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What are the Effects of Written Peer Feedback Training on Turkish ELT Students' Writing Quality?

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effects of training for written peer feedback on students' revising their   first drafts and providing written comments on each other's writings. For this purpose, an empirical study was conducted with 36 first- year intermediate level students who were enrolled in the ELT Department of Faculty of Education at Anadolu University. The effects of written peer feedback were investigated through   a comparison of the subjects divided into two groups. One group was trained in how to provide written peer feedback to the various types of essays and the others were not trained. The statistical analysis of the data revealed that the students in the experimental group produced better writing quality than the ones in the control group.

Key words: peer feedback, peer feedback training, writing quality

INTRODUCTION

Today, learning to express oneself well through writing is very beneficial for one's academic and daily life and having good writing skills has become the key to better career opportunities. A person who is   in the academic environment needs writing in order to present his reports, term papers and research papers in acceptable academic English form (Kroll, 1990; Jahin, 2012). On the other hand, a person who is not in the academic environment also needs writing to write letters, messages to represent the way he thinks and feels and relates his knowledge and experience of the world to the others (Brookes & Grundy, 1990). In our time, both foreign language learners and teachers give great importance to writing since skill in writing becomes a basic necessity for language learners to cope with academic writing tasks or fulfill very many

individual needs in target language. These reasons encourage the researchers to discover more about writing and its applications related to the area in the foreign language composition classes. Consequently, the skill of writing has gained importance in foreign language learning with the help of research studies in the area and the newly invented writing approaches (Kroll, 1990; Lam, 2010). The process approach is one such innovative approach to teaching writing. It brings out the idea that "writing is a process" and that "the writing process is a recursive cognitive activity involving certain universal stages (prewriting, writing, revising)" (Cooper, 1986:364). In other words, process writing represents a shift in emphasis in teaching writing from the product of writing activities (the finished text) to ways in which text can be developed: from concern with questions such as "What have you written?, What grade is it worth?, to "How will you write it?, How can you improve it?" (Furneaux, 2000:1).

According to Neman (1995:184), the revising phase of the writing process consists of three distinct practices: "rewriting- performing global, usually structural revision that affect the meaning of the text; editing-making changes, usually stylistic, within the paragraph and sentence, and in word choice; and proof- correcting errors and infelicities". The students need an outsider's comments on their work in this stage. Those comments given by a reader to a writer to improve their written work can be defined as "feedback" (Elbow, 1981:238). The process approach reveals various types of feedback as revision, including peer feedback, conferences as feedback and teachers' comments as feedback (Keh, 1990). In fact, the types of feedback are so varied and numerous that Lynch (cited in Muncie, 2000:47) suggests that "teachers should offer learners a range of feedback types which may stand a greater chance of success than reliance on a single technique". The types of feedback can be given in oral or written ways. Written feedback is defined as "written from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision" and oral feedback is defined as "oral input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision" (Keh, 1990:294). Oral feedback can be given in one-to-one situation or with a small group through teacher-student conferences (Zhu, 1995).

Since the late 1980s, a common respondent to students' writing, especially in the early stages of draft development, are the other students (Nelson & Carson, 1998). Working in pairs or groups, students read and respond to each other's drafts (Miller, 2001). Therefore, peer feedback has become a common feature in L2 classrooms, where the process approach to teaching writing is used. Peer feedback is seen as a way of giving more control to students because students have to make their own decisions about whether or not to use their peers' comments as opposed to a passive reliance on teachers' feedback (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Hansen & Liu, 2005). The literature claims many positive effects for peer feedback. Tsui & Ng (2000) noted many advantages which various educators (Elbow, 1981; Chaudron, 1984; Keh, 1990; White & Arndt, 1991; Nelson & Carson, 1994) have claimed for peer feedback, such as:

"1. Peer feedback is pitched more at learner's level of development or interest and therefore more informative than teacher feedback.

2. Peer feedback enhances audience awareness and enables the writer to see egocentrism in his or her own writing.

3. Learners' attitudes towards writing can be enhanced with the help of more supportive peers and their apprehension can be lowered.

4. Learners can learn more about writing and revision by reading each other's drafts critically and their awareness of what makes writing successful and effective can be enhanced.

5. Learners are encouraged to assume more responsibility for their writing." (Tsui & Ng, 2000:148-149).

The chief importance of the present study lies in its aim to unearth the merits of training students to give written feedback in a peer response activity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Peer Feedback

The peer feedback has the potential to be a powerful learning tool (Mangelsdorf,1992; Liu & Carless; 2006) and it is claimed to have various benefits, some of which are helping to generate new ideas (Amores, 1997); building a wide sense of audience awareness (Mendonça & Johnson,1994; Thompson,2001; Min,2006); building self-confidence (Chaudron,1984); having the opportunity to make active decisions about whether or not to use their peers' comments as opposed to a passive reliance on teachers' feedback (Hyland, 2000); learning to take responsibility in order to make constructive efforts to correct his own mistakes and assess himself (Ndubuisi, 1990); and being exposed to not only different perspectives; but also different writing styles and organizational patterns (Dheram,1993). Also, the feedback leads to consciousness- raising about the writing process since learners gain awareness of their ineffective or inappropriate writing habits, they realize that different people approach writing in different ways and become conscious of how their linguistic choices affect the identity they project through their writing (Porto,2001). Furthermore, peer feedback provides an effective content for the development of collaborative learning. As Hirvela (1999) and Rollinson (2005) point out, students experience increased opportunities to review and apply their growing knowledge of second language writing through dialogue and interaction with their peers in the collaborative writing group.

Empirical Studies on Training Students on Peer Feedback

Whether in grade or high school, adult education, or university level writing courses both ESL and EFL students are not likely to be experienced peer respondents. Nonetheless, these students are often asked to participate in the complex peer response task without adequate preparation. As a result of such lack of preparation, the peer response activity is often an unsatisfactory experience for students and a frustrating one for teachers. Students need to be

taught certain skills to help make it a positive and worthwhile experience (Berg, 1999a; Morra & Romano, 2009).

Research in L2 setting has also examined the effects of training students for peer feedback. In these research studies, students are trained and helped to develop strategies for peer response and results are overwhelmingly positive in L2 settings. More specifically, trained peer response is found to result in more and better quality peer feedback and writing outcomes (Stanley, 1992; Zhu, 1995; Berg, 1999b; Min, 2006; Lam, 2010; Yang & Meng, 2013; Esmaeeli, Abasi & Soori; 2014) and increase student engagement and interaction during peer response (Stanley, 1992; Zhu, 1995; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Çiftçi & Çöker, 2011). In the light of the issues stated above, this study aimed at finding out whether there was a significant difference between the experimental group who received training for written peer feedback and the control group who received no systematic training in terms of the quality of student writing. In other words, this study would attempt to answer this basic research question: What are the effects of training for written peer feedback in the freshman composition classes? Thus, the following research questions were posed to guide the study:

1. What are the effects of written peer feedback on students' written products where students do not receive any deliberate training?

2. What are the effects of written peer feedback training on students' own written products?

METHODOLOGY

Selection of Subjects

The study was conducted at the ELT Department of Faculty of Education at Anadolu University. All subjects were monolingual speakers of Turkish between the ages 17 and 19 and they were at the intermediate level. 36 first-year students participated in the study. Before the actual study, a pre-test was given to select the subjects. In the pre-test the students were asked to write at least three paragraphs on a given topic. Based on the scores of the writing exam, two groups were formed consisting of 18 students. Table 3.1 shows the comparison of pre-test results of the control and experimental groups.

Instruments and Materials

The ESL Composition Profile was used to address the quality of student writing on the first and second drafts. The ESL Composition Profile (Hughey, 1983) is made up of five component scales. These are Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language Use and Mechanics. Each component focused on an important aspect of writing and has a varying weight according to its approximate importance for written communication. The total score in the ESL Composition Profile is 100 but this score is not divided equally among the five component scales. Each component scale has different scores. The scores for each component scale are as follows:

Content 30, Organization 20, Vocabulary 20, Language Use 25 and Mechanics 5. In the evaluation of this study, two aspects were taken into consideration: Content and Organization (Content = 30 pts., Organization = 20 pts; Total = 50 pts.). Since the other three aspects (vocabulary, language use and mechanics) can be evaluated in terms of local and evaluative feedback of the Coding Scheme (Zhu, 1995), they were excluded in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data Collection Procedures for the Experimental Group

The experimental group was introduced to the process approach at the beginning of the academic term, and the purpose and the advantages of this approach were discussed during the course. The researcher pinpointed the importance of peer feedback session in the process cycle discussing two articles with the students. Furneaux's (2000) and Berg's (1999a) articles were used to convince students that peer feedback is a worthwhile activity. The students were given some guidelines which showed what to do during the feedback session. The students were also introduced through a series of drafts written on the same topic by previous students of the course. The experimental group students read from rough first draft to polished third. In this way, the researcher explained to students that each writing assignment for the course would involve several drafts, and these drafts would be read by the teacher and their classmates.

The researcher used the coaching procedures of Stanley's (1992) and Berg's (1999b) to prepare the students for peer revision (approximately 8 hours, during three weeks of a 15-week semester). As the instructor of the course, the researcher conducted the coaching (training) sessions. Coaching focused on two important aspects of peer evaluation sessions: familiarizing students with the genre of the student essay and introducing students to the task of producing effective written responses to each other. Throughout the semester this training continued. Students were required to write coherent essays on three different genres and before the feedback session they received further training which consisted of two parts. In the first part, the students were given sample essays belonging to the same genre and they were asked to write down their comments using the checklist. In the second part, the instructor and the students discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the essay concerning the genre and provided suggestions for revision. The students read their written comments and their comments were also evaluated by the instructor and the other students in the same way it is suggested in Berg's (1999a) article. For the peer feedback session, the students were told not to write their names on their first drafts in order to prevent the impact of negative and positive feelings that they felt for their classmates. They only wrote their school numbers. The researcher put special codes on the drafts based on those numbers and gave the drafts to different students. In this way, the students could not figure out their feedback giver. Following the peer feedback session, the experimental group students had one week to revise their writing and submit their revised drafts for teacher written feedback. Next, they were asked to write their third drafts based on the teacher's feedback. These drafts were collected one week later.

Data Collection Procedures for the Control Group

The control group students were introduced to the process approach exactly in the same way as the experimental group students were. They read Furneaux's (2000) and Berg's (1999a) articles and analyzed the guidelines which showed what to do during the feedback session. The researcher highlighted the importance of peer feedback session in the process cycle discussing two articles and guidelines with the students. The researcher also brought a series of drafts on the same topic written previous students of the writing course to class in order to explain to students that each writing assignment for the course would involve several drafts. Students were asked to read from rough first draft to polished third. In this way, they were expected to notice the shifts made for the development of the essay. Students in the experimental group were specifically trained for peer feedback, but students in the control group received no further training beyond the articles, sample student essays and discussion. They had regular classes with the instructor. In these regular classes, they handled the activities in their course- book. The peer feedback was held during the class hours of the control group. During peer feedback sessions, students gave written feedback to their peers' drafts. They were asked to bring copies of their drafts for their peers and were given this instruction: providing on another with specific comments and suggestions. In each feedback session, students first read the draft and then responded to the draft; they were required to give written comments to their peers' drafts, including making necessary connections. Following the peer feedback session, students were asked to revise their writing in one week and submit their revised drafts for written teacher feedback. The students were then asked to write a third draft based on the teacher's feedback. The third drafts of the essays were collected one week later.

Data Analysis

All the scores given for each composition by two scorers were calculated and the average of these scores was taken in order to find the inter-rater reliability, and it was a pleasing result calculated as 94%. The data was analyzed according to four steps. In the first stage, the scores of the students in the first drafts and the revised drafts were compared in the control and experimental groups separately in order to analyze the effect of untrained and trained written peer feedback on students' revision. Paired sample t-test was applied to see whether there is a statistically significant difference between the first and the revised drafts for each group. In the second step, the revised drafts of each group were compared in order to see whether the trained feedback was more effective than the untrained feedback or not. Independent samples t- test was used to reveal whether there is statistically significant improvement between the revised drafts of each group. Then, in the third step, since the aim was to see the effect of training on writing quality, all the drafts of each group were compared. A univariate ANOVA test was conducted to see whether the training factor was effective on students' writing quality or not. In the fourth step, the first and the revised drafts of each group were analyzed again in order to determine whether text type would make any difference on students' revisions. A univariate ANOVA test was conducted for this analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comparison of First and Revised Drafts of the Control Group

As for the statistical results for the Process Analysis essay, the difference in means is 1, 22. That is, there is an increase between the two drafts and this increase is statistically significant (t = 2,535; p < .05). For the Comparison and Contrast essay, the difference in means is 1, 23 and this is statistically significant (t = 2,535; p < .05). In the Cause and Effect Analysis essay the difference in means is 0, 72. Although this is a slight increase, it is statistically significant (t = 2,718; p < .05) (see Table 4.1).That is to say, the written feedback and revision processes without training seemed to have a significant effect on the subjects of the control group.

Comparison of First and Revised Drafts of the Experimental Group

In the Process Analysis essay, the difference in means is 4, 17. That is, statistically, there is a significant difference between the first and the revised drafts (t = 8,124; p < .05). As for the Comparison and Contrast essay, the difference in means is 4, 55. These results demonstrate that there is an increase between the two drafts and this is statistically significant. (t = 4,708; p < .05). When we look at the mean scores of the Cause and Effect essay we see that, the difference in means is 4, and this is statistically significant (t = 9,522; p <.05) (see Table 4.2). As a result, tables 4.1 and 4.2 lead us to the conclusion that written peer feedback training had a salient effect on the subjects' written quality.

Comparison of Revised Drafts of the Control and Experimental Groups

As shown in Table 4.3, for the Process Analysis essay, the difference in means is 2, 22. This result shows that, statistically, there is not a significant difference between the control group and the experimental group (t = 1,814; p >.05).When we look at the Comparison and Contrast essay, the difference in means is 2, 88. The result demonstrates that there is a significant difference between the control group and experimental group (t = 2,045; p<.05). In the Cause and Effect Analysis essay, the difference in means is 3, 44. This result shows that there is a significant difference between the control group and the experimental group (t = 2,497; p<.05).

Table 4.3 indicates that the groups were almost equal in the revised drafts of the Process Analysis essay in terms of their writing scores. There is no significant difference between the mean scores in the revised drafts of the Process Analysis essay. As for the Comparison and Contrast essay, there occurred a slight difference, which is statistically significant. This barely significant difference shows that despite the training, a few students in the experimental group failed to have meaningful exchanges about one another's writing, even without the training, a few control group students succeeded in giving specific and relevant comments to their peers who made their peers write a well-developed essay (Zhu, 1995). On the other hand, the training might have had a delayed effect on students' writing (Berg, 1999a) since the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group as for the Cause and Effect Analysis essay.

The experimental group's success can be associated with the trained written peer feedback which they achieved during the treatment in their writing lessons. This gradual improvement of the experimental group underlines an important issue: the training for written peer feedback can be considered as a process since it helps enhance students' writing in the long run (McGroarty & Zhu, 1997) and as writing teachers, we have to realize the fact that peer feedback is an on-going process which takes time and efforts to establish an environment encouraging it (Ting & Qian, 2010). In order to give a brief summary about the effect of trained written peer feedback on students' writings, we also compared the total mean scores in revised drafts of the control and experimental groups. As shown in Table 4.4, the total mean score of the control group was 37, 35; on the other hand the total mean score of the experimental group was 40, 20. The difference in total means is 2, 85. That is, statistically, there is a significant difference between the control group and the experimental group (t = 3,697; p < .05).

The Analysis of the Training Factor on Students Writing Quality

As displayed in Table 4.4, it is clearly seen that trained students improved their writing from a first to a second draft more than untrained students did. It should be noted that a difference in writing quality before treatment between the trained and the untrained group was ruled out by the independent samples t-test on the first draft scores. The students assigned to the trained group (N = 18, M = 78, 38) did not show statistically different writing quality from those assigned to the control group (N = 18, M = 77, 83) (t= 0,363, p > .05); thus, this result suggests that writing quality was equal in these two groups before treatment. In contrast, scores on second drafts differed between the untrained and trained groups. In order to investigate the impact of treatment on those higher writing quality scores of the experimental group, a univariate ANOVA test was applied. This ANOVA test yielded significance for quality scores on second drafts in the trained group. That is, the training factor had a significant effect (F = 1640,386, df = 6, p <.05) (see Table 4.5). The difference of scores between the first and second draft shows a greater gain for the trained than the untrained group. Untrained students (N= 18) improved their scores on average only 1,22;1,23 and 0,72 points for each text, whereas the trained students (N= 18) obtained an average improvement of 4,17; 4,55 and 4 points (see Table 4.1 and 4.2). These results also reveal that the training effect is statistically significant.

The Analysis of the Impact of the Text Type on Students Drafts

We performed a univariate ANOVA test to analyze the effect of text type on students' drafts. During the study, the students were asked to produce three types of essays: a Process Analysis essay, a Comparison and Contrast essay and a Cause and Effect Analysis essay. In order to see whether the text type would make any effect on the revision, a univariate ANOVA test was used. As shown in Table 4.6, text type had no significant effect on the revisions of both the control (F = 1,394, df = 2, p >.05) and experimental groups (F = 2,839, df = 2, p >.05).

Discussion

What is interesting about the findings of this present study is that training can be considered as the major factor for greater writing improvement of revised drafts; that is, trained students' second drafts improved more than untrained students', regardless of text type. That's to say the notion of peer feedback goes beyond an editing and reviewing activity and becomes an integral component of language development (Hansen & Liu, 2005). Perhaps these results should come as no surprise since there are some studies in the literature which point out the importance of training for successful peer feedback sessions. (eg., Nystrand, 1984; Huff & Kline, 1987; Stanley, 1992; Dheram, 1993; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Tsui & Ng , 2000; Zhu, 2001; Min, 2006; Çiftçi & Çöker; 2011). For example, Connor and Asenavage's (1994:267) study on peer response included some training in the form of modelling and they specifically recommend that "more extensive and specific peer response training with follow-up should be implemented" when using peer response to writing in an ESL context. Similarly, as Stanley (1992:230) states, it is not fair to expect that students will be able to perform "the demanding tasks without first having been offered organized practice with and discussion of the skills involved"; therefore, as part of learner training, the teacher should highlight the fact that "responding to peer's writing is a learning process that will raise the students' awareness of what constitutes good and poor writing, help them to identify their own strengths and weakness in writing…" (Tsui & Ng, 2000: 168). Consequently, there appears to be the need to provide all students with guidance and instruction so that they can acquire a conscious knowledge of strategies to improve their writing and to process the feedback they receive (Dheram, 1993; Zhu, 2001; Liu & Carless; 2006, Lam, 2010). The issue of effects of written peer feedback instruction on revision raises some interesting questions. Findings of this study suggest that students provided with appropriate training can influence comment types and subsequent writing quality in a positive way, so it can be asked whether instructing students in self revision would benefit writing quality or not. Berg (1999b:231) asks a similar question in her article "with such training in revision, would it not be possible to eliminate the step of peer feedback session while still producing similarly improved writing from one draft to another?" According to her, these questions miss the point of the role of peer feedback in the writing process due to the fact that the students simply would not be able to sense where in their texts they needed to revise, but a peer who has not been involved in the creation of the text can point to unclear aspects of the writing. In other words, the peer can help their classmates discover the discrepancy between intended and understood meaning of their text, as Thompson (2001:58) points out "any text can in principle be seen as a record of a dialogue between writer and reader". Admittedly, in a classroom situation, there is another alternative to peers helping each other; the teacher could provide feedback. However, it is important to remember that the quality of the teacher's feedback can be affected negatively due to crowded classes and limited time (Ndubuisi, 1997). Moreover, the students may simply try to please the teacher instead of truly considering their texts and asking themselves how they can revise their texts for clearer meaning (Berg, 1999b). But, if the student writer gets of response from his peer, he will question its validity, weigh it against his or her own knowledge and ideas, and then make a decision about the changes to make, instead of indiscriminately

accept comments as if these comments come from the teacher (Berg, 1999a; Tsui & Ng, 2000). It appears that too much can be gained from the peer feedback session, especially for people who are students of writing. However, in order for student writers to get the maximum benefits from peer feedback, they both need to be taught certain skills and strategies which would sharpen their critical sensibilities (Dheram, 1993) and be encouraged to participate in the peer feedback sessions.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FL TEACHING

Despite the limitations in terms of the small sample size, the study has certain implications for teaching of writing. Writing instructors who use peer feedback as part of a process-oriented approach to writing can consider the following issues. Firstly, writing instructors can integrate peer feedback into the writing classroom with confidence that this feedback can be effective and can be used by many students in their revisions. The fact that the peer feedback sessions did result in better essays, based on the research reported here, should encourage writing teachers to make peer feedback an integral part of the writing classroom. Secondly, in order for peer feedback to work, training seems essential. The difference in results between the trained and untrained groups in this study suggests that training results in more successful peer feedback in terms of comment types and writing quality. Hence, there appears to be the need to provide all students with guidance and instruction so that they can apply a more important role in providing effective comments and benefit more from peer feedback sessions (Peng, 2010). As Vygotsky states, (cited in Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998:508), "with assistance, every child can do more than he can by himself – though only within the limits set by the state of his development". Thus, as part of learner-training, the teacher should assist students to expand the repertoire of feedback strategies and instruct them to clarify their intentions and elicit feedback from their peers. Another major pedagogical implication is that through peer feedback the students were involved in the process of acquiring strategic competence in revising and evaluating a text, and a competence which will prove invaluable in their future academic and professional life. Our subjects are the students of ELT Department, that is, they will be providing feedback and evaluating their own students' writings in the future. The experience of peer feedback provided our students with an indispensable opportunity to analyze textual problems, internalize the demands of different rhetorical modes, acquire a sense of audience, and in general become sensitive to the genre of the student essay. In other words, students take over part of the job of the teacher (Tsui & Ng, 2000). Since they develop a critical eye toward what they read while analyzing their peer's essays (Berg, 1999b), they become more self-reliant writers, who are both self-critical and who have the skills to edit and revise their own writing at the same time (Rollinson, 2005). Similarly, Yurdabakan (2012) points out that peer feedback can have effects on the development of self-assessments skills of teacher trainees; therefore, peer feedback training can also be regarded as a significant predictor of self-assessment. The development of students' critical thinking ability plays a pivotal role in awareness raising. Awareness raising is achieved not only through getting feedback but by giving feedback to peers as well (Tsui &

Ng, 2000). Peer comments help students notice the problems which they cannot notice on their own. Moreover, reading a peer's text might serve a model for how to read text through the eyes of someone else (Berg, 1999b). It may then help students develop "a better sense of how to read their own texts from the perspective of an audience, what questions to ask, and how to systematically examine their text with purpose of improving it" (Berg, 1999b:232). All in all, peer feedback session has "the potential for bringing out into the students' limitations and creating awareness, without which remedial action would never be successfully undertaken" (Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996:69). Clearly, through adequate training and guidance, students develop positive attitude toward their peers' feedback (Morra & Romano, 2009). Likewise, in Wakabayashi's study (2013), the students wanted to receive peer comments especially in the written form because they are the active agents both as a reviewer and writer.

Another more far-reaching implication, and one that the researcher has gradually drawn as this study has unraveled, is that rather than implying the form of a teacher's comments is entirely unimportant, peer feedback and teacher feedback should be seen as complementary forms of assistance in the writing classroom. As Villamil and De Guerrero (1998:508) assert, instead of asking the question, "Which is better (or which is more effective), peer feedback or teacher feedback?"; perhaps the time has come to ask this question, "What and how can peer feedback contribute to the students' writing development in a way that complements teacher feedback?". As a close word, writing teachers should be encouraged to implement peer feedback sessions with training into their classroom settings in order to open up the "black box" (Long, cited in McGroarty & Zhu, 1997:36) of the writing classroom because writing is no longer one that gives absolute control to the teacher but rather is as Tsui and Ng (2000:168) point out, "a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment within which students ... can work through their composing processes".

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Table 3.1. The Results of t -test Showing the Difference between the Control and Experimental Groups when they are not Exposed to Peer Feedback Sessions