

THE IMPACT OF MULTI-LEVEL ANONYMITY IN ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE PEER FEEDBACK FOR EFL WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

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Online Peer Feedback (OPF) is a proven and effective peer editing tool in EFL writing classrooms. However, the level of effectiveness varies depending on the relationship between peer editors and on the available peer editing tools. This study investigates the impact of multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF by addressing two key objectives 1) to compare the effectiveness of multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF with and without teacher feedback intervention; and 2) to evaluate the quality of multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF compared to traditional teacher feedback. The study utilized a randomized pretest-posttest control group design. 62 first-year English major students from a mid-sized university in Thailand were randomly assigned to a control group of 31, and they received triple-anonymity asynchronous OPF together with teacher feedback. The experimental group of 31 received triple-anonymity asynchronous OPF without any teacher feedback. All participants completed a narrative paragraph writing task, which was used for data collection and analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations. Two key findings emerged: 1) There was no significant difference in writing skill improvement between the experimental and control groups. Triple-anonymity asynchronous OPF with or without teacher feedback intervention are both practical peer assessment tools in EFL writing classrooms; and moreover, 2) there was a moderate positive correlation between peers and the teacher feedback in the experimental group. This indicates reliability of peer feedback in the triple-anonymity asynchronous OPF group without teacher intervention. These results suggest that the incorporation of triple-anonymity asynchronous OPF into writing instruction can develop students' writing skills and can enhance assessment methods in higher education EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Peer feedback; multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF; higher education; online peer review; writing skills

1. INTRODUCTION

Peer review refers to the process in which experts evaluate and provide feedback to improve the work of others. In scholarly publishing, open and anonymous types of peer review are used to ensure the quality and integrity of academic work. In an educational setting, however, peer review usually means something else. In traditional or face-to-face formats, peer review refers to collaboration among students, promoting a student-

centered approach, and fostering dynamic formative assessments in classroom practices (Brodie et al., 2021; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Falchikov, 2005; Jones, 2018; Smith, 2020; Topping, 1998).

Beyond traditional peer feedback, online education platforms now utilize several applications for engaging students in collaboration and peer review, and for teachers to provide feedback. Some include processes known as Online Peer Feedback (OPF) and automated corrective feedback (ACF). These online processes expand opportunities for teachers and students to engage in peer feedback, allowing participants to either disclose their identities (as in open peer review) or remain anonymous (as in double-anonymity OPF).

Despite the various formats of peer review that are available, their effectiveness depends heavily on contextual factors (Shadiev & Feng, 2024; Shang, 2022). Previous research on double-anonymity OPF has demonstrated benefits of reducing peer pressure (Panadero & Alqassab, 2019). However, there are concerns about the ways in which students are influenced by knowing their reviewers, suggesting that there is much room for development of the practice (Rød & Nubdal, 2022). While face-to-face peer feedback is widely recognized as a valuable tool in writing development compared to no feedback (Huisman et al., 2019), it was found that students were hesitant to participate in peer review and even more hesitant to act on the feedback they had received (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Waluyo, 2020). Interestingly, it has been reported that students even ignore their peers' comments and rely more on the teacher's feedback to improve the second draft more significantly (Yang et al., 2006).

To address these concerns, this study explores the potential of multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF. It deploys a structured approach in which there are three anonymous peers reviews and sets of comments on each student's writing. By adding one more student in the double-anonymity OPF process and shifting the focus away from reviewer identity, this approach not only addresses key limitations in previous studies related to social pressures and evaluation bias from peers, it also contributes new insights into EFL students' engagement and independence in the peer feedback process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Peer review as an assessment

Open and anonymous peer reviews are the most common types in classrooms. Several approaches such as direct assessment, comparative assessment, group assessment, self-assessment, and co-assessment are all forms of open peer review. These collaborative learning methods involve two or more students, encouraging each other to evaluate one another's work using predetermined criteria or rubrics as a guideline (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000). Therefore, peer review allows students to be active participants and learn from each other by providing and receiving feedback and is often used as a formative assessment method (Falchikov, 2005; Topping, 1998).

Several studies have shown a significant shift away from co-assessment, a process where two or more parties work together, to group assessment, where a group of students are evaluated collectively. van den Berg et al. (2006) suggested that feedback is adequate when the assessment is performed in a small feedback group. This is consistent with Zong et al. (2021) who reported that the amount of feedback students provide is a predictor of growth in terms of the degree of helpfulness. This suggests that students working together in peer feedback groups outperformed those working only in pairs.

In addition, peer assessment plays a crucial role in formative assessment because it encourages students to work collaboratively with their peers and enables them to utilize the feedback from their peers to develop the assigned task (Topping, 1998). The aim is to support students to achieve a particular learning outcome by engaging in multiple acts of reiterative assessment. Through those different and varied acts, the student constructs knowledge and experiences cognitive gains in the process. Typical activities in peer review include writing drafts and providing, receiving, and evaluating feedback (Nicol et al., 2014).

In order to utilize peer review as an assessment in an EFL classroom setting, teachers must engage students in small groups and multiple acts of evaluation because these activities are essential for students' cognitive activation and knowledge construction during the peer feedback process.

2.2 Peer review tools

Open or face-to-face peer review used to be the norm in classrooms, whether conducted in-class or as an outside-class activities. However, over the past decade, as peer review methods have evolved, OPF has emerged as a prominent tool, whether it be synchronous or asynchronous. Some examples of asynchronous peer review are the use of tools like Track Changes in MS Word, the use of blogs and social media like Facebook, the use of WhatsApp or other texting applications, and also learning management systems like Blackboard (Chang, 2012; Özkanal & Gezen, 2023). In each of these platforms, the collaboration occurs between peers without real-time interaction. Synchronous activities, on the other hand, offer multi-user functions and real-

time interaction. Some examples of synchronous peer review include online chat, audio/video conferencing, and instant messaging (Chew & Ng, 2021). Since the lockdowns of the COVID 19 pandemic, synchronous online meetings via Zoom, Teams, and other platforms became the norm, and have since become routine for student collaboration.

Synchronous e-feedback has significantly reformed classroom pedagogy, especially with the introduction of automated corrective feedback (ACF) or automated written corrective feedback (AWCF). Two common types of ACF are lower-order and higher-order feedback. An example of a lower-order feedback tool is the embedded basic spelling and grammar checkers in MS Word (Li et al., 2015), while examples of higher-order feedback tools are the advanced reading impact rates suggested in Grammarly (Ranalli & Yamashita, 2022; Shang, 2022) and the advanced personalized feedback in ChatGPT (Zhou, 2023). However, with this writing-support technology, the peer review interaction has increasingly shifted from student-to-student interaction through a technological tool to student interaction with the online tool itself.

Despite having several positive effects on students' language learning, such as providing a richer vocabulary and suggesting better sentence writing (Shang, 2022), there are some notable disadvantages to ACF. Sometimes it fails to provide accurate or sufficient feedback when students rely on only one tool (Shadiev & Feng, 2024). ACF alone might not be recommended for students with low language proficiency or high dependency on tech resources. Shang (2022) found that less skilled EFL writers improve more with OPF than with other modes of peer review. Therefore, it is suggested that students using ACF should do so under a teacher's guidance or consider using it in conjunction with other resources (Shadiev & Feng, 2024).

2.3 Effectiveness of OPF in EFL writing classrooms

Peer feedback, primarily single and double anonymous OPF, has positively impacted university students' academic writing performance, even with learners of modest language proficiency (Neff, 2015). This is because engagement in peer feedback not only results in more considerable writing improvements compared to non-feedback controls (Li et al., 2020; Topping, 2017; van den Berg et al., 2019), but it also enhances the perceived safety of the learning environment, allowing students to give critical peer feedback and have more flexibility than in face-to-face discourse (Chen, 2016; Panadero & Alqassab, 2019). For example, in a recent study by Awada and Diab (2023) an OPF group provided more systematic feedback and outperformed the face-to-face group in improving argumentative synthesis writing. The same study also indicated that there was a shift of feedback control from teachers to students, further supporting the development of an authentic student-centered learning experience.

Another factor to consider when applying OPF in the classroom is the particular mode, either synchronous or asynchronous. Even though synchronous OPF offers a slightly more significant improvement in students' writing skills than asynchronous, it has been reported that both modes achieve better scores in academic writing tasks (Aydawati et al., 2023). Moreover, some students reported a preference for asynchronous OPF in peer assessment, highlighting the continued relevance and effectiveness of anonymous peer feedback (Waluyo & Panmei, 2024).

2.4 Research questions

All peer review tools benefit students differently. Tan et al. (2023) claim that a dynamic mix of available tools could promote the peer review experience, several factors common to students' learning dependency in an EFL writing class need to be considered. Some frequently overlooked factors include the number of peers in the process, the student's proficiency levels, the peer reviewers' identity, and the availability of peer review tools. Therefore, to strengthen EFL peer assessment by reducing students' need for external feedback, this study aims to address these gaps by implementing multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF. This procedure has three students anonymously reviewing and commenting on their peer's paragraphs. The guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

- (1) Does the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF alone improve students' writing skills more effectively than triple-anonymity OPF with teacher feedback intervention?
- (2) How does the quality of the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF settings compare to traditional teacher feedback?

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants and research design

The site of this study was Mae Fah Luang University. The target sample was 62 first-year English major students (58.06% female, 41.94% male) enrolled in an English reading and writing course in the second semester of the academic years 2022 and 2023. The participants generally obtained basic to intermediate English proficiency, ranging from A2+ to B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference

(CEFR). Even though these Thai EFL learners have over 9 years of English language learning experience from primary to tertiary education, the participants are still of ranging abilities.

One of the primary assessment methods in the course involved individual work on a narrative paragraph, where multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF was administered. This 3-week activity started with a first draft submission, peer feedback production via Google Forms, peer feedback evaluation via Google Forms, and then a final draft submission.

In order to set a baseline for evaluation and analysis, a pretest-posttest randomized experimental design was implemented. In this study, the pretest-posttest are represented by the first and final draft of the narrative paragraph written work of the control and the experimental group. The first draft sets the baseline score, and the final draft following peer review demonstrates the improvement.

The control group of 31 participants enrolled in an English reading and writing course in the second semester of academic year 2022 and received multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF peer feedback *with* teacher intervention. The experimental group of 31 participants enrolled in an English reading and writing course in the second semester of academic year 2023 and received multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF *without* the teacher's intervention.

The rationale for the 3 peer reviewers was derived from the number of participants and the peer evaluation time specification for each class. In this study, the participants in both the control and experimental groups were 31 each, with three hours of contact time each week; therefore, shifting from one-on-one to random three-peer-reviewers was considered appropriate for the setting.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

To compare the improvement in paragraph writing skills between the experimental and control groups (RQ1), a narrative paragraph of 240–260 words was used as the first and final draft to test the two groups of participants before (pretest) and after (posttest) the administration of the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF. Before administering the task, three experts on the teaching team validated the task's face and construct validity, ensuring the appropriateness and consistency of the test instruction, content, and course objectives.

A detailed rubric with three quality levels focusing on four aspects—topic sentence, supporting details, concluding sentence, and mechanics was used to evaluate the task. This rubric also included criteria, descriptors, and scoring levels for clarity. The criteria was explained to participants before the task was administered to ensure a consistent and objective evaluation. On the teacher's side, the rubric was used and applied by only 1 instructor in order to ensure fairness, consistency, and reliability for all 62 participants. The scores were then analyzed using an independent *t*-test to compare the mean scores and *p*-values. Descriptive statistics were used to explain the writing improvements in both groups of participants' first and final drafts after implementing multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF.

In order to examine the quality of the feedback provided by peers as compared to teachers (RQ2), only the first draft scores of participants in the experimental group, provided by both the teacher and by peers (triple anonymity), were compared by examining the rubric scores given. The mean, variances, and bivariate correlations between peer and teacher scores were used to determine to what extent peer feedback aligns with teacher feedback.

3.3 Research procedure

To prepare participants in both the experimental and control group, they were all introduced to a narrative paragraph writing lesson. The teacher explained the task and provided samples of components of the narrative paragraph before assigning participants to then get into small groups of 2–3 to practice writing paragraph outlines and producing the writing. The teacher gave the respondents suggestions and recommendations using a grading rubric, which would later be used in the experiment intervention. To enrich the participants' learning experience in the English reading and writing course, a session on multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF was integrated into the class instruction. This involved the teacher providing feedback for both the control group and the experimental group. After this session, the participants in both groups were involved in 4 roles: writers, peer feedback producers, peer feedback recipients, and peer feedback evaluators, as represented in Figure 1. This learning unit spanned 3 weeks with 1 3-hour meeting per week.

In week 1, the teacher took measures to ensure fairness in the process by using a pseudonym for each participant on the first draft in order to maintain anonymity. After 1.30 hours of in-class writing, the teacher systematically assigned three anonymous peers to provide peer feedback via Google Forms, which guaranteed that each student received three different peer reviews. The first drafts were then uploaded to Google Drive and shared with all participants under pseudonyms, ensuring a double-blinded process and an asynchronous mode of OPF.

The participants then had one week to complete the peer review forms, to score the draft, and give specific feedback according to each rubric category. Participants were prompted to offer constructive

comments on this form. Once this feedback process was completed by week 3, the teacher shared the review forms with the file attached for all participants to access and review before the final draft production stage. Additionally, before submitting the final draft, the writer evaluated the quality of peer feedback via a Google Form. A structured table (Figure 1) and line diagram (Figure 2) below tracks the 4 roles of sample participants throughout the process, illustrating how each student interacts in the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF system.

Role 1	Role 2			Role 3			Role 4			Role 1
Week 1	Week 2			Week 3						
Writer (1 st draft)	Peer feedback producer			Peer feedback recipient			Peer feedback evaluator			Writer (final draft)
Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student D	Student E	Student F	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student A
Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student A	Student E	Student F	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student B
Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F	Student A	Student B	Student F	Student D	Student E	Student F	Student C
Student D	Student E	Student F	Student A	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student E	Student F	Student A	Student D
Student E	Student F	Student A	Student B	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student F	Student A	Student B	Student E
Student F	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student F

Figure 1: Four roles of sample participants in the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF process

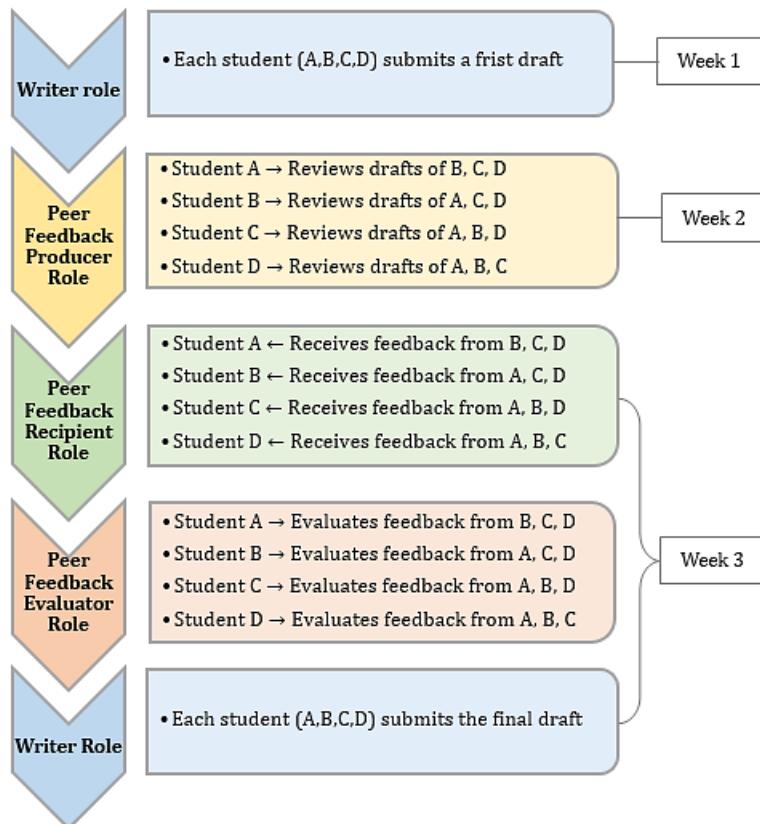


Figure 2: A structured line diagram tracking the four roles of sample participants A, B, C, and D illustrates how each student interacts within a multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF process

4. RESULTS

The aim of this study is to compare the effectiveness of multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF *without* teacher intervention to multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF *with* teacher feedback. The students' writing skills of the two groups are compared and shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison between students' writing development using multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF without teacher intervention and with teacher intervention

Sample Groups	Tests	\bar{x}	S.D.	p	Df
Control group (n = 31)	First draft	6.63	1.53	.060*	60
	Final draft	8.12	1.25		
Experimental group (n = 31)	First draft	6.91	1.76		
	Final draft	7.87	1.60		

* $p > .05$ Fail to Reject Ho

When comparing the improvement from first to final draft between the control and experimental group, the difference is not statistically significant. The difference in writing score improvement between the experimental group without teacher feedback was $\bar{x} = 7.87$, S.D. = 1.60 and the control group with teacher feedback was $\bar{x} = 8.12$, S.D. = 1.25, with $t(60) = 1.91$, $p > .05$. This result shows that the integration of multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF alone in the peer review process enhanced the participants' writing abilities in both the experimental group and control group. With or without teacher feedback, students similarly improved their writing. The results also imply that educators who want to develop EFL students' writing skills may find triple-anonymity asynchronous OPF helpful as additional feedback because of its double-anonymous characteristic, as long as the number of students is appropriate. Multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF supports construction of knowledge as students are engaged and actively provide comments to 3 classmates without knowing their identities, while also receiving 3 different perspectives from peers in return. These text engagements and interactions are essential for cognitive activation and knowledge construction during the peer feedback process.

Table 2: The comparison of the score given to the first draft of participants in the experimental group between the teacher and three of their peers

The experiment group's 1st draft scores	n	\bar{x} (10)	S^2	p	R
Teacher		6.91	3.10		
Peers	31	7.83	2.09	.004	0.46*

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The comparison between participants in the experimental group and the control group, as shown in Table 2, yielded coefficient of 0.46, which falls in a range typically considered a moderate correlation (0.3 to 0.7). This demonstrates a positive and moderately significant correlation between the scores given by the teacher and the mean scores given by 3 peers on the first draft in the experimental group ($R = 0.46$, $p = .004$). The result also implies that students' active roles in the peer review process foster honest and constructive feedback and promote independent learning, especially when they realize that the quality of feedback that they provide affects the rating they would receive. Therefore, multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF promotes a diversity of perspectives and reduces reliance on a single source of feedback, suggesting that peer feedback alone is indeed reliable.

5. DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics of the independent t-test results (p -value > 0.05) indicate that students in the experimental group who only received peer feedback showed similar improvements in their writing skills as those in the control group who received both peer and teacher feedback. In addition, the moderately positive bivariate correlation coefficient (0.46) between teacher and peer scores in the narrative paragraph writing indicated that peer assessment was considered reliable and consistent with the kind of feedback provided by the teacher. These results support the integration of multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF in EFL writing classrooms with mixed-ability students to foster student writing development independently, and there are several reasons to support this claim.

5.1 Multiple acts by students

Students having multiple roles during the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF process is crucial. It allowed each student to engage in the peer review process as a writer, a feedback producer, a feedback recipient, and a feedback evaluator. While engaging in these 4 active roles, students' cognitive processes and knowledge construction are activated (Nicol et al., 2014). As a result, students produced better drafts, as evidenced by the improvement in the writing of the final draft in both the control and experimental groups. Additionally, the feedback given was based on a detailed rubric, further enhancing its quality. Therefore, when recipients perceive feedback as specific, helpful, and reliable, which in these results is supported by a positive correlation between teacher and peer scores, the need for external feedback is reduced (Rietsche et al., 2022; Zong et al., 2021), making students more independent in their learning and potentially alleviating some burden on the teacher.

5.2 Number of peers in the process

The number of peers in the process matters. Once feedback is received from 3 peers, and perceives it as helpful, they appreciate it and often experience a change in mindset. They move away from believing that they cannot improve, or perceiving that comments are "telling them what to do." Instead, they start to see the feedback as valuable and constructive. Several studies support this finding, suggesting that feedback is adequate when the assessment is performed in a small feedback group (Luo & Liu, 2017; van den Berg et al., 2006; Zong et al., 2021). Moreover, when two students with similar abilities work together, they ignore their peers' comments and instead rely on external or teacher feedback. The odd number of peer reviewers or feedback producers, importantly with identity protected, makes multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF effective because it reduces biases of both feedback producers and receivers. This supports the positive reception of feedback and the constructive consideration of peer comments. It also fosters independent learning habits in the peer review process (Awada & Diab, 2023).

5.3 Double-anonymous peer review

Double-anonymous peer review plays a significant role in the feedback process. One characteristic of asynchronous OPF is that it allows students to engage their classmates' work at their own pace (Jongsma et al., 2023). This supports students with different levels of competency in reading, and it gives constructive feedback on their reading and writing speed once they are ready. This same feature applies to the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF that allows EFL students in classrooms of ranging abilities to engage their friends' work at their own pace and time. As for the writers, on the other hand, asynchronous OPF allows them to revisit the feedback and spend time to consider it thoughtfully. With more time, students are more likely to produce a better final draft. Moreover, regarding the review process, asynchronous OPF allows students to receive more descriptive and constructive feedback than emotional or descriptive elements that can occur in face-to-face or synchronous peer review (Jin et al., 2024; Kerman et al., 2024). This further supports why EFL students favor anonymous review when it comes to peer feedback activities in writing tasks (Waluyo & Panmei, 2024).

5.4 Practical implications for educators and instructional designers

This study highlights practical implications for educators and instructional designers by identifying the affective factors for scaffolding EFL learners to improve their paragraph writing skills. To begin with, well-planned adjustments in peer review, specifically, transitioning from traditional face-to-face or paired peer review to blinded, small-group methods on online platforms, can significantly improve formative assessment in the classroom. Additionally, instructional designers and teachers can utilize the anonymity function in OPF to reduce potential bias in peer assessments. This asynchronous instruction extends learning opportunities beyond the classroom by tailoring the asynchronous mode of OPF to the designated writing activity.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illuminate critical aspects of the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF system when structured with an adequate number of peers. Engaging students in multiple peer review cycles with anonymity protected has positive implications for improving paragraph writing skills among university EFL learners. It also positively affects perceptions about the quality of peer feedback. Regardless of whether students received teacher feedback or not, they perceived their feedback as valuable, constructive, and consistent. This demonstrates that the OPF system is credible among mixed-ability EFL students in a large classroom setting. These results suggest the incorporation of multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF into writing instruction enhances the development of student writing.

7. LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While valuable, this study has three notable limitations that may affect the generalizability of the findings. First, this study was conducted in a medium-sized higher education setting with 62 mixed-ability EFL learners. Future studies should confirm the effectiveness of the multi-level anonymity in asynchronous OPF in EFL across diverse classrooms and learners by exploring broader demographic variations. Second, this study collected data from only one type of writing task, specifically a narrative paragraph. Future studies should include a variety of writing tasks to further explore its effectiveness.

Despite the systematic process of assigning writers to their peer reviewers, achieving peer review groups of EFL with equally varied English proficiency levels in this study was nearly impossible. Therefore, future studies should consider more significant numbers of peers in the process to address this challenge of unequal proficiency levels within peer feedback groups in EFL contexts. Moreover, with the advancement of OPF tools, the integration of peer feedback and automated corrective feedback (ACF) or automated written corrective feedback (AWCF) tools such as Grammarly or ChatGPT, under the teacher's guidance, has potential to provide a more comprehensive understanding of OPF systems, and pave the way to future peer review instructional designs.

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