

## **An Investigation into Effectiveness of Peer Feedback**

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### **Abstract**

Copious researches argue the effectiveness of peer-correction in writing courses (e.g., Connor & Asenavage, 1994). Also, Coit (2004) mentions using peer feedback for correcting articles through a student-centered environment is a beneficial pedagogy to extend learners' academic-style writing practice. Therefore, this study focused on investigating effectiveness of peer feedback from communal, cognitive, cooperative and pedagogical perspectives.

This study also argues that it is English writing teachers' obligation and responsibility that they should ensure their writing learners compose articles in an atmosphere where they can learn from their peers cooperatively. According to Coit (2004), "Based on theories in collaborative learning and social cognitive development, peer review has assumed an important role in both L1 and L2 writing classrooms." (p. 902) When students are authorized to take on the role of the editor for their peer's papers to carry out the correction process, they seem to be more confident and motivation-stimulated in their writing courses.

In order to achieve this significant goal of releasing students' anxiety and raising their confidence in their writings, this study associated with peer correction was conducted and demonstrated at a required writing course assigned by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, a National University in Taiwan, Republic of China. During eight weeks of writing training and peer feedback activities, seven volunteers out of sixteen 16 English majors provided their feelings of the selected pedagogies in their advanced writing course in three credits. The results of this study revealed that most participants believed that peer feedback positively assisted their learning in English writing.

**Key Words:** Peer Feedback, Affective Filter

### **Introduction to This Study**

At the beginning of our second millennium, free writing is one of the primary methods that human beings use to convey their thoughts and communicate with each other. In a democratic educational environment of Taiwan, language learners also express their thoughts and opinions through composing articles. However, during learners' writing period, it is possible writers are not able to easily complete their articles due to negative emotions caused by their teacher's corrections.

Krashen (1983) has emphasized, emotional block could be one of the primary key factors to affect how well a learner can learn a language. Hence, this study aimed to release the language learners' stress through a specific pedagogy, peer feedback. In fact, there are many advantages of peer feedback that the students and teachers can identify. First of all, peer feedback is suggested as pedagogy of providing more self-control to language learners (Mendonça and Johnson, 1994). The reason is that peer correction would provide more

flexible and non-coercive decisions about whether the learners should adopt their peers' suggestions. In contrast, students would have less choice and usually have to follow the school's regulations and listen to their teachers' feedback. The peer correction should be a more modern and democratic pedagogy concerning the self-determining and student-centered concepts, which make students, feel freer and more independent.

In addition, replying to peer corrections and giving suggestions allow students to see similar problems and weaknesses in their own writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Based on the same topic, students would gain opportunities to read different formats of thinking and arguing. Also, they are able to self-evaluate through reading their peers' articles. Then, they can gain an idea of how much they should make progress in order to follow the whole class' learning pace.

John Dewey (1859~1952) argues that the knowledge associated the real life is more valuable knowledge. Also, a democratic atmosphere in the classroom should be a more appropriate mode that respects students' willingness. Consequently, the researchers in this study argues that the language learners in Taiwanese universities should obtain their opportunity to learn writing in a humanized learning environment that takes factors of emotion, real world, and peers' interactive brainstorming into considerations.

### **Literature Review**

From the 1970s, peer revision has been widely applied by writing teachers in first language (Bruffee, 1984; Elbow, 1973, 1981, Gere, 1987; Nystrand, 1986; Spear, 1988). Also, this type of modernized pedagogy in early years was also applied in the second language classrooms (Bell, 1991; Hafernic, 1983; Hvitfeldt, 1986). Based on the above studies, the peer feedback in first language and second language were both encouraged and applied four decades ago. Although these pedagogies had been discussed and executed for a long time, similar studies conducted for investigating and evaluating for their effectiveness were rarely found in Taiwan. Therefore, this study of peer revision in second language learning conducted at a University in Taiwan might be able to present as a significant model that would represent Taiwanese students' characteristics and responses in learning through peer corrections.

A lot of studies had been managed to investigate the effectiveness of peer feedback. Most of them revealed that peer readers can provide useful feedback (Caulk, 1994; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Rollinson, 1998). Also, the comments could be accepted either completely or partially (Rollinson, 1998). Hence, it was predicted by the researchers of this study, that the participants in this advanced writing course might also hold a positive attitude toward learning through peer's cooperations and interactions.

### **Methodology**

This study lasted eight weeks and was divided into four sessions. At first, course members were trained numerous writing strategies and skills in the first two weeks. In the

second session, they were guided to do in-class writing with the assigned topics associated with theories and concepts in their professional fields. At the same time, they obtained an opportunity to read their peers' writings and make corrections for them in both first language and second language. After the course members' correction, the trainer (one of the two researchers) also gave her different or similar grades and commentaries on the same papers.

Peer feedback, with its potentially high level of replies and interactions among classmates, gives the sense of confidence through a collaborative and friendly dialogue in which two-way feedback is established and thinking is negotiated between two sides (Rollinson, 2005). Barnes (1976) mentioned that increased opportunities for peer interaction because it allows students to engage in "exploratory talk." (p. 200) Hence, the trainer in this course assigned several writings to course members as their assignments and made the students exchange their works for revisions. Their writings were thesis papers, which were written based on learned writing strategies and topics of Krashen's "theory of "Affective Filter." At the end of writing training process for eight weeks, volunteers' perceptions of peer feedback were collected through a list of survey questions (see Appendix II). After the answers as well as the data of this quantitative study were collected, their statements about their perceptions of peer feedback style of learning were analyzed and reported.

### **Research Schemas**

1. Session 1 (the first two weeks), the power point files introducing writing strategies had to be produced.
2. Session 2 (the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> weeks), course selectors' in-class writing and peer correcting activities had to be executed.
3. Session 3 (the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> weeks), researcher cooperators were suggested to find a positions toward peer feedback pedagogies. At the same time, the writing learners learned thesis writing strategies with their trainer and their papers were corrected by peers.
4. Session 4 (the last two weeks), data through survey provided by seven volunteers had to be transcribed, analyzed and reported.

### **Statistical Study through Survey Questions**

This was a quantitative study through survey containing ten questions (see Appendix II.). Most of the variables and points on the survey sheet were key concepts investigated by previous studies (e.g. Mendonça & Karen, 1994). They were questions about how the research project cooperators perceived about the updated curriculum design of peer scaffolding. Did they support the pedagogies that the teachers had applied in class? Did the language learners in this class enjoy the training setting of peer corrections and interactions? Did they feel supported through their peer's review process? How much did they improve through learning from peers?

Because the language learners' perceptions toward the selected pedagogies might be complex and vary, adopting survey questions with levels of three different degrees: 1.

Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, and 3. Not Agree, was regarded as necessary. Through students' answers from their own willingness and freedom, the results of this study would be able to provide more accurate results from students' views. The results of the study would be valuable data for researchers in the field of, English education, and policy makers and curriculum designers in English writing learning.

### **Assumptions**

1. The language learners might support their trainer's application of peer feedback.
2. The language learners hold negative attitudes toward applied peer revision pedagogies.
3. The language learners have ambiguous positions toward the discussed issues.

### **Limitations and Solutions**

The major limitations and difficulties of this study would be participants' answers offered to the researchers might be not totally frank due to their worry or concern about the final grade scored by the trainer.

The resolutions to this dilemma were that the researchers had to inform the learners in advance that their negative reflections toward the peer feedback pedagogies must be expressed and revealed if they perceive any. In addition, the trainer had notified the volunteers that any of their negative criticisms and disapprovals toward pedagogies applied would not affect their final grades.

### **Instruments of Training and Data Collection**

A laptop was applied to create eight power point files presenting the writing strategies by the trainer (a member of two researchers). During trainer's presentations of power point files for introducing writing skills of research papers, a projector of the screen was provided by the school and applied by the trainer. After training for eight weeks, students' papers were corrected by their peers for three times. After students' correction, the trainer also proofread and graded the students' papers again.

At the end of the eight weeks of learning and correcting processes, seven volunteers were invited to answer a list of survey questions after signing a consent form (See Appendix I.). In order to do this research more efficiently without wasting course selectors' learning time in class, volunteers filled the form out using several minutes during the class break. Participants were requested freely and honestly to fill out the questionnaires according to their true feelings about applied pedagogies.

### **Contribution of This Study**

This study emphasized that language learners must gain knowledge of English writing in a democratic atmosphere where they had more choices on whether the corrections from the others would be accepted. The results of the study provided the administrators in Taiwanese universities valuable suggestions on whether they should include the peer feedback pedagogies in the syllabus of writing courses. The volunteers' perceptions toward the selected pedagogies were precious information in the field of English education, which

advised how the writing courses in Taiwanese universities should be designed and taught.

The trainer as well as one of the two researchers of this study had achieved a challenging peer feedback study, which was very different from the conventional teacher feedback pedagogy. This research project of English writing not only demonstrated how the pedagogies of peer feedback could be practiced in an English majors' course at a university, but also it provided language learners with the effectiveness of the discovered and applied pedagogies.

### **Findings and Results**

At the end of eight weeks, seven out of sixteen course selectors used five minutes after their writing course to sign their consent form and answer questions in the survey sheets. The results showed that most language learners had positive attitude toward the pedagogy of peer feedback. Only two answerers indicated that they still need teachers' corrections in their compositions (from Q1, 28.6%). The following explanations showed how students in this study perceived from their learning.

In the first question, five volunteers agreed that they preferred peer feedback to teachers' feedback. Only two volunteers (28.5 %) pointed out that they did not agree with the statement that they usually feel their trainers' corrections influence their emotions and motivation of studying writing subject matters. Two volunteers (28.6%) in this study expressed that they "strongly" agreed with their classmate's feedback to be easier to read because they would feel much more relaxed. The rest of the five answerers (71.4%) indicated they "agree" with this point as well. There was no student who could feel undemanding and calm down to examine his/her trainer's feedback when compared with reading peer's feedback.

Naturally, the researchers in this study discovered from the third question, that all of seven volunteers (100%) agreed they preferred to read peer feedback to teachers' comments. However, in the fourth question, the researchers in this study surprisingly found that although students felt more contented to read peer's feedback, they felt learning more through teachers' commentaries. In the students' answers for the fourth question, six out of seven students did not agree that they could learn more from their peers than their trainer.

In the fifth question, six out of seven volunteers agreed or strongly agreed that through brainstorming activity, they were more confident and felt supportive because of the proceeding cognitive interaction created by peers. Also, in the sixth question, this study revealed that all of the seven students (100%) felt more comfortable because they gained an access from peer correction to know their peer's writing proficiency.

Seven volunteers (100 %, 2 strongly agree & 5 agree with the 7<sup>th</sup> Q.) all agreed that they felt social interaction through writing and peer feedback provided them more inspiration and motivations in writing. However, only two participants attributed their improvements to their peer's feedback in the eighth questions. In the last two questions associated with points about

their acceptance of peer feedback activity in the writing course, five out of seven research cooperators clearly agreed that they hoped their articles could be revised and proofread again by peers. Also, they believed that the peer feedback pedagogy should be applied in English class.

### **Discussions for the Results**

From the analysis of the collected data, most participants addressed peer correction activities did make them learning experience more relaxing, confident, and inspiring. On the other hand, they did not totally agree that peer's corrections would make them improve much more than the trainer's corrections. In truth, participants perceived that they would be able to have more insights and directions of writing based on their peer's cognitive interactions. This obviously revealed that the participants gained the benefits of linguistics improvements in English writing subject from peer's cooperative activities of brainstorming and group discussions that the trainer had conducted.

From the results concluded in the 4<sup>th</sup> question, this study indicated that teachers' corrections can not be totally replaced by peer corrections. Language learners might undergo more traumatic when reading teacher's commentaries. They yet have a preference to face the challenge of the face trouble and endeavor to absorb what their professors suggested. To sum up, this study revealed that both of trainer's and peer's corrections are imperative and supportive to language learners when learning and training writing.

### **Conclusions**

In this peer feedback research project, English writing learners not only arranged their own contents of writing but also read the contexts created by their peers. Through adopting the positions of interested reviewers, proofreaders, and observers, English writing learners gained opportunities to assist their peers by exchanging ideas of the similar topics. Based on the constructive perceptions of elaborations instead of peer-competitions, the corrections given to each other, produced the functions of providing skills of negotiations and diplomacy, verbal communications, giving and accepting criticism, justifying one's positions and assessing suggestions objectively (Topping, 2000).

From this eight-week long research project conducted for English majors in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, the researchers discovered that most students agreed peer feedback had its effectiveness and should be taken into consideration when teachers design their curricula in writing courses. Conclusively, Vygotsky (2000) emphasizes that learning should involve the internalization of social interaction processes, which helps the learner progress from complex to conceptual thinking. Moreover, Krashen (1985) on the other hand argues that affective filter caused by teacher's correction would be a block of students' confidence. We recommend that peer feedback based on the concepts of "social and cognitive interaction" and "releasing students' anxiety" should be applied in the writing courses at universities in Taiwan.

## **Appendix I. Consent Form**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (Chinese name) am willing to help and provide 5 minutes for completing the 10 survey answers. The research of Peer Correction has conducted in my class for eight weeks, and my feelings of the pedagogies applied will be offered.

My answers will be employed as the data of the research and the results will be revealed through Synonym (for protecting my privacy).

I am not coerced to cooperate with Lin and I am a volunteer of this study. I am using the five-minute class break and complete the survey for this study of Peer Feedback. My learning in writing will not be influenced negatively due to answering this survey.

My answers in the instruments of this study will be reserved for five years in Lin's office. My willingness in cooperation will not influence my final grade in this writing course. The data will be destroyed after five years.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ (Name in English and Chinese)

## **Appendix II. Survey Sheet of Peer Feedback**

You are an English major in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Kaohsiung. Please answer the following questions based on your perceptions and feelings in learning writing during the past eight weeks. In order to ensure the confidentiality of this study, your name both in English and Chinese will be done anonymously. All of the information you gave me will be treated as completely confidential and it will not be possible for people to recognize the information you gave me when I report the results of this study. Please give answers honestly and freely to all of the 10 questions.

When answering the questions, please fill in the following number 1. 2. 3. according to your true perceptions in learning writing through peer feedback.

1. ***Strongly Agree***
2. ***Agree***
3. ***Not Agree***

- Q.1 ( ) I usually feel that my teachers' corrections for my paper influence my emotion and motivation in learning writing. I feel not confident and am nervous after reading my teachers' negative comments.
- Q2. ( ) I feel more relax to read my classmate's feedback for my writings.
- Q3. ( ) I prefer peer feedback to teacher's feedback.
- Q4. ( ) I feel that peer feedback makes me learn more in a relaxing way.
- Q5. ( ) Through cooperation and cognitive interaction with my peers, I am able to write more confidently and more supportively.
- Q6. ( ) Through exchanging ideas and knowing my peer's writing proficiency, I feel much more comfortable in the writing class.

- Q7. ( ) Social interaction through writing and peer feedback, provided me more inspiration (ideas) and motivations in writing.
- Q8. ( ) Generally speaking, eight weeks, I feel that I have improved my writing skills because of the peer feedback activity in my Advanced (Writing III) English Writing course.
- Q9. ( ) Hopefully, my essay and thesis can be revised and proofread by my classmates again because I can learn more.
- Q10. ( ) I think peer feedback pedagogy should be applied in English classes if I will work as an English teacher in my future career.

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### 中文摘要

寫作的過程中因老師的糾正與負面的評語可能因此造成學生的心理障礙。這種不良的情緒可能會降低學生學習以及創作的自信心 (Krashen 1985)。為解放語言學習者寫作時所產生的焦慮感，並且提升的學生的語言習得，學者專家提出，同儕的作業，可以用母語互相來批改，同儕批改將有助於學生以輕鬆的心情來面對寫作壓力 (e.g., Villamil and de Guerrero, 1996)。本研究強調，同儕批改從社區、認知、情緒、與教學法的觀點看來，皆是有效果且必須實施的方案。英文寫作教師有責任，必須要確保學習者在減壓以及同儕合作的氣氛中進行創作，作文環境不應該受到心情、或者在意老師看法的阻撓，學生有權力在無壓力的教室中，互助合作、揮灑自如。為成就以上的目標，同儕批作的研究將於高雄市之國立大學外文系的高級英文寫作班實施示範。這個研究分成八周四階段。第一階段，學生們獲知許多寫作基本方法，第二階段時，學生們進行課內寫作練習活動，教師將分發學生專業作文的試題，使學生在課堂之中完成作文。同時，學生們將以英語及母語互相批改同學的作文。在研究計畫的本第三階段，研究人員建議學生思考對此教學法的感想。最後的階段研究員們提出文獻報告，此報告有助於英語教學界寫作課程教學方案的改進。

**關鍵詞：**同儕批作，感情因素。