Student-Student Written Interactions During Peer Feedback in English Writing Instruction

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Abstract

This paper examines student-student written interactions during peer feedback activities in a semester-long English writing instruction. Fifteen students with no prior peer feedback experience participated in the activities in pairs. In order to explore how they interacted with their partners and with their partners’ compositions, their written feedback was analyzed in light of negotiation categories such as questions, explanations, restatements, suggestions, grammar corrections, and reactions. These categories, with the exception of grammar corrections, were further classified into seven aspects of compositions. The analysis found not only diverse interactions between peers but also individual variations in such interactions. The findings imply peer feedback provides students ample opportunities of reading and writing for communication and of learning from each other both academically and socially through interactive negotiations. The paper also suggests some directions for future studies.

1. Background

Peer feedback (or response) is an activity in which students receive feedback about their writing from their peers. The students are expected to have opportunities to work collaboratively with peers and to improve their writing abilities individually. Peer feedback plays a major role in second language (L2) writing classrooms, and both benefits and constraints have been pointed out in the past literature. The use of peer feedback is justified by numerous concepts and theories, such as the process approach to writing instruction, collaborative learning theory, Vygotskian sociocultural theory, and the well-established role of student-student interactions in L2 acquisition theory (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Despite these wide-ranging justifications for its use, peer feedback conceives many problems in L2 writing classrooms. Liu and Hansen (2002) pointed to such problems as uncertainty of student comments, superficial comments, and inappropriate student interactions, to name only a few. Some studies in ESL contexts even hinted peer feedback may meet with resistance from Asian students (e.g., Mangelsdorf, 1992). Nevertheless, the use of peer feedback is becoming common in EFL Asian settings and empirical research on its effectiveness has started to emerge. Braine (2003), for example, reported Chinese university students in Hong
Kong participated actively in peer feedback activities.

To confirm the benefits and constraints of peer feedback in Japan, it is necessary to apply it more extensively in a Japanese context and to examine how it works with Japanese students. Peer feedback is actually becoming familiar in Japan, and university-level classroom-based research has recently started to appear (e.g., Yakame, 2005). The present study is in line with such emerging empirical research. The previous studies mainly focused on short-term effects of peer feedback by comparing students’ writings before and after the feedback, and they reported incorporations of the peers’ feedback. Besides examining such immediate effects, it is equally important to investigate the classroom use of peer feedback longitudinally. To date, however, little longitudinal research has been conducted examining the use of peer feedback in English writing instruction in Japan.

2. The Present Study

The present study examined how Japanese university students participated in peer feedback over a semester. In a previous study, Hirose (2008) explored how a group of university students perceived peer feedback after their semester-long regular classroom experience and whether they improved their English writing abilities after the course. The students’ scores and total word counts improved for their post-instruction compositions, though not significantly. They perceived the peer feedback activities favorably and most liked reading their partners’ comments as well as reading their partners’ compositions. As a follow-up to this study, it is necessary to examine what actually occurred during peer feedback activities. Thus, the present study aimed to explore the following two research questions:

1. How do Japanese students with no prior peer feedback experience interact with each other during peer feedback activities?
2. What do the students tend to focus on in the compositions in providing peer feedback?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants were 15 university students (1 male and 14 females) in an intact English writing course from October 2006 to February 2007. They were the same fourth-year non-English majors (French, Spanish, German, or Chinese) in the Faculty of Foreign Studies who participated in Hirose (2008).¹ The course was an English writing course that was required only of those who were seeking a teaching certificate of English. All had taken a year-long English writing course previously. Thus, the participants were heterogeneous in terms of major, but they were homogeneous in terms of English proficiency levels and motivation to take the course. Their English levels ranged from intermediate to advanced, with the majority of them belonging to the
high-intermediate level. A pre-course questionnaire ensured that no participants had previously experienced peer feedback activities.

3.2 Class Procedure

The course met once a week for 90 minutes over a semester. For 12 weeks, prior to each class, the participants were required to write a minimum one-paragraph long composition. Each class was conducted entirely in English and was divided into two sections, peer feedback and instruction on English paragraph organization.

The first half of the class time (45 minutes) was spent on peer feedback activities based on the compositions. In every class, they exchanged compositions with partners and experienced both spoken and written feedback activities during pair work. Because they had new partners every class, they had a chance to be paired up with almost all classmates by the end of the semester. In pairs, they filled out and then exchanged a one-page A4-sized feedback sheet with each other. The reader was instructed to underline the topic sentence and the incomprehensible sections directly on the composition. On the feedback sheet itself, the reader was instructed to write what was liked about the composition, what was confusing, and where further details were desired. There was also space for any other comments. These were the only instructions the students received for giving written feedback. After reading the partner’s feedback sheet, each pair was free to talk about any topic that emerged from each other’s compositions and responses. The students spent approximately a quarter of the class time (about 20 minutes) reading partners’ compositions and writing responses, while another quarter was spent providing spoken feedback. After the peer feedback activities, the compositions and feedback sheets were collected, which were returned with teacher feedback in the following class.

The latter half of the class was spent on chapters from the course book (Jimbo & Murto, 1995) that dealt specifically with forms of paragraph organization such as time order, cause and effect, and classification. The 12 chapters were covered in the semester. The class read sample paragraphs and did the given exercises (mostly analyzing paragraphs). Since the book provided possible topics for writing, the students could choose one for homework assignments. They wrote compositions on their chosen topics for the following week using a newly learned paragraph organization form. They were permitted to revise earlier compositions; however, most did not choose to do so. They wrote on new topics every week.

3.3 Data

This paper focuses on the analysis of written feedback data in English, although spoken feedback data were also collected for a larger project. The written feedback data were a total number of 147 feedback sheets the 15 participants wrote in response to their partners’ compositions over the semester. The mean number of sheets per participant was 9.8. The compositions on which feedback was given were also used to supplement the analysis of the
feedback data. The parental compositions had a group mean of 184.9 words (the range of mean length of the compositions was 144.6 to 230.5 words per participant).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

All the written feedback data were read and coded by two raters, a university English instructor and the author. Ratings were made at the level of discourse, not sentence, according to the adapted version of Mendonça and Johnson's (1994) negotiation categories. Mendonça and Johnson examined ESL students' spoken peer feedback interactions in pairs. The negotiations were divided into the following six categories: questions, explanations, restatements, suggestions, grammar corrections, and reactions. All the categories except reactions were from Mendonça and Johnson. Each category, except grammar corrections, was assigned to one of these seven aspects: content, vocabulary, sentence, grammar, paragraph, mechanics, and overall. In order to trace what aspects of compositions facilitated negotiations, the aspect dimension was added for the present analysis.

Since the total number of feedback sheets each participant wrote over the semester varied (the range was 6 to 12 feedback sheets per participant), mean occurrences of categories per sheet were calculated for all the participants. Then the group means were calculated for each item.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do Japanese students with no prior peer feedback experience interact with each other during peer feedback activities?

RQ1 is addressed in light of the six negotiation categories. Table 1 shows the mean occurrence of each category. Per sheet, the participants produced a mean of 79.3 words (range = 48.4–105.5) that encompassed the mean number of 4.68 categories (range = 3.17–6.7). As shown in the table, their interactions were varied in terms of all the negotiation categories. Among the categories, they produced reactions most, followed by questions, explanations (about content), suggestions, restatements, and grammar corrections. Explanations and examples of each category follow in the order of frequency.

1. **Reactions**

   Participants expressed reactions to various aspects of their partners' compositions most frequently ($M = 2.29$; range = 0.6–4.0). They reacted to the content of compositions most ($M = 1.65$; range = 0.5–3.0). The reactions included the readers' impressions of partners' compositions and sympathizing with the partners. The following were typical examples of reactions (they were both counted as one occurrence of reactions). Reading a composition titled "Granada," the partner wrote the following: “I have never heard about Granada before. It is very interesting that there are both Catholic and Islamic cultures in Granada!! If I have a chance to go to Spain, I would like to
visit Granada!” (Participants’ responses quoted in this paper are all left unedited.) Another composition titled “Getting married with comedian” received the following reactions from the partner: “I really liked your essay because your point of view is so original and interesting. I’m also interested in the marriage of comedians recently, so there are many points that I can feel sympathy.” These examples show that reactions were not made merely at the superficial level (e.g., “I like your essay.” or “Your essay is interesting.”), because the readers also elaborated on the appeal of their partners’ compositions.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Paragraph</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Sub-Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restatements</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrections</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions</td>
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<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Total</td>
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<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) Questions

Secondly, participants almost always asked questions about their partners’ compositions \((M = 1.44; \text{range} = 0.6–3.4)\). The questions consisted of the following three types: text-based questions, text-related questions, and confirmation checks. The text-based questions were about what was written. The readers asked these questions when they did not understand the partners’ texts. On the other hand, the text-related questions were asked based on their understanding of the texts. Confirmation checks were made when the readers wanted to confirm their understanding. Among the three types, the text-related questions occurred most frequently \((M = 0.9; \text{range} = 0–2.5)\). For example, reading a composition titled “An au pair work,” in which the writer explained her au pair work, her partner asked the following text-related questions: “Have you ever worked as an au pair before going to Australia? Was there any interview or any exam before working as an au pair?” This example was rated as a question about the composition content (i.e., an au pair).
(3) Explanations
Although not as frequently as asking questions, participants also made explanations by adding related information to the parental compositions \( (M = 0.32; \text{range} = 0-1.27) \). One participant wrote a composition titled “To Go Dutch or Not,” in which she wrote about changing customs of paying bills she observed in China. Reading this composition, the partner explained about customs in Switzerland and Japan based on her own experiences as follows:

In Switzerland, people who invited the guests always pay all. In Switzerland, I have never seen such situations that people split the bill at the restaurant. But here in Japan many people do so. Now I work part-time at the restaurant and I am always asked if guests can split the bill. Some guests just pay for just what they ordered without asking. I don’t know which custom of payment is better... But I don’t like to see such a situation at the cashier.

As this example exemplifies, explanations were partners’ comments driven from the understanding of the compositions. All participants except one added explanations for the semester.

(4) Suggestions
Less frequently than explanations, participants made suggestions on almost all aspects of partners’ compositions \( (M = 0.30; \text{range} = 0-0.78) \). Four participants made no suggestions on any aspect for the whole semester. The following example is a suggestion concerning the whole composition. Reading a two-paragraph composition titled “Television,” the reader suggested adding an explanation sentence early in the composition indicating the number of main points to be addressed: “There are many bad influences on TV, so at the beginning you can say, ‘There are 3 points I want to mention …’ like that. And we can figure out easily how many points there are.”

(5) Restatements
Participants restated or summarized what their partners wrote \( (M = 0.23; \text{range} = 0-0.9) \). The restatements were made at the levels of sentence, paragraph, and beyond paragraph (rated as content). The cases rated as overall referred to pictures drawn based on the understanding of a space order composition, for example. Seven participants made no restatements throughout the semester.

(6) Grammar Corrections
Participants made grammar corrections the least \( (M = 0.10; \text{range} = 0-1.33) \). Most corrections concerned were noun + verb agreement (e.g., companies is \( \rightarrow \) are), tense (e.g., need \( \rightarrow \) needed), or verb complementation (e.g., like study \( \rightarrow \) studying). However, 12 participants never made any grammar corrections for the whole semester. With no explicit teaching given except for several instructions on the feedback sheet, they did not make grammar corrections voluntarily. They were instructed to underline incomprehensible parts, whether grammar related or not, directly on the
compositions. Besides underlining, some readers actually put question marks on the compositions. Grammar corrections were limited to those they gave on the feedback sheet. This manner of correcting might have required confidence, lack of which might have made them hesitant. The participants also knew the teacher would read and give feedback on the compositions. Thus, they might have expected the teacher to correct grammar.

(7) Summary
Concerning RQ1, the findings revealed diverse written interactions between peers. Reactions, not in Mendonça and Johnson’s (1994) categories, occurred most frequently. Although this should be confirmed, this frequency may be characteristic of highly motivated students. Except for categories of high frequency such as reactions and questions, there seemed to be consistent individual patterns in other categories. In these categories, there were cases of no occurrences depending on students. The present study found very few cases of inappropriate interactions that Liu and Hansen (2002) pointed out as a conceivable problem of peer feedback. False suggestions and grammar corrections made by the reader could have caused inappropriate interactions if they were accepted by the writer. However, such interactions, if they occurred, were remedied by the teacher feedback afterwards. Low occurrences of suggestions and grammar corrections might have been a result of no specific instructions to improve the compositions.

4.2 Research Question 2 (RQ2): What do the students tend to focus on in the compositions in providing peer feedback?
As Table 1 shows, participants focused most on content, followed by paragraph elements, vocabulary, and grammar. Explanations with examples follow in this order, and sentence, mechanics, and overall aspects are dismissed from discussions because of very low frequency.

(1) Content
Content was the most focused on aspect of compositions (M = 3.16; range = 2.2–4.1) and induced the most varied feedback in terms of the negotiation categories. One participant wrote a composition titled “Cats,” in which she challenged the common belief that cats were not as faithful to human beings as dogs by describing her cat’s very faithful behavior. Her partner asked, “Do you hate dogs? Tell me more about your cat.” This “Cats” composition also elicited reactions from another partner: “Although we have no any reason to believe that cats are not friendly nor faithful to human like dogs, so far I have believed the common mistaken notion. Your essay entirely changed my notion about cats.”

What helped the participants most focus on content? The wide variety of topics the homework compositions dealt with undoubtedly attracted readers’ attention. The compositions embodied their diverse knowledge and experience, ranging from “The longest day in my life” about the writer’s one-day trip from Toronto, Canada to Guanajuato, Mexico, to “My turning
point,” in which the writer discussed her one-year stay in China and her decision to study at graduate school upon graduation. Furthermore, they almost always had a partner with a different major. A French major student, for example, had a chance to read a composition on Chinese onomatopoeia written by a Chinese major student. Through reading and giving feedback on each other’s compositions, they had chances to get to know each other and learn new information from each other’s first-hand experiences, often those in foreign countries.

(2) Paragraph Elements

Paragraph elements were the second most focused on aspect of peers’ compositions \( (M = 0.48; \text{range} = 0–1.75) \). All participants except one gave feedback concerning paragraph elements. They caught the reader’s attention and elicited not only reactions \( (M = 0.40) \) but also suggestions. Reactions were mostly positive, such as, “You use ‘time order’ effectively so that reader can understand about the history” (the “Granada” composition). Suggestions included the following feedback advising the writer to delete sentences because they were unrelated to the rest of the paragraph: “I think you don’t need first two sentences because this paragraph is about your most favorite food ice cream.”

The participants learned about English paragraphs (i.e., the topic sentence, paragraph organization and related vocabulary, such as time words, comparison words and phrases) in the other half of the class, and they read and analyzed model paragraphs given in the course book. It seems that reading peers’ compositions, which were not as well organized as the model paragraphs, gave them numerous opportunities to raise their consciousness toward these elements and to use their newly learned knowledge. It was instructive for them to be exposed to even poorly organized paragraphs, as well as well-organized ones written by their own peers.

(3) Vocabulary

Vocabulary was the third most focused on aspect \( (M = 0.45; \text{range} = 0.1–1.4) \) and was taken up mostly in questions. The readers asked the meanings of unknown or unfamiliar words or phrases in peers’ compositions. Examples were “What is ‘convivial meeting’?” “I didn’t understand ‘chorizos’.” (text-based questions), and “I apologized to her precious does this mean ‘very much’?” (confirmation check).

(4) Grammar

Less frequently than vocabulary, grammar was focused on either by corrections or questions \( (M = 0.30; \text{range} = 0–1.75) \). Grammar did not receive much attention. In fact, six participants never gave feedback on grammar for the entire semester.

(5) Summary

Regarding RQ2, the results found that participants all focused on the content of partners’
compositions most. Given approximately 20 minutes for reading the partner’s composition and writing comments, the reader’s attention was focused on content, and, as discussed in the previous section, content facilitated the most varied negotiations. These findings seem to imply that the students used the written peer feedback session for communicating, not for finding mistakes in grammar, vocabulary choice, or mechanics (spelling). They attempted to understand what the writer wanted to say and then to write what they thought about it in response. In their investigation of ESL students’ spoken negotiations, Mendonça and Johnson (1994) found that the students tended to concentrate on the ideas expressed in the compositions and rarely made grammar corrections. The present study seems to provide similar findings. However, what caused such tendencies seems to be different between the two studies. Mendonça and Johnson speculated the tendency to focus on ideas derived from the teacher’s instruction to do so, whereas in this study the students focused on ideas with no such teacher instruction.

Except for content, there seemed to be individual differences in what they focused on. Regardless of which compositions they read, for example, some always tended to pay attention to vocabulary words, while others never focused on them. There is a possibility that they raised questions about other aspects of compositions during the following spoken feedback session, where the reader could solve the questions on the spot and receive immediate feedback from the writer. Thus, the spoken feedback interactions should be also examined to confirm whether they focused on content while limiting focus on grammar, vocabulary choice, or spelling in peers’ compositions.

5. Conclusion

The present study revealed that (a) peer feedback interactions covered multiple negotiations, especially reacting to and asking questions about numerous aspects of peers’ compositions; (b) the students focused most on composition content; (c) they learned to incorporate course content (= paragraph elements) into their feedback; and (d) there were also individual styles in their feedback patterns. These findings implied peer feedback provided the students abundant chances to read and write for communication and to learn from each other both academically and socially. They certainly give explanations for the students’ own highly positive perceptions of reading peers’ feedback as well as their compositions (Hirose, 2008). They suggest that peer feedback is a promising way for students to work collaboratively and benefit from each other’s ideas. Receiving peers’ reactions or questions may not have directly led them to improve their writing abilities. Undoubtedly, however, having their compositions commented on by their new partners every week exerted favorable influences on them as they wrote their compositions.

Active student-student interactions found in this paper could have been derived from several factors. First, the heterogeneity of the participant group may have played an unignorable role in facilitating interactions. Closely related to heterogeneity, the compositions on which feedback was
given provided diverse information sufficient for such interactions to occur. The participants’ relatively high English proficiency also enabled them to easily engage in written interactions with each other. Future studies should confirm the results of this study with other participant groups.

This was a small-scale study and more classroom-based research is required concerning the effects of peer feedback. From pedagogical viewpoints, many other ways of peer feedback ought to be devised to facilitate student-student interactions that will increasingly aid students in becoming more skillful peer reviewers and be used to maximize its success in EFL classrooms.

Notes

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1 More than half of the participants had spent a year abroad, in such countries as Australia, Canada, China, France, Spain and Mexico, and often stayed an extra year in the Japanese university. Despite a small class size, even the same major group consisted of students from different years.

2 When the total number of participating students was uneven, the class had one group of three.

3 Since the participants did the spoken peer feedback immediately after reading the partners’ feedback sheets, the spoken interactions were expected to partly overlap the written interactions.

4 The overall aspect was assigned to unspecified cases (e.g., “Your essay is very good.”).

References


