Wong, L.-H. et al. (Eds.) (2013). Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on Computers in Education. Indonesia: Asia-Pacific Society for Computers in Education

Choosing sides: Student preferences for peer vs. expert feedback

Emily PETIT*& Wen-chi Vivian WU
Dept.of English Language, Literature and Linguistics, Providence University, Taiwan
**emilyjpetit@gmail.com*

Abstract: This qualitative study examined two issues with regard to English as Foreign Language (EFL) writing by analyzingthe contents of student online writing as well as the feedback and suggestions provided by both the experts and their peers. Twenty seven university students majoring in English participated in a one-semester-long study carried out across two private four-year institutions in central Taiwan. The students wrote essays based on news articles read and discussed in class, then submitted their essays for review by a group of semi-anonymous peers and experts. Students then were encouraged to adopt suggestions of their reviewers in creating a second draft of their essay. The experts consisted of the two instructors at the two institutions, as well as qualified colleagues and graduate students. The peers in this study were not classmates but rather students at the other participating institution. The two issues this study focused on were the numbers of adopted suggestions from peers and experts, as well as the accuracy of those suggestions, in an attempt to draw useful conclusions about how students value their various sources of feedback. Results show that students prefer expert to peer suggestions, but the data regarding suggestion accuracy is inconclusive.

Keywords: peer review, peer feedback, CMC, student preferences

1. Introduction

Peer review has long been accepted as a valuable, and valid, strategy for teaching language skills in L1 classrooms (Nystrand& Brandt, 1989), and in recent decades has enjoyed a growing popularity in L2 environments as well. As far back as the mid 90's researchers have been reporting the usefulness of face to face peer review for improving overall English writing quality in ESOL classrooms. Mendonça and Johnson (1994) and Paulus (1999) both employed face to face peer review in tertiary ESOL contexts, in classrooms whose students had widely different language, education, and personal backgrounds. Both studies found that draft quality significantly improved when students received globally-oriented reviews from their peers and were able to revise accordingly.

In concert with the progress of technology, more recent studies have examined the impact of computer mediated communication (CMC) on peer review. Liu and Sadler (2003) reported on a quasi-experiment in which two university freshman English composition classrooms, comprised of both native and non-native English speakers, were assigned to engage in traditional (face to face) or CMC (both synchronous and asynchronous) peer review activities. Comparisons were drawn with regard to the volume of comments made in the various modes, the types of comments made, and students' general satisfaction with the activity. The results were mixed. The students who had engaged in face to face peer review generally felt better about the experience, stated that they understood more clearly why their peers had made the comments they had, and their conversations were generally more globally focused (i.e., less focused on line edits). The CMC group of students generated a larger volume of comments of all kinds, including more global comments, then their analog counterparts. There were complaints, though, about the technology – the students found the software employed for asynchronous reviews unwieldy. A decade later, when students are more tech-savvy, and the tech itself is generally more intuitive, we may be able to focus on the evidence that a CMC mode for peer review exhibits no major deficiencies when compared to a traditional, face to face mode.

The purpose of the present study is to assess student preferences for sources of review, and the relative validity of those sources. Chinese L2 speakers of English engaged in CMC (computer

mediated communication) review sessions in which they uploaded an essay to a class website and received reviews from anonymous experts and anonymous peers. This study seeks to ascertain if students choose to adopt suggestions from one source over another when revising their essay, and analyzes the correctness of those two sources in hopes of finding useful implications for pedagogy.Many peer review studies use teacher review in tandem (for instance, Paulus, 1999), and others have used experimental procedures to examine the usefulness of peer review as compared to expert review (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). Few, though, have looked into student preferences for one or the other. Thus the present study asks the following two questions, embedded in an asynchronous CMC context:

1) When students are given feedback by both anonymous experts and anonymous peers, what is the rate of adoption of suggestions between the two sources?
2) How correct were peer suggestions for revision as compared to expert suggestions of revision, assuming that the expert suggestions were correct?

2. Research Design

2.1 Context

The study took place over one semester and across two tertiary education institutions in central Taiwan. The two universities had a focus on teacher preparation (TP) and general education (GE) respectively, and one English composition class at each university participated. The instructors of the two classes were experienced EFL teachers and researchers, and they collaborated to ensure consistency of structure and content across their classes. Naturally each instructor brought their personal philosophies and nuances to the course, but the general layout of both courses was as follows.

Students were informed at the beginning of the semester of the nature of the cross-institutional review activities they would be engaging in, and were coached in performing globally-oriented written peer review. News articles were then read and discussed in class, and students were assigned to write reflection essays based on those articles. Guidance and prompts were provided so that students' onus was shifted from idea generation to essay production. Once students completed their essays, they uploaded them to a class website and the reviewing process began. Each student was assigned a numerical designation to preserve anonymity, and was directed at two or three essays written by students at the other participating university. Expert reviewers, culled from among the qualified acquaintance of the two instructor-researchers, picked their own usernames and were similarly directed at two or three student essays. All reviewers, student and expert alike, were provided with the same holistic rubric against which to judge the essays they read. Students, after receiving reviews from, on average, one or two experts and two or three peers, revised their essays and uploaded their second drafts. This process took place twice for two different news articles.

2.2 Participants

The participants in this study were all English majors, mostly female and between the ages of nineteen and twenty. They were attending one of two participating universities in central Taiwan, one general education (GE) university, and one teacher preparatory (TP) university. The students at the TP university numbered 20 and the composition course they were taking was required. They were all sophomores. The GEuniversity students were fewer, only 15, juniors, and their composition course was an elective. However, a total of only 14 of the TP students and 13 of the GE students completed all four of the required drafts, thus the total participants in this study are 27.

2.3 Data Analysis

The essays and reviews were collected from an online platform, especially designed for this across-institutionalanonymous peer and expert review and analyzed by a qualified graduate student. Suggestions made by peers and experts were counted and qualitatively analyzed for correctness by

comparison with the text. Then second drafts were compared to first drafts and to revision suggestions to ascertain which, and whose, suggestions were adopted.

3. Findings and Discussion

Question 1. When students are given feedback by both anonymous experts and anonymous peers, what is the rate of adoption of suggestions between the two sources?

The results of the analysis of rate of adoption of suggestions show that the students in the study placed a slightly higher value on the suggestions of experts as compared to the suggestions of their peers. In the first round of writing-review-revision, it was found that students from the TP university worked 18 out of total 75, or 24%, of expert suggestions into their drafts, whereas they applied 21 out of 118 or only 17.8% of suggestions made by their peers. Similarly, students at the GEuniversity adopted a higher number but lower percentage of peer suggestions as opposed to expert suggestions in the first round of writing. Out of total 102 expert suggestions, they adopted 41, or 40.2%, and out of total 151 peer suggestions they adopted total 49, or 32.45%.

Table 1 – First Writing Cycle Rate of Adoption of Peer vs. Expert Suggestions

	Peer suggestions			Expert suggestions		
	Total	Adopted	%	Total	Adopted	%
TP	118	21	17.8%	75	18	24.0%
GE	151	49	32.5%	102	41	40.2%

TP = Teacher Prep university students GE = General Education university students

These trends gained strength in the second writing cycle, suggesting that students found their peers' reviews significantly less helpful than those provided by the experts. The TP students adopted 29 of 88 or 33% of the experts' suggestions but a meager 5 of 112 or 4.5% of their peers' suggestions. The GE students adopted 50 of 132 or 37.9% of the experts' suggestions but only 39 of 136 or 28.7% of their peers' suggestions.

Table 2 – Second Writing Cycle Rate of Adoption of Peer vs. Expert Suggestions

	Peer suggestions			Expert suggestions		
	Total	Adopted	%	Total	Adopted	%
TP	112	5	4.5%	29	88	33.0%
GE	39	136	28.7%	50	132	37.9%

TP = Teacher Prep university students GE = General Education university students

A number of factors must be taken into account when interpreting these numbers. For one, most students received more peer reviews than expert reviews, which accounts for the greater volume of peer-sourced suggestions total, and therefore the greater volume (although not greater proportion) of peer-sourced suggestions adopted. Second, it is worth noting that a qualitative assessment of the various sources reveals that peers tended to leave more grammatical, line-level suggestions – much easier to adopt than the global, discourse-level suggestions which the experts tended to provide. Finally, differences between the two student groups may be partially explained by differing proficiency levels. The TP students, although slightly younger, were judged to be rather more generally proficient in English by both the instructors. This may be the reason for their consistently cool enthusiasm for their cross-institutional peers' suggestions; they felt that their own judgments were more valid than those of the less proficient GE students.

The fact, however, that both the more and the less proficient groups of students seemed to prefer the suggestions of experts to the suggestions of their peers may carry implications for pedagogy. Much has been made of the benefits of peer review, but would students perhaps rather receive instructor reviews? How can the usefulness of peer review be combined with the face validity of instructor review? One option is to stress to students the purposes for using peer review: to develop critical thinking skills via writing reviews (Trautmann, 2007; Li, Liu &Steckelberg, 2010); to obtain the general advantage of having more than one (e.g., more than just the instructor's) opinion on a piece of writing (Cho & MacArthur, 2010); to stress the communicative nature of writing via

interaction with readers (Mendonça& Johnson, 1994). It has been shown that peer review training is important in maximizing the quality of reviews given and student willingness to adopt those reviews (Min, 2006), but it may be equally important to ensure that students understand not just the how, but the why – what peer review is intended to accomplish.

Question 2. How correct were peer suggestions for revision as compared to expert suggestions, assuming that the expert suggestions were correct?

The data in answer to this question are highly mixed and permit little in the way of conclusions. It was found that, in the first round of writing, the GE students – who, it must be recalled, were the less proficient peers – submitted 103 correct suggestions for revision out of a total 118 suggestions. Therefore their rate of correctness was 87.3%, an acceptably high percentage. This stands in strange contrast to the TP students, of whose 151 suggestions for revision in the first writing cycle only 94, or 62.3%, were correct. In the second writing cycle, the two groups of students' positions were switched. The GE university students submitted 79 correct suggestions out of a total 112, or 70.5%, whereas the TP university students' rate of correctness rose to 77.9%, with 106 correct suggestions out of total 136. Finally, the experts' suggestions were nearly 100% correct across both writing cycles. These findings are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 – Rate of Correctness of Suggestions for Revision Between Both Student Groups over Both Writing Cycles

	First Writing Cycle			Second Writing Cycle		
	Total	Correct	%	Total	Correct	%
TP	151	94	62.3%	136	106	77.9%
GE	118	103	87.3%	112	79	70.5%
Experts	162	161	99.4%	234	227	97.0%

TP = Teacher Prep university students GE = General Education university students

While it is difficult to discuss implications for pedagogy aside from a general conclusion that students may be right to put greater faith in the suggestions of experts, interpretation of the data may offer its own suggestions. It is posited that these numbers may have been skewed due to differences in student commenting priorities. For instance, an impressionistic analysis of the reviews shows that the less proficient group, perhaps feeling less sure of themselves when commenting on global concerns, may have emphasized simple grammatical fixes and line edits in the first round of performing peer review. By sticking to their comfort zone, they ensured that a large majority of their suggestions were correct. The more proficient students, on the other hand, seem to have tried from the start to focus, as instructed in their peer review training, on global concerns, and with some success. In the second round of writing the less proficient students began to stray from their comfort zone and make globally-oriented suggestions, while the more proficient students, having already made a start, simply continued to improve. Thus it may prove useful for both student reviewers and review receivers to have extensive training and practice in offering globally-oriented review suggestions, so that they feel more comfortable both giving and receiving reviews once peer review activities begin.

4. Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited by size (only 27 participants), and by that lack of perfect control of all variables which is collateral to a context involving multiple institutions and instructors. Further, while students were encouraged – and taught – to focus their reviews on global, discourse-level issues, both student and expert reviewers still made, with varying degrees of frequency, suggestions for grammatical and line-level edits. The present study has not been equipped to differentiate between on-target (globally-oriented) suggestions and off-target (line-level) suggestions. Future studies may explore this avenue in greater detail to ascertain whether such variance in the data has a significant effect on what conclusions may be drawn therefrom. Future studies may also consider varying the foci of peer and expert reviews, varying the chronological order of reviewers, or applying an experimental treatment in which one group is thoroughly informed of the empirically documented

benefits of peer review, as hinted at above. Finally, future studies may be able to illuminate numerical trends via supplemental qualitative interview data.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the NSC of the Republic of China, Taiwan, for financially supporting this research under contract No. NSC 101-2511-S-126-007.

References

Chang, C. (2012) Peer review via three modes in an EFL writing course.*Computers and Composition, 29*, 63-78

Cho, K.& MacArthur, C. (2010) Student revision with peer and expert reviewing. *Learning and Instruction, 20*, 328-338

Li, L., Liu, X.,&Steckelberg, A. L. (2010) Assessor or assessee: How student learning improves by giving and receiving peer feedback. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 41*(3), 525-536

Liu, J.& Sadler, R. W. (2003) The effect and affect of peer review in electronic versus traditional modes on L2 writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 2*, 193-227

Mendonça, C. O.,& Johnson, K. E. (1994) Peer Review Negotiations: Revision Activities in ESL Writing Instruction. *TESOL Quarterly, 28*(4), 745-769

Min, H. T. (2006). The effects of trained peer review on EFL students' revision types and writing quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 15*, 118-141.

Nystrand, M.,& Brandt, D. (1989).Response to writing as a context for learning to write.*Writing and response: theory, practice, and research*. Anson, Chris M. ed. USA: National Council of Teachers of English.

Paulus, T. M. (1999) Theeffect of peer and teacher feedback on student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 8*(3), 265-289

Trautmann, N. M. (2007) Interactive learning through web-mediated peer review of science reports. *Association for Educational Communications and Technology*, published online 4 December 2007.