Secondly, the most important contribution of digital feedback is the possibility of exchanging feedback anonymously. This enables students to make a more honest critique of each others' work. Otherwise, while exchanging peer-feedback openly, they withhold commenting on their peers' weaknesses to avoid problems in daily relations. Moreover, anonymous peer-feedback should be provided from several peers selected in accordance with their writing proficiency. Single-matches can be demotivating due to the risk of being matched with a less proficient peer who cannot provide beneficial feedback.

Finally, lecturer feedback should be provided after peer feedback. Participants' comments indicated this makes them feel much safer. In sum, a combination of “self-, peer, and tutor [review is needed] to help students make informed decisions about [revising] their early drafts and [reflecting] upon the strengths and weaknesses of their writing development” (Lam, 2013, p. 446).

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