PhD candidates and peer review: Reflections on teaching an Academic English module in an emergency situation

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ABSTRACT

The idea of using peer feedback in second language writing classes is not new and dates to the 1980s. Despite the abundant evidence supporting the integration of peer review into L2 writing courses, it was not before the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic that this activity was incorporated in the Academic English module (AEM) module for PhD students at the University of Trieste. This paper adopts a reflective teaching perspective to report on a case study in which peer review of students' abstracts was introduced as a 'new' teaching technique in the AEM delivered online due to the pandemic. Based on the responses to two questionnaires, this paper illustrates how the students tackled two peer review tasks and examines the participants' attitudes and feedback, with the aims of stimulating a critical reflection on the experience and formulating concrete plans to make peer review an integral part of future Academic English modules.

KEYWORDS

Peer review, English for Academic Purposes, computer-mediated language training, academic writing, remote teaching

1.   INTRODUCTION

Hardly any university course traditionally taught in a physical classroom remained unchanged during the unprecedented worldwide health crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The shutdown of all higher education institutions in Italy led to the adoption of a wide variety of measures allowing universities to continue carrying out their teaching activities through the internet. The Academic English module (AEM) organised for PhD students enrolled in the doctoral programmes offered by the University of Trieste was no exception and was entirely delivered online.

This paper adopts a reflexive approach to report on the implementation of peer review as a training activity in the module mentioned above. Before the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the AEM was offered in a physical classroom. In 2020, due to the health crisis, it was converted into a remote synchronous module, with an overall duration of 30 hours, divided into ten 3-hour weekly sessions delivered over two months (May-June 2020). The module was open to all the PhD students of the University of Trieste, regardless of the Department they worked at and of their year of enrolment. The participants thus had heterogeneous fields of specialisation (from migraine management to functional analysis of counterfactual thinking, from Fanconi anaemia to lichen mycobiome, just to name a few), as well as varying degrees of experience with academic writing, with PhD candidates in their 3rd year having submitted many more abstracts and research papers than candidates in their 1st and 2nd year. The transition from in-person to remote teaching offered the opportunity to reconsider the techniques and materials used and include writing tasks to promote active – though computer-mediated – student participation. Given the benefits that peer review can bring to students' learning processes (Bauer et al. 2009: 26–27), the choice fell precisely on peer review, i.e. "the use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities more typically taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing" (J. Liu & Hansen Edwards 2018: 1). This paper is thus meant to describe how two peer-review tasks on learner-generated materials were implemented in the AEM and to discuss the relevant feedback provided by the students in order to reflect on the steps and changes necessary to use this pedagogical activity in a more effective and engaging way.

2.   PEER REVIEW IN HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the main needs expressed by the participants at the outset of the 2020 AEM was to develop writing skills for research purposes. To address this goal, peer review was considered a potentially valuable teaching activity since it creates "a facilitative socio-interactive environment in which L2 learners receive social support and scaffolding from peers" (Hu & Lam 2010: 373), and in so doing it fosters the acquisition

of knowledge as well as language competence and writing skills (Bruffee 1984; J. Liu & Hansen Edwards 2018). In line with previous research (see, for instance, Berggren 2015), peer review was believed to do so not only in feedback-receivers, but also (or even especially) in feedback-givers (N. F. Liu & Carless 2006; Lundstrom & Baker 2009). While the former are made aware of their mistakes and knowledge gaps, the latter have a chance to sharpen their own sense of audience and genre and thus to improve their own writing and self-revision. Furthermore, peer review is an activity in which doctoral students usually engage early in their PhD programme, so it is one of the skills that they need to develop, but this frequently happens without formal training. On a more personal note, peer review was also chosen because the literature reports a lack of research on peer feedback among doctoral students, while research on peer review among high-school pupils and undergraduate students is much more abundant (Yu & Lee 2016a), and because there is a need to investigate how peer review activities can be accommodated in virtual classrooms (Yu & Lee 2016a).

A review of the literature of the past three decades shows that peer review has become "a popular pedagogical activity in L2 writing classrooms" (Yu & Hu 2017b: 25). Peer feedback, as Yu and Hu prefer to call peer review, is an activity where "learners work together and comment on one another's work or performance and provide feedback on strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement" (Yu & Hu 2017a: 178). While this is "a workable and straightforward definition of peer feedback" (Banister 2020: 747), peer review as a pedagogical activity is such a multifaceted practice that research could not but diversify to reflect its various facets.

Considerable research has been conducted on the use of peer review in different educational settings, such as in higher education (Carless & Boud 2018; Falchikov 2001; Poverjuc, Brooks & Wray 2012; Rollinson 2005; Yu & Hu 2017b), which is the focus here. The literature in this field is vast and it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a systematic account of the theoretical and empirical efforts made to understand how peer review can bring value to the (writing) classroom. By way of simplification, in relation to higher education the variety of aspects on which research has focussed ranges from the process of peer review to its effects. As regards the process, research has concentrated, for instance, on the relationship between language proficiency and peer review (Yu & Hu 2017a; Yu & Lee 2016b), the use of L1 or L2 in providing feedback (Yu & Hu 2017a), the meta-discourse used (Banister 2020; Carless & Boud 2018), and sociocultural factors affecting this activity (Hu & Lam 2010; Hyland 2019; J. Liu 2012; J. Liu & Hansen Edwards 2018; Zhu & Mitchell 2012). As for the effects of peer review, studies have been conducted on the impact of peer review on learning in terms of (lack of) effectiveness or performance (Connor & Asenavage 1994; Gielen et al. 2010; N. F. Liu & Carless 2006; Moore & Teather 2013; Nelson & Carson 1998; Rieber 2006; Zhang 1995; Zheng 2012) and writing process (Baker 2016), as well as on the learners' (and teachers') perception of the process, content and effects of peer review (Bauer et al. 2009; Nelson & Carson 1998). Comparisons between teacher and peer feedback have been made (Falchikov & Goldfinch 2000; Jacobs et al. 1998; Paulus 1999; Zhang 1995), and the benefits and drawbacks related to peer

review have also been investigated (Rollinson 2005; Rourke et al. 2008; Tsui & Ng 2000). Another significant strand of research, considering both the process and the effect of peer review as a teaching/learning tool, has addressed the role of training in the success of peer feedback in the classroom (Berg 1999; Hansen & Liu 2005; Hu 2005; Min 2005; Stanley 1992).

The increasing presence and use of computer-mediated communication in educational settings have led to growing research in the modes of peer response, which Liu and Hansen Edwards (2018: 6–21) classify as traditional, computer-mediated, and mixed. Given the focus of this paper, it is worth mentioning the studies carried out on the implementation of peer review in online courses (Knight & Steinbach 2011; Rourke et al. 2008), studies which have contrasted online with face-to-face peer review (Ho & Savignon 2007; J. Liu & Sadler 2003; Pritchard & Morrow 2017), and those that have analysed the peculiarities of synchronous and asynchronous online modes (Chang 2009; Liang 2010) or explored the interactional and social aspects as well as learners' perceptions of online peer review (Guardado & Shi 2007; Jones et al. 2006; Zhao, Sullivan & Mellenius 2014).

3.   Learner-generated texts and peer review in the 2020 AEM

The training philosophy underlying the AEM has always been 'hands-on learning by doing', with explanations and activities introduced on the basis of both the instructor's observation of students' written and oral production and language issues raised directly by participants. In the two previous editions of the module, PhD students handed in abstracts written before the start of the module or for the module itself. These abstracts were used to identify the learners' needs for the purpose of planning the sessions efficiently, proposing activities of potential interest for most participants, and promoting brainstorming and in-class discussion. The language issues spotted served as a starting point for retrieving teaching material from 'pre-packaged' textbooks about English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and Academic English for Research Purposes. This material was then used in class and as homework assignment to tackle the most common difficulties encountered by the students (e.g. verb tenses and word order of adverbs) and expose them to language forms they rarely used (e.g. hedging and phatic expressions).

Although materials and resources devoted to English for Academic Purposes abound, those used in the first two editions of the module turned out to be only partially appropriate to address the specific professional communication needs of a heterogeneous group of learners such as the one involved in AEM. The first reason is that these materials are organised by topic and generally focus on one aspect at a time. Therefore, when using these materials, students practice various language features separately (and may face no difficulties when completing the relevant exercises) but have the (often well-founded) impression of not being able to apply what they have learnt to their own writing. The second reason is that these materials target

a wide, often unspecified audience, which results in topics being covered that are too general (especially in EGAP textbooks) or far away from the PhD students' research interests. This may lead students to feel disengaged, since they may not see a direct connection between what they practice during the module and what they are required to produce for their doctorate.

To make the part of the module devoted to writing as learner-centred and tailored on concrete needs as possible, the students' own written production was thus considered to be the most suitable material: working on learner-generated texts allows the lecturer to identify the participants' weaknesses and propose training activities to overcome them as well as to develop specific tasks with possible beneficial outcomes for all the participants. This, in turn, hopefully also leads to a higher degree of student engagement. To increase both the meaningfulness of the activities proposed and the student engagement, the instructor saw the online rather than face-to-face version of the module as a chance to reduce the use of pre-packaged teaching materials in favour of learner-generated texts (abstracts) and to use them to perform peer review tasks. In fact, while in previous module students' abstracts were pre-processed by the instructor and the whole class was exposed to pieces of writing (of variable length, from single sentences to whole paragraphs and beyond) in need of revision to trigger discussion, in 2020 abstracts were used in peer review tasks in small groups. Apart from trying to adopt a more learner-centred approach, capable of catering for the needs of each and every participant, the integration of peer review was also believed to increase the participants' motivation and participation, since the training material was their own work and was thus grounded in their experience and knowledge and connected to their reality (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 172).

The study presented in this paper was guided by the following research question: Is peer review of learner-generated abstracts in a completely computer-mediated environment an appropriate teaching activity for PhD students? More specifically, the research question could be subdivided into three sub-questions:

1. How did the single groups organise the activities in terms of remote mode of interaction?
2. Did the students perceive peer review as a useful learning activity?
3. What was their degree of satisfaction with these tasks?

To address these questions and reflect on possible future developments of peer review tasks in AEMs, the responses to the questionnaires administered after two peer review tasks illustrated in Methods are discussed in Findings.

4. Methods

After two face-to-face editions, in 2020 the Academic English module offered to PhD students at the University of Trieste was held entirely online due to the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 41 PhD students enrolled in the module,

23 of whom took part in at least one of the two peer review tasks described below. All of them were native speakers of Italian, and their average age was 30. Since the module was open to all the PhD students of the University of Trieste, the participants were heterogeneous in terms of both affiliation and year of enrolment. They represented six different departments: Department of Life Sciences (13), Department of Engineering and Architecture (4), Department of Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sciences (2), Department of Mathematics and Geosciences (2), Clinical Department of Medical, Surgical and Health Sciences (1), and Department of Physics (1). The majority (18 out of 23) were first year students, and, given that no minimum entry level was required, the students' level of English proficiency was heterogeneous.

Prior to the start of the module, a questionnaire was administered for the instructor to profile the participants and gather information as to their experience with both written and spoken Academic English and their self-perception of their weaknesses and strengths. In the latter regard, only two PhD students out of 23 stated having no weaknesses in Academic English. Students who replied in the positive were asked to specify what they believed to be their weak points (and were not presented with a list of items to choose from to avoid any possible bias). The issues specified by the participants could be grouped in the following categories:

(i) problems with the organization of sentences, paragraphs, and content;
(ii) unspecified problems with grammar (with exceptions; some indicated verb tenses as a major source of difficulty, while others mentioned prepositions and word order); and
(iii) problems related to limited vocabulary and insufficient knowledge of phrasal verbs.

As for strengths in Academic English, thirteen participants reported believing they had none. Of the remaining ten participants, two reported being confident with their knowledge of English grammar, and seven stated their strong point was familiarity with the terminology of their research area. What also emerges from these replies is that PhD students may have a limited awareness of what academic writing entails.

Along with the questionnaire, participants were required to hand in an abstract written by them, either already existing or written on purpose. Based on the instructor's previous experience, almost all PhD students have already written at least one abstract in English, even though they may have done so for slightly different purposes compared to the ones motivating the drafting of an abstract during a PhD programme (e.g. an abstract as a short summary of an MA thesis). Indeed, abstracts are probably the first academic text type PhD students deal with, and they are also a good and concise example of what students are capable of at this stage of their formal education. The questionnaire confirmed this, since only one participant reported never having written an abstract.

Based on the information gathered from the abstracts collected, in the first half of the module the topics presented in class were discussed with the whole group present and free to participate as much as they wished. This part of the module served as an implicit training for peer review tasks, since PhD students were exposed to examples

of the most common mistakes found in their own work, encouraged to share their opinions and reactions to the prompts provided, and stimulated to provide their own suggestions for improving their written production.

The first aim of these training sessions was to increase the PhD students' awareness of all the aspects that come into play when academic writing is involved and thus stimulate learners to go beyond their perceptions of what their strengths and weaknesses are and help them develop more sophisticated noticing skills (Hinkel 2020: 51). By taking a cue from passages extracted from PhD students' abstracts and, if need be, combining them with other examples, participants were invited to reflect on and discuss aspects such as readability, reader-centred writing, author's stance, change of focus, and cohesion. Given the variety of research fields in which the PhD students work, they were also prompted to collect relevant literature samples (mainly research articles) in order to build a reference corpus of realistic rather than textbook representations of the texts produced in their own field of expertise. This corpus was meant to enhance autonomous learning, since it could be consulted to observe the recurrent domain-specific lexical patterns and verify or confute the discursive aspects presented by the instructor or emerged during in-class discussions. It could also contribute to raising students' genre awareness and acquisition (see, for example, Hyon 2018: 114) as well as their "rhetorical consciousness" (Swales 1990: 213). The use of a reference corpus is considered particularly useful since most PhD students read for information and the resulting language acquisition is incidental, while one of the purposes of the module is to move to a more "intentional or explicit learning that takes place through focused study" (Hinkel 2020: 52) and thus to develop PhD students' deliberate, conscious attention to the linguistic features of English for Academic Purposes.

4.1.   PEER REVIEW TASKS AND DATA COLLECTION

After the first part of the module, the PhD students were divided into seven groups, ensuring that a student's field of specialisation did not match the topic addressed in the abstract they were given for peer review, so that they could shift their focus from content to language. Each group completed two peer review tasks, as described below.

4.1.1.   PEER REVIEW TASK 1

The first task consisted in reviewing an anonymized abstract chosen from the set of abstracts written by the PhD students specifically for the module. The reason for starting with these abstracts was straightforward: they did not undergo modifications by writers other than the PhD students themselves. They were thus considered authentic raw material which could reveal a higher frequency of linguistic issues to

be addressed as compared to existing abstracts.[1] As such, they were suitable to start training PhD students on noticing linguistic features rather than reading for information, thus triggering intentional and not just incidental learning.

No member of any group was the author of the abstract assigned to the group so as to ensure that all the members could contribute to the activity on an equal footing and feel the necessary detachment from the text. The peer review task was illustrated during a remote session as a teamwork activity in which the group members should use Google Docs, so that every member could work simultaneously on the same file. PhD students were instructed to consider all the aspects that had been dealt with up to then in the module. These aspects included the IMRaD structure, the logical presentation of information, the general-specific order of presentation, clarity, readability, sentence structure, paragraph structure, grammar (e.g. definite and indefinite articles, verb tenses, subject-verb agreement), and the presence of 'Italian-sounding' sentences. Students were encouraged to write their observations, comments and suggestions and their possible questions for the author directly in the file they were reviewing. They were also prompted to be ready to contact the author of the abstract and give oral feedback if they felt the need to do so. Every group then met during the session in a dedicated virtual room in Microsoft Teams for a first meeting, to read and discuss the abstract they were assigned. After a short debriefing with the whole class to verify whether the groups had understood the task, groups were encouraged to continue the peer review activity autonomously, in the days before the next session, and were left free to do so in any way they saw fit. During the next session, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire on this activity, the responses to which are discussed below.

4.1.2. PEER REVIEW TASK 2

The second peer review task was modelled on the first task. Group composition was not altered for this task in the hope that this could favour interaction and make the teams more efficient and prone to working more smoothly over time. Other elements remained unchanged (no abstract author in the group, group members not specialised in the topic at hand, total freedom to choose the ways to complete the task), except for the fact that the groups were assigned an existing abstract. The rationale behind the latter choice is that at this point in the module the PhD students were believed to have improved their abilities to notice linguistic issues, despite the limited amount of Academic English training received and the short experience with peer review. Again, after completing the task, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire.

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1   Most of the existing abstracts handed in had undergone some form of revision, whether by the PhD supervisor(s), members of a research team or an editorial board.

4.1.3. QUESTIONNAIRES ON TASK 1 AND TASK 2

The two questionnaires (QT1 and QT2) were completed by a total of 21 and 14 students respectively, although not all of them replied to all the questions included in them. The aims of the two questionnaires were three-fold: to collect information on the way in which students organised themselves to complete the activity in the time of the pandemic, to gather information on their degree of satisfaction, and to collect any other feedback useful for action research purposes. In order to collect as much information as possible and allow students to express themselves freely in relation to their personal experience with the peer review tasks, besides multiple-choice questions the questionnaires contained also open-ended questions, which led to rather heterogeneous responses.

5.   FINDINGS

5.1.   TEAMWORK ORGANISATION

The first part of QT1 and QT2 was devoted to understanding how the groups organised to complete the two tasks outside module sessions. In both tasks participants showed a preference for asynchronous collaboration (43% in T1 and 64% in T2), followed by synchronous collaboration (29% in both T1 and T2) and both asynchronous and synchronous collaboration (29% in T1 and 7% in T2).

Other questions inquired whether the group members met virtually to discuss the tasks and, if so, what tools they used. For Task 1, ten students replied that they met virtually and reported using Microsoft Teams, the default platform chosen by the University. One student specified that the meetings did not occur with all the members of the group being present, but rather in pairs, since they experienced difficulties in organising the meetings. As for the 11 students who replied in the negative, two of them indicated using both the synchronous and the asynchronous modality. This may imply that the group members worked on the same file at the same time, but without discussing the activity in a virtual room and instead opting for discussing the group's choices in writing rather than orally. In Task 2, students showed a higher preference for meeting virtually and used a variety of tools. However, some caution is needed here to interpret the students' answers. One student who replied in the positive stated that only two members rather than the whole group met, which means that not all the group members took part in the virtual meeting, while another one stated that the group used two tools, i.e. Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp.

5.2.   TEAMWORK DIFFICULTIES

The next question concerned the possible organizational difficulties encountered by the students in the two peer review tasks. For Tasks 1 and 2, 14 and 6 students respectively reported encountering no organizational difficulties. However, one student specified that in completing Task 1 the only problem experienced by the group – who worked in the asynchronous mode – was the delay with which the members replied to the messages in Microsoft Teams, while another student, whose group worked synchronously, reported that some members were unable to meet due to work reasons. This observation is in line with what emerges from the positive replies to the question, where the time issue is preponderant. Indeed, although variously expressed, several students indicated finding a time suitable for all the members to meet as problematic (with one of them specifying the resumption of work activities after the Covid-19 lockdown as a further complication). One student reported that the time available when Task 1 was assigned was insufficient, while in a quieter period the group could have reached more satisfactory results. According to another respondent, some group members did not collaborate, whereas another reported as problematic the fact that the group did not meet after the meeting in class. Only one student was undecided and replied "I don't know", but specified that most of the task had been completed during the in-class meeting.

5.3.   USEFULNESS

Despite the teamwork difficulties described above, respondents unanimously answered that peer review may help them improve their writing and reviewing skills. For Tasks 1 and 2, 18 and 11 students respectively decided to motivate their positive answers. Most students seemed to agree that the main benefits of peer review are the exchange of ideas and experiences, the easier identification of possible mistakes and ways to correct them, and the discovery of alternative solutions as well as new ways of expression.

With regard to Task 1, two students acknowledged that when reading the focus is generally on comprehension rather than text production (reading for information). They seemed to agree that the analysis of a text from the formal and grammatical perspective helps them become more critical towards their own writing and allows them to both identify their weaknesses in grammar and broaden their vocabulary, thus leading to an improvement in future writing tasks. Several students highlighted the importance of having an external view. One of them stated that collaborative writing and revision give the opportunity to ask questions about and thus understand the reasons why the other group members make certain corrections. Another respondent recommended the institution of a peer review group among PhD students, since supervisors often lack the time to read and review their PhD students' written work.

Another student stated that peer review is useful for engaging in a written activity which partly differs from the drafting of scientific texts but is closely connected to it.

One respondent appreciated the exchange with students with a different educational background, since the variety of fields of specialization is beneficial in terms of clarity and readability. The same student reported that the group who reviewed his abstract gave him valuable suggestions on some linguistic forms that he believed were comprehensible but readers found not so easy to understand. As regards the fields of specialisation, another student exploited this question to describe the difficulties she encountered. In particular, she wrote that she found rewriting an abstract (her group actually rewrote the abstract and listed a series of suggestions for the author) very useful but also complex since the main problem faced by her group was understanding the content of the abstract at the beginning of the task, given that no group member was familiar with the topic. Finally, a PhD student raised an interesting point regarding Task 1: he wrote that external feedback is always fundamental but specified that receiving it while revising a text is a particularly efficient way of saving time.

5.4.   Degree of satisfaction and relevant feedback

The last question that QT1 an QT2 had in common concerned the general degree of satisfaction with the peer review activities proposed during the module. For Tasks 1 and 2, most PhD students reported being satisfied (19% and 43% respectively), followed by students who indicated being very satisfied (71% and 50%) and then by students who considered peer review "an activity like any other activity" (10% and 7%).

Among the satisfied students, a total of 14 students motivated their opinion. In QT1, one student from a group who worked asynchronously wrote that she would have preferred meeting the other members also after the session for a final revision of the review work. Another student stated that she joined the group once they had already started with the peer review task and that she would have preferred working on the task from the very beginning. One student appreciated the possibility to exchange ideas with people with a different scientific background. On the contrary, a student found that while having peer reviewers who are not knowledgeable in the field of expertise of the abstract is certainly useful, this could also be a drawback because some specific terms or concepts may be considered inappropriate even though they are not. The student admitted finding it difficult to formulate suggestions that were not closely related to grammar only, since some topics were too far away from her field of expertise and education.

Several students commented on the computer-mediated mode in Task 1. Many stated that working on site rather than remotely would have been better and, in this regard, a respondent (whose group worked asynchronously) added two suggestions: repeating the activity in future AEMs on site and increasing the support provided by the instructor, who could give some pointers during the activity and thus help the group members be more efficient and focused. As regards the online versus on site mode, one student in QT2 suggested a combination of the two modes to increase the effectiveness of the activity. In QT1, the same student who raised the time issue in

the previous question reaffirmed his standpoint that peer review is a very useful activity because it speeds up the correction phase and makes it possible for everybody to learn something new. Another student stated that the activity was useful both to understand the mistakes that he makes and to try and understand the mistakes that others make.

Among the very satisfied students, in QT1 one student found it useful to see how the group members approached the review, what their starting point was and what changes they suggested. Another respondent stated that, regardless of the correctness of the suggestions and corrections made during the peer review, the task allowed her to learn a lot. Finally, another student said that he was satisfied for two main reasons. The first was that learning how to work in team and collaborate without problems is nowadays essential, while the second was that the task allows participants to understand how different persons face the same problem and thus to find different strategies. The same student also specified that the task was enjoyable and one of the few activities not affected by the impossibility to meet in person.

In QT2, two students declared themselves very satisfied because they found the exchange with the group members efficient and fruitful, and one of them said as much despite the limited time available and the various commitments. Another respondent wrote that she really enjoyed exchanging ideas on writing and reviewing with her peers because she received useful suggestions on how to structure her sentences better and simplify them while maintaining "an elegant style".

Finally, three students considered the peer review task as "an activity like any other activity". In QT1, one of them admitted not being thrilled by peer review but finding it useful anyway, while in QT2 one respondent stated that he was very busy and, regrettably, was not able to dedicate the time needed to Task 2. He also reported being involved in the same type of activity for a co-authored paper and finding it difficult to organise all the work remotely.

5.5.   Differences between Tasks 1 and 2

The last question in QT2 required to indicate any possible difference between Task 1 and Task 2. Five respondents stated they noticed no difference, one replied with a more tentative "I don't know", and another student admitted not having participated in Task 1. Of the seven respondents who noticed a difference, one student said that, unlike in Task 1, in Task 2 his group did not meet to discuss the revisions, without further commenting on the possible pros and cons of this choice. One student wrote that the abstract to be reviewed in Task 2 was more "definitive", having already been revised by the author's supervisors. Therefore, the group concentrated more on providing "conceptual suggestions" instead of focussing on grammar. Five students acknowledged a greater degree of collaboration, and some of them also specified the reasons (there was a lower level of shyness compared to Task 1; the members knew each other better). In the same vein, a student noticed that the peer review in Task

2 was more varied and richer in cues. She also mentioned that each member of her group contributed to the peer review task and highlighted aspects that she would not have taken into consideration in Task 1.

6.   Reflections on the past: Lessons learnt

By taking a closer look at the PhD students' responses, the first – obvious and unsurprising – lesson learnt from this experience is that the remote mode as the only way to perform peer review tasks may represent a limit to interaction. PhD students need to build a relation and establish peer trust (Hansen & Liu 2005: 33) before engaging in a teamwork activity, and, as they themselves stated in the questionnaires, a fundamental component to fostering collaboration is face-to-face interaction in a physical space. To stimulate interaction, an icebreaker activity was proposed in the first half of the module. The PhD students were given the opportunity to introduce themselves and their research interests and projects to the whole class; however, a certain degree of reticence was noticed, since some students did not embark on this challenge. An in-class personal introduction – be it real or virtual – does not necessarily mean that PhD students have a chance to establish a relation, socialize and display a higher confidence and propensity to overcome the possible initial shyness, collaborate on a shared task and "engage in a community of equals who respond to each other's work and together create an authentic social context for interaction and learning" (Hyland 2019: 188).

Yet, the remote modality is not considered the only reason for learners failing to complete the task or participating actively. Considering the average number of attendees per session and the number of PhD students completing the questionnaires, the lack of participation can be attributed to various reasons: for example, the fact that peer review is a new activity to most PhD students, that the module and the tasks are non-compulsory, and that there is no final testing. Moreover, some students may find it difficult to combine their research activities with training. Therefore, while doctoral students are believed to need to become accustomed to teamwork and to be mature enough to organise teamwork autonomously so that it suits the needs of the group members, what emerges from this experience is that, in line with Liu and Hansen Edwards (2018: 105), the trainer should act as a facilitator to support their work from an organizational perspective, ensure constant monitoring so that all group members benefit from collaborative activities, and help students gradually acquire the skills necessary to carry out collaborative activities efficiently and independently.

The above observations do not mean that, now that the health emergency is over and teaching activities are resumed in a physical environment, online learning is to be completely abandoned. In fact, online learning can be integrated into a 'traditional' module offered to PhD students, where "the CMC [computer-mediated communication] format extends the interaction possibilities beyond the classroom" (J. Liu 2012), especially as regards the time and physical constraints imposed by the academic

calendar and university facilities respectively. For such integration to be successful, however, the activities that can be carried out remotely and an appropriate timing must be identified, and the module plan and design must be modified accordingly. This leads to another crucial lesson learnt, which is specific to peer review: based on students' responses, a 'covert' form of training is probably insufficient, and PhD students need specific, explicit training (Berg 1999; Min 2006; Rollinson 2005; Stanley 1992). For this reason, in future AEMs, students will be explicitly trained on peer review, as advocated by Lam (2010) and Min (2005), since it is supposed to improve not only their reviewing skills, but also their writing skills (Baker 2016; Rahimi 2013).

7.   Reflections on the future: Optimising the peer review process

As regards future plans, the ad hoc linguistic training designed for PhD students should be ideally subdivided into several modules and distributed over at least two years. Such design would require a more in-depth "present situation analysis" (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 124), taking into account not only subjective needs (i.e. the strengths, weaknesses, and self-perceived needs), but also objective needs (e.g. those identified through the observation of the abstracts written by the PhD students). To this end, an assessment of Academic English written skills should be introduced at the very beginning of the module to provide a clear picture of what PhD students really need and, on that basis, develop a detailed and possibly engaging learner-centred approach.

Given the importance of peer review in research and the prior knowledge needed to complete it satisfactorily, in an ideal training setting this activity should be introduced in the second year of linguistic training, once the PhD students have already been sufficiently exposed to the features and conventions of Academic English and have hopefully developed sophisticated noticing skills. Introducing collaborative tasks in the second year would also mean that participants are given the opportunity to establish a relation with their peers in the first year, which should help them overcome possible reluctance towards teamwork.

The timing would not be the only difference compared to the way the tasks described in this paper were carried out. Indeed, it is the author's belief that the authentic material produced by the PhD students (abstracts) should continue to be used in AEMs, but the composition of the peer review groups should change so as to include at least one member whose field of expertise is close to the topic involved in the text to be reviewed. As emerged from the questionnaires, the variety of the group members' background knowledge and education has both benefits and drawbacks since it provides multiple perspectives but may hinder understanding. The presence of an 'expert' in the group may solve comprehension issues and thus allow the whole group to focus more on linguistic rather than conceptual aspects.

In an ideal teaching setting, given the "need to explore the impact of 'virtual' classrooms on the use of peer feedback and investigate how and to what extent peer

feedback can be accommodated in the new type of online instruction" (Yu & Lee 2016a: 484), the online component of peer review would not be completely eliminated but introduced at a later time. Indeed, after initial training on peer review, the instructor's intention is to assign multiple peer review tasks to be carried out in different modes. The first peer review task would be performed in small groups in class, so that the instructor could monitor the activity and intervene when necessary or when the participants require so. This initial peer review activity would allow the instructor to verify whether the presence of an 'expert' in each group is sufficient to understand the topic of the text assigned and whether the students have developed satisfactory noticing skills. Moreover, the physical presence of the instructor would allow her to immediately give suggestions or feedback when needed or required and to build confidence despite the traditionally unequal student/instructor relationship. The second peer review task, on the other hand, would be performed remotely, outside the physical classroom. As in Task 2 described above, the groups would remain the same, but they would work remotely and be free to choose how to work in terms of mode (synchronously/asynchronously), tools, time frame, etc. The instructor would be available as a facilitator to provide organisational and relational support, to solve possible linguistic doubts and to contact the author of the text to be reviewed in case of conceptual doubts.

The shift from an in-class to a computer-mediated activity would allow the instructor to dedicate the time in class to the discussion of the suggestions and revisions proposed by the participants in a flipped classroom fashion, while it would give PhD students a chance to experience what working in a distributed research team involves. Through questionnaires (and possibly structured interviews), the instructor would then assess the PhD students' participation to the two activities, degree of satisfaction and choices made to move from a classroom to a virtual environment. The aim of this assessment would be to identify PhD students' preferences, the choices made to accommodate to the online environment and the difficulties they may encounter, in order to suggest possible solutions. What the virtual Academic English teaching experience described in this paper tells us is that the possibilities offered by online environments are a fruitful avenue to be pursued further to optimise the use of peer review.

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