



The Effects of Peer Feedback on Writing Anxiety Levels of Pre-Service English Teachers

Seda Sivaci
 İstiklal University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to find out whether the use of peer feedback activity in writing classes could reduce the writing anxiety levels of pre-service teachers of English in Turkey. In total, 26 students participated in the study lasted for 2 academic terms in 2019-2020. During the study, after each writing assignment (8 writing assignment), peer feedback forms prepared by the researcher were distributed and the students were paired to give and receive feedback on each other's paragraphs and essays. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to support the findings of the study. For quantitative data, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) (Cheng, 2004) was given once at the beginning and once at end of the study as pre-test and post-test, and results were analyzed by using paired samples t-test. For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students and the results were analyzed by content analysis. The results of the study showed that the participants have benefitted from peer feedback and it is found that using peer feedback decreased the writing anxiety levels of them.

INTRODUCTION

Writing, one of the essential productive skills, has gained significant attention in language learning. Nunan (2001) claims that "In terms of skills, producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language. It is something most native speakers never master" (p. 271). Therefore, most of the English learners believe that writing is one of the most challenging skills in language learning and they encounter difficulties in writing. These difficulties make them feel anxious about writing classes and they develop a negative attitude towards writing itself. To lower the writing anxiety of English learners, writing teachers have been trying to enrich learners' writing skills by applying various techniques. One of these techniques is peer feedback or peer-reviewing in which student writers can have the opportunity to give feedback to each other. It has been found that peer feedback has positive effects on the writing process (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Atay & Kurt, 2006).

It has been observed that pre-service English teachers have also been experiencing writing anxiety in writing classes even though they have had an intensive skill-based preparatory education for one year before starting their department. In light of the related literature, the writing teacher has decided to use peer feedback to decrease the writing anxiety of the learners and to feel more confident and autonomous during writing. All in all, this study aimed to investigate whether using peer feedback lower the writing anxiety of prospective English teachers.

Peer Feedback

Peer feedback, also known as peer review, peer editing, peer response, and evaluation, is defined as “the learners’ use of sources of information and interactions for each other in such a way that learners take on the responsibilities in commenting on each other’s drafts in the process of writing” (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p.1). In other words, peer feedback is one type of feedback by which learners evaluate and give feedback to their peers. According to Damon and Phelps (1989), peer feedback helps learners improve intellectually and develop their critical thinking skills and their social relationships with their peers in the classroom. It is also believed that since peer-feedback allows students to participate actively in the writing process by giving them a space in constructing and scaffolding their skills and sharing their ideas, it effectively supports students’ writing abilities (Lu & Law, 2012; Reynolds, 2009). Additionally, some studies have shown that the effective use of peer feedback in writing classes has improved students’ learning (Lam; 2010; Min, 2016) in such a way that a repetitive peer feedback process promotes self-confidence and awareness, motivation, critical thinking skills, and social skills of students in the learning process (Farrah, 2012; Orsmond et al., 2013). According to Brusa and Harutayunyan (2019), the peer feedback process can help students gain autonomy in learning.

Undeniably, peer feedback has important effects on the writing performance of learners in terms of cognitive, linguistic, and social. For cognitive effects of it, Damon and Phelps (1989) claim that peer feedback saves students from being passive listeners, but make them think critically and deeply in the process. Hence, they understand that the only source of feedback is not the classroom teacher; they can also contribute and give feedback to their peers. Also, learners can have a chance to improve linguistically. That is to say, they need to read and write and try to find out the strengths and weaknesses and share them with their peers which improves their knowledge about the language, as well. As for social advantages, while giving and taking feedback from each other, learners are involved in interaction and negotiation with their peers by sharing ideas or comments. According to Leki (1990), because learners share their feedback in a sincere and stress-free environment where the teacher is not seen as the judge, their anxiety level might decrease which affects their writing performance positively.

Writing Anxiety

Anxiety as an affective factor has gained a lot of attention in the second/foreign language learning. It causes fear or stress, hence, hinder the performance of learners in the language learning process. Therefore, there have been many recent studies concerning the effects of anxiety on language learning performance (Alshahrani, 2016; Ballester, 2015; Shahi, 2016; Yim, 2014), language skills, especially speaking (Akkakoson, 2016; Hamzaoglu, & Koçoğlu, 2016; Öztürk, & Gürbüz, 2014; Sanaei, 2015; Zhang, & Rahimi, 2014; Kralova, Skorvagova, Tirpakova, & Markechova, 2017), test anxiety (Delavari & Nourdad, 2017; Marzec-Stawiarska, 2015). However, a new type of anxiety, writing anxiety, specific to language learners’ writing skills has been proposed (Burgoon and Hale, 1983; Daly and Wilson, 1983; Blin, Lowe, Meixner, Nouri, and Pearce, 2001). Thompson (1980) defines writing anxiety as being afraid of the writing process, blocking the possible benefits of writing ability (cited in Kurt and Atay, 2006). It is claimed that writing generates anxiety as much as the other skills in language learning do since it is a productive skill which needs individual effort (Tsui, 1996). Therefore, writing anxiety is regarded as one of the elements affecting the performance of learners in writing classes.

The studies regarding the writing anxiety have tried to find out the types, reasons, degree, and effects of it on the language learning process. For example, Razaee and Jafari (2014) found out that receiving negative feedback, having a low level of confidence, the teacher’s judgmental perspective, and facing the high standards set by the teachers are some of the

reasons why learners feel anxiety in writing. In addition, Jebreil, Azizifar, Gowhary, and Jamalinesari (2015) conducted a study to examine the writing anxiety level of Iranian EFL learners and found that although all EFL learners had a high level of anxiety, learners' proficiency levels of English also affected their level of writing anxiety. The results of the study showed that the more proficient they become in English the less they have anxiety in writing, which is supported by the study of Min and Rahmat (2014) as well. Studies (Zhang, 2011; Razaei & Jafari, 2014; Jebreil et al, 2015) have also found that cognitive anxiety is the most prevalent type of anxiety in language learners. Besides, the relationship between EFL learners' writing anxiety and their achievement in writing tasks have also been investigated. It has been found that when learners have a high level of anxiety, the quality of their writing decreases (Kurniasih, 2017; Hassan, 2001). On the other hand in their study, Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) found that learners with a high level of writing anxiety showed better performance in writing tasks in tests. Based on the results of the study, they assert that having anxiety to some degree can have a facilitative role in promoting students' writing skills. Therefore, having a high or low level of writing anxiety might have significant effects on learners' writing performance somehow. Moreover, it is believed that learners' beliefs and perceptions towards writing significantly affect their performance in writing. In a study conducted by Cheng (2002), when learners have positive perceptions and beliefs in their writing skills, they become more successful in writing. Ho (2016) also found that having low confidence and afraid of receiving negative feedbacks cause writing anxiety in learners.

However, the negative effects of writing anxiety on learners' writing skills are supposed to be controlled to make learners better at writing. For this purpose, Tsiriotakis, Vassilaki, Spantidakis, and Stavrou (2017) highlight the importance of learning environment by suggesting that teachers should provide a stress-free classroom environment where learners feel more comfortable in order to decrease their writing anxiety. Another suggestion to decrease the level of writing anxiety is to give a space where learners feel freer and face any judgments such as having freewriting notebooks or diaries (Scullin and Baron, 2013). On the other hand, as Topping (2000) suggests as a solution to decrease writing anxiety, applying peer feedback might be useful since it has been proved to have a significant effect on increasing learners' motivation and self-confidence. As a theoretical background, peer feedback is based on a socio-cognitive approach to learning which asserts "knowledge is best to acquire through negotiated interaction" (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, p. 380 as cited in Kurt and Atay (2006, p.15)). In that respect, since the learners are involved in interaction and negotiation about their and their peers' writing products with their real audience in a real environment, their writing performance can develop effectively.

Hence, the purpose of the current study is to investigate whether the use of peer feedback in the writing classes would decrease the writing anxiety of pre-service ELT teachers in the Turkish context.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The main purpose of this study was to find out whether the use of peer feedback in writing classes would decrease the students' writing anxiety. To reach the aim of the study, a mixed design study in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed was used. For quantitative data, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale (SLWAI) and for qualitative data semi-structured interviews were conducted by the participants.

The study took place in two semesters in 2019-2020 academic year and lasted 28 weeks under the course of Writing Skills I-I, a two-hour a week course taken by all 1st-year students

of English Language Teaching Program. In the first semester, the students were introduced with 4 paragraph types (Opinion, Descriptive, Comparison and Contrast and Informative) and in the second semester, 4 types of essays (Opinion, Compare & Contrast, Cause & Effect, and Argumentative) were introduced to students. After, introducing each topic and doing the related activities, the students were supposed to write their 1st draft at home and bring it for the next class in which they would exchange their writings with peers and give feedback based on the peer feedback forms prepared by the writing teacher. After giving and taking feedback from the peers, they did the necessary corrections and submitted it to the teacher to get feedback from her. After getting feedback from the teacher and making the corrections if any, they were needed to put their drafts in their writing portfolio to submit in the final week for the general evaluation of the course.

Participants

26 pre-service English teachers who were at 1st grade at the department of English Language Teaching at a foundation university were included in the study. There were no predetermined criteria, therefore the ones who volunteer to participate in the study were involved.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale developed by Cheng (2004) was used to collect the data to measure the students' writing anxiety level in writing in English. It is a five-point Likert-scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) including 22 items. The SLWAI was administered once at the beginning and once at the end of the writing classes. Therefore, a t-test analysis was used to analyze the data to see whether the writing anxiety level of the participants has been changed. Semi-structured interview results were used to support the quantitative data and included questions related to the students' views and attitudes towards the use of peer feedback in their writing process.

RESULTS

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative data were explained in this part. First of all, to find out the difference between the writing anxiety levels of the students before and after the use of peer feedback in the writing classes, paired-samples t-test analysis was used. The related results were presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Paired samples t-test analysis of pre-test and post-test of writing anxiety

| Test | Mean | Std. Dev. | T | P |
|------------|-------|-----------|------|-------|
| Pre- Test | 68.89 | 9.66 | 2.30 | 0.03* |
| Post- Test | 64.67 | 10.23 | | |

*p < 0.05

As shown in Table 1, the difference between the mean scores of pre and post-test of writing anxiety was found significant at the 0.03 level ($p < 0.05$). In other words, a statistically significant difference between the anxiety levels of the students at the end of the study was found. When the mean scores were analyzed, the writing anxiety levels of the pre-service ELT students decreased from 68.89 to 64.67 (see Table 1).

As for the results of the interviews conducted with the students, most of the students declared that they found peer feedback useful. They said, they enjoyed the writing process

more, and peer feedback activity made this process fun for them. For example, one of them said *“While giving feedback, I felt more active and involved in the classroom. I had a different perspective towards writing class, but now I think it can be enjoyable in this. In other writing classes, we were passive and waiting for feedback just from the teacher.”*

They also stated that from the feedback from their peers, they gained a different perspective in terms of word choice and writing style. Also, one of the students stated *“Exchanging papers and getting and giving feedback created an interactive environment in which we could interact with our friends in the classroom. I had a chance to know different friends and share ideas with them.”* Accordingly, from the statements of the learners, it can be said that integration of peer feedback in writing classes created an interactive atmosphere in the classroom in which they communicate, discuss, and share their views. It can also be claimed that peer feedback presented a more sociable environment for them.

Additionally, when how they felt during the peer feedback activity, 22 of the students said they did not feel any anxiety while taking feedback from their peers. In fact, giving and receiving feedback from their peers made them more self-confident in the process as they claimed. Also, one student said that *“It was a relax environment and I could ask what I want to ask many times without feeling any anxiety and my friends replied.”* Another student pointed out that *“When peer feedback process, we know that it was just to help each other. I mean we are not giving grades to each other. We are just sharing some suggestions. So it was a kind of relief for me. So yes, I can say that I really did not feel any negative emotion during the process.”*

On the other hand, when the problems with peer feedback were asked, they mostly said that they had some problems especially in giving and receiving feedback for grammar. One of them stated that *“when reviewing the paper, I have some problems in grammar. Sometimes I cannot understand the structure if it is a complex one and I do not know how to fix it as well. And it is the same for my peer. She does not know what is wrong with the sentence, but we know that there is something wrong.”* In addition to these, some of the students said that their friends did not give explicit feedback. One student stated *“Ok. It is a nice activity but some of our partners do not give much feedback. I mean they do not even read the whole paragraph or essay. They just say “Ok. It is fine. I couldn’t find any mistakes” but I know, I mean I already see that I have some mistakes.”*

Lastly, the students were asked which one they prefer; teacher feedback, peer feedback or integration of the two. 18 of them stated that they prefer peer feedback since they felt themselves more relax and confident. 2 of them stated that they prefer feedback from the teacher and 6 of them said that they prefer the integration of the two. So, as it is seen most of the students believe that peer feedback is a beneficial activity for them.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to identify the effects of peer feedback on the writing anxiety levels of pre-service English teachers. The findings of the study pointed out that applying peer feedback activity in writing classes has decreased the writing anxiety levels of the participants. The results of the present study are parallel with the findings of other studies focusing on the effects of peer feedback on writing anxiety conducted in different contexts (Nystrand and Brandt (1989), Leki (1990), Topping (2000), Kurt and Atay (2007), Kastra (1987)).

The results of the interviews have also indicated that the participants found peer feedback beneficial in their writing process. They stated that they had the opportunity to see different

perspectives, writing styles, and common mistakes in writing. Also, peer feedback provided an interactive atmosphere in the writing classes in which they used to be passive receivers before. They think they are more active and involved in the process and they shared their views with their friends in a comfortable environment without feeling any anxiety. They felt more confident and safer since they were not graded. These results confirm the related research claiming that peer feedback affects positively the students' attitudes towards writing by increasing motivation (Topping, 2000) and decrease the anxiety levels of the students in writing by increasing their confidence (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

On the other hand, there were a few students who found peer feedback not beneficial enough since they thought that their peers were so helpful and competent in giving feedback to them. The feedbacks given were superficial. Therefore, they declared that they prefer teacher feedback instead of peer back or both of them at the same time. According to Zhang (1995) and Leki (1990), learners believe that teachers are the most reliable source of information and they are the ones who could give the correct feedbacks in writing classes. Hence, because of these reasons, some of the participants found peer feedback not so useful for their writing development.

All in all, the results of this study showed that the use of peer feedback in writing classes presents a positive classroom atmosphere where the students feel less anxious and stressed. Being in a writing class in which students are supposed to collaborate and work together highlights the significance of learning from each other supporting each other's learning.

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Seda Sivaci is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Translation and Interpreting at Kahramanmaraş İstiklal University, Turkey. She received her MA and Ph.D. in English Language Teaching. Her current research interests include affective factors in language learning and teaching, preservice language teacher education, and technology integration in language learning.

Email: seda.svc@gmail.com