1. Normalizing Norming: Training Your Students to Be Reviewers

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"You don't know what you don't know." This modern take on an old philosophical idea may sound obvious or flippant, but it quickly proves true in the classroom. Teachers regularly scaffold new concepts, recognizing that students need guided support to build understanding. Yet, when the class transitions from learning new concepts to trying new activities, this same fundamental philosophy can fade away to make space for a list of instructions, diminishing necessary support. Despite how straightforward instructions may seem to teachers, students may be left floundering and uncertain, prompting teachers to repeat explanations that do not provide foundational understanding. As teachers, we often adopt established practices without fully considering the student experience, and one of the greatest examples of this is peer review. Faced with unclear expectations and concern about offering incorrect feedback, students may approach peer review with anxiety and restraint. When learners are expected to carry out a demanding task without proper training, the task is doomed to be only superficially successful at best. The truth is laid bare: students do not know what they do not know.

What, then, can be done?

Providing support to fill in this knowledge gap is the clear first step, but the concept of what that support looks like needs to change to better aid the students. In many cases, students are expected to exchange drafts and provide meaningful feedback, working under the assumption that familiarity with course content naturally translates into the ability to evaluate others' work. As a result, teachers may find themselves dissatisfied with the quality of students' feedback, even when clear instructions or worksheets are provided. In discussions about peer review with teachers who had minimally satisfying results, it seemed a common thread was a lack of "norming." From a peer review task, we want our students to produce similar results as experienced reviewers, so making the effort to norm them to the task should be a necessary step.

Ferris and Hedgcock (2023) and Hyland (2019) remind writing instructors that students are not “trained teachers,” and stipulate that the efficacy of response sheets or checklists is heavily dependent on student proficiency with the language and experience with peer review. Interestingly, peer review response sheets are situated as a possible form of teaching students to do peer review (Hyland, 2019), opening doors for a variety of styles of peer review once students are familiar with the process and its purpose.

Ardill (2025) and Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) discuss how students utilize comments from their peers more when there is a strong group dynamic and trust in each other’s abilities. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) also mentioned how much students overwhelmingly enjoy the collaboration inherent in peer review. Concerns about students perceiving peer review as not as valuable as teacher feedback (Tsui & Ng, 2000) teach educators that norming students to a peer review task may also enhance the value they perceive the task to have. In this way, students may begin to seek peer feedback rather than simply tolerate this step of the writing process.

Experiences such as these highlight the need to reconsider not only how to prepare students for peer review, but the purposes we describe with each step. As Hyland (2019) notes, peer review has the great benefit of encouraging students to critically evaluate their own work, helping them to develop awareness of argumentation.

Although the term “norming” has been predominantly used thus far, the more common phrase when looking at current literature is "training." This shift in vernacular is important as it better describes the core concept of the practice. The goal of norming (for example, when judging a competition) is to produce consistent outcomes across judges or reviewers. Training, however, focuses less on equivalent final results and more on giving students the tools and feedback literacy to complete peer review practices on their own.

The following sections clarify the role of training, distinguishing it from scaffolding, before examining why training is often overlooked in peer review practice. The chapter then addresses the risks inherent in assuming that students are prepared to give feedback, before finally exploring the impacts of training on feedback quality, communication, and student confidence.

Training vs. Scaffolding

Most teachers would think, "Of course I provide scaffolding for my students." But herein lies the problem. Similar to norming, there is a small but significant difference between training and scaffolding. Scaffolding in L2 writing is the concept of teachers providing and then slowly taking away support as students develop better competence (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023). An example of scaffolding in writing might be giving students fewer templates and specific guidelines throughout the semester when assigning them a paragraph to write. Training, on the other hand, focuses on developing a specific skill or knowledge through explicit instruction and structured practice. Although it may be a part of overall scaffolding in the class, the purpose of training is narrower. Training is designed to teach students how to perform a specific skill. We will elaborate on what training in a peer-feedback context can look like later in the chapter.

Why is no one talking about training?

The short answer is, they are, but not enough. Although research acknowledges the benefits of training, there is not a wealth of literature on training compared to other aspects of the practice, like peer-review effectiveness or students' emotions during the process. Although there is literature lauding the practice of training students, especially with peer feedback, it often seems to be omitted from the activity. Beyond anecdotal evidence found during conversations with writing teachers, where they admit training is not a part of their standard practice, one can also see the omission when reading articles on peer-review practice, where training is replaced by a simple "students were introduced to the rubric".

Why, then, is sufficient preparation omitted?

One explanation is purely practical. Training takes time—time that many instructors feel they do not have. Peer review has become so normalized in writing instruction that it is often squeezed tightly into the writing cycle. Introducing training can feel like an interruption: students write, then review, then revise. Training requires stepping back to teach students how to review before they do so, which feels like a disruption to the course flow. Yet without training, peer review becomes less effective. Writing instructors should consider training as integral to the process, not an optional supplement.

A second explanation is conceptual. Teachers may skip student training because they assume that if students understand how to produce the required content, they know how to give feedback on their peers' work. It simply may not occur to them that specific training as peer reviewers is necessary. Throughout the course, all students would be exposed to the same content that would appear on any peer-feedback rubric or checklist. It could therefore stand to reason that shared knowledge is training enough. Nevertheless, a student knowing what a thesis statement is does not equate to identifying or commenting meaningfully on one in someone else's writing.

Similarly, teachers who conflate scaffolding and training may not realize anything is missing. As stated earlier, you do not know what you do not know.

The Dangers of Assumption

A major problem with assuming students know how to conduct a peer review is that it leads to ineffective practices. If anyone has ever worked at a writing center, it seems the most common requests are along the lines of "Is this good?" and "How's my vocabulary and grammar?" In L2 contexts especially, students' anxieties about language use often overshadow broader aspects of writing, such as clarity, structure, and argumentation; their idea of formative feedback does not often stray beyond the very local. It may not be that they do not want to get feedback; they may not know what kinds of questions to ask or what kinds of feedback are appropriate.

If a student is then given the task of reviewing another student's work, they are unlikely to stray outside of their comfort zone, focusing primarily on local issues they find in their partner's essay. Likewise, students may misunderstand the purpose of peer review and focus more on corrections than feedback. Not only does this touch on the previous problem, but it also puts more responsibility on the reviewer than the author. It is not enough to simply notice a classmate's error or area for improvement; they also have to think of a solution. This can be daunting, causing them to focus on what they can fix. While this is not an ineffective practice, it is not necessarily satisfying to the student-author or the teacher, as the final draft might have fewer grammatical errors but is vastly off topic.

Even experienced teachers (ourselves included) have discovered, through editorial work including this volume, how

steep the learning curve for effective feedback can be. It is unrealistic to expect novice writers, especially L2 writers, to possess skills that take professionals years to cultivate.

Peer feedback is not intuitive, which leads to students regarding expert and peer feedback as differing in usefulness and quality (Wu & Schunn, 2020; Zhang & Yu, 2019). Although it has been noted that students tend to make low-quality changes before attempting high-quality ones (Wu & Schunn, 2020), which could be a benefit of poorly structured peer review, students who are well-trained are usually better reviewers and more feedback literate, leading to higher efficacy and reported usefulness of peer feedback (Kuyyogsuy, 2019; Zheng & Yu, 2018). Kuyyogsuy (2019) mentioned that familiarity with peer feedback leads to better integration of peer feedback, which only further emphasizes the need for training to create familiarity and confidence with peer review practices.

Even if students are familiar with the feedback itself, the manner in which it is delivered can, once again, make a notable difference in how well students are able to implement the feedback or their interest in giving necessary feedback. There is also a marked difference between being able to write and being able to talk about writing.

Insights into Training

Training and Feedback

In Rahimi's (2013) comparative study, the researchers trained students in Min's (2005) peer review procedure. They found that the feedback given by the control group focused on the formal, or local, aspects of writing. The trained group not only had higher instances of global feedback than the untrained group, but they also produced more global feedback than local feedback when reviewing. This corroborated Min's (2005) findings of a higher percentage of global feedback, as well as increased feedback overall among trained students.

Increased instances of global feedback were also found in Chang's (2015) research, who lauded the benefits of student training but showed concerns that one-time training may not lead to long-term learning. As a countermeasure, after initial training, the teacher modeled [language, phrases, and expectations] throughout the semester. The result was that for most aspects, for those students who were exposed to modeling, there were increased instances of feedback, and the

"reviewers' audience-aware feedback and affectivity were both enhanced" (Chang, 2015, p. 14).

Research examining the effects of gender and training on feedback (Ocampo et al., 2024) did not observe an increase in the number of comments by trained students but noted that it could be due to limited training. This supports Chang's (2015) idea that training students throughout a semester may have a more desirable effect than isolated and limited training sessions.

Liou and Peng (2009) found that comments aside, training did not significantly increase the frequency of correction integration by student authors. While there is not enough research in the area to say whether this is an exception, studies have shown that beyond increased global comments and comments overall, students also seem more likely to make changes to their writing according to their classmates' feedback if training is included (Min, 2005; Sánchez-Naranjo, 2019).

In their 2021 study, Sippel shared the possible beneficial impact of training and form-focused instruction on local issues, specifically grammatical structures. While not without its merits, because local feedback comes more naturally to students, training seems to have a greater impact on global feedback and feedback frequency.

Contextual Considerations for Student-Driven Feedback Approaches

Unfortunately, across many L2 writing contexts, peer review is treated as something students should be able to perform as soon as they have produced a draft. Yet few students, regardless of their proficiency level or educational background, arrive with the ability to discuss writing meaningfully in a second language. Some may have experience with peer review in previous classes, but these experiences often involve checking grammar, answering yes/no questions, or filling out surface-level checklists. For other students, peer feedback is entirely unfamiliar territory.

Across contexts, teachers often assume that if students have learned the course content (e.g., thesis statements, transitions, coherence), they should be able to identify those elements in their peers' work. The reality is far more complex. Without explicit training, students default to what feels safest: praise ("Good job!"), grammar-focused corrections, or short, closed-ended responses. Many students also fear offering incorrect advice, making overly negative

comments, or accidentally "hurting feelings." As a result, untrained peer feedback tends to be shallow, inconsistent, and disconnected from the goals of the writing task.

These patterns do not show a lack of student motivation. Instead, teachers should recognize them as predictable outcomes when learners are expected to perform a cognitively and socially demanding task without the linguistic tools or feedback literacy to do so. In contexts with time limitations, large classes, or teachers who have not received peer feedback training themselves, these challenges become even more pronounced. Training is therefore crucial not only to improve the quality of feedback, but also to ensure that students understand their role, the purpose of peer review, and how to engage with peers' writing in ways that are formative rather than intimidating.

Training and Communication

Min's (2005) research on their four-step training process also found improved feedback as well as improved language. The training offered gave students the tools to question their classmates and communicate their feedback, and in a friendlier tone, connecting to the texts as "readers" and not just "reviewers." Similarly, Cheng (2015) found that, along with an increase in global feedback, students' comments were also more collaborative and showed more affection.

Sánchez-Naranjo (2019) focused on discussion as a part of their training to guide students to welcoming comments. They confirmed that training had a "significant positive impact on the type and quality of reviewers' comments" (p. 19).

Stanley's (1992) method of peer training involved extensive training of over 7 hours with students. The training focused specifically on familiarizing students with the genre of the essay as well as how to make effective responses to each other's work. This was done by having students analyze multiple sample essays and their subsequent drafts, where they had to identify, but not correct, issues within the text and communicate these thoughts to the author. In this comparative study, Stanley found that there was greater interaction and communication among the trained group.

Teacher Takeaways

How to get started. Here are some easy ways training can be implemented into peer review practices.

- Do not skip training: Even short, well-timed micro-training sessions before each peer review can change the entire dynamic of the activity.
- Model the type of feedback you want: Show students what strong global comments look like on a real sample text, and contrast them with weaker comments.
- Norm expectations around the rubric: Make sure students understand not just the categories but what each criterion looks like in practice.
- Start small: Train students on one feature (e.g., introductions, topic sentences) before expecting them to review entire essays.
- Encourage "reader response" over "editorial correction." Train students to comment as readers, using stems such as "I noticed…" or "I was confused when…," rather than defaulting to grammar editing.

Contextual Considerations for Communicative Approaches

Beyond improving feedback quality, training plays an important communicative role in L2 writing classrooms. Peer review is, at its core, a conversation about writing, but many L2 learners do not know how to initiate or sustain such conversations in English. Students may hesitate to ask clarification questions or to probe deeper into ideas because they lack the language, confidence, or pragmatic knowledge to do so. Others may avoid offering critical feedback altogether because they cannot gauge their peer's preferences or are unsure how to phrase criticism politely.

Without training, peer-review interactions are prone to being short, awkward, and highly transactional. Students read a sentence, make a local correction, and move on. What is missing is the collaborative negotiation characteristic of effective peer review—asking follow-up questions, explaining confusions, comparing interpretations, and jointly exploring meaning. Such discourse rarely emerges spontaneously, especially at lower proficiency levels.

Training, therefore, provides the essential conversational models that transform peer review from a checklist activity into an authentic communicative event. By modeling question starters ("Can you explain what you mean by…?"), reader-response phrases ("As a reader, I wasn't sure about…"), and polite suggestions ("You might consider adding…"), teachers equip students with the linguistic tools they need to participate confidently in writing-centered dialogue. When done well, training not only improves the content of peer feedback but also deepens students' ability to communicate about ideas, structure, and clarity—skills that extend far beyond a single assignment.

Teacher Takeaways

By incorporating communication in training, teachers have a head start in modeling communication in practice. How can communication be built into training in different contexts?

- Provide language stems for questions and suggestions: Students are more confident when they have ready-to-use expressions ("Could you explain…?" "What do you want your reader to understand here?").
- Model feedback as a conversation, not a correction list: Demonstrate how reviewers can ask follow-up questions, probe ideas, and negotiate meaning.
- Revisit communicative scaffolds regularly: Reinforcement matters; students will not internalize feedback language from a single training session.
- Use collaborative formats when possible: Group review practices, such as station review (chapter 4) or panel review (chapter 3), help reduce the pressure on individual reviewers and increase interaction.

Training and Confidence

There is not much literature emphasizing how training students to do peer review may raise their confidence, let alone what kind of confidence it fosters. However, there is enough research to begin to suggest that training may foster confidence in our students as they tackle the intensive task of reading and offering feedback on their peers' work.

Student reflection in Min's (2005) work showed that students realized that they could have more confidence in their language ability, because the reason they struggle to understand a peer's essay may have more to do with the writing than the reviewer's language ability.

Contextual Considerations for Confidence in a Second Language

Confidence is rarely discussed in the peer-review literature, yet it plays a substantial role in whether students engage actively or passively in feedback practices. If students are not confident in their own abilities to provide feedback or lack confidence in their peers' abilities to give feedback, they may be less engaged and therefore have a negative perception of their own learning (Ardill, 2025; Mercader et al., 2020). Many L2 writers interpret difficulty understanding a classmate's text as a failure of their own language ability rather than a signal that the writing itself could be improved. This self-blame makes students reluctant to comment, especially on global aspects such as argument clarity or logical flow. Others fear giving incorrect advice, overstepping their role, or misunderstanding the assignment.

Training may help challenge these assumptions. When students are guided through sample texts, analyze drafts together, or see models of effective commentary, they begin to realize that misunderstandings often stem from unclear writing—not from their own linguistic shortcomings. This realization increases their willingness to ask questions, point out confusions, and comment on higher-level features of the text. Group review formats, such as panel peer review, further reinforce this confidence by allowing students to see how peers interpret the same text, providing safety in numbers and normalizing differences in understanding.

In contexts where students experience low writing confidence or where tasks are high-stakes (e.g., portfolios, research papers), training becomes even more important. Students need reassurance that peer review is not a test of correctness but a shared meaning-making activity. Training, therefore, not only improves feedback outcomes but also builds the confidence necessary for students to adopt more active, curious roles in giving and receiving feedback.

Teacher Takeaways

Training should give students the tools and skills to better accomplish the task at hand. The following tips can help students trust their knowledge and instincts, building confidence along the way.

- Normalize misunderstanding: Remind students that confusion is a natural signal of unclear writing, not of weak language ability.
- Use sample texts to build confidence: Having students analyze drafts together reduces individual anxiety and fosters shared interpretive norms.
- Highlight the value of questions: Emphasize that asking "What do you mean here?" is not a sign of incompetence but of active engagement.
- Encourage small wins: Recognize when students take risks by offering global suggestions or clarifying questions.

Conclusion

Ultimately, peer feedback is neither intuitive nor automatic. In other words, peer review is often treated as an activity students can perform once they have produced a draft. In reality, it is a skill that must be taught. It does not emerge effectively through the mere distribution of rubrics or by simply instructing students to exchange drafts. As we have argued, peer review is a cultivated practice—one that necessitates explicit guidance, structured modeling, and deliberate training. When students are equipped with the knowledge and tools required to provide substantive feedback, the outcomes are evident: higher-quality comments, more meaningful interaction, and increased confidence in navigating the complexities of writing in a second language.

Significantly, the integration of training into peer review need not represent a substantial disruption to instructional time. Strategic, well-timed interventions, e.g., brief norming exercises, targeted modeling of feedback language, or the provision of question stems, can have a disproportionate impact on peer-review efficacy. For instance, a brief modeling activity can preempt confusion, while training in reader-response strategies can shift the feedback focus

toward global issues of content, organization, and clarity, rather than superficial or strictly mechanical concerns.

Training also reinforces the central purpose of peer review: communication rather than error correction. Through explicit instruction, students learn not only to identify strengths and weaknesses in their peers' texts, but also to articulate their responses with clarity, tact, and textual awareness. In doing so, they develop essential feedback literacy, cultivate greater confidence, and come to view themselves as active participants in a collaborative learning environment rather than passive recipients of evaluation.

Thus, whether instructors are newly implementing peer review or refining established practices, the message is clear: intentional training is indispensable. When enacted with consistency and care, training transforms peer review from a procedural task into a meaningful pedagogical practice that supports students in becoming more effective writers, critical readers, and able communicators. In this way, peer review can serve not only as a tool for textual improvement but as a guide for developing broader academic competencies.

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