# Peer Review and Journal Writing in the Eyes of First-Year Students of English Studies: A Writing Course at the University of Łódź

**Ola Majchrzak and Łukasz Salski**

**Abstract**  The aim of this paper is to show the results of a questionnaire that was completed by 91 students of English studies enrolled in the first-year writing course at the Institute of English, University of Łódź, Poland. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information on students' opinions on three aspects of the course, namely forms of feedback on written work, peer review, and journal writing. These points were considered crucial for meeting the objectives of the course, so it was hoped that examining the students' opinions about these issues could provide valuable feedback on the new course.

Giving feedback and peer reviewing have been seen as closely related and involve such issues as the role of the tutor in evaluating students' work, cooperation with peers, and possible improvements in this area. The most common form of feedback about a paper was a conversation between the student and the teacher. However, the choice of the form of feedback was up to the teacher: It included either a talk with the teacher or the teacher's written commentary on the paper. Simultaneously, peer review as a technique used during classes was regarded as helpful by more than half of the students.

As far as journal writing is concerned, the students found keeping a journal to be a positive experience, saying that writing journal entries not only helped them improve their writing skills but also allowed them to "open up," learn how to express their own opinions, and even to relax. They suggested that journal entries be submitted online and checked by the tutors more frequently.

**Keywords**  Academic writing · Peer review · Journal writing · Writing survey · EFL

O. Majchrzak (✉)
Department of Humanities, University of Humanities and Economics in Łódź, Łódź, Poland
e-mail: omajchrzak@ahe.lodz.pl

Ł. Salski
Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics, Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, Łódź, Poland
e-mail: lukasz.salski@uni.lodz.pl

## 1 How It All Began

The first-year writing course in its present form was created following recommendations of Professor Melinda Reichelt of the University of Toledo after her stay in Łódź as a part of the Fulbright Senior Specialist program (see Reichelt 2013). The main aims of the course are twofold. The first important goal is to help students develop their general language competence and English writing skills, with a particular focus on preparing them for the demands of the academic readership. Additionally, but not less importantly, the course is intended to build up students' confidence in writing, as well as their positive attitude to writing in general. This appears particularly important in Poland, where high school students' writing experience is often limited, both in the second language and native language (Reichelt 2005, Salski 2016). Another important factor causing many students' negative attitudes to writing is that writing assignments are often perceived as a form of assessment rather than means of practicing writing skills or developing language competence. Currently the traditional approach still dominates writing instruction in Polish as a native language, and it is transferred to L2 writing practice. Among different languages taught in Poland, English may be an exception, as there are EFL teachers who have been exposed to alternative approaches to teaching writing when studying English themselves and who may apply elements of these writing pedagogies in their own classroom.

## 2 The First-Year Writing Course

The present first-year writing course that is the object of this study was created when four two-hour-per-week classes (in speaking, listening, reading, and writing) were replaced by a four-hour class of integrated skills. Soon, however, the faculty realized that the writing practice that the integrated skills course could provide was far from sufficient. It was decided that the new writing course should not revive the old syllabus and, instead of focusing solely on the required academic outcomes, it should reflect both the academic context in which the students are at the moment and the volume and quality of their high school writing experience (see Reid and Kroll 2006, p. 263).

Therefore, it was assumed that in the first semester students should work on creative writing assignments, such as a descriptive passage, a short story, and writing an autobiography. Simultaneously, time should be spent on practicing paragraph and essay structure, as well as on raising the students' awareness of audience expectations. It was decided that only in the second semester should the course focus on introducing students to the basics of academic writing by requiring them to write a research paper on a topic of their choice, the only requirement being that they can find appropriate sources to cite. Thus, the required skills are developed within a framework that draws on students' personalized interests, as the course follows

Silva's (2006) assertion that "it seems...most reasonable and motivating to have students (individually or as a group) choose their own topics, those in which they have a sincere interest and some intellectual or emotional investment" (p. 156). In this way, not only are the papers, as Silva further explains, "well-informed, skillfully crafted, very persuasive, and incredibly moving" (p. 156), but student writers also develop a sense of authorship more effectively. The final outcome at the end of the spring semester is a research paper of around 3000 words, but before students complete this assignment, they also do a range of exercises in summarizing, paraphrasing, using academic register, and using punctuation that enable them to make their first steps in academic writing and acquire skills that they will need to write their BA theses as well as semester papers throughout the whole BA program. Additionally, throughout both semesters students are requested to keep a writing journal in which they add a one- to two-page entry once a week on a topic of their choice or responding to suggestions provided. This is done with a view to developing fluency rather than accuracy in writing.

## 2.1   Focus on the Process

Since this course aims at raising students' awareness of the writing process in order to give them the knowledge and skills necessary to make the most of their writing processes in the future, class activities include brainstorming ideas, planning, multiple drafts, team-writing, and peer reviewing. For many of the first-year students, who are typically accustomed to being assigned papers that are then only graded, this may be the first experience of such activities. All of the sections of first-year writing are taught in a similar way, even though each year there are at least three instructors teaching the course. While on one hand the instructors are encouraged to maintain their individual teaching style, on the other hand they are also required to follow the general guidelines sketched out by Reichelt and to liaise closely to ensure consistent standards across the sections. For example, as each instructor stresses the importance of the process in writing, home assignments may involve not necessarily complete papers, but rather individual stages of the process, outlines, or drafts. All students do multiple drafts and regular in-class peer review sessions of the major assignments, which are description, narrative, and autobiography, and in the second semester the sections of the research paper are reviewed.

## 2.2   Peer Review

Peer reviewing was introduced as an integral element of the course because of its objectively unquestionable merits. As White (2007, p. 64–65) asserts, the main advantage of group cooperation in writing is that it widens the scope of the audience: Instead of writing to satisfy the teacher, students become aware of the fact that

different readers may have different expectations and preferences. Additionally, when students cooperate, they learn from each other as well as get to know each other, which seems a particularly relevant consideration in their first year of study.

There are, however, several difficulties connected with introducing peer reviewing. Students who are not accustomed to it, and additionally lack expertise in writing, may have difficulty accepting the role of a reviewer claiming that only the teacher should give feedback on students' papers, because only then the comments can be reliable or, as they frequently put it, professional. Another problem is that inexperienced student peer reviewers tend to give very general feedback, taking care not to offend the author. Of course, as a result, such feedback is useless, or nearly useless. It typically takes some time for Polish freshmen to take to peer reviewing, and instructors need to be both consistent and sensitive not to discourage students who need to be assured that, on the one hand, all readers are eligible to express their opinion on the texts they read and, on the other hand, each of them also is a writer who should have his or her criteria of what makes a good text. They should also obviously take advantage of listening to other writers' opinions. Novice writers—and reviewers—benefit from clear guidelines on which they can base their feedback. That is why in our course, peer-reviewing sessions are mostly based on specially designed evaluation sheets, where the students' task is to comment on various aspects of their peers' written works, as specified in the form. An example of a peer review sheet that has been used for evaluating narrative essays can be seen in Appendix 2.

## 2.3   *Journals*

Journal writing was introduced in the new first-year writing course as an element intended to help students develop their writing skills, fluency in particular, and enhance their positive writing experience. Following Grabe and Kaplan (1998, p. 295–296), we assumed that journals not only extend the volume of writing practice as another opportunity for students to write, but also allow students to write on topics that are of immediate interest to them and to voice their opinions on the this course or other classes and activities. Typically, students write a short entry in a specially prepared notebook once a week; an entry is usually one to two pages long and develops a topic of the student's own choice or one of the suggestions from a list provided by the instructor (Appendix 3). The journals are periodically collected and the instructors respond briefly to the content, but do not assess them formally, purposefully leaving possible errors uncorrected. While a student's systematic work on the journal influences his or her final overall grade for the semester, individual journal entries are neither marked nor graded. This approach is intended to encourage students to write meaningfully and freely, without being preoccupied with issues of grammatical accuracy, vocabulary choice, spelling, organization, or the visual aesthetics of their texts.

## 3   The Study

The present study is an action research project designed as partial evaluation of the writing program described in the sections above, with particular focus on the forms of feedback and the techniques of peer reviewing and journal writing. It is based on a questionnaire that was distributed to 91 first-year students of English Studies at the Institute of English, University of Łódź, who were participating in the first-year writing course during the winter semester of 2013–2014. All of the students were taught by either one of the present authors or by a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant, Megan. The main goal of the questionnaire was to collect information on students' perceptions of the new composition course, focusing specifically on the forms of feedback, peer review, and journal writing. It was assumed that the findings of the study would verify the validity of important elements of the first-year writing course and consequently contribute to improving it by adjusting it better to the students' needs and preferences.

The study was conducted by means of a questionnaire written in the Polish language. It was assumed that the use of students' mother tongue would eliminate the influence of possible differences in individual students' levels of proficiency in English and that it would trigger more natural and honest answers. However, an English translation of the questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 4. It is also worth adding that all of the values that appear in the tables in the analysis section were calculated only for those students who provided an answer to a given question. Hence, it does not always mean that 100% signifies the total number of students who participated in the questionnaire; instead, it refers to the total number of students who answered a given question.

### 3.1   Forms of Feedback

The first aspect the students were requested to comment on was the forms of feedback used throughout the whole course. The students were asked which form of feedback they preferred (they could choose between the teacher's written commentary on their work, conversation with the teacher about their work, or opinions of their classmates). Table 1 presents the data pertaining to this issue.

It is clearly visible that the most appreciated form of feedback on the students' work was an individual conversation with a student about their work: 42% of all the respondents provided this answer. Receiving a teacher's written commentary on the students' works was also popular: 31% of students chose this answer. Finally, 18% of students preferred a mixture of both a teacher's written commentary and conversation. It is, however, noticeable that none of the students preferred peer comment as a form of feedback. This is especially interesting when compared to the students' answers to Question 6 (see Peer Review section).

**Table 1** The questionnaire results: Form of feedback

| Form of feedback | Result |
|---|---|
| Teacher's written commentary on the work | 31% |
| Conversation with a teacher about the work | 42% |
| Teacher's written commentary and conversation | 18% |
| All forms | 9% |

**Table 2** The questionnaire results: The relationship between the form of feedback and the instructor

| Form of feedback | Megan | Ola | Łukasz |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher's written commentary on the work | 44% | 17% | 36% |
| Conversation with a teacher about the work | 23% | 69% | 21% |
| Teacher's written commentary and conversation | 23% | 8% | 29% |
| All forms | 10% | 6% | 14% |

We observed that the aforementioned results depended on the individual teacher to a great extent, as can be seen in Table 2.

In the case of both Megan and Łukasz's groups, the form of feedback most popular with the students was teacher's written commentary on their work. However, Ola's students appreciated conversation with her about their work most. To understand the differences in the students' answers, the way of providing feedback has to be explained. Both Łukasz and Megan focused on commenting on their students' work in writing. However, when distributing the graded work to their students, they also discussed the papers in further detail as necessary. Ola also always provided written commentary on the students' papers; however, she never returned the papers to the students during a regular class. Instead, she always organized a session during which she talked to every student about their work in five-minute individual conferences. Apparently, her students appreciated those oral comments more when compared to the groups taught by Megan and Łukasz.

## 3.2 Peer Review

Łukasz and Megan used peer review to practice constructive, objective criticism; Ola, on the other hand, approached peer review as a form of subjective reader response. As has been explained, the technique of peer review is not very popular in Poland, where it is still the teacher who, in the opinion of the students, possesses all the necessary knowledge to guide their writing process. This also refers to grading papers, a notion closely connected with the product approach to writing, also deeply

**Table 3** The questionnaire results: The usefulness of peer comments

| Were the comments useful? | Result |
|---|---|
| Yes | 57% |
| No | 25% |
| Not always | 11% |
| A valuable experience | 7% |

rooted in the Polish educational tradition. It is generally assumed that whatever students write has to be graded; otherwise, it is not worth doing it. Nevertheless, as the new writing course aimed at fostering the process approach to writing and popularizing the technique of peer review, the questionnaire's goal was to check what the students' attitudes towards peer reviewing were. Table 3 shows the results for Question 6: How do you assess peer review? Were your classmates' comments useful for you? Why?

It is clearly visible from the table that, despite the above-mentioned attitude towards peer review, more than half of all the students appreciated their classmates' comments. The students very often observed that peers' comments allowed them to understand how their work was perceived by others, whether it was clear to readers, and which fragments needed developing. Although some claimed that the idea of peer review was a bit awkward, they usually admitted that it helped them to improve the final paper. Hence, it may be regarded as a positive result, which shows the changing attitude towards peer review among university students.

Nevertheless, in the view of the results from the previous section, it may be assumed that peer review, despite its growing popularity among students, is still not perceived as a form of providing feedback that is as reliable as teacher's comments. Many students remarked that peers' comments were not valuable to them as they thought their classmates did not possess adequate skills to be able to assess their paper in a reliable way. There was even one student who wrote that she would not use peer review in the future as "she [was] not competent enough to assess somebody else's work" (They also noticed that the comments were not always honest: Students very often did not want to offend their classmates by criticizing their work. Others complained about comments that were too general, which did not help them understand what needed improvement and why it needed it.

In order to improve the quality of peer review, the next question focused on the possible changes that could be introduced in the future, such as a different evaluation sheet and more or less time devoted to peer review. The students' suggestions are presented in Table 4 below.

Thirty-four per cent of all the students felt there was no need for any improvements in the peer review technique, while 28% of the respondents suggested introducing changes in the feedback sheet. Little is known, however, about which aspects of the sheet the students felt needed improvement. On the basis of the instructors' observations and the next suggestion, that more time should be devoted to peer review sessions, it can be hypothesized that the sheet was mostly too long and too detailed for the students. Some students felt they were unable to comment on their peer's work in the time allotted, which was usually 45 min. This leads to the ques-

**Table 4** The questionnaire results: Suggested changes in the peer review technique

| Changes in peer review | Result |
|---|---|
| No changes needed | 34% |
| Changes in the feedback sheet | 28% |
| More time devoted to peer review | 22% |
| Better teacher control | 3% |
| Less time devoted to peer review | 3% |
| Other changes | 10% |

**Table 5** The questionnaire results: Students' attitudes towards keeping a journal

| Did you like keeping a journal? | Result |
|---|---|
| Yes | 82% |
| No | 10% |
| So-so | 8% |

tion of whether the time should be lengthened or the feedback sheet shortened. Other changes suggested by the students concerned such aspects as better teacher control over the process of peer review, oral instead of written peer review, anonymous peer review forms, or peer review done in small groups of students rather than in pairs.

## 3.3 Journals

The following table presents the results concerning students' attitudes towards keeping a journal (Table 5).

On the basis of the results presented, it can be concluded that students generally enjoyed keeping journals. As some of the students wrote, keeping a journal taught them to approach writing as something natural and easy. They noticed that writing regular entries helped them work on their language. But there was even a more important aspect to journal writing: The students reported that writing an entry gave them time to stop for a moment, collect their thoughts, and write them down. What is more, they saw the journal as a chance to open up and share their thoughts with their tutor, which they valued. Throughout the course, the instructors observed that students felt like real writers whose entries were appreciated by their reader—the instructor. One student admitted that although she was not keen on writing about personal things, writing the journal was a form of escape from usual tasks and the teacher's comments made her happy. Of importance is probably the fact that the entries were not corrected by the teachers, which helped the students feel that it was

**Table 6** The questionnaire results: Suggested changes in keeping a journal

| Changes in journals | Result |
| --- | --- |
| No improvement needed | 39% |
| Online entries | 27% |
| Topics | 15% |
| More frequent check-ups | 13% |
| Other changes | 7% |

content not form that was important, which may sometimes be forgotten in the process of preparing for various exams, such as the high school final exam. Hence, keeping a journal was considered a form of relaxation by some students.

When asked about possible improvements concerning journals, students provided the following answers (Table 6).

Many students (39%) felt that no changes were needed. One student observed that "it is not worth improving anything. A journal has to be personal. Its efficacy depends on whether the writer wants to keep it and how much he strives to do it well". Many students suggested that the entries should be submitted online, which would make the teacher-student communication faster, more frequent (as some students complained about the teacher's comments being too rare), and more up-to-date. One student noticed that "online entries would be an interesting modification because peers could also have access to their classmates' entries and possibly comment on them". Online entries, or even blogs, are a suggestion that is worth considering when modifying the course in the future. It was interesting that 15% of the students suggested that the topics should be modified. It is surprising, as the students were given a choice of two topics for every week with an option to write on any other topic if the two were not suitable in any way. Still, some of the students complained about the choice of topics. The instructors noticed that those entries that were written on very popular topics such as Christmas, Halloween, or my last holidays, were usually written in an uninteresting way, with a very basic choice of grammar structures and simplistic vocabulary. Hence, such clichéd topics should be avoided in the future. Other changes mentioned by the students included more frequent entries, or being given the possibility to improve the entries; there was also a suggestion made that entries could be made during classes.

## 4   Overall Suggestions and Improvements for the Future

The valuable feedback on the writing classes provided by the questionnaire findings has been or will be implemented in the subsequent editions of the course. First, there is a need for a balance of the forms of feedback used in the course. Written

comments on students' papers need to be supplemented with one-on-one conferences and, if possible, a combination of both forms needs to be used in order to provide the students with as clear feedback on their written performance as possible. It has to be remembered that while individual conferences take up a lot of class time, their indisputable advantage is that they create opportunities for students to ask for clarification or further explanation. Second, while it seems that Polish students of English respond reasonably well to peer reviewing, there is always room for improvement. Peer reviewing sessions can easily become repetitive and tedious, so more variety of peer-reviewing tasks and forms needs to be introduced. Also, it has to be remembered that novice writers—and reviewers—need clear and short instructions, possibly simple worksheets. Finally, journal writing has been received enthusiastically by nearly all students, who appreciate the freedom of expression and an opportunity to stop to reflect that it offers. However, it would be appreciated even more if its form was more of a conversational journal with more frequent responses from the instructors, which of course can be demanding on the part of the instructor with a large number of students. Writing journal entries online rather than in a paper notebook is another suggestion that may be considered in order to ease student-teacher exchange. Also, as some respondents suggested, a choice of more controversial or inspiring topics could stimulate students to write more effectively than the free topic option. Finally, asking students to put together a portfolio of all the papers written for the course may lead not only to more systematic and valid summative feedback, but also to giving them a better sense of progress and achievement during the course.

The course, however innovative in its initial form, was not free from flaws and continues to be improved. Because of its specific nature, it can only achieve its goals if it meets the students' needs, expectations, and interests. Only if the students' feedback is used to fine tune the content and form of the classes will it be possible to keep them motivated and interested, which in turn may allow building up their skills as well as enhancing their attitudes.

# Appendices

## *Appendix 1*

**Writing and Text Analysis—Year One**

**Class Evaluation Survey**  The aim of this survey is to collect information on the writing class you have taken this semester. Your responses will remain anonymous and they may influence the shape of the course in the future, so please answer the questions honestly.

**Instructor's Name:**

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1. What is your general opinion on the course? Did you learn much? Why?

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2. Were the genres practiced in class (description, narrative, autobiograpny) interesting for you? Why (not)?

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3. Would you prefer to have written more in class? If so, how? Individually, in pairs, in groups? Why?

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4. Did you receive valuable feedback from your classmates in the peer reviewing session? Did you use these comments when rewriting your papers?

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5. Was commenting on your classmates' papers helpful to you? If so, how? If not, why not?

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6. Do you feel that keeping the writing journal helped you develop linguistically? Did it help you improve your writing skills? If so, how? If not, why not?

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7. Is there something that could have made this course fuller and more effective? What?

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8. Overall, what did this course give you?

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**Thank you for your honest answers** ☺

## *Appendix 2*

PEER REVIEW FORM – **NARRATIVE**

**AUTHOR:** …………………………………………………….
**REVIEWER:** …………………………………………………………

*Read the essay carefully and respond to the questions below. If you find glaring typos or errors, you can circle them, but your job is **<u>NOT</u>** to grade or fix grammar errors – you are **reviewing** the writing and providing feedback on how to **revise**.*

1. Has the <u>beginning</u> of the story made you want to continue reading? YES/NO
   If so, what makes it so? If not, how could it be improved?

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2. Is your attention kept <u>until the very last moment</u>? YES/NO
   If so, what makes it so? If not, how could it be improved?

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3. Does the story develop in a logical way? YES/NO
   If so, explain how it works. If not, how could it be improved?

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4. Do the <u>descriptive</u> passages help the author to tell the story? YES/NO
   If so, explain how it works. If not, how could it be improved?

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5. Are you satisfied with how the <u>characters</u> are presented? YES/NO
   If so, explain why. If not, how could it be improved?

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6. As a reader, do you always find it easy to picture images, characters, situations? YES/NO
   If so, explain why. If not, how could it be improved?

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7. Dialogues

- Are the dialogues used in the story <u>effective</u>? YES/NO
- Are they presented in an appropriate way (e.g. punctuation)? YES/NO
- Has the author used <u>a variety of verbs</u> to introduce a quote? YES/NO

Specify what – concerning the dialogues – would need further improvement.

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8. What passage or area would <u>benefit most from revision</u>? You can mark it in the text. Provide the author with at least one suggestion that might help improve the piece.

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9. What is the <u>most effective aspect</u> of the paper? Why?

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**<u>Author's comments after editing the paper:</u>**
Which reviewer's comment proved most useful when editing your story? Why?
Which fragment of your paper was moderated thanks to this comment? (mark it on the text)

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## *Appendix 3*

University of Lodz, Institute of English Studies

**ACADEMIC WRITING YEAR 1**
**Topics for journal entries**

| Week 1 | Journals, diaries… |
|---|---|
| | What I expect from the composition classes |
| | Free topic |
| Week 2 | Yes, I would do it once again |
| | I am new here |
| | Free topic |
| Week 3 | What makes a good writer? |
| | "Who wants to live forever…" |
| | Free topic |
| Week 4 | It changed my attitude to… |
| | … and lived happily ever after. |
| | Free topic |
| Week 5 | Rain |
| | In my pocket… |
| | Free topic |
| Week 6 | On my way to school |
| | Dreams |
| | Free topic |
| Week 7 | Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow (Shakespeare) |
| | Running |
| | Free topic |
| Week 8 | Late in the evening… |
| | Travel… the perfect freedom |
| | Free topic |
| Week 9 | "I do." |
| | It is still dark when I get up in the morning. |
| | Free topic |
| Week 10 | I never thought of that! |
| | "Life is what happens when you plan to do other things" (Lennon) |
| | Free topic |
| Week 11 | My pride and joy |
| | If only… |
| | Free topic |
| Week 12 | What I need to concentrate on next semester |
| | What I would like to tell my teacher |
| | Free topic |

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