

Students' Perceptions of Three Different Types of Collaborative Feedback in an L2 Academic Writing Workshop

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Introduction

The idea of incorporating peer-feedback in the classroom is relatively new, and a closer look at the academic literature shows that peer-feedback studies span many disciplines, from corporate training to psychology, to applied linguistics. There is a plethora of conflicting views in the literature on the effectiveness of peer assessment, and while in general positive effects have been demonstrated, the results remain inconclusive. (Dochy et. al, 1999; Topping, 2003) It is difficult for researchers to define what constitutes effective peer-assessment because a commonly agreed upon model has not been proposed as yet. (Kollar & Fischer, 2010) A review of the literature on peer-assessment in higher education by Van Zundert et. al (2010) has revealed that there is a need for more experimental and quasi-experimental studies, as well as studies which contrast single variables between groups. (Topping, 2010)

Despite a lack of consensus in the literature, a growing number of studies have shown peer-feedback activities to be very beneficial for learners (Liu & Hansen, 2002), especially for classes with students of mixed levels of ability. (Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Donato, 1994; Ohta, 1995 and 2000; Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Suzuki, 2008). Many researchers have used Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory of human learning as the basis for conducting studies on peer-feedback (Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; Allen & Mills, 2016) because this theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in individual development. The Zone of Proximal Development was proposed by Vygotsky (1978, 1986) to explain how experts can help novices to achieve a higher level of learning.

In the L2 writing classroom teachers can apply this theory by pairing up stronger students with weaker ones, however this has to be fine-tuned to make sure that the difference in levels is not too wide: if the levels of the peers are too disparate, the lower level students receiving the feedback might not be able to fully benefit from it, as they might not be able to comprehend it and thus it is highly unlikely that they can incorporate it in revisions. (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Nasaji & Swain, 2000; Hamp-Lyons, 2006; Allen & Mills, 2016) Van Gennip et. al (2010) introduced the concept of psychological safety, or the idea that students need to be in a group environment in which they can feel confident to take personal risks. In other words, students are more likely to offer suggestions and ideas for corrections to a group of peers rather than the teacher or students, who are perceived to be at a much higher proficiency level. (Allen & Mills, 2016) Although previous research has shown that some students give preference to teacher corrections over corrections from peers (Paulus, 1999; Yang et. al, 2006), many teacher corrections often seem to go unnoticed by students. (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). Teacher feedback can result in passive and dependent learners (Lee, 2008), while peer feedback has been associated with a larger degree of student autonomy. (Yang et. al, 2006)

Peer-feedback is most efficient and leads to the development of writing skills when students are properly trained how to engage in this activity. (Berg, 1999; Suzuki, 2008; Lundstrom & Balkler, 2009; Van Steendam et. all, 2010; Van Zundert et. all, 2010) Students can also be given incentives to collaborate in peer-feedback activities by having their peer-feedback efforts graded as part of the class work. (Anton, 2011; Ewald, 2015)

The Current Study

Many of the studies in the academic literature to which the researcher had access describe student writers of much higher proficiency than the students in the researchers' courses. For example, a lot of the students described in the literature could voice their opinions and offer feedback to peers in L2, or they had taken the TOEFL IBT test, etc. The motto on the brochure of the researcher's institution is "*Helping weaker students to succeed.*" (Source: Himeji Dokkyo 2016-2017 Student Brochure) Moreover, due to scheduling issues, the researcher's third year

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elective writing workshop, which is aimed at higher level students, is attended by an increasing number of lower level students. This wide disparity presents a big challenge for lesson planning and curriculum development, so the researcher wanted to see if it was possible to apply lessons from successful collaborative feedback activities from the academic literature. In particular, the main question asked was which combination of proficiency levels in peer groups and which methods for providing corrective peer feedback are these students most receptive to?

Research Questions

1) Which peer-feedback method do students prefer: a) oral feedback from writers at the same proficiency level (Expert-Expert, Novice-Novice) b) oral feedback from mixed proficiency levels with at least one Expert, or c) anonymous written comments via a software program from unknown peers?

Methods

Participants were 10 third year university students (7 females, 3 males) enrolled in an Academic Writing Workshop taught by the researcher. One female student was from Korea, the rest were Japanese. At this particular institution students are divided into different tiers, based on their performance on the TOEIC Bridge and the TOEIC tests, as well as in-house tests. For the first two years students attend courses geared towards their tier level, then in the third year, students from all tiers can sign up for any elective courses they choose. This Academic Writing Workshop is one of these third year elective courses. Although this particular writing course requires a minimum TOEIC score of 450, in reality many students with much lower scores sign up due to scheduling problems. Six of the participants (4 females and 2 males) were from the Advanced Tier, and four (3 females and 1 male) were from the Beginner Tier. The Beginner Tier students' scores were all below the 450 TOEIC mark.

The Advanced Tier students had been introduced to process writing in a course taught in the previous year by the researcher. They had also received training for conducting peer feedback and revision and had carried this out as part of their assignments. They shall be henceforth referred to as "Experts." The

Beginner Tier students had not been introduced to process writing in their previous EFL courses at this university. They will be referred to as “Novices.”

Over the course of one semester (15 classes) all participants had to complete three writing assignments, with one revision task for each, for a total of 6 writing assignments. In the first two sessions of the semester all students were trained how to do peer-feedback and how to incorporate revisions. For the Experts this was their second training. It differed slightly from the training in their previous writing course in that there were two training sessions and they were told to pay careful attention to certain categories of errors (Verb Tense, Organization, Formatting, Topic Sentences) in addition to their previous training. The feedback was focused (but not limited to) on these four categories in order not to overwhelm the Novices. Truscott (1996, 2007) has called into question the benefits of grammar correction for improving writing skills: he has argued that there is no evidence that grammar correction is effective and that it might even be harmful, in that it detracts students’ focus from the new task, process writing. In the current study one type of grammar correction (verb tense) was selected as a criteria for feedback simply because the Novices needed to improve their use of grammar in general. However stylistic errors directly related to process writing were included in the assessment criteria as well.

The gap in proficiency levels was quite high for this class, and the researcher wanted the Novices to be able to participate and contribute to the peer review. Everyone worked with guidance from the teacher to correct a draft from the previous year’s Academic Writing Course. Then students worked in groups to correct and discuss another draft, also from the previous year. Students could use either their native language, L1, or English, L2 during peer-feedback. As Anton (2011) has pointed out, L1 use plays a major role in helping students to interact efficiently in collaborative feedback.

The students were then assigned to groups of the same proficiency level and were given their first assignment to work on. For the second assignment students were put into groups of mixed levels of three peers. Although the researcher wasn’t able to find studies that show the effects of gender pairings on

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collaborative feedback, observations from past experiments seem to indicate that male participants are more open to giving feedback than female participants. (van Gennip et. all, 2010) Consequently the class was split into groups of three with one male participant per group.

For the third assignment participants received feedback anonymously through a software program from two other peers. For this assignment students used a computer lab where their screens were controlled and allowed to interact with other class members selected by the researcher. Although the participants might not have been aware of this, the researcher included at least one Expert in each group. The students did not know who was reviewing their papers. They received written comments via the software and were able to clarify any points by writing to their reviewers. Again, L1 or L2 could be utilized for the written discussion. Students were told that they would be graded not only for their writing assignments, but also for their feedback. The teacher only provided comments after the completion of each of these corrective feedback activities lead to a final product. The first draft, the feedback comments, and the final product were handed in and the teacher provided comments and grades on these.

After each assignment students had to fill out a questionnaire about the peer-feedback experience. They were asked to rate the experience on a Likert scale from 1 (Not helpful at all) to 5 (Very Helpful). They were also asked to explain the reasons for their selections. While the students were encouraged to use English when writing their comments, Novices were explicitly allowed to use Japanese in case they found it too difficult to express their opinions. This was done to avoid overly general comments from beginner students and to encourage them to express their thoughts.

Results

One female Novice student was unable to successfully complete the course due to many absences, so her answers to the questionnaire were excluded from the data.

Oral feedback in same proficiency level groups

The Expert Group

All the Experts said this method was “5, Very helpful.” Some comments indicated that they put more trust in the students with whom they studied in the previous year, because they had more experience with writing and knew how to give corrections. They also said it was easier to talk to their friends.

The Novice Group

In the Novice group the opinions were a little more mixed: a female student said she didn't have a lot of confidence and wasn't sure if her corrections and comments were good. (“2, Not very helpful”) One female and male from the Novice group said they preferred talking and getting help from someone they knew well and rated this collaborative feedback experience as “4, Helpful.” (“I'm shy to talking new people.” wrote the Novice male participant, indicating the students from the Expert group as the “new people,” who had never had lessons together with the Beginner Tier students).

Oral feedback in mixed proficiency level groups

The Expert Group

Four of the Experts indicated this collaborative feedback method was “5, Very Helpful,” while two rated it “4, Helpful.” When asked why they thought it was less helpful than the previous task, one student said she did not get as many comments from the Novice in her group, while the other was unsure why he felt this way.

The Novice Group

Two of the female students from the Novice group rated this experience as “5, Very Helpful.” Their comments indicated they felt the Experts gave them a lot of corrections and advice not only for grammar, but also taught them new vocabulary. The male Novice was less satisfied with the mixed proficiency group (“3, Somewhat helpful”) because he said the two Experts spoke a lot in English and he couldn't understand their comments. Even when he asked for clarification in Japanese, he did not understand his peers' replies in Japanese regarding his topic sentence.

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Written feedback in Anonymous peer groups

The Expert Group

Two members of the Expert group rated this experience as “4, Helpful.” One female participant commented that it took her more time to write text messages than just talking face to face. The other male participant said sometimes the software had glitches and it would take too long to send and receive comments. He also felt it was more time consuming and he preferred talking face to face. Three Expert members rated this collaborative feedback experience as “2, Not very helpful.”

Some of their comments indicated the time-lag in receiving replies/questions on their feedback, another talked about the terse, unclear feedback comments he received, while they all mentioned that talking about their assignments was their preferred method of communication with their peers. One male participant rated the experience as “3, Somewhat Helpful.” He cited that he liked being able to have time to gather his thoughts and write them down for his peers, but the corrective feedback he received was unclear, so he had to spend a lot of time on clarification.

The Novice Group

The two female members rated this experience as “4, Helpful.” Their comments mentioned that having to provide corrective feedback through writing gave them time to check their dictionaries when writing comments. One of them said that even though the feedback comments from her peers were in English, she could have time to look up words she did not know and did not feel embarrassed. The male Novice student rated the experience as “5, Very helpful.” He explained that he was shy and liked writing more than oral communication for this task. According to his comments, reading the feedback from his peers gave him time to check the meaning of their comments and reflect on them.

Collaborative Feedback Method	Expert	Novices
Same proficiency level; Verbal	6 members: Very Helpful	1 member: Helpful 2 members: Not very helpful
Mixed proficiency with at least 1 Expert; Verbal	4 members: Very Helpful 2 members: Helpful	2 members: Very Helpful 1 member: Somewhat Helpful
Anonymous (mixed proficiency with at least 1 expert); Written	2 members: Helpful 1 member: Somewhat helpful 3 members: Not very helpful	1 member: Very helpful 2 members: Helpful

Discussion

From the students' comments it would appear that advanced students who have had previous exposure to process writing and peer-feedback prefer conducting these activities with students at the same proficiency level through face-to-face communication. This could be due to the students' familiarity with each other and their previous experience with process writing, peer-feedback, and revisions. Novices seemed somewhat less confident to offer and incorporate revisions from other Novices perhaps because of the novelty of the task and their lack of confidence in their own and their peers' ability.

The second experimental condition, collaborative feedback in groups of mixed proficiency levels seems to be rated as the most optimal condition for peer-feedback by both Experts and Novices. Some of the Novices indicated that they were able to receive suggestions about their choice of words, and thus could acquire new vocabulary. One Novice was unhappy with the verbal communication because he felt that he could not fully understand the comments made in English. In this particular class Experts outnumbered Novices two to one, and Experts had been trained by the researcher and other teachers for the previous two years to use English as much as possible to communicate with their peers. While it is rewarding to see that using English has become the *modus operandi* for these students, perhaps it would be beneficial for future practice in such mixed level writing classes to teach the Novices to seek clarification more actively, and to ask the Experts to try to clarify their feedback in Japanese. Or perhaps to insist that the feedback language in mixed proficiency groups should just be the native language. This of course should be the subject of future research.

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The third experimental condition, anonymous collaborative written feedback in mixed proficiency level groups seemed to be the least preferred feedback interaction for this student group. All Experts indicated that they preferred face-to-face communication and they were not satisfied with the time it took to receive and clarify comments on their writing. The Novices seemed to find this feedback method more positive in that they had more time to consider and write their comments as well as check the meaning of the comments they received. Since they are new to process writing and not used to expressing their ideas orally in English, they found a relative psychological safety in having time to prepare and revise their feedback. An interesting observation is that when the Novices received feedback comments in English, they would generally make an effort to reply in English.

Although this was not the goal of this study, based on the researcher's observations of both Expert and Novice groups, it seems that the Expert students used verbal communication even in the planning and preparatory stages for the writing assignments, while Novices were reluctant to do this, even when told they could use their native language and encouraged by the teacher. This could be due to their individual personalities, or to the fact that the Novices probably felt intimidated by the Expert students' knowledge and abilities. There could be a lot of other factors at play in these interactions: for example, besides having to focus on completing a new task, the students from the two groups were also relative strangers, having studied in separate classes for the previous two years at this institution. However, even when interacting in the first experimental condition with members from the same proficiency level, Novices were reluctant to communicate verbally in either L1 or L2.

As this is just a qualitative study with a very small number of students, it is not advisable to make any generalizations for other student populations. The scope of this study was to help the researcher devise a better curriculum and pedagogy for this type of academic writing course, where students of widely varying proficiency levels enroll in the same class. Most of the studies on peer-feedback in the L2 writing class in the academic literature deal with students at much higher proficiency levels than the students that the researcher has been

teaching at this institution. A lot of the studies mention the participants' TOEFL scores (Allen & Mills, 2016) or how the feedback comments are generally made in the L2 (Diab, 2016). With the resources available to her, the researcher has not come across any studies dealing with such huge gaps in proficiency as she is having to manage in this particular writing workshop.

It is important to carry out such studies to learn how to prepare instructors for dealing with these types of mixed level classes, which are becoming more and more a reality for small private academic institutions in Japan, due to the number of decreasing enrollments. It would also be useful to see which types of errors students offer more feedback on, and which types of errors are revised by the students based on the feedback they received, and whether there are differences between the Experts and Novices.

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Abstract

This is a small qualitative case study (n=9) which takes a look at how students in a mixed proficiency level writing workshop perceived different types of collaborative peer feedback. The same group of students experienced three types of feedback activities, after receiving training: 1) oral feedback in groups of peers with the same proficiency level; 2) oral feedback in mixed proficiency level groups; and 3) written feedback in anonymous peer groups.