Native and non-native English speaking student teachers engage in peer feedback

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Abstract

This paper draws on data from questionnaires and participant discussion posts on WebCT to show how native and non-native English speaking student teachers explore the topic of peer feedback. Engaging in peer feedback for their own draft papers provides student teachers an opportunity to gain experience, then reflect on their experience and consider it in light of course readings and discussions. The data show that participants' comments revolve primarily around an initial lack of confidence in their own and their peers' ability to offer useful feedback; the difficulties of offering criticism without negatively affecting social relationships; and, knowing what to comment on as well as how to formulate the comments. Findings show that both native and non-native English speaking participants share the same concerns. They also show that connecting experience with development provides valuable learning opportunities for the participants.

Résumé

Cette communication porte sur la façon dont les étudiant(e)s-enseignant(e)s dont la première langue est l'anglais et d'autres dont l'anglais n'est pas la première langue, réagissent aux commentaires de leurs pairs, et fait la synthèse de questionnaires ainsi que d'échanges affichés sur WebCT. Les commentaires de pairs sur le brouillon de travaux écrits donnent aux étudiant(e)s l'occasion d'acquérir de l'expérience et d'y réfléchir dans le contexte des lectures du cours et de leurs discussions. Les données obtenues montrent que les commentaires des participants traitent essentiellement d'un manque de confiance, au début, dans leurs aptitudes et dans celles de leurs compagnons de cours ; de la difficulté de critiquer un travail sans affecter négativement les contacts interpersonnels ; et de savoir sur quoi et comment formuler des observations. Les résultats montrent que les participant(e)s partagent les mêmes soucis, que leur première langue soit l'anglais ou non. Ils montrent également que le lien entre l'expérience et le développement théorique ouvre aux participant(e)s une excellente occasion d'apprentissage.

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Introduction

The teaching of writing in second/subsequent language (L2) teacher education programs has typically received little attention in the curriculum. It is often combined with reading, or simply as part of a general course on teaching methodology. In addition, there is little research and discussion on how pre- and in-service teachers develop insights into the theories, research, and practice of L2 writing. Hirvela and Belcher (2007, p. 126) point out that "while in the larger domain of TESOL there is a steady focus on teacher education issues, we have fallen short in terms of addressing writing as a component of teacher education." This paper aims to begin to address this shortfall by describing how student teachers in a graduate course on L2 writing explore the concept and use of peer feedback, a concept that has been widely adopted and studied for close to 20 years (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), and one of the topics covered in the course.

Peer feedback refers to an activity frequently used in second/subsequent (L2) writing classrooms to elicit feedback from a sympathetic reader, another student writer, on a draft version of a text. In the process, student writers receive feedback from peer readers, which gives the writers a sense of how readers might react to their texts. At the same time, peers giving feedback to each other draw on and develop their critical reading skills, and both writers and readers are likely engaged in the negotiation of meaning (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). While peer feedback in most studies so far has occurred in a face-to-face setting (see below), a number of studies have also explored aspects of peer feedback in either real time (synchronous) or delayed time (asynchronous) environments or they have compared the two (Ho & Savignon, 2007; Liang, 2010). A number of different terms are used for peer feedback in the literature, sometimes to highlight subtle differences in the objectives involved, sometimes simply as stylistic variables. For the purposes of this paper, *peer feedback*, *peer response*, and *peer comment* will be used interchangeably to highlight that the feedback is typically supportive, constructive but non-evaluative criticism from the perspective of a writer in a similar situation, i.e., a peer, who acts as a sympathetic reader. The feedback represents a personal opinion and helps writers understand how their audience might perceive a given text. By contrast, terms such as *peer critique*, *peer editing*, and *peer correction* tend to highlight an evaluative component that may or may not be for assessment purposes.

Background

The literature has highlighted both advantages and disadvantages associated with peer feedback at cognitive, social interactive, affective, linguistic, and methodological levels. Among the advantages discussed are the dialogic nature of peer feedback that has been shown to foster multiple support systems (Hyland, 2000) and communicative behaviours (Villamil & Guerrero, 1996) beneficial for language acquisition. The collaborative dialogue facilitated during peer feedback provides opportunities for negotiation of meaning (Gass & Mackey, 2006; Goldstein &

Conrad, 1990; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994), output (Swain, 2005) and interaction (Long, 1996). The negotiation and discovery of meaning provide opportunities to explore effective expression involving a range of language and writing skills, and engage learners actively in the learning process (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998). More specific writing skills fostered during peer feedback include incentive for writers to consider points of view other than their own, develop awareness of their audience and audience needs (Ferris, 2003; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Paulus, 1999; Rollinson, 2005), and promote revision of draft texts (Berg, 1999; Liu & Hanson, 2002; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Min, 2006, 2008; Paulus, 1999). More recently, researchers have also focussed on the learning opportunities peer feedback offers for readers and their writing development (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Tsui & Ng, 2000).

Disadvantages of peer feedback considered in the literature include student writers' reluctance to engage in collaborative group work and to comment on a peer's work for fear of negative consequences for their social relationships (Carson & Nelson, 1996). Researchers have also pointed out student writers' inability to provide concrete and useful feedback to peers (Leki, 1990; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Lockhart & Ng, 1993, Tsui & Ng, 2000). In addition, ESL students themselves often appear unconvinced of the value of peer feedback (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994), either arguing that they feel ill equipped to help others improve their language skills or that their peers are learners themselves, thus not qualified to offer constructive feedback. Indeed, studies show that the feedback exchanged during peer feedback sessions is often limited to surface level phenomena (Paulus, 1999), presumably due to student writers' lack of understanding of what to comment on and a lack of vocabulary to express their comments concisely and diplomatically (Leki, 1990; Manglesdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Min, 2008; 2005). More recently, however, researchers have pointed out that many of these studies were conducted with student writers who had not received training in how to engage in peer feedback. Relevant training on the purposes of peer feedback, the value of collaboration as well as techniques in giving, receiving and incorporating peer feedback ensures appropriate and useful feedback (Berg, 1999; Liu & Hanson, 2002; Min, 2005).

My frequent discussions with L2 writing teachers as well as participants in numerous in- and pre-service workshops seem to suggest that teacher education programs rarely include a component on teaching L2 writing or explore theories only, leaving teachers ill prepared to teach L2 writing and especially to offer their L2 writers suitable support for peer feedback. In addition, many of these L2 writing teachers have little experience as writers and few of them have ever experienced peer feedback. While preparation of L2 writing teachers for the classroom would need to offer opportunities to develop background knowledge in L2 writing theories, research and practice, it might also include some first-hand experience to relate to when reading and discussing key concepts. Richards and Lockhart (1996, p.4) point out that "experience is the starting point for teacher development"; it provides a first step that triggers a student teacher's awareness and leads to "a process of reflection, critique, and refinement of the teacher's classroom practice" (Freeman, 1989, p. 40). Consequently, course components for in- or pre-service L2 writing teachers should include first-hand experience wherever possible, including a component on peer feedback, to meet the objective of "integrating training and development in teacher education" (Winer, 1992, p. 57). The opportunity to experience peer feedback, then

engage in discussion and readings provides a rich learning opportunity that results in the "development of knowledge and skills, as well as attitudes, values, and sensibilities" (Boyd, 1989, pp. 196) for the student teachers themselves as well as their future classroom practice.

In the following section, results are presented from an exploratory mixed-methods study that examines how Native Speaker (NS) and Non Native Speaker (NNS) student teacher participants, who are unaware of the literature on peer feedback, react to giving, receiving, and evaluating peer feedback. The study relies on qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data are in the form of asynchronous discussion postings (i.e., postings that occur in delayed time such as email) study participants made on class bulletin board and open-ended responses to a pre- and post-study questionnaire. The quantitative data consist of responses to the pre- and post-study questionnaire. Short answer or numeric questionnaire items are thus supported through longer prose responses and posts to explore how NS and NNS student teachers who are not familiar with the literature on peer feedback experience three key areas raised in the peer feedback literature:

- Lack of confidence in peers' feedback
- Concern around social relationships vs. offering constructive criticism to their peers to be dealt with
- Difficulties knowing what to comment on and how to formulate the comments.

Specifically, do they encounter similar uncertainties and reservations when first engaging in peer feedback as many of the ESL student writers described in the literature? Do NS and NNS student teachers' experience similar uncertainties and reservations?

Setting and Participants

The participants in this study were graduate-level students enrolled at a mid-sized North American university in a course designed to familiarize them with theories, research, and practice in L2[1] writing. Part of the course material deals with process approaches to the teaching of writing and therefore includes literature on peer feedback. The basic course text was Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), which was supplemented by selected journal articles to cover additional topics (e.g., genre-based approaches). Fifty-four participants completed the study; just over half (30 or 56%) of them were NS of English while 24 (44%) were NNS of English who represented seven different language groups. One third of the student participants were male; two-thirds were female.

Table 1: Study Participants

L1	Male	Female
English	10	20
Arabic	2	2
Chinese	2	2
German		2

[1] The course did not include or relate to a practicum, which is typically a component of undergraduate teacher education.

Japanese		3
Korean	2	2
Russian		2
Taiwanese		3
Thai		2
Total	16	38

The study participants ranged in age from 24 to 54 years, with an average age of 29 years. The majority of the participants had little or no ESL teaching experience, but a small number of participants had been teaching for up to 25 years. The average length of teaching experience was 2.5 years, mostly in private schools at the primary and secondary levels. None of the participants had experience teaching writing.

Procedures

Students were introduced to the research project and invited to take part at the beginning of the course. The activities that were part of the study were part of the regular course work, but students had the option of releasing or withholding their data for inclusion in the study. As the researcher was also the instructor, the letters of consent were collected and deposited in a sealed envelope with the administrative office by the students after the instructor had left the classroom. The letters were held by the administration until final grades had been submitted at the end of the course. Students who had signed a consent form became study participants.

The participants responded to a pre- and post version of a short questionnaire that explored their prior experience with, understanding of, and attitudes toward peer feedback. The pre- and post questionnaires were completed at the beginning and at the end of the course during the last 30 minutes of class time. Before they received the pre-questionnaire, class discussion focused on reflections of personal experiences with learning and developing writing skills, similar to the procedures described in Ferris (2007). The questionnaires were designed to elicit information on participants' prior experience with peer feedback and to elicit some of their thoughts about the activity as they engaged in it (see Appendix A for questions relevant to this discussion). The course requirements included writing a comparative, persuasive, or argumentative paper of a maximum of 2,500 words. Any topic directly related to the course material (and listed on the course outline) was acceptable, but participants were required to include a minimum of two course readings as part of their sources. Participants were required to post the first draft of their first paper in the course by a date specified and agreed on at the beginning of the course. This date fell two weeks before the topic of peer feedback was covered through short lectures, class discussion, assigned reading, and a workshop on implementing peer feedback for ESL writers. The topic of peer feedback was followed by the topic of teacher feedback, covered through the same class activities as peer feedback. This sequence of topics and associated activities, including drafting and revising their own papers, provided many opportunities for students to compare, contrast, and discuss the two types of feedback and

develop their understanding of theoretical and practical issues. During the class, and prior to the date when students were to post their drafts, each student drew two strips of paper, each with the name of a different peer whose work he/she was to comment on. As a result, each student received feedback from two peers. The participants were asked to comment on the draft of their peers' work in a way that would help the writers improve their revised draft. A short questionnaire, designed for the purpose and available on WebCT, was available to feedback providers. The questionnaire (see Appendix B) was modelled after the type of peer feedback questionnaires frequently used in ESL classes (Ferris, 2003; McGarrell & Brillinger, 2008). The participants were expected to complete relevant sections on the questionnaire, then email it to the author of the draft. Feedback had to be sent within four days after the drafts were posted; a revised version of the draft papers was to be submitted to the instructor one week after receiving peer feedback.

Participants were encouraged to contribute to asynchronous discussions on WebCT from when they first posted their draft to after they had completed their paper. The purpose of the discussion was to comment on their experiences with posting their drafts, giving, receiving and incorporating peer feedback in preparation for a revised draft. They were invited to post their comments, observations, and frustrations with giving and receiving peer feedback; to respond to peers' postings, readings, lecture, and in-class discussions; and to relate observations to the assigned readings. A total of 324 relevant posts[2] were recorded on WebCT, with each participant contributing between 4-7 posts of an average length of 145 words (minimum 7, maximum 160 words). The posts were saved, personal identifiers removed, and codes assigned in place of student participant names. The electronic versions of the posts were then coded based on the three key areas indicated above:

- Lack of confidence in peers' feedback
- Concern around social relationships vs. offering constructive criticism to their peers
- Difficulties knowing what to comment on and how to formulate the comments.

In addition, the questionnaire data were compiled and tabulated.

Findings

One of the background questions on the pre-questionnaire served to determine participants' prior experience with peer feedback. Forty students indicated that they had never used peer feedback, seven indicated that they rarely used peer feedback, and another seven students (all females) indicated that they frequently used peer feedback. Four of the students in the last group were NNSs who had attended intensive English language programs in North America and three were NSs who had been formally introduced to peer feedback in high school. Two of these three students indicated that they had received explanations or training in how the give peer feedback; one stated that the teacher gave instructions to "give feedback" or "make

[2] WebCT was occasionally used for other discussion too; only those posts relevant to peer feedback were included for the purposes of the study.

comments" on the work of a peer but no details were offered. Table 2 below summarizes the study participants' previous experience with peer feedback.

Table 2: Participants' Experience with Peer Feedback

	NS-M (10)	NS-F (20)	NNS-M (6)	NNS-F (18)	Total
Never	8	15	5	12	40
Rarely	2	2	1	2	7
Frequently		3		4	7

The participants' prior experience with peer feedback was similar between NSs and NNSs. While 77% of the NSs had never used peer feedback, 70% of NNS were in the same situation. The NNS who had used peer feedback previously, all had attended English language programs in Canada, the US, or Australia, where they were introduced to the activity. The NS who indicated prior experience with peer feedback used the activity in high school English classes.

In response to the question "How would you describe or define peer feedback?" the participants reflected their lack of experience with the term. This question served to determine their level of understanding of the concept before and after the unit on peer feedback. The question also served to confirm that participants had little or no background of the ESL peer feedback literature. In the pre-questionnaire, 48 of the participants referred to "correcting" or letting the writer know what is "wrong" with a text in their responses. They viewed peer feedback as primarily a corrective activity in which at least one participant knew the answer or the correct way of doing things in a writing assignment. There were slight variations between NS and NNS responses. Male NSs defined *peer feedback* primarily in terms of correcting work and "telling NNSs how to write correctly," whereas the NNS male respondents defined it as correcting or checking the writer's grammar. While the NS females also saw peer feedback as a corrective activity, two also added that it provided opportunities for comments "to make text clearer." Three of the NNS females included correction of vocabulary and ideas as part of peer feedback. Table 2 below summarizes the number of participants who assigned a corrective element to their definition of peer feedback in the pre- and post questionnaires respectively.

Table 3: Participants' pre- and post view of peer feedback as "correction"

Definition	**NS-M (N-10)**		**NNS-M (N=6)**		**NS-F (N=20)**		**NNS-F(N=18)**	
	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post
"corrective"	8	0	6	1	17	2	17	2

Table 3 also shows that both NS and NNS participants showed a predominantly corrective perception of peer feedback before they engaged in the activity: 83% of the NSs and

95% of the NNSs provided a corrective perspective on peer feedback in the pre questionnaire. However, their responses on the post questionnaire indicate that taking part in peer feedback followed by reading and discussing the literature resulted in a major change of their perception: only 7% and 12% receptively expressed a corrective view of peer feedback at that point. Both the pre- and post-questionnaire responses suggest that NSs and NNSs had very similar perception of peer feedback.

Most of the participants expressed discomfort with sharing their drafts on WebCT: 82 % of NSs and 85% of NNSs selected "uncomfortable" on the questionnaire. Over half of the participants (31 or 57%) commented in their posts on experiencing apprehension, shyness, or even dread when first faced with the task of posting their draft on the class website, while 42 (78%) expressed the same sense when faced with offering and receiving feedback from the two peers. Posting their drafts on the class website was a new experience for these participants, whose previous educational experience had prepared them to write for their teacher only and the notion of an audience beyond their teacher, whether real or imagined, was not something they had been asked to contemplate. Participants' main concern about posting their drafts was the notion of exposing their weaknesses. NSM015, whose paper dealt with the impact of assigned composition topics on ESL students' writing, elicited posts from three quarters of his peers agreeing with him after he wrote, "I kept worrying about my ideas and how I expressed them. I was sure that everybody was going to laugh at my paper. I mean, the stuff I wrote is pretty basic, but I had to do so much reading just to come up with what I wrote..."[3]

Although apprehensive about posting their drafts, the participants also commented on the value of being made aware of having an audience, as the following post illustrates:

> I think the most beneficial part of peer feedback for me is that having more motivation for writing since I realize that I have audiences who expect something my writing. Therefore, when I got feedback, it confirmed whether my ideas in writing clearly displayed or not. Besides, having two peers to read is helpful because it either offers different perspectives or points out the same problem in my writing. If both of them found the same problem, it made me realize that I really need to work on this part. (NNSF317)

While the participants expressed concern about posting their own drafts, they were eagerly looking forward to an opportunity to read their peers' work, something they had not had an opportunity to do in previous courses. NSM016 started a series of posts that confirmed this by writing: "I enjoyed reading your working drafts, and I found that providing feedback on two papers helped me focus on my own writing." Almost all study participants mentioned in at least one of their posts how interesting or valuable they found the opportunity to read peers' draft papers. In hindsight, even the notion of having exposed themselves seemed less problematic as expressed in the following comment "…after all, it [my paper] was just a draft and we all did a lot more with the ideas in the revised version we submitted" (NSF126). The fact that the majority

[3] All participant responses are reproduced as in the original WebCT transcripts.

of participants chose to post their drafts voluntarily for the second paper requirement in the course provides concrete support for the attitudes expressed in these posts.

Issues related to writers' lack of confidence in their peers' ability to offer useful feedback were explored through two related questions. First, when participants were asked whether they expected that feedback from a peer might help them improve their own writing, the majority of participants responded negatively. However, when asked whether they felt that they might offer useful feedback to a peer, more than half of them indicated that their input would be useful to a peer.

Table 4: Perceived Value of Peer Feedback (Pre Questionnaire)

Question	**NS-M (N-10)**		**NNS-M (N=6)**		**NS-F (N=20)**		**NNS-F(N=18)**	
	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	agree	disagree
A	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	2 (33%)	4 (67%)	10 (50%)	10 (50%)	3 (17%)	15 (83%)
B	8 (80%)	2 (20%)	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	12 (60%)	8 (40%)	9 (50%)	9 (50%)

Question A: A peer's feedback would help me improve my own writing.
Question B: My feedback would likely help a peer improve his/her writing.

Table 4 shows that both NS and NNS were disinclined to trust a peer's feedback prior to engaging in the activity, although both groups felt that they would be able to make a useful contribution to a peers work. The NNS females were most strongly disinclined towards trusting a peer's feedback, whereas the NNS males felt most strongly that their contribution would help improve a peer's work. However, this trend changed noticeably as a result of engaging in peer feedback, when participants expressed a more positive attitude towards the value of the activity, as Table 5 below illustrates:

Table 5: Perceived Value of Peer Feedback (Post Questionnaire)

Question	**NS-M (N-10)**		**NNS-M (N=6)**		**NS-F (N=20)**		**NNS-F(N=18)**	
	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	agree	disagree
A	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	16 (80%)	4 (20%)	17 (95%)	1 (5%)
B	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	6 (100%)	0	17 (60%)	3 (15%)	15 (83%)	3 (17%)

Question A: A peer's feedback helps me improve my own writing.
Question B: My feedback likely helps a peer improve his/her writing.

Most of the posts that related to participants' confidence in the value of their peers' comments were posted right after peer feedback had been received and suggest that many participants changed their mind as a result of the activity. The following sample posts show that participants were very appreciative of the comments they received from their peers.

While I was reading my peer's comments, I learned how I develop my ideas, and where I put my thesis statement. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to read your papers. After I get my feedback, I revised my paper a lot. I better say I write another paper. In my peer feedback, they mentioned that my topic sentence is not clear enough to understand. I organize my paper again. I was also encouraged by their positive feedback. (NNSF311)

> I've never thought how much peer feedback can be helpful. I thought teachers can help me to improve my writing. However, from this experience, I found that peer feedback is a lot helpful on organization, content and ideas rather than form. (NNSF316)

In reaction to another post, one participant elaborated,

> I also liked receiving feedback. I'm often too close to my work to see the trouble areas. On the other hand, sometimes I can see the trouble areas, but I need another reader to help me figure out how to fix them. My peers helped me with this today. Thank you. (NSF121)

Only two posts referred to lack of trust in NNSs feedback specifically and both of them were from NNSs. Several posts, however, expressed concern over receiving structure-based comments that might be wrong but found that the peer feedback questionnaire helped peers comment on text-based issues:

> I was disappointed when I got peers who are still learning English because they can't give me good feedback but their questions and comments were very helpful. They look at my ideas and say 'read more carefully about this idea' or 'tell me more, I don't understand your point' so I think you can give good feedback if you are not native speaker. (NNSF318)

One participant, expressed frustration over his peer's focus on structure-based issues:

> It's not helpful to correct my grammar. I can do that when my paper is finished. Tell me how you like my ideas or if I should add more sources or whatever but just correcting my draft is not helpful at all…My teachers in China always correct my grammar but never told me to consider my audience or to support my ideas. (NNSM205)

Students generally appreciated the feedback activity and several made their own arrangements to give each other peer feedback on subsequent assignments. One participant summed up the kind of sentiments expressed by many of the participants:

I really appreciated the peer feedback I got. After reading the feedback, I recognized that my introduction was not clear enough for the audience; I need afford more information for them. So, I enjoy doing this feedback activity and thank you all for your help. (NNSM210)

> After the feedback activity, I learnt a lot from this new experience. When I provided my feedback to peers, I read through the whole paper and analyzed every part of the paper according to the questions we were given [the peer feedback questionnaire on WebCT]. I felt I had focus to look at the paper when I had these questions in mind. So, I think it is a good idea that teachers provide students a questionnaire when they do peer feedback. But they also need to help students understand how to give and take feedback from peers and what to do with it. I appreciate learning in this course that feedback can be ignored if it seems inappropriate: the writer has responsibility for the text. (NNSM210)

Experiencing peer feedback appears to have led several participants to change their views on the value of peer feedback for their own as well as their peers' writing, as shown in Table 6 below:

Table 6: Perceived Value of Peer Feedback – NS-NNS Differences

Question	**Pre Questionnaire**				**Post Questionnaire**			
	NS (N=30)		**NNS (N=24)**		**NS (N=30)**		**NNS (N=24)**	
	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	agree	disagree
A	14 (47%)	16 (53%)	5 (21%)	19 (79%)	25 (83%)	5 (17%)	22 (92%)	2 (8%)
B	20 (67%)	10 (33%)	13 (54%)	11 (46%)	26 (87%)	4 (13%)	21 (88%)	3 (12%)

Question A: A peer's feedback helps me improve my own writing.
Question B: My feedback likely helps a peer improve his/her writing.

Before experiencing peer feedback, 53% of NSs and 79% of NNSs were disinclined to expect a peer's feedback to be beneficial for their own writing, but 67% of NSs and 54% of NNSs felt that their feedback would help a peer improve his or her writing. Their responses on the post questionnaire show a strong shift in their perception of the value of peer feedback for their own revisions, when 83% of NSs and 92% of NNSs expected that peer feedback would help them improve their own writing. At the same time, the percentage of participants who felt that their own feedback on their peers' writing would result in improvements increased to 87% for NSs and 88% for NNSs. The posts confirmed this shift in the value participants attached to peer feedback, with comments like:

> I didn't think that my peers could help me with my writing because I thought they'd just tell me to put a comma here or there and add more variety for my vocabulary and I think how do they know? Especially if they are not native speakers - but they gave me really good comments, like one said that there were two sentences that could be my thesis statement and pointed them out but I hadn't intended either of them as my thesis so I knew I had to work on that. (NSM004)

Although their posts indicate that the participants appreciated the feedback activity, 52 (96%) of them indicated in the post questionnaire that giving feedback was difficult. Only one NSF and one NNSM felt it was "easy." Prior to engaging in peer feedback, many of the NNS participants commented that they were unsure of "knowing enough grammar" (NNSF317) to help NS peers while no NS participant expressed similar concerns. On the post questionnaire, their responses to the prompt inviting them to explain "why" referred to the three areas indicated above, i.e., lack of confidence in peers' feedback, concern around social relationships despite critiquing a peers' work, and difficulties knowing how to formulate the comments. The following offers some sample posts referring to each of the three areas, starting with the concern about maintaining social relationships and "hurting a peer's feelings" (NSF127). One of the participants, NSF121 quoted above, continued her post with a reference to the social issue:

> I have only one negative issue. It is difficult to give critical feedback without feeling like I am going to hurt someone's feelings. This is especially true because we are all peers. I am afraid of sounding conceited because I don't really know more than any of my peers, yet here I am giving advice. (NSF121)

Even the few participants who had used peer feedback prior to the graduate course expressed similar feelings:

> As for giving peer feedback, I found it very difficult at first. In my ESL classes, we were asked to give feedback on our peers' writing. But there was no guideline to do this activity. I tended to focus on spelling or grammar but I don't know spelling and grammar well. When I gave peer feedback this time with guideline [the peer feedback questionnaire made available on WebCT for the activity], it was much easier. The questions on the peer feedback sheet [the questionnaire] guided me to find essential information in their writing or how I understood their ideas, so it's much better than just mistakes. (NNSF317)

While many other participants echoed these concerns, some took a pragmatic approach, as illustrated by the following comment:

> It can be awkward offering feedback on someone else's writing. However, the perspective of the reader (as opposed to the writer-then-reader) is extremely beneficial; I mean, when you think of it, what we write is always for an audience, and if part of that audience has

> something to tell you before you submit your final version, it is worth listening to, regardless of how you feel about it. (NSM018)

The third issue explored difficulties in knowing what to comment on and how to formulate the comments, and elicited the largest number of comments from the participants. Most of their posts, whether from NS or NNS, connected this with concern over potentially upsetting a peer, either by:

> ...commenting too much or commenting too little; it's a balance because you can also insult a peer by not saying anything positive or helpful about the draft. I'm a peer and don't want to seem more knowledgeable than my peers…what if I don't know the topic area my peer chooses to write about? I might ask for a detail that is obvious to those familiar with the topic and embarrass myself and my peer. (NSM018)

This last point elicited responses from several peers, either reminding NSM018 that the assignment was to "write a paper for an audience of peers who know what you knew before you started researching your topic…" (NNSM210) or reassuring him that as long as the feedback is concrete, it will be helpful:

> I also concerned about the negative issue of giving feedback. However, I only thought what I felt when I got my feedback. I was thankful for my readers because surely they spent quite some time to read my paper and think of my weak point. They give me precise information on why they don't understand or what is missing. Likewise, I assumed that other peers also expect my thoughtful comments for their papers. I never thought about how peer feedback is helpful for revising..." (NNSF315)

Participants also mentioned how they frequently had to re-read a section several times to be sure that they had not missed anything before they prepared their feedback. E.g., NSF111 wrote "you don't want to look silly by saying something is missing when it's actually there but you've missed it." Some connected this idea to teacher feedback, commenting that:

> This gives me a new appreciation for the comments I get from my professors. How long do they spend reading and commenting on papers? I know I will spend a lot of time reading my students' writing, trying to understand what they want to say, commenting in a way that they will find helpful. (NNSF212)

Although each participant responded to only two draft papers of approximately 2,500 words each, most of them indicated that they spent four hours or more completing the activity of reading the two draft papers and responding to the questionnaire with eight questions for peer

feedback. Most of the participants also inserted comments with the MS Word comments or track changes feature directly into the electronic draft version they received from their peers.

The post questionnaire included comments from many participants on the usefulness of a questionnaire to guide peer feedback and help student writers respond to appropriate items. They indicated that such a questionnaire should be an essential component of any peer feedback activity in L2 writing classes, as illustrated in the following post:

> ...When I provided my feedback to peers, I read through the whole paper and analyzed every part of the paper according to the questions. I felt I had focus to look at the paper when I had these questions in mind. They were not my questions, so, don't get mad at me for saying this. So, I think it is a good idea that teachers provide students an instruction when they do peer feedback... (NNSM210)

Many of the participants seemed to agree that because a certain question was asked in the peer feedback questionnaire provided, the writer would value feedback on it without feeling insulted that the question was raised. For example, one question asked readers to identify and underline the thesis statement in the peer's text. If there was no such statement or they could not identify it, they simply indicated that they could not find it, without commenting on it. Some identified a sentence that they *thought* might be a thesis statement but, in their opinion, did not conform to the characteristics of a thesis statement discussed at the beginning of the course. They commented simply on why they felt that the thesis statement they identified fell short of characteristics discussed earlier in the course.

Discussion and Conclusions

The data from the student teacher participants show that they experienced many of the same difficulties ESL writers have been shown to experience when engaging in peer feedback without prior training. Only 26% of participants had experienced peer feedback prior to the study and half of them had engaged in the activity only rarely, while 74% were new to the activity. Initially, 89% of the participants, 83% of NSs and 95% of NNSs, associated peer feedback with correcting someone's work. At the end of the course, only 7% of NSs and 12% of NNS attached a corrective element to peer feedback.

NSs and NNSs felt equally uncomfortable about posting their work on WebCT. Their posts suggest that NSs were more likely concerned about showing weaknesses in grammar *and* content, while the NNSs commented on the difficulties they had expressing their ideas in coherent and grammatically accurate English. Despite their apprehensions about posting their own work, NSs and NNSs commented with equal enthusiasm about the opportunity to read their peers' work. There were no comments that reflected negatively on the content or grammar skills of peers.

Despite the discomfort expressed by participants about posting their drafts and possibly revealing weaknesses in their work, many were confident in their ability to provide feedback that

would help improve peers' work. NSs males were particularly confident (80% compared to 60% of female NSs) in their ability to provide valuable feedback for their peers at the time of the pre questionnaire, 67% of NNS males also felt confident while only 50% of the NNS females expressed such confidence. On the other hand, 83% of NNS females indicated that a peer's feedback would not likely help them improve their own writing; 67% of male NNSs expressed the same view. Sixty percent of male NSs and 50% of female NSs also felt disinclined to trust the value of a peer's feedback. As these responses were at the time of the pre questionnaire, the participants likely responded primarily based on their perceived ability with grammar, which would explain why their responses changed noticeably on the post questionnaire, when 95% of female NNSs, 90% of male NSs, 83% male NNSs and 80% of female NS indicated that a peer's feedback would be help them improve their work. Their comments and posts indicate that their experience with peer feedback, their readings and class discussions and activities had convinced them that peer feedback depends on critical reading skills more than language skills, as shown in the following post:

> We may know what 'sounds right' but to give good feedback, you have to read critically, be a thoughtful reader who thinks beyond the text given to tell the writer what could be. You can use the computer to correct spelling but it takes an attentive reader to tell you that you did not address the PAT Principle, or that your thesis statement doesn't make sense or something like that. (NSF101)

The data show that regardless of linguistic or cultural background, the participants expressed an initial lack of confidence in their peers' ability to provide useful feedback. They also showed similar concerns about negative consequences for their social relationships should their feedback be perceived negatively or otherwise inappropriate. As shown above, participants spent a lot of time over deciding what to comment on and how to phrase their comments. It would appear that "not knowing the rules of the game, so to speak, made it challenging" (NSM018), rather than being a NS or a NNS.

An important finding from the participants' posts is that the majority of NS participants found it difficult to know what to comment on in their peers' drafts and appreciated the questionnaire provided for the peer feedback activity. NS participants did not know intuitively what to comment on or how to comment: they valued both the questionnaire and the training provided. Their experience illustrated to them the value of giving ESL writers a questionnaire. An added benefit of such a questionnaire, they found, is that the focus is clearly on the text and on how the reader perceives it. A peer giving feedback does not need to say, "you don't have a thesis statement" but has the option of saying, "I'm having difficulties finding the thesis. Is it….?" Participants also drew on their experience to project to their future careers:

> Teachers must train students for peer feedback to make sure understand that they do not correct but give an opinion. Why did they think students can just give feedback, without being shown how? If students give feedback, they can ask questions that help the writer to improve the text but if I they try to correct, they have problems because they don't know either. (NNSM211)

Above all, they demonstrated through their comments that giving and receiving peer feedback on a writing assignment is not an intuitive activity: careful training is needed for ESL writers (as observed by Paulus, 1999) but also those who will teach ESL writers, the teachers. Connecting experience with development (Winer, 1992) was clearly a valuable experience for the study participants' growth as writers and as future L2 writing teachers (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009):

> Giving and receiving peer feedback has taught me so much about my own writing and I want to use peer feedback again for the next assignment. But it has also taught me a lot that I can use in my teaching. I won't write "unclear" in the margin because I know it doesn't tell students ANYTHING (NSF126).

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Appendix A

Questions re Peer Feedback (PRE)

Try to answer the questions below as best as you can; where appropriate, mark your choice (a, b, c). Feel free to add comments or to leave out questions you are not comfortable answering.

1. What courses have you taken for English writing?

2. Have you experienced peer feedback in a writing class before this course?
    a. never
    b. rarely (fewer than 5 times)
    c. frequently (more than 6 times)

3. What is your understanding of peer feedback? Please give as precise a description or definition as you can.

4. How do you feel about sharing your draft paper with your peers by posting it on WebCT?
    a. comfortable
    b. uncomfortable
    c. not sure

Please add any comments or explanations you can to clarify your response.

5. A peer's feedback would help me improve my own writing.
    a. agree
    b. Disagree

Please add any comments or explanations you may be willing to share.

6. My feedback would likely help a peer improve his/her writing.
    a. agree
    b. disagree

Please add any comments or explanations you may be willing to share.

7. Commenting on a peer's draft paper is
    a. easy
    b. difficult
    c. not sure

Please explain your response.

Questions re Peer Feedback (POST)

Try to answer the questions below as best as you can; where appropriate, mark your choice (a, b, c). Feel free to add comments or to leave out questions you are not comfortable answering.

1. What is your understanding of peer feedback? Please give as precise a description or definition as you can.

2. A peer's feedback would help me improve my own writing.
    a. agree
    b. disagree

    Please add any comments or explanations you may be willing to share.

3. My feedback would likely help a peer improve his/her writing.
    a. agree
    b. disagree

    Please add any comments or explanations you may be willing to share.

4. Commenting on a peer's draft paper is
    a. easy
    b. difficult
    c. not sure

    Please explain your response.

Appendix B

Questions for Peer Feedback

Use the questions below to guide your feedback to each of your peers; not all questions may be relevant. Remember to try and give the kind of feedback you think would help your peers revise their draft paper. As you read each draft, consider whether your peer addressed the elements of the PAT (Purpose, Audience, Topic) Principle.

1. Identify what you consider to be the thesis statement.

2. What is the most important point the writer made in his/her paper? Please paraphrase it in your own words, as precisely as you can.

3. Was there any part in this paper where you would need more information to understand the ideas presented? Please write down questions you have.

4. Was there any part in this paper where you felt you needed more information to follow the writer's reasoning? Please ask questions you would like answered.

5. Was there any part of this paper where you wanted more information because you were interested? Please ask questions to show what you would like to know.

6. Indicate two things you learned from this paper that you either did not know before or had not thought of in the way presented in the paper.

7. How could the writer improve the organization of the draft paper?

8. Add any other comments you feel might be helpful to the writer.