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Cross Campus Peer Feedback on Writing using a Web 2.0 Resource: Initial Findings

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Abstract: With the ever increasing use of web 2.0 resources in support of English as an International Language (EIL) teaching, the increase in learner online collaborative / social learning necessitates research to enhance our understanding of this form of activity. This study therefore investigated a specific case of EIL learners providing peer feedback on the writing of other EIL learners through a Web 2.0 resource. Anonymous asynchronous nonreciprocal feedback was collected from students in three Taiwanese universities participating in a cross campus activity commenting on peer narrative compositions posted on the *Storybird* internet site. The aims were to ascertain what kinds of feedback were provided and whether it varied depending on the apparent proficiency of the person whose writing was being responded to. The writers were of two levels of proficiency (freshman and senior). Results from qualitative and quantitative analysis show a rich variety of kinds of response. In general the focus was on the content more than the form and included a considerable amount of genuinely communicative response to the message in the story being read. There were a number of differences in both the quantity and quality of the feedback given to each group of writers, which with the less proficient group often exhibited signs of politeness strategies such as starting with a positive comment to soften later negative comments, using more positive than negative comments, and establishment of an interpersonal tone with explicit use of first and second person pronouns. The findings suggest that this type of feedback is potentially valuable to complement conventional teacher feedback, and that the cutting edge technology of Web 2.0 can be valuably integrated into the formal curriculum for EIL learning.

Keywords: writing (composition), comment (feedback), EIL, peer evaluation, online learning

1. Introduction

The benefits of Web 2.0 for education, including foreign language learning, have been widely advocated (e.g. Luo, 2013; Wang and Vasquez, 2012). Although a good deal of empirical research is actively ongoing, there remain many specific backgrounds and levels of learner and many types of language task where we still have insufficient evidence to be able to say with confidence even what actually occurs, let alone how effective it is, when learners engage in language-related activity through this medium. The current study therefore aims to add to our knowledge by investigating one such specific case - the kinds of feedback provided by university level EIL non-majors in Taiwan to stories written by peers of more than one proficiency level.

There is a continuing history of studying feedback (aka response, review, evaluation, assessment) given to students about what they write. Traditionally this includes considering not only teacher feedback but also peer feedback and self-feedback, and latterly automated computer feedback, provided either during the writing process or after a final draft has been produced. Research begins with analyzing what kinds of feedback these different sources give, on various dimensions such as corrective versus non-corrective (Ferris, 2012) and many others (e.g. Ellis, 2009).

Most of this research has been on handwritten compositions where feedback is given on the hardcopy, often in a classroom setting. However, where the composition is produced and revised electronically, there is the opportunity for more and more writing, even in the context of classroom instructed learning, to be not just written but also delivered electronically and to receive feedback through the same medium, whether from a teacher or from peers (Ware and O'Dowd, 2008) or an online writing centre (Rosalia, 2010) or from other readers. Indeed increasingly compositions are more widely published or shared in some way online via blogs (Vurdien, 2011), wikis (Woo et al., 2013; Pifarre and Fisher, 2011), *Moodle* (Diez-Bedmar and Perez-Paredes, 2012) or websites designed for this purpose, such as *iLap* (Lu and Law, 2012) or *Storybird*, which is the subject of the current study. In this way compositions are liberated from the classroom environment and available for feedback from anyone

who is licensed to access the site and chooses to read them at any time, including teachers, peers and complete strangers on the WWW, who may include native speakers of the target language (and collaborative rather than single-authored writing is also facilitated).

This sort of asynchronous computer mediated (CMC) feedback on writing has been relatively little studied and while we know of a few studies close to ours, none have precisely the same parameters. For example they involve peer feedback on email correspondence rather than compositions (Vinagre and Munoz, 2011), or on asynchronous discussion (Ware and O'Dowd, 2008), or they involve feedback from peers who are native speakers of the target language of the writers rather than other learners of it (Li, 2013), of from teachers of writing (Alvarez et al., 2011). Although these studies suggest something of the kind of feedback provided, they do not throw light on whether peers differentiate between writers of different levels. For our task and situation, the first requirement, as we perceive it, is to investigate simply what kind of feedback is given in this medium by genuine learner peers, and how far it resembles feedback found in other studies, including of non-internet published compositions, and whether peers are sensitive to different kinds of writers. From such a base one can then progress to other crucial issues such as the effectiveness of the feedback.

2. Research questions

2.1. What kinds of unprompted feedback in English do Taiwanese university students give in online response to English compositions by unknown non-English major peer learners?

2.2. Is their feedback different depending on the level of writing proficiency exhibited in the compositions?

3. Method

3.1. The context and participants

The study took place with cooperation of three Taiwanese universities. We gathered two sets of stories written by Taiwanese students and published in *Storybird*, each with feedback via *Storybird* from other Taiwanese students, all in English. All participants were native speakers of Chinese, of ages ranging between 18 and 25.

The story writers came from two non-English major groups which participated. Those taking the Children's Literature Appreciation and Creation course (CLAC) were seniors so reasonably proficient in English. Those taking the Oral Training course (OT) were freshmen so of lower English proficiency.

The students giving feedback on the stories were other Taiwanese students of rather varied English proficiency levels. Some were from the same university as the writers, others from other universities.

3.2. Procedure

25 CLAC and 31 OT students each wrote a story individually online in *Storybird* as part of course requirements. No suggestions were made as to what topics to write about, or for what audience, except that if they could not think of an imaginative topic they should write introductions about themselves. In fact the OT story writers fell back on this option quite often, and generally wrote shorter stories than CLAC students. The teacher intention in getting them to do this was to practice their general English writing skills, in narrative genre. The students knew they were going to get feedback via *Storybird* from other Taiwanese students whom they did not know.

The pool of students giving feedback had access to *Storybird* to respond to whatever stories they wanted to from OT or CLAC writers. In fact they did not all respond to all stories, and indeed some only responded to CLAC stories, some only to OT stories. These students were asked to respond in their own time out of class. Participation was not obligatory and no incentives were offered. The respondents were not prompted as to which stories to respond to nor trained in how to respond, since we were interested in their spontaneous feedback, and they were not told that some stories were from students of different English proficiency from others.

3.3. Data Analysis

The feedback was downloaded and stored in Word files, where it was analysed by the researcher repeatedly, using the Comment function to record the analysis. First, 656 distinct chunks were identified which appeared to constitute distinct pieces of feedback information. Next, these chunks were each multiply coded in an initial coding for key aspects of the content of the feedback. For example the chunk *You have misspelled some words* was coded LANG SP NG U, capturing that it was

Table 1: Incidence of different categories of feedback, standardized per 1000 words of feedback.

		Group of writers responded to		
Feedback category		CLAC	OT	Overall
Evaluative position with respect to (some aspect of) the story	Description (Non-evaluation)	10.0	9.5	9.75
	Positive Evaluation	27.5	32.6	30.05
	Negative Evaluation	26.3	18.3	22.3
Aspect of story targeted	Language, including:	11.9	18.3	15.1
	Grammar	4.7	5.8	5.25
	Spelling	3.1	0.7	1.9
	Vocabulary	1.6	1.0	1.3
	Fluency	0.0	2.0	1.0
	Content, including:	56.3	52.3	54.3
	Part of story only	4.1	4.8	4.45
	Plot of story	11.9	2.0	6.95
	Other aspects of the stories:			
	Genre	1.3	7.5	4.4
	Simplicity	4.1	2.4	3.25
	Shortness	5.9	3.1	4.5
	Style	2.2	1.0	1.6
	Specific item	3.4	1.7	2.55
	Pictures	3.1	3.4	3.25
Reported effect on feedback giver	Affective	4.7	2.7	3.7
	Cognitive	6.9	7.8	7.35
Non-declarative formulations used	Suggestion	17.5	12.9	15.2
	Comment	13.8	17.3	15.55
	Hope	1.3	6.5	3.9
	Thanks	1.3	2.7	2.0
	Greeting	0.0	1.7	0.85
	Question	1.6	2.0	1.8
Explicit reference to participants in communication	Feedback giver (I)	26.6	29.2	27.9
	Writer (you)	27.5	53.7	40.6
	Audience in general	2.2	4.8	3.5
Communicative response to writer's message		18.8	29.6	24.2

a negative evaluation statement targeting an aspect of the language, the spelling (though not pointing to a specific item), with explicit reference to the writer. *I hope that you have a satisfied career in the*

future was coded HOPE I U CM, capturing that it is an expression of hope with genuinely communicative force, mentioning both the reviewer and the story writer explicitly. This coding was progressively refined as the data was gone over repeatedly.

Initially it was planned to use one of the feedback classifications from the literature, but it soon became apparent that those were unsuitable as they mostly dealt only with corrective feedback, which was a small minority of the feedback in this study. Hence we adopted a more ethnographic approach and developed from the data itself a set of codes which seemed to capture the main themes expressed. The resultant classification is wide-ranging over linguistic and non-linguistic areas (see the categories in Table 1). For quantitative reporting, since the amount of feedback was different for each of the two groups of stories, frequencies are presented standardized per 1000 words of feedback.

4. Results

A number of results stand out. First, the amount of feedback providing language correction, common in many studies of feedback on writing, is relatively small. As Table 1 shows, positive attitudes are expressed more often than negative ones (which are implied by correction), and instances of feedback on core areas of language such as grammar and vocabulary are far outnumbered by those on content and other matters. Furthermore, there was a considerable amount of communicative feedback, in the sense of response to the actual message conveyed by the writer rather than to the language or coherence of storyline etc.

Second, there are some clear effects of the two groups of story writers. Stories by more proficient CLAC writers received feedback from between 0 and 41 people (average 15.3 per story), and the amount of feedback was on average 517 words per story. By contrast the less proficient OT stories attracted feedback from between 0 and 11 people (average only 3 per story), and the average length of feedback was only 95 words per story. The number of words written by each person giving a response was only slightly less for OT stories, however: 32 on average versus 34 for CLAC. Hence the key difference is in how many people chose to respond to stories from the two sources rather than how much feedback each person who did respond wrote. We speculate that, left to their own choice, in contrast with most studies in the literature where they are required to respond, the respondents in our study opened some OT stories and thought them too simple or full of errors to be worth commenting on so closed them without responding. CLAC stories on the other hand attracted their interest more.

There are also clear differences in the type of feedback, based on our analysis of its content (Table 1). One notable difference is in the evaluation. There is slightly more evaluation overall of the CLAC stories, but what is more marked is the difference in polarity. While the amount of positive and negative evaluation of CLAC stories was more or less the same, OT stories received considerably more positive than negative evaluation. This is clearly not because the OT stories were actually better, but presumably reflects a wish to encourage what were detectably weaker students. What is not reflected by the table is that also in general in the feedback given by each person a positive point was mentioned first, before negative ones, with the same softening effect.

Another key area of difference is in the areas focused on. One might have expected considerably more attention to the language of the less proficient OT stories, and indeed language feedback is 50% greater than that given to the CLAC stories. However, it remains little compared with feedback on content and is largely given at a general level, with few specific items identified, and only slightly greater attention given to grammar. The greater feedback on genre could be due to the fact that many OT stories turned out to be self-presentations rather than stories as such. Furthermore, OT stories receive considerably more communicative response than CLAC ones, suggesting a wish by the feedback givers to demonstrate to OT writers that it was possible to engage with the message conveyed by their texts despite the deficiencies in the language used to convey it. Finally, OT response is characterized by far more explicit reference to the OT writer by the respondent than occurred for CLAC, so conveys to the writers reading the feedback a much greater feeling of personal attention.

By contrast CLAC writers attracted more negative evaluation than OT ones, though this is directed more towards aspects of the content, such as the story plot, than to the language. CLAC writers were also to some extent criticized for writing too briefly or simply, perhaps because the feedback givers recognized that their level of writing ability allowed them potentially to write at a higher level than some of them did.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This is a small, exploratory study, but nevertheless highly suggestive. The focus on content rather than language form bears witness to the impact of the 'content creation' focus of Web 2.0 in general, while the incidence of fully communicative responses is consistent with its 'social rapport' aspect (McLoughlin and Lee, 2007). Most studies of feedback (whether on paper compositions or online text) are, explicitly or by implication, conducted in conditions where corrective feedback is required or expected, and hence we do not see this focus. Ware and O'Dowd (2008) however did include an 'e-partner' condition where respondents were left free, and report a similar finding to ours that when peers are not instructed to respond on matters of language form, they very often choose not to. There seems little doubt that the nature of the medium, along with the fact that participants were not in our study directed in what feedback to give, allowed or encouraged the participants to give feedback in a much richer and more humanistic way than the traditional narrow range of largely negative evaluative and language oriented feedback. The feedback often feels closer to a social exchange or conversation (Danis, 1987) than an educational response, and far from mimicking "teachers' feedback, which was mostly teacher-centred, <and> made students passive and dependent on teachers." (Lee, 2008: 144). The following example of a complete piece of feedback to a CLAC story illustrates how the respondents were often able to combine feedback on content and language with elements of communicative response to the message: "You use simple words successfully to show us the great family's love!! It is very close to our daily lives because sometimes when there is a new member in our family, some parents would feel so happy that ignore their children without the intention. But actually parents love their all children very much from their deep heart! But maybe you can mention the new member's relationship with the boy later in the story. I think that it would become more complete!!"

The differences between responses to writers of different proficiency levels also show students' ability to vary response according to the writer, where they choose to respond, which is a characteristic also of expert teacher response (Vandercook, 2012). Although language issues are predictably more targeted with less than with more proficient writers, there seems to be an attempt to encourage weaker writers by also emphasising positive aspects, targeting content more than language, and engaging in more communicative response with a strong interpersonal tone than with more proficient writers. In effect this is a form of what has been termed mitigation in the traditional feedback literature (Treglia, 2009).

In conclusion, there is much more work to do in this area. Interviews would be valuable to confirm some of the interpretations we have offered. The impact on the story writers needs to be investigated, such as how satisfied they were with the feedback, what they implemented as a result, and of course whether they benefited, e.g. in being encouraged to write more or in improvement of their writing products. Some traditional studies have suggested that in fact it is specific feedback on language points that is most expected and effective (e.g. Sweeney, 1999), hence it remains to be seen whether the rather different focus of unprompted Web 2.0 mediated feedback in fact also has learning benefit. The impact on the respondents can also be investigated. Their English was also far from perfect, but does it in any way improve through this sort of activity? Topics like this have been researched in the traditional feedback literature, but are as yet largely untouched in the online Web 2.0 medium for non-native speakers. The challenge for Web 2.0 at university level remains whether such EIL peer interaction provides a "means to link informal and recreational writing with formal and academic writing." (Godwin-Jones, 2008:7).

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