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Peer groups and the language of negotiation

Peer groups and the language of negotiation¹

Joanne Drechsel

This paper examines the oral and written language used in peer groups working on draft revisions. There is a brief review of the literature dealing with peer groups and language usage. A study involving college-age students illustrates the characteristics of a language of negotiation that is integral to the draft revision process, especially in small peer groups. The implications for writing pedagogy are then briefly explored.

Writing groups of one kind or another have been in existence for more than two hundred years and yet, as Gere (1987) points out in her comprehensive history of writing groups, we are continually discovering them. This is certainly true for writing groups in the English classroom. Within the past ten years, writing theorists and researchers have begun to take a closer look at the interaction of group members, especially those members who involve themselves in giving and receiving draft revision suggestions.

Of the research to date that deals with peer groups, the majority of the studies focus upon the effectiveness or the efficiency of these groups. Few studies on English-speaking students have scrutinized the actual language of peer response groups. Danis (1980, 1982), Gere and Abbott (1985), and Gere and Stevens (1985) have attempted to describe and categorize the types of oral responses students give and receive in draft workshops. Gere and Stevens (1985) evaluated student talk for idea units and then coded the language according to function, general focus of attention, and topic of utterance. Danis (1980) found that student talk about drafts fell into five main categories: development of ideas, focus, language, mechanics, and organization. My own classroom research (1988) supported the findings of Danis in that the participants focused their talk on revision issues involving content and language rather than microstructural concerns such as grammar and punctuation.

An unexpected finding in that study, however, was the occurrence in oral and written responses of modal verbs that made those responses function as directives. Often such utterances were preceded by complimentary phrases such as "I like your opening paragraph," or "That's good," while the modal forms contained the revision suggestions and were similar in construction to the following: "You

could put more description in about the party," or "Don't you think you ought to make it clearer?" It was apparent that this language form provided group members with a powerful tool for negotiating revisions and that the social context of the group itself had provided the students with an opportunity for exploring and shaping language to meet their needs.

Bruffee (1984), who has done extensive work on the value of collaborative learning, has noted that talking in groups presents the students with language that they can "internalize" and later "re-externalize" in their writing. Pica and Doughty's research on the use of group work in ESL classrooms indicates that ". . . group work can be effective in promoting the kinds of interaction which involve negotiation of message meaning" (1985: 246). However, the researchers stress the importance of a definite task, one that "compels individuals to negotiate meaning rather than simply inviting them to participate in conversation" (246). These researchers are speaking of the richness of language learning that peer groups can provide. But aside from learning the formal syntactic structure of language through peer interaction, another form of language which I call the language of negotiation seems to arise and become influential in successful draft revision groups. It is this language that my present study explores.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to observe, record, and describe the oral and written interaction of participants in draft revision sessions in order to quantify the use of embedded imperatives (modal verbs), hedged language forms, and unmarked directives used to affect revisions, and then to evaluate the effectiveness of their usage in promoting draft revisions.

This study was conducted on a state university campus during the fall semester 1988. Subjects for the study were 19 freshmen enrolled in a first-year writing course. They ranged in age from 17 to 21 and were homogeneous in social and economic status. Students did not know each other at the beginning of the semester. Classes met three times a week for fifty-minute sessions.

Data were collected from audiotape recordings of two different speech situations. Gumperz (1972) defines speech situation as the social context in which utterances are made. For this study, one speech situation that was utilized was that of students and instructor (the researcher) engaged in a fifty-minute revision session within the classroom. Both the students and the instructor sat in a large circle. Copies of three students' drafts were distributed to members in the group

and then each writer in turn was asked to read his/her draft aloud to the class. With this task completed, class members were asked to respond orally by asking questions, suggesting revisions, or commenting on any aspect of the writer's inability to communicate clearly. No formal checklists were used. The writers were also urged to articulate their concerns or to solicit help from the group members.

A second speech situation was a small peer group (three students) who chose to meet in the university library. The instructor was not present during this group's fifty-minute session. Their task was to read each other's drafts and to offer revision suggestions. For both of these speech situations, the speech event (Gumperz, 1972) was the same: conversation about draft revisions. Speech act, as defined by Gumperz, is the way in which ideas are communicated in language. Austin (1962) and Searle (1976) suggested that there are a limited number of ways to communicate ideas in speech. Five speech acts were proposed by Searle: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. The present study is concerned with directives and how they are employed by group members to encourage revisions of their peers' drafts. As Hatch and Long (1980) comment, Searle's notion of directives includes imperatives as well as questions, thus demonstrating that although language forms may vary, their function may remain the same. For example, a student may use any of the following sentences to achieve the same result--getting the writer to add more description:

Ex. 1: Add more description. [unmarked imperative]

Ex. 2: You could add more description. [embedded imperative]

Ex. 3: What does her dress look like? [interrogative]

Another type of data was the students' written responses to their peers' drafts. The students in this study routinely met in small groups to evaluate each other's drafts and to suggest revisions. The process involved completing a set of three response forms. The first form, Writer's Analysis of Draft, asked the writer to characterize the draft, to list strengths and weaknesses, and to request specific help from the reader in reformulating, revising, or editing the work (see Appendix A).

A second form, Reader's Response to Draft, asked the readers to identify the draft's main idea, to list strengths and weaknesses, and to respond to the writer's request for revision suggestions. Each writer had two readers who completed this form and returned it to the writer who then had the option of accepting or rejecting the suggestions (see Appendix B).

The third form, Writer's Response to Peer Evaluations, was completed by the writer after revising the draft at home. Writers were asked to identify the peer responses that they considered most helpful, least helpful, and which suggestions they actually used to develop or improve their final paper. This information was used to determine what types of language were used to affect the revision (see Appendix C).

These sources of data--audiotapes of speech situations, written response forms, students' drafts, revisions, and the researcher's field notes--were utilized in this study.

Analysis

The two speech situations were transcribed and, along with the written response forms, coded for directives. In order to do this, it was necessary to identify form, function, and context in keeping with Searle's (1976) speech acts. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) also stress the necessity of defining the situation in order to understand the fit between the syntactic structure and the discourse. Using this as a basis for interpretation, four language forms emerged and were identified because of their illocutionary force as qualifying as directives. These forms comprise two basic classes: direct and indirect imperatives. The direct form, or unmarked imperative, is represented by such student comments as "Use more pronouns," and "End the paper the same way you started it." The indirect class is composed of three categories and includes embedded imperatives with modal verbs, hedged forms, and interrogatives that direct the writer's attention to weaknesses which prevent clear understanding. Examples of these forms follow:

Embedded Imperatives: This *might* need some rephrasing.
You *could* move this right up there.

Hedged Forms: *Just* sum up your whole paper and say
'because of the crime'--
I thought *maybe* that first paragraph
could be a *little* more developed.

Interrogatives Used
as Directives: Why twenty years ago? [Directive: Add more detail]
Is the story going to be in the past tense or the present?
[Directive: Change your verb tenses]

The utterances qualifying as directives were quantified for each of the speech situations and also for the Reader's Response forms. The various modal

verbs and hedged forms were grouped in order to detect a prevalence of any specific form. Table 1 quantifies the classes and categories for the speech situation that involved students and instructor. This data does not include the speech of the instructor.

Table 1
Language of Negotiation in Classroom Speech Situation
with Students and Instructor

	<u>% of Directives</u>	<u>Number of Directives</u>
Direct Imperatives	2%	1
Indirect Imperatives	<u>98%</u>	<u>41</u>
-Hedged	69%	29
-Embedded	22%	9
-Interrogatives	7%	3

The results show that when offering revision suggestions, students preferred the use of indirect imperatives and in particular the use of hedged forms (69%). Of these hedged forms, the word "like" was used 33% of the time.

The second most often used form for this speech situation was the phrase "I think" or "I don't think" along with the word "just." The following examples are taken from the students' oral responses and demonstrate how these words were used as directives.

- Ex. 1: I *think* she could go on, *like* put more examples in.
[Directive: Add more examples]
- Ex. 2: When you were *like* talking about earthquakes and everything? I'm not sure I get it *like*--I know they're going to be there--it's their job.
[Directive: Clarify the meaning]
- Ex. 3: I *think* an example *like* she says that *like*, 'By the time I got to the light it was yellow then just turning red' that's *like* slang. I mean, *like* I got to laughing--.
[Directive: Formalize the language]
- Ex. 4: . . . *just*--shorten it up a little.
[Directive: Be concise]

The most frequently used modal verb (10%) in this speech situation was the word "should."

- Ex. 5: I think she *should* put that more forward in the essay rather than at the end.
[Directive: Reorganize the essay]
- Ex. 6: Or *shouldn't* like it be informal--I mean formal?
[Directive: Change the tone]

Although this speech situation consisted of 19 students and an instructor, the student interaction and language production was generated by 7 students. The instructor's comments are not tallied in with this data, as this was not the focus of the study. It is interesting to note, however, that the instructor preferred the use of modal verbs (53%) to hedged forms (47%) when responding to student drafts. The most frequently used modal by the instructor was "should," while the hedged form was "I think (you need)." These last two forms reflect the student preferences and possibly indicate the extent to which the instructor represented a model for language in this classroom session.

The second speech situation, three students meeting in the university library without the instructor, is quantified in Table 2. Long et al. (1976) found that when peers work without the instructor present, they tend to produce more language. If this is true, then the library group should have produced more language of negotiation. Audiotape recordings of the two speech situations allowed for the quantitative comparison of the utterances in these social contexts.

Table 2
Language of Negotiation in Small Group Speech Situation
with Students Meeting Outside of Classroom

	<u>% of Directives</u>	<u># of Directives</u>
Direct Imperatives	2%	2
Indirect Imperatives	<u>98%</u>	<u>91</u>
-Hedged	71%	66
-Embedded	23%	21
-Interrogatives	4%	4

The results of the quantification of the utterances from this second speech situation showed 93 forms qualifying as directives. Of these forms, 91 were classified as indirect imperatives. Students preferred the hedged forms (71%) over the modal verbs (23%) and the interrogative forms (4%). The most frequently used hedged form was the word "just," which was used 24 times (26%). The following are examples of this usage.

- Ex. 1: It sounds better if you *just* say this is necessary.
- Ex. 2: You could *just* rephrase that first sentence.
- Ex. 3: Maybe *just--just* make it clearer.

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Another frequently used hedged form was the phrase "I don't know" or "I don't understand" which seemed to allow the speaker to pose as a non-authority but yet give a directive.

- Ex. 1: Well, then, *I don't know* if this is right, but maybe you can like cut some of these examples out--put some of this right after each other--this is good.
[Directive: Reorganize and be concise]
- Ex. 2: Uh, *I don't understand* this sentence. I don't really. *I don't understand* it. Maybe you didn't even finish it.
[Directive: Clarify the meaning. Note that the speaker provides an excuse for the sentence's apparent ambiguity thus lessening his critical evaluation of the sentence]

The word "like," which appeared in 33% of all imperatives in the classroom speech situation, was employed in 9 utterances (10%) by the small group. Modal verbs were used in 21 utterances with the most frequently used word "could" representing 9% of the total indirect imperatives. The following examples show their usage.

- Ex. 1: Um--you *could* say 'take American politics for example.'
[Directive: Change wording]
- Ex. 2: You *could* just rephrase that first sentence.
[Directive: Rewrite the sentence]

A comparison of total utterances of the two speech situations showed an increase in the quantity of language of negotiation in the small group that met in the library. There were 42 utterances (direct and indirect) for the classroom group and 93 utterances for the library group. Both groups met for the same length of time (fifty minutes). An increase of 51 utterances corroborates Long's (1976) findings about the quantity of language production in small groups.

Having concerned itself with establishing the presence of language of negotiation, this study then attempted to analyze the effects of such language on actual revisions. One student's draft which was discussed by the small peer group in the library was followed through to the revised version. What follows are excerpts from the student's draft, the oral responses given to her by the peer group, and her revised version.

Draft: From a very early age, people in this society are taught to trust each other as a way of living and live most of their lives following this standard of belief in their fellow beings. Children, as a prime example, will trust their parents to tell the truth when asked a question.

PEER (P): (Reads this portion of the draft and comments)
Okay, let's start off--ah--this sentence [he reads in a muffled voice]. When you use that example in there, it *really doesn't really* fit in.

WRITER (W): I know.

P: *Just* use, 'It should not be understood that by trust I do not [sic] mean blind'--you don't *really* need an example in there.

W: Okay.

P: You *really don't* need that

W: Okay.

Revision: From a very early age, people in this society are taught to trust each other and live their lives following this standard of belief in their fellow beings. It should be understood that by trust I do not mean blind faith. Instead, I speak of the element of simple faith that one person has in another.

In the above example, the writer has taken the peer's suggestion and incorporated it into her own text in order to qualify her use of the word "trust" in the essay. The writer evidently knew that something was not right with the original text for she readily accepts the needed lines. In the excerpt below, W (the writer of the draft) has included in her first paragraph a discussion on the trust that children have in their parents. P (the responding peer) talks with her about the issue.

P: . . . I *guess* they trust them to guide them, but it's--I really don't have much of a choice.

W: I know.

P: Yeh. It's *like* you can say that stuff, but then you can say well--

W: They're taught that way.

P: They don't--they don't have any--if they don't trust their parents then--

The conversation continues between the two students as they discuss children and their trust in parents. P indicates that perhaps older children--teenagers--do not always trust their parents. The conversation ends as follows:

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- W: Do you think I should leave it out?
- P: *I don't know. Maybe just--*
- W: Maybe just shorten?
- P: *Just* make it clearer that--
- W: A short paragraph?
- P: *Maybe* make it clearer--like older children. Okay, so [he laughs and then goes on to the next section of the paper].

P's comments cause W to omit the entire paragraph from her final paper. P's hedging--"Maybe just," and "I don't know"--have created enough dissonance for the writer that she decides that the example is faulty and should be eliminated from the essay.

Another area of W's paper allows P to respond to it through a personal experience.

Draft: When in a store and ready to check out by purchasing one's goods, people trust that no one is going to just step in front of them in line. Also, when they get to the cashier, they trust that the cashier will not overcharge them or try to unjustly keep some of the change.

- P: Ah, let's see. This example there. That people trust the cashier to give them the exact change all the time and stuff like that. *I don't know*. I was a cashier for awhile [laughing] and nobody trusted me [laughing]. They didn't trust--they'd be looking over everything. 'Was that on sale? Was that on sale? Did you overcharge me?' 'No, I didn't. I'm giving you the right price.' *I don't know* about that one! Like people don't--they don't trust--well they may trust cashiers, but maybe they don't trust that the cashiers won't make a mistake or something because most people do watch very closely.

Later in the transcript P refers back to W's example of the cashier.

- P: But I think it's good [referring to her whole essay]. *Maybe just--maybe just* that one about the cashier.
- W: Okay.

P reads the draft further and asks about some words that W has scribbled on the paper. She tells him that they are "just some ideas jotted down."

P: Just jotted down. That's good. Let's see, umm oh, *maybe--just* to replace the cashier one, you can say 'people trust their lawyers in court' or something like that.

Again the comments made by P cause W to eliminate this example from her final text. Along with his hedged forms and his "authority" as a former cashier, P's referring back to this example twice also reinforces his position that "maybe--maybe just that one about the cashier" should be revised.

In the transcript and W's draft, there is additional evidence of peers' influence on the revisions that are made. One final example follows. In this case, the use of modal verbs are employed by P. The writer has realized that she has a paragraph that "contains a couple different ideas." P agrees that it "probably *could* --probably *would* be a good idea to expand a *little* bit." After re-reading the paragraph, he notes how W has "jumped from place to place all over the place." He then adds, "I'd like to see you develop that one about the jobs a *little* more. Because that's a good one." W has a sentence dealing with employer-employee relationships and then two sentences about crossing the street, and then back to the employer-employee trust.

Draft: For many jobs in which there is not a fixed salary, employees trust their employer to pay them a correct hourly wage for the exact amount of hours worked. Also there is the trust one has in others everytime he or she crosses the street Trust can be encountered not only in such simple things, but also in serious parts of your life. When one seeks a job and goes to the interview for it, the employer trusts that the resume completed by the person is accurate and true.

P: You *could* put his--'when a person goes for a job, for an interview'--you *could* put this up here with the other thing because they're both dealing with the same thing--the employer and the employee. So you *could* do that. You *could* move this right up there. And then you *could* go--this crossing the street thing here and then go into--use this and then go right into the doctor.

Revision: Trust can be encountered in various other forms also. Such a situation might occur when a person is in pursuit of a job and goes to the interview for it. The prospective employer usually trusts that the resume completed by that person is accurate and true. Likewise, for many jobs in which there is not a fixed salary, employees trust their employer to pay them a correct hourly wage for the exact amount of hours worked.

W has revised her draft through a reorganization of paragraphs and ideas. P's language of negotiation appears to have brought about this change. The above

examples provide some evidence of the power that language of negotiation has over draft revisions.

The final source of data for this study came from the written responses that students gave to each other when they met in small peer groups within the classroom. Reader's Response forms were coded for language of negotiation in order to permit quantification of direct and indirect imperatives. Table 3 summarizes this data into the total number of suggestions offered, total direct and indirect imperatives, and the total number of each of the forms that caused writers to revise their drafts. This information was taken from the Writer's Response to Peer Evaluations form.

Table 3
Language of Negotiation in Students' Written Responses

	<u>% of Directives</u>	<u># of Directives</u>	<u>% Utilized</u>	<u># Utilized</u>
Direct Imperatives	15%	8	2%	1
Indirect Imperatives	<u>85%</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>68%</u>	<u>36</u>
-Hedged	36%	19	32%	17
-Embedded	32%	17	28%	15
-Interrogatives	17%	9	8%	4

Embedded imperatives and hedged forms combined to produce the majority of language forms used to influence draft revisions. Although 15% of the forms were evaluated to be direct imperatives, only 2% of the revision suggestions offered this way were actually used by the writers. Embedded and hedged forms were written in similar quantities (32% and 36% respectively); whereas, in the speech situations mentioned above, students showed a marked preference for hedged forms. The most frequently used embedded imperative was the word "could" which was written 12 times (22%). The second most often written indirect imperative was the hedged form "little." In some cases, students used both "could" and "little" in the same directive. What follows are two examples of how revision suggestions were given by the reader (Reader's Response form) and received by the writer (Writer's Response to Peer Evaluation form).

Ex. 1: READER: *Could* add a *little* more detail in paragraph 2.

WRITER: I used a little more description where it was needed to make the paper run smooth. One reader says to add a little more detail in the 2nd paragraph so I combined

the first two paragraphs.

- Ex. 2: READER: #1 I *think* 3rd and 4th paragraphs and 5th and 6th paragraphs *should* be together as 2 paragraphs.
- READER: #2 Last sentence, 3rd paragraph *could* be 1st sentence 4th paragraph.
- WRITER: They told me that I didn't group my paragraphs well. I changed my paragraphs and lengthened them also.

Even in the students' written responses, indirect imperatives abound and are accepted as the norm for negotiating changes in drafts. Notice the interpretation that the writer above forms from the two readers' responses. Apparently students have no difficulty in interpreting this language and sifting out the directives.

Findings

In order to analyze the differences between the two speech situations and among the speech situations and the written responses, Table 4 is used to summarize the classes and categories of utterances which qualify as imperatives. It becomes apparent then that when students participate in draft revision sessions and are given the opportunity to discuss each other's drafts, they typically use a language rich in hedged forms. It does not seem to matter whether students are in classrooms or engaged in discussion about drafts outside of the classroom. They still use the same form in their language.

Table 4
Totals for Speech Situations and Written Response Forms

		%	#		%	#
Student/ Instructor:	Direct Imperative	2%	2	Indirect Imperative	98%	40
				-Hedged	69%	29
				-Embedded	22%	9
				-Interrogatives	7%	3
Student/ Student:	Direct Imperative	2%	2	Indirect Imperative	98%	91
				-Hedged	71%	66
				-Embedded	23%	21
				-Interrogatives	4%	4
Written Response:	Direct Imperative	15%	8	Indirect Imperative	85%	45
				-Hedged	36%	19
				-Embedded	32%	17
				-Interrogatives	17%	9

What is significant, however, is the quantity of language generated in the small group without the instructor. This group of three students produced 93 utterances which qualified as directives as compared with the classroom group of 19 students who produced 42 directives. Students who met in this small group reported having received more in-depth feedback from their peers and having felt more relaxed in the informal setting. Perhaps, then, the social context was conducive to the production of greater peer interaction and thus more language.

The benefits of small peer group interaction for language production can also be seen in the greater variety of modals and hedged forms used in this social context as compared to that of the classroom group and the writers of the response forms. If, as this limited study indicates, the use of language of negotiation enhances the likelihood of revisions, then it would seem prudent for an instructor to include small group interaction as part of the writing course's format.

When data from the response forms are compared with the data from the speech situations, the most noticeable difference is seen in the reduction of hedged forms used in written responses. These writers seem to balance their directives between the use of modals and hedged forms. Regardless of the form used, responders do expect that their suggestions will be implemented in the revised paper. The researcher has observed proofreading sessions in which comments such as "That worked out good," and "It reads smoother now," indicated the satisfaction of the peer who suggested the revisions.

But why do these writers and speakers find indirect imperatives so useful? And why are direct imperatives generally avoided? A partial answer to the first question may be found in the research of Brown and Levinson (1978) who proposed two categories of politeness for classroom use. Positive politeness has as its emphasis the "solidarity" of teacher-student and student-student rapport. On the other hand, negative politeness or "politeness-deference" tends to reduce the teacher's or student's "imposition" on the listener (reader). Brown and Levinson identify nine forms of speech that qualify for their negative politeness category. Four of these forms appear in the data collected on the subjects in this study. Included are indirectness ("I'd like to see you develop that one about the jobs a little more."), minimizing the size of the imposition ("Just sum up your whole paper and say"), use of distance markers ("I would say the third paragraph--she says that a social convention"), and the use of hedges, as seen throughout this study.

The use of negative politeness allows a reader or speaker to objectively evaluate a draft without offending the writer of it. The use of distance markers,

especially found in the classroom group, tend to separate the author momentarily from the critical remarks themselves, thus making them less threatening. It should also be noted that college freshmen enter a course usually not knowing many, if any, of their classmates and then see them for only fifty minutes three times a week. This fact in itself promotes a negative politeness among students. The absence of negative politeness may account for some of the failures of peer groups, especially those composed of younger students who spend time together in and out of the classroom. Negative politeness appears to be a learned strategy arising from life experiences. Whatever its origin, it plays an active and useful role in some peer response groups.

This study has focused upon the language used to negotiate draft revisions and has identified two general classes, direct and indirect imperatives, and yet students only occasionally resort to direct imperatives in their discourse. One reason for this could stem from the students' past experiences with using directives in situations outside the classroom; another touches on the writers and their sense of authority over their written texts. Successful peer response groups, through their language of negotiation, allow the authors of the texts being evaluated to retain this authority because they offer suggestions in such a way that the authors are free to accept or to reject the ideas. One student wrote the following comment after receiving indirect imperatives that alerted her that her essay did not flow smoothly.

All comments are helpful to me. I may not always follow their suggestions, but I always listen to them. I changed some of my sentences so that the transitions between them was smoother. I also rephrased many sentences.

Language of negotiation, then, provides a source of mediation between writers and responders and enhances the author-text-reader relationship by acknowledging the authors' rights to their own texts.

Implications

Data from this study serve to emphasize the importance of group interaction during revision processes. Language of negotiation, which appears to be a natural component of college students' discourse, is something that could be modelled by instructors of writing. Its power as a tool for promoting revisions should be remembered when comments are written on the students' drafts and revisions. We instructors already know what power we wield with our direct imperatives. But perhaps we should reflect upon the importance of empowering our students with a

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sense of ownership over their writing. By doing so, we will have taken a step toward balancing the unequal power that exists in the classroom.

¹ This paper was written for the course "Classroom Discourse and Interaction" taught by Teresa Pica, University of Pennsylvania, Fall 1988.

Appendix A

WRITER'S ANALYSIS OF DRAFT

Name _____ Essay # _____

1. How would you characterize your draft at this point?

2. List those strengths and weaknesses that you have found in this draft.

STRENGTHS

WEAKNESSES

3. What would you like your readers to focus on at this time? How can readers help you reformulate, revise, or edit your work? (Be specific)

Appendix B

READER'S RESPONSE TO DRAFT

1. What do you think is the main idea of your classmate's draft?

Reader #1 (name) _____

Reader #2 (name) _____

2. List those strengths and weaknesses that you have found.

STRENGTHS

WEAKNESSES

Reader #1

Reader #2

3. Please respond to your classmate's request for suggestions.

Reader #1

Reader #2

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