Investigating changes in peer feedback

Jennie Roloff Rothman
English for Liberal Arts Program
International Christian University

Peer feedback is a controversial, yet often used tool in the writing review classroom; however, its popularity in the EFL context continues to grow with each year. Most research has focused on whether or not it is effective rather than on what it looks like, or how students develop their feedback skills over time. This study investigates this topic by introducing a specific method of peer review training. Preliminary results show that the student feedback does change, and primarily in a positive sense, over time. It also supports training for students, but it remains unclear whether this particular training method was effective.

"Peer feedback is the notion...that knowledge is essentially a socially justified belief," (Carson & Nelson, 1994).

A key part of process writing since the early 1980's is the concept of incorporating peer feedback into the act of writing. It manifested itself in L1 contexts in many ways, including classrooms (Bruffee, 1984; Sengupta, 1998; Stanley, 1992) and through the creation of writing centers (Harris, 1990; North, 1985) and, in more recent decades, has expanded its appeal within the field of second language teaching (Berg, 1999; Min, 2005, 2006; Rollinson, 2005). This social activity involves students reviewing the work of a peer in some sort of learning environment and giving comments and suggestions on the work at hand. It may occur in the students' L1 or in the L2.

Its popularity in EFL/ESL has grown for a variety of reasons. Giving this form of feedback in the L2 supports the immediate development of language skills (Hyland, 2003), allows students to gauge whether they have communicated effectively, and promotes the development of critical thinking and evaluation abilities (Leki, 1990; Min, 2005, 2006; Lam, 2012). This allows writers to deepen their understanding of the reader's point of view (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Hyland, 2003). Additionally, the flexibility of this task allows it to be done anywhere and in any manner, be it verbal, written or via technology. The leveled playing field of peer feedback also allows students to admit to each other, rather than to a teacher, that they are unable to do or cannot understand part of the writing task in an environment which is low stress and unthreatening (Harris, 1980, 1995; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Leki, 1990; Sommers, 2002). Finally, a benefit that cannot be overemphasized is the fact that peer feedback relieves the teacher of the pressure to control the feedback environment freeing them up to be facilitators, not only in the development of writers' abilities, but in the creation of a supportive environment for knowledge to be freely exchanged (Carson & Nelson, 1994; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994).

Despite the numerous advantages to incorporating peer feedback into the L2 writing classroom, its effectiveness remains somewhat controversial. Scholars have identified a lack of student ability to evaluate writing deeply (Ferris, 2003; Cheng & Warren, 2009) student preference for teacher feedback, and distrust of comments from their peers (Leki, 1991;

Lockhart & Ng, 1993, 1995) as reasons to avoid the use of this activity. Even more confusing, there is evidence to suggest cultural background may have both positive and negative impacts upon perceptions of peer feedback. Students in Chinese contexts tend to be reluctant to criticize others or see advice of their peers as less useful (Cheng & Warren, 2009; Leki, 1990; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1995), while students in Japan have more positive attitudes towards it (Hirose, 2008; Saito & Fujita, 2004). Adding to the controversy further still, are numerous researchers who have found little to no difference between feedback provided by the teacher or peers (Hirose, 2008; Nakanishi & Akahori, 2005; Patri, 2002). This paper aims to provide empirical and longitudinal evidence of quality development in peer feedback so that the debate regarding its effectiveness and use may be resolved sooner rather than later.

Methodology

Rationale

My background in writing centers created a natural bridge into the teaching of writing. The experience of fostering conversations about writing in centers has informed my classroom practices. If these methods and techniques are effective outside the classroom, surely they can be of use inside it as well. Furthermore, research shows that if assessment criteria are clearly set (in this case the qualities of a good paper), then students will evaluate each others' papers in a manner similar to that of the teacher (Patri, 2002). By reflecting on the writing process and peer work, learners can improve their own writing skills while supporting the same in their classmates' works. Additionally, training students to effectively interact in groups helps to create a safe, mutually beneficial environment-a community of writers-where learning and sharing can flourish (Cassidy, et. al, 2012; Harris 1990). In order to do this properly, however, peer feedback should not be used as formalized assessment and training of the students is crucial (Berg, 1999; Liu & Carless, 2006; Hu, 2005; Matsuno, 2009; Min, 2006). This research aims to identify how training ought to be conducted, what should be covered, and how feedback is best given.

Research questions

Does explicit feedback training result in improved comments?
What language do students use when giving peer feedback?
How does peer feedback change over time?

Context

The study was conducted at a private language university in Japan on sophomore university students in a yearlong academic writing course. The course was taught entirely in English, as most first and second year courses are in the institution, effectively creating an EFL immersion environment. All of the students had received one year of academic writing instruction prior to entering my class. Each student's level of familiarity and comfort with peer feedback varied, thus explicit training was necessary to create a common base from which to measure changes. For this study, the written peer feedback papers of three students (one male, two female) in the class were randomly selected from a bank of 22 students, all of whom had consented to have their written feedback collected and analyzed by me-their

instructor and researcher. In addition to this training, throughout the study, they were also exposed to one year of my instruction and tutorials, during which I consistently used the metalanguage of academic writing to reinforce the language of peer feedback.

Training Process

The primary model for my training process design was drawn from the principles of effective peer response by Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), which require peer feedback to be an integral part of a writing course in which students are accountable to each other not only for giving, but receiving feedback. The process must be modeled for the students and structured in a way that allows them to confidently provide responses to their classmates. Furthermore, the procedure should allow students to give feedback in a variety of ways that build their skills progressively throughout the term of study. Research by Matsumura and Hann (2004) as well as Ekoniak, Scanlon and Mohammadi-Aragh (2013) found that, for EFL writing, using two forms of peer feedback, with one being face to face interaction, provided the most benefit; thus variety was created in this study through the use of both oral and written feedback. However, it is not simply the type of the feedback that matters; of equally great concern is the quality and content of the delivery (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Ruegg, 2010). A nonthreatening environment is crucial for effective feedback to be given. As such, the specific language for making comments and how they are shared were taken from writing center philosophy (Cassidy, et. al, 2012; Harris, 1990; Hansen, & Liu, 2005; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005), as well as from the principles of self-regulation in formative assessment (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The specific metalanguage introduced was intended to provide structure to the task as well as address students' need to have language available to appropriately talk about writing in an academic environment.

The training took place across two ninety-minute class periods after students completed one round of peer feedback as a pre-test. The pre-test involved students exchanging their favorite essay from the previous school year with a classmate to receive feedback on how to improve it. On the initial day of training, students were given a worksheet with useful language for peer editing (Appendix 1a & 1b) and each section was explained to them in detail. Then, students were placed into groups of three to four and given the same writing sample from a bank of anonymous papers used as student model papers. As a group, they were asked to discuss what they thought of the paper and decide as a group what feedback they might give the author, while trying out as much of the provided language as possible. Following this, each group was asked to share their comments with the whole class so a variety of ideas and methods of delivery could be heard. The second day of training repeated this task, but culminated in an actual session with a classmate. Each student brought a draft of their first essay to be exchanged with a peer for comments. In pairs, students practiced giving feedback to each other, again hopefully using the language worksheet provided.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data collection was done by collecting written peer feedback forms from three randomly selected students at six points throughout a 30 week academic term. Though the entire feedback process in the classroom included both verbal and written feedback, the written feedback was deemed easiest to collect and monitor. The first writing sample was collected in April, pre-training, followed by two post-training collections midway through

spring semester and just before the end of term. In the autumn semester, three additional forms were collected, near the start of term in September, mid-term and in January during the final weeks of the school year. The same form was distributed each time (Appendix 2).

Narrative inquiry, or more specifically, thematic analysis of the content and discourse of the written responses, seemed the most appropriate for interpreting the collected data (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik 2014). This allowed me to fully explore both *what* students said and *how* they said it while gauging quality. The feedback worksheet provided to students was divided into five main sections which, in practice, became the themes of analysis (parentheses provide examples, brackets denote language on student worksheet) (Appendix 1a & 1b):

• Key Metalanguage and Useful Descriptives [Useful language for peer editing]
• Structuring Feedback (positive comment + suggestion, etc.) [When giving feedback...]
• Useful Phrases and Structures for Feedback ("I think your ~ is ~") [Helpful phrases]
• Verb Tense [Tense]
• Transitions [Transitions].

To best evaluate both the quality and content of the written feedback, two sets of criteria were used. Use of Mendonça and Johnson's (1994) five categories of interaction seen in ESL peer review (questions, explanations, restatements, suggestions and grammar corrections) helped to clearly determine the function of students' remarks, while Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger's (1992) five types of ESL peer responses (no comment, generic comments, critical evaluation, critical evaluation and suggestions, and critical evaluation and extended suggestions) was used to analyze the content of the feedback . Between these two sets of criteria, an image of how peer feedback functions and changes over time should be clearly evident. Furthermore, the immersion nature of the course by and large mirrored the ESL environments in which these criteria were first developed, so they seemed fitting for this study.

Results & Discussion

These results will primarily discuss the following three themes in detail, as they were the most prevalent in the student writings:
• Key Metalanguage and Useful Descriptives
• Structuring Feedback
• Useful Phrases and Structures for Feedback

In general, use of both metalanguage and useful phrases increased over time, however this was not true for each individual student. As the year went on, there was also an increase in other language consistently used by students, such as "sources," "citations," "information," or "references." One pattern that emerged across multiple students was the use of the condition, for example, Student B wrote, *"If you explained these words, the reader could read easier[sic]."* Nearly all of the students used the conditional grammar structure at some point in their feedback, which was similar in meaning to the phrase *"I like your -- the -- is good, but maybe you need --,"* introduced in section three of the useful feedback language worksheet (Appendix 1a). The use of this wording is not unexpected, as it is a part of *juken eigo* (exam English) which Japanese high school students study. It is natural for students to incorporate, or even rely upon, previously learned structures as they gain experience with the feedback process.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the structure of couching constructive comments in positive statements. Those that used it prior to training continued to do so, those that had not failed to consistently use it, and one student who followed the structure weakly at first eventually stopped doing so altogether. Two possible explanations for this exist: either students gradually became less interested in being polite to their peers while giving feedback, or they felt increasingly comfortable in the atmosphere of mutual support, which over time could have become less threatening and more casual. It is difficult to identify with any certainty the degree to which either affected the usage of the structure. The final two themes, verb tense and transitions, were barely mentioned; thus there is little to comment upon. Most student comments fell under two of Mendonça and Johnson's (1994) categories: explanations and suggestions. A representative example of an explanation would be a comment about why the student's writing was detailed enough, *"I could understand well because you have many [sic] information about gay marriage,"* (Student A) while a typical suggestion statement was *"if the paragraph has more citation, it will be much easier to understand,"* (Student B).

The real value in these results lie not in understanding overall trends, but in studying the changes in individual students over the course of the academic year, a task for which Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger's (1992) categories of response is particularly well-suited. Each person's feedback does change in some way, though not always for the better. One student showed minimal, but consistent improvement, others (1-2) inconsistent changes, some (1-2) dramatic improvement and one gradual decline in feedback quality. Exploring the shifts between generic and more critical evaluation or suggestion is best done here by individual analysis.

Trends in Individual Writers

Student A. This female student was the weakest writer in the class and failed to provide meaningful or quality feedback throughout the duration of the spring term. Her language did not really change in that she infrequently used editing metalanguage and relied heavily on basic grammar not listed under *Helpful phrases* on the worksheet. Pre-training, her comments suggested a lack of confidence with her writing, *"I think it's more better [sic] if you write 'my friends and I sometimes...'"* At later points in the spring term her feedback was limited to very general, sometimes even superficial, explanations of why the paper was good, such as *"your essay is good because each paragraph's details are enough and you put together your thoughts well in conclusion,"* (end of spring term). Fortunately, in the fall term reviews she showed some improvement, giving higher quality praise by telling her partner:

> *Your essay is great! You write much information in it and words you use is academic [sic]. I respect you because you have many references. Your topic is interesting. AWL (Academic Word List) great!*

before identifying concrete areas for improvement, writing *"Please write more information on your conclusion and refernce[sic], then your writing will be perfect."* Her language of praise is more colorful than that of her suggestion, but at least a suggestion exists, whereas in spring there had been none. Detailed explanations of why she likes the paper at hand still seem to dominate her remarks, but it suggests that, at a minimum, she learned the structure for providing both affirming and constructive feedback recommended by Hyland and Hyland (2001). It also shows a slight shift from Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger's (1992) generic comments to basic critical evaluation and suggestion.

Student B. This student used little of the introduced metalanguage in any of her feedback, nor did she use many of the taught phrases, yet she still managed to give quality comments over the course of the year. This manifested itself in two ways. First, she used her own phrases, such as *"It is easy to understand why you think German string quartet[s] will help a lot of people,"* and *"I could understand how movie[s] and music have good influence on people who wants[sic] to improve English."* She seems to take care to acknowledge both the content and writer's opinion in great detail. This makes her inconsistent use of the positive + constructive model all the more interesting. By alternating all year between using it or ending feedback without a final positive message in combination with a detailed restatement of content, it appears she has her own preferred way of communicating with the writer. This method does not appear from the beginning, it develops over time as she gains confidence. Pre-training feedback included some detail, like *"Your writing is easy to read and easy to understand,"* but it is tempered with, *"I'm not sure, but 'hope they will learn' is better than 'hope they learned.'"*

Post-training, her writing has one qualitatively different element, all signs of her uncertainty are replaced with more directive language, which only seems to grow stronger as the year went on. Immediately post-training, she uses the conditional phrase plus mildly direct language, *"If you use 'they will conduct free concert' instead of 'they will have ~,'* ***it would be better*** *and you can increase the academic word!!"* Later in the year she says, *"I could understand...However there are some that not using[sic] comma...I think you should add comma after the words 'however' or 'therefore.' Yet your essay has a lot of information!"* This is not rude in any way, but it is not the softest way of giving advice to someone. The strength of her directive language culminates at the end of the year with *"I want you add more detail of second paragraph's reply,"* and *"You used 'it means ~' but according to the textbook 'means" is inappropriate. Therefore please change it."* Though she shows variable interest in the affirmative/constructive feedback approach, this student has clearly improved in her ability to give specific, detailed comment; consistently incorporating Mendonça and Johnson's (1994) explanation, restatement, suggestions and grammar correction. She also moves from critical evaluation of the content to critical evaluations and extended suggestions (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992).

Student C. This male student began the year by providing brief feedback, but doing so within the sandwich structure of suggestion. Unfortunately, as the year progressed, this his feedback became increasingly general and less polite. Pre-training, he wrote:

> *Your writing is really simple, so it was easy to understand. Your explaining is clear so for me, it's really good. In addition, it's not so long, so I didn't feel tired to read[sic] that. However, I thought that the story of your writing goes a little bit too quick. Especially line 7 and line 8. You can add more interesting facts, conversations, etc.*

Here he gave a very specific comment on two lines that needed more detail, but by late spring, his suggestions were lacking the same level of detail. Also, the lack of polite structure stands out more, making the comments feel dismissive or as though he was uninterested in participating in the task of providing feedback. In these late term comments, all he wrote was, *"I understood roughly. However there are several points that [are] not clear enough. Times New Roman is better, I suppose."* This leaves the writer very little to work with in the way of making improvements to his or her essay. By the end of the second semester, he simply writes:

> *Briefly your paper seems well done. I couldn't find any big mistakes or points that I'd like to say. But just small things that I recognized.*

-Heading
-Beginning of survey paragraph.

Again he starts the constructive sandwich structure, but ends the feedback abruptly and almost rudely. These comments at least provide some specific areas for improvement, but like the late spring remarks, do not give any real suggestions. His comments hover somewhere between generic comments and very basic critical evaluation, which occurred more towards the beginning of the term (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992). This student was one of the most proficient writers in the class; unfortunately, his attitude and dedication to assignments waned as the year progressed. Towards the end of the year his attendance decreased and his final paper was well below its potential. With this particular student, I would conclude that either outside circumstances were negatively impacting his overall academic performance or that he did not place much value in the concept of peer feedback.

Limitations

The individual descriptions of each student's development paint vivid pictures of the writing classroom. Despite this valuable input, there are a number of uncontrolled variables in this study which prevent me from drawing any larger conclusions that might be applicable beyond this context. First of all, since student's level of familiarity and exposure to peer feedback varied, it is impossible to make a truly objective conclusion regarding the effectiveness of this particular training regime. Furthermore, there were a number of factors within the classroom that might have affected students' quality of feedback. It is possible that the students would have learned to use this language simply through hearing how I used it rather than as a result of the explicit training at the start of the year. Practicing any skill results in its improvement over time and peer feedback is no exception. Finally, with summer vacation occurring midway through, the data collection period was split into two parts. There is a noticeable decline in quality of comments at the end of the first term (in hot weather) and the start of the second (while everyone is recalling what was learned previously). No doubt, results would be more conclusive if such a pause in gathering data did not occur.

Perhaps the most significant influence came in the fall term. As the students transitioned from writing two- or three-page essays to a five-to-seven page research paper, they were required to use a textbook, *Basic Steps to Research Writing* (Kluge & Taylor, 2007). This book provided support on effective writing structure and used the appropriate metalanguage of the field so the significant increase of metalanguage use by the study participants in the fall term could be the result of experience or the presence of an additional text that serves as a reminder of what feedback content should include. Future research should mitigate or eliminate these external factors when the aim is testing out a particular method of peer feedback training. Furthermore, research that attempts to explore both effectiveness of, or changes and quality development in, peer feedback are best done exclusive of each other in order to maximize the strength of the results.

Conclusion

The findings, while inconclusive as to whether the improvement seen is due entirely to the explicit training in peer feedback, do support a larger study done by Rinnert and Kobayashi (2001) which showed that, as they gain writing experience, Japanese EFL writers

pay more attention to clarity, organization and logical connection. More effort to control outside variables is needed in similar future research to verify the efficacy of such training. Nevertheless, there are clear qualitative improvements in this study with respect to writing metalanguage used, as well as in the quality and depth of responses by the end of the year which are in line with prior research (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

If this study is repeated under improved conditions, it is possible that the results may more closely correlate with Rinnert and Kobayashi's (2001) work, which determined that, with careful training, eventually the feedback of the EFL students resembles that of L1 teachers. This study cannot confirm the effectiveness of explicit training, however it does find that regular opportunities to provide feedback results in the improvement of feedback quality, both in terms of metalanguage use and increased politeness in phrases.

Author Bio

Jennie Roloff Rothman is an instructor in the English for Liberal Arts Program at International Christian University. She received her MA in TESOL from Teachers College Columbia University. Her areas of interest include: academic writing, peer feedback, learner autonomy, writing centers, tutor training and development of critical thinking skills.

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Appendix 1a

Useful Language for peer editing

Noun	(person, place or thing)
Verb	(action)
Tense	(the form of the verb that shows time)
Subject-Verb Agreement	(do the tense and the subject form agree)
Spelling	(words are spelled correctly)
Conjunction	(words like so, and, for, but, however, therefore…)
Content	(the information you include in your essay)
Organization	(the thoughts are in order and move from 1 idea to the next)
Structure	(introduction, body, transition, body, transition…conclusion)
Thesis Statement	(the main idea/point of your paper)
Supporting Sentences	(the examples/details that explain your thesis or why it's correct)
Paragraph	(1 section of your essay)
Word choice	(appropriate level of formality for academic writing)
Paraphrase	(say something in other words than the original)
Summary	(writing a short description of something that includes only main details)

strong   clear   weak   unclear   confusing   (more) detail

When giving feedback…

1. Always talk about the positive elements in the paper first; then discuss any improvements or suggestions. Be polite and friendly, writing is very personal and if you are not sensitive, it may hurt your partner's feelings.

2. Always explain why you give a certain kind of feedback.

3. If you understand a grammar point that your partner seems to have difficulty with, explain it to them and help them understand by giving a few examples/

Example:
The content of your essay is really engaging, but the organization needs work. Here you talk about your club experience, but then you talk about how difficult it is to study. Then, you talk about your club again. It's a little confusing.

You say that the voting age should be lowered to 18 because other countries have their voting age set at 18. You don't mention what countries though, or why you think it's good to do the same as other countries. Please tell me more about those things.

Helpful phrases

- ···I think your thesis statement is a bit unclear because ~.
- I like your second paragraph, the content is good, but maybe you need more detail.
- What do you mean here? I don't understand your explanation/description. Can you use a different word
- These words are too casual, what about trying ~?
- These words sound too similar to what is in the article. You should work on paraphrasing.

Useful language for peer editing worksheet, page 1

Appendix 1b
Useful language for peer editing worksheet, page 2

Things to Check for…

Tense
The *present tense* is the best tense to use because it makes your paper stronger.

GOOD: This paper examines the harmful effects of lack of sleep on driving ability, then describes ways to improve sleep quality.

BAD: This paper will examine the harmful effects of lack of sleep and then will describe ways to improve sleep quality.

When you are talking about the past or the future, however, it is ok to use other tenses.

Transitions
"First", "second," "next", etc. are good to use when you have ideas close together, but there are many other options you can use:

before	after	while	even though	in addition to
yet	however	therefore	nevertheless	furthermore

*Always include a transition before you use a direct quote to prepare the reader for what it will say.

Casual	**Formal**
Like this,	In this way,
Then,	Consequently,
Then,	Subsequently,
Especially,	In particular,
Now,	Presently, (at the time of writing)
Now,	At any reate, (writing about your topic)
Really,	In fact,
Really,	Actually,
But,	However,
But,	Nevertheless,
And,	In addition,
And,	Furthermore,
So,	Thus,
So,	Therefore

*Avoid phrases like "and so on" or "etc."
    Try to use "for instance ~", "for example ~" or "such as."

Appendix 2
Peer editing feedback form for students

PEER EDITING FEEDBACK

There are three steps to good peer editing:
1. Compliment the author
        What are a few things that you liked about the author's writing?
2. Make specific suggestions regarding the author's work

• Word choice	• Transitions
• Use of details	• References
• Organization	• Use of Connectors
• Topic	• Noun Phrases
• Sentence length	

3. Mark corrections on the writing piece
        Look for spelling, grammar, and punctuation mistakes.

4. Write comments below:

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Name of Peer Reviewer: