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Impact of Peer Feedback on Developing Academic Writing: A Case Study on EAP Learners at a Private Higher Education Institute in Sri Lanka

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Academic writing (AW) skills, mandatory for tertiary education, are often perceived to be challenging for tertiary level learners. The study focuses on twenty-two students, following the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) module in a Private Higher Education Institute. The module aims to prepare students for AW, which highlights the use of formal language and impersonal writing. Various techniques implemented to develop AW skills of EAP learners have been inconsequential in previous semesters. Alternatively, a peer feedback (PF) technique was proposed in the current study to develop these learners' AW. The study attempts to identify the impact of PF on developing AW. Aiming to examine the impact of PF on these learners' AW, the study explored the effectiveness of students in identifying and correcting errors in their peers' essays, and examined the learners' level of engagement during PF and studied their views about PF. Learners in groups exchanged feedback on aspects of AW and modified their essays incorporating peers' feedback. The original (before feedback) and modified versions of essays were one data collection instrument. Other instruments included audio-recordings of learners' conversations and observed behaviour during the activity and a focus group discussion after the feedback process. A Mixed method was used to analyse data. The modified essays compared with originals indicated improvements in well-defined aspects of AW. These aspects were categorized to facilitate analysis. Errors identified in these categories had decreased within a range of 52% to 75%. Audio-recorded conversations and observed behaviour revealed enthusiastic interactions throughout the activity. The learners enjoyed it and were benefitted by numerous gains. Focus group discussions confirmed the above benefits since the majority mentioned that the activity enabled them to share knowledge of AW and identify weaknesses in their own writing. The study concluded that PF in the above context produced various benefits and can be implemented for similar learners in subsequent semesters.

Key words: Academic Writing (AW), EAP (English for Academic Purposes), EAP Learners, Peer Feedback (PF)