The effect of peer feedback on writing anxiety in Turkish EFL (English as a foreign language) students

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Abstract

One of the researchers has been teaching writing and experiencing writing anxiety in her classes for three years, which has influenced her teaching writing, her students’ attitudes towards writing, and academic achievement in writing exams negatively. In order to deal with the issue, the researchers planned to use peer feedback in writing classes. Hence, the present study aimed to investigate the effects of peer feedback on Turkish EFL students’ writing anxiety and perceptions towards it. It was carried out with 16 students studying English in an English Language Preparation Department of a Turkish university. It lasted 8 weeks. It adopted mixed methods research design. To collect data, researcher’ diary, two interviews and Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) by Cheng were used. SLWAI was used as pre- and post-test. The interviews were made in the end. It was content analysed. The diary was narrated. SLWAI results were analysed through descriptive statistics and paired samples t-test. The content analysis of the interviews and narration of the diary results showed that the students formed positive perceptions towards writing. Also, the results indicated that the students believed using peer feedback in writing classes decreased their writing anxiety, increased their confidence, and improved their writing by collaborating with and learning from each other. The quantitative results of the study indicated that the use of peer feedback in writing classes reduced their writing anxiety in terms of cognitive, somatic, and avoidance anxiety.

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the productive skills that are paid special attention in English language teaching. However, students may experience some difficulties while writing in English. One of these problems is writing anxiety. It
affects students negatively and causes them to form negative attitudes towards it.

One of the researchers taught writing in an English language preparatory department of a Turkish university and experienced this problem continuously in her classes. The researchers decided to find out a solution to this difficulty by reviewing the literature. The literature indicated that peer feedback is one of the ways used to overcome this obstacle. Therefore, the present student aimed to find out the effect of peer feedback on Turkish EFL students’ writing anxiety and perceptions towards peer feedback in writing classes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Peer feedback

The only dominant type of feedback for the production process of developed text cannot be teacher feedback. Seliger (1983) pointed out that student writers can also give feedback to each other, which is called peer feedback. It has been getting popular in language teaching and is also called peer review, peer response and peer evaluation (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Liu and Hansen (2002, p.1) defined peer feedback 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.” Peer feedback can contribute to peers’ social relations, intellectual improvement, and progressing of creative and critical thinking (Damon & Phelps, 1989). Mittan (1989), Damon and Phelps (1989) discussed the advantages of peer feedback regarding cognitive benefit in leading students to think rather than receive feedback from the teacher. Therefore, they become aware that the teacher is not the only source of feedback, they can also provide feedback to each other. Since it also provides immediate feedback, students have the chance to ask for clarification and questions and discuss the responses instantaneously (Bartels, 2003). Peer feedback also has some social benefits. Exchanging feedback gives students a new perspective on revision. Students who get feedback only from their teacher see the teacher as a judge who critiques what they write. However, the students who go through peer feedback experience collaboration with their peers because their text is revised with the expectation of their readers, which means working with peers with their own purposes (Nystrand & Brandt, 1989). In this way, students can gain confidence since they express and negotiate their ideas in a stress-free zone that can decrease the anxiety they go through during the writing process (Leki, 1990).

2.2. Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the factors that have been an issue in language teaching. Anxiety is defined in Advanced American English Longman (2005) “as a feeling of wanting to do something that may happen or may have happened, so that you think about it all the time or is a feeling of wanting to do something very much, but being very worried that you will not succeed.” (cited in Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012, p. 2578).

Among the different types of anxiety in language learning, writing anxiety is defined by scholars like Thompson (1980) as an inability to write, which is caused when a person is fearful over the end result and cannot concentrate on the writing process itself. Tsui (1996) also said that writing in a foreign language causes more anxiety than other skills since in most classes writing is product-oriented that requires a great deal out of student with regards to their own thinking and ideas. Additionally, they may not be getting the support from instructors that help them to know that they are on the right track. These two things make writing stressful for students. Also, writing anxiety is defined by Hassan (2001) as a general avoidance of tasks or situations that may require writing and has the possibility of evaluation and assessment.

Thus, the anxiety factor in writing can affect learners’ perception toward writing and their writing performance. Cheng (2002) noted that students with high-anxiety tend to avoid enrolling in writing courses and prefer careers that have very little to do with writing. Some students with anxiety in writing courses do not attend the classes regularly; find excuses to write at home or outside class so that they have a friend write instead of themselves. They have less confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem.
2.3. Reasons for having writing anxiety

Martin (2007) states that anxiety is the fear of the unknown because unknown things are threatening. Feelings like anxiety cause a person to avoid tasks that require productive skills. Writing is a demanding productive skill that requires strategies such as finding ideas, collecting information, organizing and combining that information and those ideas with a correct linguistic knowledge of L2. Basturkmen and Lewis (2002) said that in order to be successful in writing, you need to be able to express yourself, meet your readers expectation, organize your ideas smoothly, enjoy writing in L2, and your self-esteem should be increased, yet L2 students cannot cope with them easily (cited in Kara, 2013).

The research also supports that because of the complexity of writing as a skill and complexity of a language can cause apprehension among students (Bruning & Horn, 2000). According to the study that was administered by Kara (2013), the three causes of anxiety in writing courses are the most attention grabbing: “writing itself, writing as a skill” and the “teacher.” Then, Kara (2013, p. 108) explains them:

The learners claimed that they have writing anxiety and may fail because they do not have a writing habit and they occasionally wrote in their previous experience and they are not used to writing and express themselves in writing because in their previous education they are familiar with taking tests.

Most students have not had the writing experience in their previous education life since they have a predominantly test-based education background that requires students to choose one of the options that are already given. This can create a generation that lacks critical thinking ability and cannot put down the things they have learned on paper. In such a system, when learners, who come from such a system, are asked to write, they will not be able to produce what is expected. Even if they do, they will have many difficulties during the process, which will finally make them feel anxious. Kara (2013) continues in explaining the second reason “writing as a skill.” Learners, who already see writing as a complex productive skill, believe that they lack skills such as finding ideas, collecting information, organizing and combining that information and those ideas, as they have not practiced those skills enough. In addition, students’ limited linguistic capacity also results in poor performance that causes an increasing number of anxious students (Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 2000). For the third reason, Kara (2013, p. 108) says:

Learners stated that the teacher does not encourage, does not give feedback and is not interested in students’ writing problems. The teacher’s teaching style may cause trouble as well like not giving examples or not teaching in an interesting way.

2.4. Effect of peer feedback on writing anxiety

There are various effects of peer feedback on writing L2 anxiety. Peer feedback increases motivation through the sense of self-responsibility, and it also has an impact on the self-confidence of learners (Topping, 2000). Since student readers see that other students make the same mistakes or go through the same difficulties, they are relieved, their apprehension decreases. In turn, their confidence increases (Kurt & Atay 2007). With collaborative dialogue, two-way feedback and discussion on content between the peers will be stimulated (Rollinson, 2005). The peers can discuss the reasons of revision required on their writings and question them. However, when teachers give feedback, students just take them without questioning. Thus, peer feedback gives students the opportunity to improve their critical thinking abilities in a learner-centred and non-threatening classroom atmosphere.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research is a small scale mixed methods study because according to Creswell (2012), a mixed method research uses qualitative and quantitative research and methods for collecting and analysing data in a study in order to understand a research problem. The mixed methods research design of this study is embedded because Creswell (2012) mentions that an embedded mixed methods research design requires different research methods for different research questions. Accordingly, this study has two research questions and each of them requires a different research
method. Qualitative research method is used for the first question, but the second question uses quantitative research in data collection and analysis.

3.2. Participants

The total number of the participants was 16, eleven were female students and five of whom were male students. The participants were students at an English preparatory department of a university in Turkey. Their level of English was intermediate, which was determined by a placement and proficiency exam organized and done by the Testing Office of the department.

3.3. Data collection instruments

In order to collect data, qualitative and quantitative data collection tools were used. For the qualitative data collection, the interviews and researcher’s diary were used. For quantitative data collection, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was used. They are explained in detail in this section.

3.3.1. Second language writing anxiety inventory

In order to collect data about students’ writing anxiety level before and after the study, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was used, which was developed by Cheng (2004). It is a five-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The students were asked to express their degree of willingness by selecting one of the following responses: strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree. The SLWAI has got 22 items. Seven of these items (1, 4, 7, 17, 18, 21, and 22) are negatively worded; so reverse scoring was used when these items were analysed to have the total score. Cheng reported that the reliability of the SLWAI is 0.91. In this study, the results of pre-test showed that the SLWAI has a reliability of 0.84. Cheng categorizes the levels of anxiety as high, moderate, and low. Anxiety levels depended on the total score of the SLWAI. If a total score is above 65, it is named as a high level of writing anxiety, but if it is below 50, it shows a low level of writing anxiety. If the total score is between 50 and 65, it indicates a moderate level of writing anxiety.

3.3.2. The interviews

The interview 1 has three questions and the second one has four questions. The first, second, and third questions are the same in the interviews. They are about the effect of receiving and giving feedback to classmates on writing anxiety and on confidence, and whether they like this or not in order. The second interview has a fourth question. It is about the students’ evaluation of the peer feedback process. Depending on the questions, four categories were formed: writing anxiety, confidence, feelings about the process, and the evaluation of the process by the students.

3.3.3. Researcher’s diary

One of the researchers kept a diary during the study. She wrote down her experiences, observations, and interactions with the students in detail.

3.4. Data collection procedure

A legal permission was taken from the institution. A peer feedback education program was prepared. Then the first interview was made, and the SLWAI was carried out. The participants were trained about how to give and use peer feedback in the first two weeks. In the following six weeks, they did peer feedback activities in writing classes. In week 8, the second interview was made, and the SLWAI was carried out.

3.5. Data analysis

To analyse the data from the SLWAI, descriptive statistics and paired samples t-test were used. The analysis was made with SPSS 20 for Mac. The researcher’s diary was narrated, and the interviews were content analysed.
4. Findings

The findings were explained according to the aims of the study in order.

4.1. The effect of peer feedback on the students’ writing anxiety levels

The second research question was aimed at finding out what the effect of peer feedback was on the students’ writing anxiety levels. To answer the question, first of all, the mean scores of the students after the pre-test were given and categorized as high, moderate, and low level of writing anxiety in Table 1. Second, the mean scores of the students after the post-test were indicated and levelled as high, moderate, and low in Table 2. Finally, the result of paired samples t-test was shown in Table 3 and analysed.

| Table 1. The mean scores categorized as high, moderate and low in the pre-test |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
| Total | 16 | 55 | 89 | 70.5625 |
| High anxiety | 12 | 65 | 89 | 74.0833 |
| Moderate anxiety | 4 | 55 | 63 | 60 |
| Low anxiety | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

There are 22 items in the SLWAI. The lowest score is 22 and the highest score is 100. As Cheng (2004) states, if a student has a high level of writing anxiety, the mean score of him/her is higher than 65, but if the mean score is lower than 50, he/she is considered to have a low level of anxiety, and if the mean score is between 50 and 65, he/she is thought to have a moderate level of anxiety. Table 1 shows that 12 out of 16 students have the mean score 74.0833 which is higher than 65 and are believed to have high writing anxiety, while four out of 16 students have a moderate level of writing anxiety (M=60, <65). According to Cheng, if the mean of a group’s total score is higher than 65, that group is thought to have high anxiety in writing. Therefore, the students who joined the research have high anxiety in their writing classes (M=70.5625, > 65).

| Table 2. The mean scores categorized as high, moderate and low in the post-test |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
| Total | 16 | 45 | 93 | 57.3125 |
| High anxiety | 3 | 67 | 93 | 76 |
| Moderate anxiety | 6 | 56 | 62 | 59.1666 |
| Low anxiety | 7 | 45 | 54 | 47.7142 |

As Table 2 shows, the mean score of the students before the treatment was 70.5625 and the mean score of them after the treatment was 57.3125. Since the mean score before the treatment was higher than the mean score after the treatment, it shows that the students were more anxious at the beginning of the research project than they were at the end.

| Table 3. Paired samples t-test analysis of pre-test and post-test writing anxiety |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Kind of The Test | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | T | p |
| Pre-test | 16 | 70.5625 | 10.16510 | 2.757 | 0.015* |
| Post-test | 16 | 57.3125 | 12.19136 | | |

*p<0.05
It is shown in Table 3 that the difference between the means score of the pre-test and post-test of writing anxiety is significant at the .05 level (p<0.05). This indicates that there was an apparent statistical difference between the students in terms of their writing anxiety levels before and after the peer feedback treatment.

4.2. The perceptions of the students towards peer feedback

In order to find out the perceptions of the students toward peer feedback, the interviews were content analysed. The content analysis was summarized. In the first interview, according to most of the students, receiving and giving feedback to their friends may decrease their anxiety in writing. They know that making mistakes is a part of learning and they make some common mistakes. They collaborate with each other to overcome the mistakes while writing. These are the reasons for this assumption. These reasons make the learning environment less stressful and anxious according to the students. On the other hand, some students opposed this assumption because their friends did not have the capacity to give feedback and did not want to show their writings to someone else. Most of the students think that receiving and giving feedback to their classmates may increase their confidence in writing. Some mistakes are common among the students, so they feel less anxious and stressed while writing something in English. In addition, the use of positive language in feedback can motivate the students. On the other hand, the dependence on teachers and characteristics of the students caused some of the students not to support the assumption that receiving and giving feedback to their friends could increase their confidence in writing. Most of the students liked using this activity in their writing classes. It made their learning environment less anxious and stressful because it helped the students collaborate with each other more. This collaboration helped them learn more from each other, according to the students. However, the relationship between the students in class may influence the feelings of the students towards peer feedback negatively.

In the second interview, most of the students believe peer feedback reduces writing anxiety. The analysis of writing anxiety shows that the students understand that they make some similar mistakes, so they are not afraid of showing their writings to their peers. In addition, the findings of interview indicate that this learning occurs in the form of error correction, and it makes learning more permanent. In the analysis, the students claim that this type of learning makes the classroom less anxious and more enjoyable. On the other hand, some students mentioned that they disliked the comments of their friends, and that their friends did not know a lot, so they did not want to learn something wrong. Most of the students agree that peer feedback may increase their confidence in their writing classes. They mentioned that everybody made similar mistakes, so they understood that no one was better than another one in writing. This makes writing less anxious and stressful for the students. Also, the students state that their friends’ feedback is understandable because of their similar levels of English proficiency and peer feedback helps them interact with each other in a positive way. On the other hand, characteristics and dependence on teacher affect the students’ thoughts about peer feedback in a negative way. Most of the students liked using the peer feedback activity in writing classes. According to them, it helps them to learn different perspectives for different topics from their friends’ comments and writings. Also, the relation between peers has an effect on the students’ feelings because if it is a positive one, peers can like the activity. However, the dependence on teacher’s feedback, subjective feedback, lack of writing skills, and taking responsibility have a negative impact on the feelings of the students regarding peer feedback. Most of the students think that peer feedback is an educational, supportive, collaborative, and relaxing classroom activity. They improve their self-awareness and self-assessment skills by receiving and giving feedback to their friends. Peer feedback provides continuous feedback to the students, which results in improvement in writing according to the students. In addition, it makes the interaction between the students positive. However, dependence on teacher feedback creates a negative attitude among some students. They also mentioned that they could not learn something new from each other and time constraints made peer feedback ineffective.

In addition, the researcher’s diary was narrated. It was summarized. According to the researcher, the students had negative attitudes toward writing, were afraid of writing, and did not want to make mistakes. They were not familiar with peer feedback. Also, they did not want to take and give peer feedback because of their educational background, not seeing their friends as qualified to give feedback, not wanting to hurt their friends, not wanting their friends to
see their mistake, and not knowing how to give peer feedback. During and after the study, the researcher observed that collaboration between the students increased, writing classes became more student-centred, the atmosphere in class became more friendly, the students learned from their friends’ feedback, they improved their critical thinking skills, interaction and communication in class increased, so they improved their writing skills.

5. Discussions

According to the narrative analysis of the teacher diary, the students who participated in the research were very anxious in their writing classes because they were afraid of making mistakes, which is one of the reasons why writing anxiety needs to be taken seriously, as indicated by Hassan (2001), Kara (2013), and Daly and Miller (1975). According to Zhang (1995), Leki (1990), Nelson and McMurphy (1993), students see teachers as reliable source of information, so they prefer teacher feedback in writing classes. Also, Leki (1990), Nelson and McMurphy (1993) mentioned that students might think that their peer’s comments are not valid as they are not the native speakers of English. These two issues are two of the reasons why some of the students were not in favour of using peer feedback in writing classes. In addition to these two reasons, not wanting to upset their friends and not being objective may also negatively affect students regarding peer feedback.

The reasons that the teacher diary mentions as to why some students were not in favour of using peer feedback in their writing classes are the same as those mentioned in the content analysis of the two interviews. The issues made students think that peer feedback is not effective and valid as some other researchers including Leki (1990), Nelson and McMurphy (1993), Mangelsdorf (1992), Zhang (1995), and Saito (1994) stated in their studies about peer feedback. Therefore, they thought it could not reduce writing anxiety and increase confidence in writing classes. In addition to these issues, the relationship between the students and the students’ personalities also affected their perceptions toward peer feedback.

In spite of them, peer feedback can affect the students in their writing classes in a positive way as Tudor (1996), Topping (2000), Şimşek (1993), Damon and Phelps (1989) stated. It requires the students to check their friends’ writings and give feedback to them. Then they are required to receive feedback from their friends and correct their writings according to their friends’ feedback. It helps them understand that there are some common mistakes and everybody can make mistakes as it is mentioned in Tudor (1996). It also helps them learn from each other’s mistakes permanently, which makes their learning more impacting. According to Olsen and Kagan (1992), Nystrand and Brandth (1989), Saito and Fujita (2004), and Damon and Phelps (1989), peer feedback makes students more collaborative while giving and receiving feedback, which is what the findings of the present study shows. As Topping (2000), and Damon and Phelps (1989) stressed, this collaboration creates positive interaction between the students. Leki (1990), Nystrand and Brandt (1989), and Kurt and Atay (2007) emphasized that peer feedback lessens the writing anxiety of students and increases their confidence in writing. In relation to their findings, the present study shows that all the positive things about peer feedback makes the learning environment less anxious and stressful for the students, which results in an increase in their confidence. As a result, the students like the use of peer feedback in their writing classes as Kastra (1987) stated that the students who joined another study developed a positive stance toward peer feedback in writing. The findings of the content analysis of the two interviews are also confirmed the observations of the researcher.

In addition to positive effects of peer feedback, most of the students considered peer feedback as educational and supportive. According to students, they improved their writings. This is in line with the findings of Berg (1999), Kurt and Atay (2007), Villamil and De Guerrero (1996), Kastra (1987), and Zeng, (2006), who pointed out that peer feedback makes the learning environment less anxious and stressful. They interact with each other, try to help their friends find out with their mistakes and help them correct their mistakes in a non-judgmental environment. This results in an increase in their self-assessment and self-awareness skills according to Zeng (2006) and Grabe and Kaplan (1996). As Edge (1989) and Makino (1993) mentioned about self-feedback, they realize some of their mistakes and correct them by themselves because they learn the types of mistakes that they and their friends make in writing while giving feedback to each other.

Consequently, peer feedback creates a classroom atmosphere in which students can feel less nervous and stressful while writing. The classroom atmosphere requires students to co-operate and collaborate with each other in giving
and receiving feedback, which enables them to learn from each other as it is mentioned in Tudor (1996), Topping (2000), Bartels (2003), Zeng (2006), Nystrand and Brandt (1989), Grabe and Kaplan (1996), and Rollinson (2005). It is educative and supportive. Therefore, the students’ perceptions towards peer feedback in their writing classes are positive like the students in the study of Kastra (1987).

At the beginning of the study, the students had high writing anxiety in their writing classes. At the end of the study, the students’ writing anxiety levels decreased when compared to the levels in the beginning with the peer feedback treatment as it is pointed out in Nystrand and Brandt (1989), Leki (1990), Topping (2005), Kurt and Atay (2007), Kastra (1987), Villamil and De Guerrero (1996), and Berg (1999). The use of peer feedback in writing classes reduced the students’ writing anxiety levels as some other researchers including Nystrand and Brandt (1989), Leki (1990), Topping (2005), Kurt and Atay (2007), Kastra (1987), Villamil and De Guerrero (1996), and Berg (1999) found out. At the beginning of the study, they showed negative physical and cognitive reactions to writing anxiety, which resulted in a preference to avoid using and writing in English as it is emphasized in the studies of Hassan (2001), Daly and Miller (1975), Cheng (2002), and Martin, (2007). However, peer feedback reduced their cognitive and somatic writing anxieties and led to a reduction in the rate of avoiding writing English compositions.

6. Conclusion

The students’ perceptions about peer feedback are positive because they believe it reduces their writing anxiety and makes them more confident in writing classes. According to them, it indicates that making mistakes is a part of learning and they can help each other in improving their writings by interacting and collaborating with each other. The interaction and collaboration between the students enabled them to learn from each other and make the learning environment less anxious and stressful. Therefore, they considered it as educational and supportive. The results of the pre-test and post-test indicate that it reduces the students’ writing anxiety levels. As a result of this reduction in writing anxiety levels, the students’ physical and cognitive reactions to writing anxiety changed in a positive way by the end of the study, and it encouraged students to use English to write compositions. Consequently, peer feedback can be used in writing classes in order to decrease the students’ writing anxiety levels.

References


