



© 2023 the authors. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

1. Yasaman. Sattarpour^{ID}: Department of Educational Psychology, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran
2. Shahab. Bahadori^{ID}: Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran (Email: Bahadroimeteor@yahoo.com)

Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 13 May 2023
Revised 11 June 2023
Accepted 23 June 2023
Published online 01 July 2023

How to cite this article:

Sattarpour, Y., & Bahadori, S. (2023). A Qualitative Study of Factors That Influence Student Acceptance of Peer Review in Classroom Settings. *Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences*, 1(3), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.61838/japes.1.3.1>

A Qualitative Study of Factors That Influence Student Acceptance of Peer Review in Classroom Settings

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the key psychological, social, and contextual factors that influence students' acceptance of peer review practices in university classroom settings. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 20 university students from Tehran, selected through purposive sampling. Participants represented diverse academic disciplines and were chosen based on their prior engagement with peer review activities in their coursework. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. The analysis followed a three-stage coding process: open coding to identify initial concepts, axial coding to categorize subthemes, and selective coding to establish overarching themes. Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) Perceived credibility of peer feedback, which included students' judgments about peer expertise, feedback objectivity, and the usefulness of structured review formats; (2) Emotional and social responses, such as fear of negative judgment, the role of interpersonal relationships, and the emotional impact of criticism; and (3) Educational context and implementation, highlighting the importance of instructor involvement, peer review training, timing of feedback, and the overall classroom culture. Participants emphasized that trust in the process and reviewer was central to accepting feedback, and emotional safety significantly shaped their willingness to engage with peer evaluations. Student acceptance of peer review is shaped by a complex interplay of cognitive evaluations, emotional reactions, and institutional design. Trust, clarity, and support emerged as critical facilitators of acceptance. These findings suggest that effective peer review implementation requires training, instructor moderation, and the cultivation of a feedback-positive classroom environment.

Keywords: Peer review; student acceptance; feedback literacy; formative assessment; qualitative research; higher education; NVivo analysis; classroom feedback practices.

Introduction

The growing emphasis on student-centered learning in higher education has spurred interest in instructional practices that encourage active engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking. Among such practices, peer review—or peer assessment—has emerged as a pedagogical strategy that not only enhances students' understanding of course content but also fosters metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning (Topping, 2009). Peer review refers to the process by which students evaluate each other's work, provide feedback, and reflect on the feedback received. Its integration into classroom assessment has been linked to a variety of academic and affective benefits, including improved writing performance, greater autonomy,

and deeper learning engagement (Liu & Carless, 2006; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014). Despite these documented benefits, students' acceptance of peer review remains inconsistent, and concerns regarding the reliability, fairness, and emotional impact of such practices are often raised by both students and instructors (Wen & Tsai, 2006; Kaufman & Schunn, 2011).

The effectiveness of peer review in classroom settings is contingent not only on how the process is designed and facilitated but also on how it is received by students. Acceptance of peer feedback is particularly important, as it determines whether students meaningfully engage with the comments and revise their work accordingly (Carless, 2013). However, student resistance or reluctance to accept peer feedback is a well-documented challenge. Studies have shown that students may question the credibility of peer reviewers, particularly when peers are perceived as less competent or less experienced (Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006). In addition, concerns about bias, social dynamics, and emotional discomfort can undermine students' willingness to both provide and receive critical feedback (Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010). These challenges necessitate a deeper understanding of the psychological, interpersonal, and contextual factors that shape students' attitudes toward peer review.

The conceptual framework underlying this study draws upon theories of social constructivism and formative assessment. From a social constructivist perspective, learning is seen as a socially mediated process in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978). Peer review, when implemented effectively, creates a space for such interaction by allowing students to articulate criteria, evaluate work, and negotiate meanings. Formative assessment theory also underscores the importance of timely, actionable feedback that informs learning and promotes progress (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Peer review, as a form of formative assessment, can thus be a powerful tool for scaffolding student learning—provided that students trust the process and value the feedback they receive.

Numerous empirical studies have explored the implementation and outcomes of peer review in diverse academic disciplines and educational contexts. For instance, Patchan, Schunn, and Clark (2018) found that peer feedback could be as helpful as instructor feedback in improving the quality of student writing, especially when the peer reviewers had received adequate training. Similarly, Huisman, Saab, van Driel, and van den Broek (2018) emphasized the importance of scaffolding in peer assessment, noting that structured guidelines and rubrics increased the quality and usefulness of feedback. Nevertheless, the variability in students' responses to peer review highlights the importance of investigating not just what peer review achieves, but how it is experienced. In particular, qualitative research can provide rich insights into the subjective dimensions of peer review—how students interpret feedback, what emotional responses it elicits, and under what conditions they are likely to accept or reject it (Van den Bos & Tan, 2019).

One recurring theme in the literature is the issue of reviewer credibility. Students are more inclined to accept feedback from peers they consider knowledgeable or competent (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). Perceptions of expertise may be shaped by prior academic performance, social reputation, or even interpersonal familiarity. This issue intersects with broader concerns about fairness and objectivity. As Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) demonstrated in their meta-analysis, peer assessments can be reliable, but students' trust in the process is influenced by whether they believe the feedback is impartial and constructive. Lack of consistency across peer reviews, or vague and unhelpful comments, can further erode trust in the process and lead to disengagement.

Emotional and relational factors also play a significant role in shaping students' acceptance of peer review. Being critiqued by a peer can provoke anxiety, fear of judgment, or defensiveness—particularly in collectivist cultures or high-stakes academic environments (Wang, 2014). Conversely, strong peer relationships may foster a sense of psychological safety, increasing receptivity to feedback. The style in which feedback is delivered—whether it is polite and supportive or blunt and critical—

can also influence how it is received (Nicol, 2010). In this regard, peer review is not only a cognitive task but also an affective and social one.

Another crucial consideration is the pedagogical context in which peer review is embedded. Instructor involvement has been found to be a key factor in legitimizing peer review practices and enhancing student buy-in. Research by Mulder, Pearce, and Baik (2014) indicated that students were more accepting of peer assessment when it was clearly aligned with course objectives, integrated into the grading structure, and supported by instructor feedback. Training and preparation are also vital. Without guidance on how to provide constructive feedback or how to interpret peer comments, students may struggle with both the giving and receiving aspects of peer review (Topping, 2010). Thus, peer review should not be seen as a standalone activity but as a process that requires careful scaffolding, cultural framing, and pedagogical support.

In light of the above, there is a compelling need for qualitative research that delves into students' lived experiences of peer review, particularly in non-Western contexts where cultural norms may shape feedback practices differently. Much of the existing literature originates from Western academic systems, and there is limited understanding of how peer review is perceived and accepted in Iranian higher education. In such settings, factors such as social hierarchy, academic competition, and face-saving concerns may exert a significant influence on peer feedback dynamics. A culturally grounded investigation can reveal unique insights into the interplay of personal, relational, and institutional factors that mediate student acceptance of peer review.

This study seeks to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative inquiry into the factors that influence student acceptance of peer review in classroom settings among university students in Tehran. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research aims to identify key themes that reflect students' beliefs, emotions, and contextual interpretations related to peer review. By foregrounding the student voice, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the barriers and enablers to effective peer feedback practices. The findings will not only inform pedagogical strategies for implementing peer review but also contribute to the broader discourse on student agency, feedback literacy, and collaborative learning in diverse educational contexts.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore the factors influencing student acceptance of peer review in classroom contexts. A qualitative approach was selected to capture the depth and complexity of participants' subjective experiences, attitudes, and perceptions regarding peer feedback practices. The study utilized a purposive sampling strategy to recruit university students who had prior experience with peer review activities in various classroom settings. A total of 20 participants were included in the study. All participants were undergraduate or graduate students enrolled at universities in Tehran. The sample included a diverse group in terms of academic disciplines, year of study, and gender to ensure a wide range of perspectives. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, no new conceptual insights emerged from the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each participant. This method was chosen to facilitate open-ended discussions and enable participants to express their views in detail, while allowing the interviewer to probe for clarification and deeper insight. An interview guide was developed, covering themes such as students'

perceptions of peer review, emotional responses to receiving peer feedback, perceived fairness and credibility, trust in peer competence, and contextual factors influencing their engagement. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of participants. All interviews were conducted in Persian, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English for analysis and reporting purposes.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis facilitated by NVivo software. A systematic coding process was employed, starting with open coding to identify initial concepts, followed by axial coding to group related codes into subcategories, and finally selective coding to develop overarching themes. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison was applied to refine categories and ensure conceptual consistency. The trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced through member checking, where selected participants reviewed summaries of their responses for accuracy. Triangulation of coding among multiple researchers was also employed to minimize individual bias and enhance analytical rigor. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of all data.

Findings and Results

1. Perceived Credibility of Peer Feedback

Peer Expertise:

Participants repeatedly highlighted that their willingness to accept peer review depended on the perceived academic competence of their reviewers. Several students expressed skepticism toward feedback from peers they considered less knowledgeable. As one participant noted, “If the person doesn’t even get better grades than me, how can I trust their judgment?” Another added, “I take comments more seriously when I know the reviewer is strong in writing or already has experience with the topic.”

Feedback Objectivity:

Many students voiced concerns about the subjective nature of peer feedback. The potential for personal bias, favoritism, or interpersonal tensions influenced how feedback was received. One student explained, “Sometimes I feel like they just want to find something wrong, even if it’s minor.” Others emphasized the importance of neutral, constructive language: “I like it when peers comment like a teacher—objective and fair, not personal.”

Depth of Comments:

Participants valued detailed and insightful feedback over superficial remarks. Students were more accepting of reviews that offered specific suggestions for improvement rather than vague affirmations or critiques. “Just saying ‘good’ or ‘unclear’ isn’t helpful,” a participant said. “But when someone explains why something is unclear and how to fix it, I really appreciate that.”

Familiarity With Reviewer:

Familiarity with the reviewer influenced perceived reliability and openness to critique. Several participants expressed more comfort receiving feedback from classmates they knew and trusted. “When I know the person, I feel less defensive,” stated one student. Another reflected, “Sometimes it’s awkward when you don’t know them, like you don’t know what they really mean.”

Review Format Clarity:

Students underscored the importance of having structured formats, such as rubrics or guided questions, to frame the peer review process. Such formats provided clarity and reduced anxiety about expectations. One student shared, “The rubric helps me know what to focus on when I’m reviewing others and also helps me understand what they mean when they review me.”

Feedback Consistency:

Discrepancies between peer reviews diminished students' confidence in the process. Participants expressed confusion when different reviewers offered conflicting feedback. "One peer told me my intro was strong, another said it was weak—who do I believe?" asked a participant. Such inconsistencies led some students to default to the instructor's evaluation instead.

Institutional Support for Peer Review:

Participants emphasized the role of institutional or instructor-level support in legitimizing peer review. Training sessions, modeling of peer feedback, and instructor involvement were seen as crucial. "Our teacher explained how to do peer review properly, and that helped a lot," remarked one student. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have taken it seriously."

2. Emotional and Social Responses

Fear of Negative Judgment:

A dominant theme was the fear of being judged harshly by peers, especially in face-to-face settings. Participants described a sense of vulnerability. One explained, "I'm afraid they'll think I'm stupid if I make a mistake," while another said, "I edit my work more carefully before peer review than before submitting it to the teacher because I care what they think."

Acceptance of Criticism:

Students varied in their openness to constructive criticism. While some embraced feedback as a growth opportunity, others took it personally. "I like when they tell me what's wrong—I want to improve," said one student. In contrast, another admitted, "It's hard not to feel attacked, even if I know it's meant to help."

Peer Relationship Dynamics:

Preexisting relationships shaped the way students engaged with peer review. Friendships sometimes softened feedback, while rivalry could intensify it. "My friend was too nice—she didn't tell me anything useful," a participant shared. Another noted, "Some students just want to show off, and their comments reflect that."

Feedback Delivery Style:

The tone and language used in feedback significantly affected how it was received. Participants preferred polite, respectful phrasing and disliked blunt or overly critical remarks. "Even if the feedback is correct, if it's said harshly, I feel discouraged," one student noted. "Positive tone really matters," added another.

Motivation and Self-Esteem:

Peer feedback impacted students' motivation and academic confidence. Encouraging comments boosted engagement, while negative or unclear feedback could reduce enthusiasm. "After a positive peer review, I felt more confident turning in my paper," explained one student. Conversely, another reflected, "A harsh review made me doubt myself the entire semester."

Perceived Evaluation Pressure:

Some students felt as though they were being informally graded by their peers, which induced stress and performance anxiety. "Even if it's not part of the grade, it feels like it is," one participant said. This pressure led some to over-edit their work or engage in performative efforts rather than authentic learning.

3. Educational Context and Implementation

Instructor Involvement:

Participants agreed that instructor engagement was critical to the credibility and usefulness of the peer review process. Teacher moderation of feedback and clear expectations increased student trust. "When the teacher checks the reviews and gives feedback on the feedback, I feel it's more serious," one participant explained.

Training in Peer Review:

Lack of formal training or orientation sessions was seen as a barrier to effective peer review. Participants who received instruction felt more confident in both giving and receiving feedback. “They gave us examples of good peer reviews. That really helped me know what to write,” said a student.

Timing and Frequency of Peer Review:

The effectiveness of peer review was linked to its timing within the assignment schedule. Reviews conducted early allowed time for revision, while late-stage feedback felt redundant. “If I get feedback the day before the deadline, there’s no point,” one participant remarked. Another suggested, “More frequent peer reviews would help us get better gradually.”

Feedback Integration into Grading:

Students responded differently based on whether peer feedback influenced their grades. Some found it motivating, while others saw it as unfair. “It’s tricky when your grade depends on someone else’s comment,” said one student. Others preferred peer review to remain formative and separate from summative assessment.

Classroom Norms and Culture:

The broader academic culture of the classroom shaped peer review dynamics. In environments where collaboration and mutual respect were emphasized, students were more engaged. “In classes where everyone participates and helps each other, peer review feels natural,” shared a participant. Conversely, competitive or indifferent classroom climates weakened student investment.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the multifaceted factors that influence student acceptance of peer review in classroom settings, drawing on the perspectives of 20 university students from Tehran. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, three major themes emerged: perceived credibility of peer feedback, emotional and social responses, and educational context and implementation. These findings reveal the intricate interplay between cognitive evaluations, affective reactions, and contextual variables that shape students’ engagement with peer assessment processes.

The first theme, *perceived credibility of peer feedback*, underscores students’ reliance on judgments about the expertise and fairness of their peers. Participants reported greater acceptance of feedback when the reviewer was perceived as academically competent or knowledgeable in the subject area. This aligns with previous studies indicating that students assess the value of feedback based on their assumptions about the reviewer’s competence (Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006; Kaufman & Schunn, 2011). The notion of “peer expertise” is particularly salient in high-stakes academic environments, where students may be reluctant to trust peers they perceive as underqualified. This concern was often compounded by inconsistencies across peer reviews, a finding also reported by Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000), who noted that variability in peer evaluations can diminish confidence in the assessment process. Additionally, students emphasized the importance of structured feedback formats, such as rubrics, to guide peer reviews and mitigate subjectivity. The presence of a clear framework not only enhances the perceived fairness of the feedback but also increases its usability—a conclusion supported by Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2014), who found that rubrics serve as scaffolds for high-quality feedback exchanges.

The second theme, *emotional and social responses*, highlights the affective dimensions of peer review. Participants commonly expressed anxiety about being judged by their peers, particularly in situations where feedback was public or where social relationships could be disrupted. These findings are consistent with research by Wang (2014), who documented students’ emotional discomfort during peer evaluation, especially in collectivist cultures where face-saving is paramount. In such contexts, critical feedback may be perceived as a threat to self-esteem or group cohesion, leading to defensiveness or disengagement. Conversely, familiarity with the reviewer and the presence of supportive peer relationships were found to

enhance students' openness to criticism. This supports the work of Gielen et al. (2010), who noted that interpersonal trust plays a critical role in how feedback is interpreted and acted upon. The style and tone of the feedback also emerged as a crucial variable, with polite and constructive comments being more readily accepted than harsh or dismissive ones. This echoes Nicol's (2010) assertion that effective feedback is not only about content but also about delivery—an insight that has important implications for training students in feedback literacy.

The final theme, *educational context and implementation*, draws attention to the institutional and pedagogical structures that shape students' perceptions of peer review. Participants emphasized the pivotal role of instructor involvement in legitimizing the process. When instructors modeled feedback, moderated peer reviews, or provided meta-feedback, students reported greater trust in the process. This finding aligns with studies by Mulder, Pearce, and Baik (2014), who demonstrated that instructor facilitation enhances both the credibility and educational value of peer assessment. Furthermore, students indicated that prior training or orientation improved their confidence and competence in peer reviewing. This supports Topping's (2010) argument that peer assessment should be treated as a skill to be taught and practiced, not simply assumed. Timing also emerged as a significant factor; feedback provided early in the assignment cycle was seen as more actionable than feedback received close to submission deadlines. This confirms the formative function of peer assessment emphasized by Black and Wiliam (2009), who advocate for timely feedback to drive iterative improvement. Finally, the integration of peer review into classroom culture was seen as either a facilitator or a barrier. In classrooms that valued collaboration and mutual respect, peer review was embraced more fully—a pattern observed in studies of social constructivist learning environments (Van den Bos & Tan, 2019).

Taken together, these findings suggest that student acceptance of peer review is not a static trait but a contextually mediated disposition. It is influenced by the characteristics of the feedback provider, the emotional safety of the learning environment, and the design of the peer review task itself. Trust—whether in the peer, the process, or the institution—emerges as a central construct that connects all three thematic domains. Without trust, even technically sound feedback may be disregarded or misinterpreted. This underscores the importance of cultivating a feedback culture that emphasizes respect, reciprocity, and shared learning goals.

Moreover, the study adds to the existing literature by providing insights from a non-Western, high-context academic setting. While much of the peer review literature has been based on Western educational paradigms, the Iranian context brings unique cultural dynamics to the forefront. For example, the impact of social hierarchy, the value placed on group harmony, and the emphasis on academic competition were particularly salient in shaping feedback interactions. These findings resonate with Liu and Carless (2006), who call for culturally sensitive approaches to feedback design and implementation. Recognizing that feedback is interpreted through culturally embedded frames of reference is crucial for promoting its acceptance and efficacy across diverse educational settings.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

References

- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 5–31. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9068-5>
- Carless, D. (2013). Trust and its role in facilitating dialogic feedback. In D. Boud & E. Molloy (Eds.), *Feedback in higher and professional education: Understanding it and doing it well* (pp. 90–103). Routledge.
- Cho, K., & MacArthur, C. (2010). Student revision with peer and expert reviewing. *Learning and Instruction*, 20(4), 328–338. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.08.006>
- Cho, K., Schunn, C. D., & Charney, D. (2006). Commenting on writing: Typology and perceived helpfulness of comments from novice peer reviewers and subject matter experts. *Written Communication*, 23(3), 260–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088306289261>
- Falchikov, N., & Goldfinch, J. (2000). Student peer assessment in higher education: A meta-analysis comparing peer and teacher marks. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 287–322. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070003287>
- Gielen, S., Peeters, E., Dochy, F., Onghena, P., & Struyven, K. (2010). Improving the effectiveness of peer feedback for learning. *Learning and Instruction*, 20(4), 304–315. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.08.007>
- Huisman, B., Saab, N., van Driel, J., & van den Broek, P. (2018). Peer feedback on academic writing: Undergraduate students' peer feedback role, peer feedback perceptions and essay performance. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(6), 955–968. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1424318>
- Kaufman, J. H., & Schunn, C. D. (2011). Students' perceptions about peer assessment for writing: Their origin and impact on revision work. *Instructional Science*, 39(3), 387–406. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11251-010-9133-6>
- Liu, N. F., & Carless, D. (2006). Peer feedback: The learning element of peer assessment. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(3), 279–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510600680582>
- Mulder, R. A., Pearce, J. M., & Baik, C. (2014). Peer review in higher education: Student perceptions before and after participation. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 15(2), 157–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787414527391>
- Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: Improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 501–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602931003786559>
- Nicol, D., Thomson, A., & Breslin, C. (2014). Rethinking feedback practices in higher education: A peer review perspective. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(1), 102–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.795518>
- Patchan, M. M., Schunn, C. D., & Clark, R. (2018). Accountability in peer assessment: Examining the effects of reviewing grades on peer ratings and peer feedback. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(12), 2263–2278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1320374>
- Topping, K. (2009). Peer assessment. *Theory Into Practice*, 48(1), 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840802577569>
- Topping, K. J. (2010). Methodological quandaries in studying process and outcomes in peer assessment. *Learning and Instruction*, 20(4), 339–343. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.08.003>

- Van den Bos, F., & Tan, E. (2019). The social side of self-directed learning: The influence of peer interaction on learning and motivation. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 41(3), 321–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2018.1550905>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wang, Y. (2014). Students' emotional experiences of peer feedback in EFL writing. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 40, 15–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.01.005>
- Wen, M. L., & Tsai, C. C. (2006). University students' perceptions of and attitudes toward (online) peer assessment. *Higher Education*, 51(1), 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-6375-8>