The effect of peer response groups on EFL college writing students' perceived peer social support

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Abstract- *This article reports the findings of a quasi-experimental study that extended over two consecutive semesters to gauge the effect of collaborative learning activities within peer response groups on 42 Saudi subjects' perceived peer social support. Results show that many subjects experienced poor social and behavioral skills and insufficient peer acceptance that negatively affected their social competence. Most students worked to maintain group harmony during discussion interactions by avoiding making direct corrections to their peer's drafts or giving straightforward suggestions to improve their compositions. Results of the study suggest that the impact of group work remains limited in the Saudi educational context which indicates a need for further research on the nature of relationship between group work and the prevailing cultural norms in this particular educational setting.*

Keywords- *collaborative learning; peer response; social support; writing*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

Recent studies that examined educational outcomes concluded that it is important to provide learners with signposts to help develop their studentship skills and become better learners in general (Dunlosky et al., 2013). Collaborative learning is a modern educational approach to teaching and learning that help students to better regulate their learning through the use of effective learning techniques (Weltman & Whiteside, 2010; Hackathorna et al, 2011). This approach depends on pairing and grouping learners for the purpose of achieving a certain learning goal such as answering a question, solving a problem, completing a task, or creating a product (Van der Linden et al. 2000). Collaborative learning is based on a theoretical assumption that learning is a naturally social act where participants work together to achieve a common goal (Goodsell et al., 1992). Student interaction in collaborative activities influences both their academic outcomes and social relationships in the sense that group work offers a perfect environment for students to provide help to their peers who are less skilled. Participants in collective tasks find it necessary to share information with their teammates because all of them can benefit from their good achievement, and consequently good grading (Wentzel, 2002).

Peer response groups are collaborative learning techniques utilized to provide more connectivity among peers by offering more opportunities for students to interact and work together (Van Den Berg et al. 2006; Hall, 2009). Peer response groups are an effective student-centered classroom strategy that encourages group learning by stimulating increased interaction among students (Hodson & Hodson, 1998). Moreover, when students engage in peer response groups they can achieve at higher levels of thought and retain information longer than learners who work individually (Bracey, 1994). Peer interactions have been found to be an essential element that increases interest among the participants, motivates them to take responsibility for their own learning, and promotes their critical thinking skills (Nelson, 1994). This article reports the findings of an experiment that involved 42 EFL students and measured their perceived peer social support when they studied two writing courses in two consecutive semesters where peer response groups was the educational method used.

Theoretical stances

There are theoretical stances that support the utilization of peer response groups in teaching L2 writing. The theory of constructivist learning, for example, considers learning a social activity associated with our connection with other learners who construct knowledge for themselves as they learn (Baker et al., 2009). Learning is an active process in which learners construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through authentic activities, social negotiation, and group construction of meaning (Driscoll, 2000). In addition, the process-oriented approach to teaching writing emerged as a response to the traditional product-oriented approach that considered writing a linear process and valued form over meaning (Li Wai Shing, 1992). The process approach advocates the recursive nature of writing in which the act of composing is broken down into many stages (Lo, 1996). Peer response is a key component in the teaching of writing as a process as it allows for putting students to work together to expand the concept of audience through which students consider not only their teacher's opinion but also their peers' opinions (Levine et al., 2002). Another theoretical stance that supports utilizing peer response groups is research in the

field of second language acquisition. Group work encourages authentic use of the target language and meaningful communication (Bygate, 2000) and motivates learners to use the vocabulary and skills they have acquired to produce comprehensible output, which is necessary in order for second language acquisition to take place (Swain, 1995).

1.2. Social support

According to the Penguin dictionary of psychology, social support refers to "all those forms of support provided by other individuals and groups that help an individual cope with life" (Reber & Reber, 2001). More particularly, social support is defined as "the sum of the social, emotional and instrumental exchanges with which the individual is involved having the subjective consequence that an individual sees him or herself as an object of continuing value in the eyes of significant others" (Gordy, 1996). Social support is considered a positive experience that students gain from college life that affects their growth in a number of domains, including psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development; academic competence; technical skills; and quality of life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Some researchers, such as Scholten (2004), look at social support as a person's network of relationships with other people that can be defined in terms of:

Quantity – how many relationships a person has;

Quality – the type of relationships a person has and how satisfied a person is with those relationships.

Schools of educational psychology emphasized the significance of peer interaction as a source to obtain peer social support during the process of learning (Davydov & Kerr, 1995). From a behaviorist point of view, motivation to learn is strongly associated with peer interactions in the sense that learning takes place only in as much as people reinforce each other in the academic arena. Accordingly, students learn better when they belong to peer groups which encourage learning and provide reward for behavior that indicates that learning is valued (Terry, 2006). According to Bandura's social learning theory (1996), human interactions are key components in facilitating the process of learning. This theory maintains that observational or vicarious learning occurs as a function of observing, retaining, and replicating novel behavior executed by others. Students most likely engage in learning enthusiastically if they are surrounded by peers who appreciate engaging in learning activities because they have positive attitudes toward education (Ge & Land, 2003).

Moreover, the sociocultural approach, pioneered by the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), highlighted the idea that learning is fundamentally a process that takes place in a milieu that provides help and support to learners within the prevailing social and cultural context (Davydov, & Kerr, 1995). The individual's mental development, such as thought, language and reasoning process is a result of social interactions with others around him/her within the shared knowledge of the culture.

Consequently, the individual's cognitive development is a result of a dialectical process, where he/she learns through shared problem solving experiences with other individuals, such as parents, teachers, siblings, or peers (Rogoff, 1994). Interactive human relationships facilitate the process of guiding the learner to higher stages of cognitive functioning that otherwise he/she can not reach without the aid of others. The transitional assistance that mentors, including parents, teachers, and more capable peers, provide to the student works as "scaffold" that is removed when it is no longer needed and the student has internalized the mentor's support (Feden & Vogel, 2006). The theoretical perspectives to learning mentioned above promote the position that learning is influenced by communication with others in social settings. These different approaches to learning agreed on the significance of emphasizing human interactions and providing social support to students to facilitate the learning process. Based on these views, the interactive perspective on teaching and learning seems an ideal educational context because "interacting with peers in cooperative social settings gives the learner ample opportunity to observe, imitate, and subsequently develop higher mental functions" (Chapman, 2004: 92). The current study employs collaborative tasks and peer interactions as classroom situations where students talk directly with each other in small groups to ask questions, give answers, exchange opinions, and have the opportunity to provide their peers with social support.

1.3. Collaborative learning and social support

Collaborative learning is a term that refers to "a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together" (Smith & MacGregor, 1992: 9). According to Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991), collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning that make it possible for learners to provide each other with academic and social support when they work together under conditions that include the following elements:

1. **Positive interdependence.** Team members are obliged to rely on one another to achieve the goal. If any team members fail to do their part, everyone suffers consequences.
2. **Individual accountability.** All students in a group are held accountable for doing their share of the work and for mastery of all of the material to be learned.
3. **Face-to-face promotive interaction.** Although some of the group work may be parcelled out and done individually, some must be done interactively, with group members providing one another with feedback, challenging one another's conclusions and reasoning, and perhaps most importantly, teaching and encouraging one another.
4. **Appropriate use of collaborative skills.** Students are encouraged and helped to develop and practice trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.

5. **Group processing.** Team members set group goals, periodically assess what they are doing well as a team, and identify changes they will make to function more effectively in the future.

Ultimately, positive peer relationships encourage students to engage actively in the learning process and provide social support to their classmates. Perceived peer social support has been found a protective factor in relation to school engagement, as well as feelings of frustration and behaviors expressing a lack of adjustment to the school environment (Robu, 2013). Collaborative tasks have positive influences in enhancing the development of personality traits that are important for successful learning because "the collaborative effort among the learners helps them achieve a deeper level of knowledge generation while moving from independence to interdependence" (Paloff & Pratt, 1999: 110). In other words, collaborative learning situations help students get a feeling of social presence by supporting a variety of interaction stimuli (Tozer et al. 1995). Effective peer interactions help learners recognize each other's social presence which has been defined as "the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication" (Gunawerdina & Zittle, 1997: 9). Social peer interactions within collaborative tasks determine how the group develops, how a sense of community of learning is established, and how social spaces are characterized by group cohesion, trust, and respect (Yingli & Zhaowen, 2008).

Peer response groups are collaborative learning settings that constitute a good environment for students to provide academic and social support to their peers. The more the students engage in group activities, the more they care about their fellow students and wish to facilitate their learning. Students engaged in group activities experience more help and encouragement from their peers than students in competitive and individual learning settings (Johnson et al., 1983). Peer response groups gained increasing importance in composition studies as a consequence of a pedagogy shifts from written products to writing as a process (Bruffee, 1983; Faigley, 1985). Composition scholars argued that peer response groups are inherently social and can provide an audience that assists the writer in revising (Legge, 1980). The current study introduces peer response groups to EFL Saudi college students at Umm Al-Qura university and investigates how they perceive the level of social support from their peers during discussion in peer response groups.

1.4. Significance of the study

The current project's idea is based on the sociocultural approach that views learning as integration into a community of practice (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Proponents of this approach emphasize the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge (Greeno, 2006). This study is a pioneering study in the sense that it is the first of its kind that investigates the construct of perceived peer social support in the field of teaching English composition to Saudi EFL college students in a collaborative learning setting. Particularly, Saudi students who learn English as a foreign language have serious problems in learning how to write satisfactorily in L2 (Alqurashi, 2005). The level of writing Saudi students produce is very weak. Part of the problem is due to the inadequate teaching methods followed in writing classrooms which are mainly competitive and product-oriented (Jouhari, 1996). This study adopted collaborative learning techniques and process-oriented approach to teach L2 writing and aimed at exploring the subjects' perceptions about how much social support they feel they received from their peers when they are engaged in peer response groups.

2. METHODS

2.1. Aim

The current study is a quasi-experimental study that extended over two consecutive semesters in the academic year 2008/2009. This study has been designed to gauge the effect of introducing collaborative activities within peer response groups on the level of social help and support that the students feel they got from their peers. More particularly, the study tried to track the students' impressions whether their peers provided them with social support to promote their learning and success or that their peers did not care about their feelings during group work. In other words, what is measured in the current study is the subjects' feelings about how much their peers were emotionally cooperative with them and sensitive to their social needs. The independent variable in this study was peer response activities as the learning strategy introduced in the two semesters. The dependent variable was the amount of social support that the subjects felt they received during discussion. The Research question of the study is:

Can collaborative activities within peer response groups raise the students' perceived peer social support?

2.2. Subjects

The subjects of the study were 42 freshman students enrolled in the BA program at the department of English, Umm Al-Qura University. All the subjects were male students because education in Saudi Arabia is gender-segregated. Upon their admission to the program the students take 14 hours of intensive English language courses per a semester in the first year. These courses are: Listening and Speaking (3 hours), Writing (3 hours), Reading (3 hours), Grammar (3 hours), and Study skills (2 hours). The researcher taught the subjects *Writing I* in the Fall 2008 and *Writing II* in the Spring 2009. The classes met twice a week during the two semesters. The first meeting was a 100-minute lesson while the second meeting was a 50-minute lesson per week. The books used in the two semesters were *interactions I* (a low-beginning textbook) and *Interactions II* (a high-beginning textbook) respectively.

2.3. Procedures

Throughout the two semesters the subjects learned the basic stages in the composing process according to the process approach (prewriting, writing, and rewriting). More particularly, the students worked in small groups to generate ideas for the topic in hand, to make an outline for their compositions, to comment on each others' multiple drafts, and to do exercises in the book. Group members were required to review and make comments on what their peers wrote in a face-to-face mode of discussion. Group discussion was the teaching method followed during the two semesters to see if collaborative learning techniques could successfully create a positive environment for group mates to provide social support to their peers or not.

Students were grouped randomly in groups of three. The researcher asked the students to join a different group each time in order to give the opportunity for each student to come into contact with every other student in class and to live through multiple experiences in working with different peers. In the first meeting the researcher asked the students to open their books to the first chapter 'School Life.' There were four pictures of different activities that students usually do. Students were asked to describe the pictures. Then, they were asked to get together in small groups to compare their answers. Many students were hesitant to join groups. The researcher encouraged them and asked them to come closer to each other to be able to exchange answers. Some students remained hesitant to participate maybe because they did not know their group mates. The researcher came to each group and asked every student to give a description to picture #1 and asked his group mates if they agree with what he mentioned. Then, the researcher asked the three students in the group to do the same with the other pictures and made sure that each member in every group participated.

2.4. Instrument

Quantitative data were collected for this experiment via a pre-course questionnaire that was administered at the beginning of the Fall semester and a post-course questionnaire at the end of the Spring semester. The questionnaire represents a scale to measure the independent variable, perceived peer social support. The scale is a classroom life instrument developed by Johnson, Johnson, and Anderson (1983) to examine the influence of group learning experiences on classroom climate over an entire school year. Social support is one of the most important aspects of classroom climate that may influence learners' psychological health and academic achievement in the sense that "the availability of people on whom learners can rely for assistance to achieve goals and for liking and caring is critical for academic productivity and psychosocial adjustment" (Ghaith, 2002: 263). All items of the questionnaire were prepared in a Likert-scale format with five response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Unsure, Disagree, Strongly disagree (questions are listed in tables 1 and 2). Arabic translation to the questionnaire items was provided to the students to make it easier for understanding. The accuracy of translation was verified by a translation specialist in the English department, Umm Al-Qura university.

3. RESULTS

73 subjects responded to the questionnaire in the pre-test conducted in the second week of the first semester (Fall 2008). Only 42 subjects responded to the post-test conducted in the last week of the second semester (Spring 2009). A number of subjects failed the course *Writing I* and subsequently did not qualify for the *Writing II*. Some other students passed *Writing I* but joined sections of *Writing II* that other professors taught. Accordingly, only the responses of the 42 students were considered while the responses of other students who did not take the post-test were excluded. Subjects' responses to the questionnaire items were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11.0 for windows.

Table 1: Subjects' responses to the questionnaire

	Test	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Chi-squared probability
1. Students in my classes think it is important to be my friends.	Pre	6	16	14	5	1	0.97
	post	6	18	13	4	1	
2. Students in my classes like me the way I am.	Pre	6	13	17	5	1	0.31
	post	6	15	18	2	1	
3. Students in my classes care about my feelings.	Pre	2	9	25	5	1	0.003
	post	4	19	16	2	1	
4. Students in my classes like me as much as they like others.	Pre	3	16	16	4	3	0.301
	post	4	16	18	3	1	
5. Students in my classes really care about me.	Pre	1	6	17	12	6	0.0001
	post	3	17	14	7	1	

4. ANALYSIS

The type of analysis utilized to assess the data was chi-squared test, a statistical test used to examine differences with categorical variables (2). Chi-square test is commonly used to compare observed data with data the study would expect to obtain according to the hypothesis in hand. Chi-squared tests were carried out for each questionnaire item to determine if there were significant differences in distribution of scores pre and post the teaching period. Results summarized in table (1) were as follows:

- No significant difference was found in the distributions for question 1 p = 0.97.
- No significant difference was found in the distributions for question 2 p = 0.31.
- A significant difference was found in the distributions for question 3 p = 0.003.
- No significant difference was found in the distributions for question 4 p = 0.301.
- A significant difference was found in the distributions for question 5 p = 0.0001.

This study extended over a full academic year to track any possible changes in the students' views about how they perceived the amount of social support they received from their peers when working together in peer response groups in two courses, *Writing I* and *Writing II*, which are part of the English BA program, Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia. Throughout that year students were grouped together in groups of 3 students to do exercises and comment on each others' compositions.

During the two semesters, the researcher observed that some students suffered a deficit in basic collaborative skills which might have weakened their ability to function educationally, socially, and emotionally across a variety of collaborative tasks. It turned out that those students were underachieving students who either failed the courses or had low scores. Collaborative tasks could have represented a challenge to the subjects that might have affected their responses to the questionnaire. They could have felt intimidated when they were asked to participate in group work with other students that they did not know. The existing instructional methods in higher education settings in Saudi Arabia do not integrate collaborative learning techniques into classroom activities. Being exposed to a new learning style could have had an emotional impact on the subjects and prevented them from having positive attitudes to collaboration through which they receive social support from their peers.

5. DISCUSSION

Students' responses to the questionnaire items varied. There were no significant changes in the students' responses with regard to the first item: *Students in my classes think it is important to be my friends*. In the pre test 22 subjects approved the idea of the first item while 20 subjects were either unsure or did not approve the idea. Students' responses to the first item remained almost the same in the post test (24 subjects approved the idea and 18 subjects were either unsure or against it). In other words, the newly introduced teaching/learning method, group work, did not create a real change in some students' perceptions of their classmates' opinions about the importance of being their friends. One possible reason for this result is that many students in this particular social context thought that their relationship with their classmates should only be at the level of *classmates* and should not be elevated to the level of *friends*.

Moreover, there were no significant changes in the students' responses to the second item: *Students in my classes like me the way I am* and the fourth item: *Students in my classes like me as much as they like others*. This means that the new learning technique did not succeed in making more students feel that their classmates like them the way they are and as much as they like others. Both items here deal with the notion of 'liking' that can be better understood within the concept of 'peer acceptance' which refers to the degree to which an individual is socially accepted by peers. The concept of peer acceptance "includes the level of peer popularity and the ease with which an [individual] can initiate and maintain satisfactory peer relationships" (Peer acceptance, 2009).

Peer acceptance witnessed within peer interactions is important to the learners' social and emotional development. Normal peer acceptance and friendship provide students with a wide range of learning and development opportunities and help them build sufficient social skills. There are two points considered in examining peer acceptance. The first point is the student's social standing in the peer group as a whole, characterized by his level of social acceptance by other group mates. The second point is the student's individual friendships, indicated by both the quantity and quality of these friendships (Hundley & Cohen, 1999). Consequently, the students who felt that their classmates did not like them the way they are and did not like them as much as they liked others, might have had certain problems in terms of being accepted by their classmates which could be considered a problem in their social competence. Previous studies considered peer acceptance an index of social competence and an operational definition of success in social settings (Hymel & Rubin, 1985).

The concept of social competence refers to "the condition of possessing the social, emotional, and intellectual skills and behaviors needed to succeed as a member of society" (Social competence, 2009). Individuals within a certain society typically share assumptions about what skills and behaviors that make them successful in their relationships within the broader cultural context. Yet, there are variations among the different parts of the same society with respect to those assumptions about the necessary skills and behaviors that constitute individuals' social competence (Ogbu, 1995). Even though all the subjects of the study had the same broader cultural background they displayed different, and sometimes contradictory, types of behavior when they worked together in peer response

groups. The subjects varied in how they engaged in discussion, how they expressed their opinions, how they argued for certain points, and how they understood and reacted to their group mates' facial gestures. Those variations could be interpreted as different individual behavior patterns that affected their perceived peer social support. At the same time, those variations could be attributed to the different types of social competence the subjects had based on the specific cultural background of their sub-societies.

It was clear throughout the two semesters that many subjects were not well prepared to participate in group activities with other peers maybe because they came from diverse social backgrounds with different social norms that could have made them face some difficulties in interacting with other subjects and interpreting their behavior. Those difficulties could have negatively affected their peer acceptance and made them reluctant to *like* their group mates. It seems that the subjects lived in closed circles of resistance to the concept of working with others and could not make use of peer response groups as a helpful medium to undermine their traditional patterns of behavior. This result brings up the issue that there are some constraints against implementing collaborative learning techniques as tools to compensate for differences in background that college students in Saudi Arabia bring with them. Consequently, the formation of a learning community becomes a difficult task because the processes of communication and meaning-making in any learning community are socially and culturally-mediated within a certain sociocultural context (LeBaron, 2003).

Students' responses to the third item: *Students in my classes care about my feelings* and the fifth item: *Students in my classes really care about me* witnessed significant changes pre and post the introduction of peer response groups. More students felt that their classmates cared about them and their feelings at the end of the academic year than at the beginning of the academic year. Both items dealt with the concept of *caring*. It seems that the students felt that they needed to *care* about their peers even if they did not *like* them. A prominent form of caring about classmates was through staying away from doing anything that could intimidate them. The researcher observed that many subjects avoided making blunt comments on their group mates' vocabulary and grammatical errors or giving serious suggestions to improve their compositions. The students may have felt that they are not knowledgeable enough to detect and correct errors or may have felt that such comments and suggestions could hurt their group mates' feelings. In other words, it seems that students sacrificed, to a certain extent, the academic benefit in order to care about their classmates and maintain the group harmony.

Previous research in the field of EFL/ESL composition investigated group harmony within the discussion dynamics exercised in peer response groups. For example, Carson and Nelson (1996) compared the interaction styles implemented by Chinese-speaking students and Spanish-speaking students within peer response groups in an advanced ESL writing class at a large urban university in the United States. The Chinese-speaking students were more social-oriented for the purpose of maintaining the group harmony. They were reluctant to speak when their comments might indicate a suggestion for revision in the sense that disagreeing with a peer would create conflict and tension within the group. Instead, they suppressed their disagreement and withheld comments that they thought might be hurtful to other group members in order to minimize the potential conflict. Quite the reverse, the Spanish-speaking students were more task-oriented for the purpose of contributing effective criticism to their peers. They interacted freely in their groups, expressed clear opinions about their peers' writing, and gave effective suggestions to improve their group mates' compositions. Evidently, L2 learners react differently in group discussion based on their cultural standards and views of the significance of group harmony. It seems that the majority of the subjects of this study were more social-oriented because they tended to give positive comments on peers' writing may be as a harmony-maintenance strategy.

Studies on the influence of culture on the learners' behaviour proposed that the learners' cultural background can shape the way they interpret their roles and function when interacting with others in any communicative event (Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1995). The cultural background determines the essential patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that learners display in group work and constructs their classrooms assumptions and values with regard to what they should or should not do (Muller, 2004). One of the prevailing cultural standards in the Arab mentality is being sensitive to the interlocutor's feelings by avoiding giving comments or suggestions that might turn invalid (Ward & Al Bayyari, 2010). It was clear that many students preferred to be passive and refrained from giving comments or suggestions on their peers' compositions maybe because they were not certain about the validity of those comments and suggestions. In other words, it seems that those students withheld their opinions on their peers' writing in an attempt to avoid any possibility for negative reaction from peers that could embarrass them or put them to shame. Ultimately, the significant change in the subjects' responses about the third and fifth items indicate that joining peer response groups succeeded in making more subjects feel that their classmates care about them which raises their level of perceived peer social support.

6. CONCLUSION

This study presents a data-driven analysis of 42 EFL college students' perceived peer social support. The subjects engaged in peer response groups throughout a full academic year where they studied two Writing in L2 courses. The subjects responded to a five-item questionnaire pre and post the teaching period. Results showed that engaging in group work did not make more students feel that their classmates like them which

indicates a problem of peer acceptance in some subjects' social standing in the learning group and their ability to make more friends. This result reflects the poor social and behavioral skills of some subjects that negatively affected their social competence and limited their chances of being successful members of that particular learning group. Results showed also that engaging in group work improved the perceptions of more students that their classmates like cared about them and their feelings and worked to maintain harmony with them. Subjects were cautious in giving rough comments or blunt suggestions to their peers to eradicate any possibility for negative attitudes. The subjects' inconsistent perceptions of their peer social support suggest that the impact of group work turned limited for this group of learners which can be used as an initial indication of the difficulty of introducing collaborative learning to EFL college students in Saudi Arabia. There is a need for further investigation of the conformity of collaborative learning techniques to the prevailing cultural norms and individual learning styles Saudi EFL learners.

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