A comparative study of peer and teacher feedback in a Chinese EFL writing class

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Abstract

Feedback plays a central role in writing development. This is particularly so in tertiary education in China because of both the attitudes of tutors and staff and also the move towards a more process orientation to teaching writing. However, constraints resulting from examination-focused programmes and the number of students in each class mean that the provision of feedback is limited. This study examines whether peer feedback may provide a resource for addressing this issue by examining two groups of students at a Chinese University writing essays on the same topic, one receiving feedback from the teacher and one from their peers. Textual and questionnaire data from both groups and video recordings and interviews from 12 individual students revealed that students used teacher and peer feedback to improve their writing but that teacher feedback was more likely to be adopted and led to greater improvements in the writing. However, peer feedback was associated with a greater degree of student autonomy, and so even in cultures that are said to give great authority to the teacher, there is a role for peer feedback.

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Context of study

Despite the importance attached to writing, teaching writing is often a thankless job. English teachers in China “suffer” from the “tedious and unrewarding chore” of correcting students’ essays (Hyland, 1990). Even though feedback is valued very highly by students and teachers
(Brick, 2004; Hu, 2002), the mistakes in these essays keep on repeating themselves. This is partially to do with the number of students in each class. In the university where two of the researchers teach, as in much of higher education in China, class sizes are rising. Forty is common in this university, but we know of classes of over 100 students. It also a reflection of the ways in which writing is taught. There is considerable variation in this, but classes are often focused on exam practice and, even in non-exam classes, students produce only one draft and receive feedback on this. To illustrate this point, we will describe what happens in the research university, which we consider to be typical of Chinese universities.

Students receive one hour of instruction in writing in English per week during a 16-week writing course. Following a faculty decision about the way writing is taught, the teacher researcher’s classes use the process oriented writing activity book of the North Star series (Solorzano, 2003). Unfortunately, administrative constraints, the local culture of education (e.g. Hu, 2002; Scollon, 1999), and class size means that, in practice, the focus of the writing class is on student products. Blocks of lessons based on this book generally consist of three stages: the teacher presents sentence (e.g. the use of the past perfect), paragraph (e.g. the use of topic sentences), or text level knowledge (e.g. comparison/contrast essays) by a combination of example sentences, paragraphs, or texts and a discussion, largely in English. The students then use this knowledge to write texts, or paragraphs, normally out of class. Finally, the teacher evaluates the student writing. There is some variation in the kind of feedback provided but the teacher researcher, who was not in this respect particularly unusual, looked at organization, the development of ideas, grammar, and vocabulary. (The peer feedback sheet in Appendix A is based on this teacher’s feedback procedures.)

There has been much discussion within the English department about how to manage the provision of feedback in a way more consistent with process approaches, so that students receive feedback on drafts before submitting final products (e.g. Tribble, 1996; White & Arndt, 1991) in ways that are consistent with the time available to staff and the class size. This study investigates whether peer feedback might be a useful resource to address this issue.

Before we could implement the use of peer feedback, there was an ethical concern that needed to be addressed by examining the literature. This related to the impact of peer feedback on writing development and the related issue of student attitudes to peer feedback. Saito and Fujita (2004) comment that

there is a persistent belief among teachers that students are incapable of rating peers because of their lack of language ability, skill and experience (p. 48).

Similar views are reported in Rollinson (2005, p. 23). One commentator points out that Chinese education places a great emphasis on

maintaining a hierarchical but harmonious relation between teacher and student. Students are expected to respect and not to challenge their teachers. (Hu, 2002, p. 98)

Such relations may make peer feedback particularly problematic in China. We needed to be sure that our investigation was not damaging the writing development of our students. As Zhang (1995) puts it we needed to be sure that

the anticipated benefits are adequate to compensate for the attending affective disadvantage (p. 219).
Even assuming that peer feedback was effective, we wanted to ensure that we implemented it in the most effective way, and this meant examining the practice of others who had used peer review.

**Literature review**

We have drawn on three main areas of the literature:

- the impact of peer and teacher feedback,
- student views of peer and teacher feedback,
- implementing peer feedback.

*The impact of peer and teacher feedback*

Connor and Asenavage (1994) investigated the impact of peer and teacher feedback on eight ESL students from different countries in a university in the USA. They found that teacher feedback had a much more significant effect than peer feedback, with only 5% of peer feedback resulting in changes.

Paulus (1999) investigated the impact of peer and teacher feedback on 11 ESL students on an intensive English language course at a public university in the USA and found slightly higher figures. Peer feedback accounted for 13.9% of all changes and teacher feedback for 34.3%. Teacher feedback was more likely to have an impact than peer feedback with 87% of teacher comments resulting in some change compared to 51% of peer feedback.

Villamil and De Guerrero (1998), working in Puerto Rico, found that peer feedback had a beneficial effect on the quality of writing and also led to more learner autonomy (1997, p. 508), though they made no comparison with teacher feedback.

Berg’s (1999) study of ESL classes in the USA also confirms the effectiveness of peer feedback as a means of aiding writing development, though it was beyond the scope of this study to compare the impact of peer and teacher feedback. Berg (1999) also found that peer feedback encouraged critical reasoning.

The student cannot just take the advice as given and make the change, as is likely when the expert (i.e. teacher) provides feedback. Instead, the student will need to consider the advice from a peer, question its validity, weigh it against his or her own knowledge and ideas, and then make a decision about what, if any, changes to make (p. 232).

Tsui and Ng (2000) looked at the impact of peer and teacher feedback on the writing of secondary school EFL students in Hong Kong. All students addressed a higher percentage of teacher feedback than peer feedback, but there was considerable individual variation. One of their case study students addressed 100% and 20% of teacher and peer feedback comments respectively, but for another the figures were 83% and 78%. They also noted that some students reported that they benefited from reading other students’ work as they prepared to give feedback and suggested that using peer feedback may contribute to the development of learner autonomy.

Rollinson’s (2005) study of college level students of EFL in Spain found peer feedback was effective with 80% of peer feedback comments considered valid and 65% acted on.

Adopting a slightly different approach, Saito and Fujita (2004) investigated feedback provided to EFL students in a Japanese university and found that teachers and peers rated students’ writing in broadly similar ways.
The research broadly indicates that teacher feedback has a much greater impact than peer feedback, though with considerable variation, but that peer feedback can contribute to writing development. This has to be balanced against the fact that introducing peer feedback in most contexts means students will receive more feedback than they would if only the teacher were providing feedback and that there may be other benefits, such as developing critical thinking, from encouraging peer feedback. However, even if peer feedback has advantages, it can only be introduced if students find it acceptable.

**Student views of peer and teacher feedback**

Zhang (1995) carried out a controversial (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Zhang, 1999) study of ESL students at two universities in the USA. A very high figure of 94% of students preferred teacher feedback to peer feedback. Jacobs et al. (1998) investigated student attitudes to teacher and peer feedback and found almost exactly the same percentage, 93%, of their EFL students in Hong Kong and Taiwan said they would like to receive peer feedback as one kind of feedback. Tsui and Ng’s (2000) study of Hong Kong secondary schools, cited above, and Hu’s (2005) study of Chinese students studying English in Singapore also found students welcomed peer feedback.

There has been some discussion of whether particular groups of students deal with peer feedback equally well. Allaei and Connor (1990) found students’ culture had a significant impact on the effectiveness of peer feedback groups. In a series of papers, Nelson, Carson, and Murphy argue that peer review works less well with Chinese speaking students. The first study (Nelson & Murphy, 1993) found that Chinese speaking students were less likely to accept the right of other non-native speakers of English to judge their writing. Similarly, Carson and Nelson (1994) found that Chinese speaking students studying ESL will generally work toward maintaining group harmony and mutual face-saving to maintain a state of cohesion (p. 23).

This meant that the peer review groups were less successful because of an unwillingness to criticize others.

A later study of a group of 11 students of mixed nationalities on an advanced ESL course at a university in the USA led the researchers to suggest that Chinese students, amongst others, are also more like to have negative views of feedback from fellow students.

ESL students from countries with a large power distance are perhaps less likely to value their peers’ views than are students from countries with a lower power distance (e.g., students from the United States).


While this finding is consistent with the view that Confucian cultures ascribe a particularly high status to teachers (Scollon, 1999), not all commentators have accepted this position (e.g., Gieve & Clark, 2005; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). It is also not easy to reconcile the finding with the studies of peer feedback with Chinese students carried out by Tsui and Ng (2000) and Hu (2005). At the least, however, Nelson, Carson, and Murphy’s work raises questions of how Chinese students deal with peer feedback.

The literature suggests that teacher feedback is more valued than peer feedback and that, while many students believe peer feedback can be of use, attitudes are variable. When considered with
the literature on the impact of teacher and peer feedback, the introduction of peer feedback to our writing classes seemed a reasonable course of action, but we needed to make sure we implemented it in the most effective manner.

Implementing peer review

There appear to be two main issues in implementing peer review: the size of the peer feedback group and the form of training, which Berg (1999) identifies as a prerequisite for successful use of this strategy. There is considerable variation in the size of the groups in peer feedback research. Zhu (2001), for example, worked with groups of three or four with both native and non-native speakers of English and noted that group dynamics had a strong impact on how the feedback group functions. Similar group sizes were used in several other studies (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Rollinson, 2005). Min however says that “the use of paired peer review is preferred by most EFL students” (2005, p. 296), and Paulus (1999) argues that

pairs of students have greater opportunities for intensive discussion about their writing (p. 272).

Hu (2005), working with a group which was similar in age and culture to our own students, suggests that, initially at least, this issue is best addressed by limiting group size to two participants. Pairs were also adopted by Villamil and De Guerrero (1998), working with what they term ESL students in Puerto Rico. Pairs are also possibly less likely to lead to the kinds of issues raised in Carson, Murphy, and Nelson’s work cited above.

There is also some variation in approaches to training students to provide peer feedback. The students in Zhu’s (2001) study received training in the form of watching a video on peer review, and Tsui and Ng (2000, p. 153) report only that their students were simply given broad categories under which they needed to write comments. However, most studies have used more extensive preparation. Berg’s (1999) study shows the benefits of an 11-stage training plan. Min (2005) found that a demonstration of feedback and conferences between the teacher and individual students with each conference lasting one hour was effective. This is in line with Rollinson’s (2005) guidelines.

The literature provides useful insights as to how to implement peer feedback, particularly suggestions such as the use of modelling by the teacher and use of feedback sheets (Berg, 1999). However, not all suggestions will be applicable to all contexts. For example, although conferences or extended training programmes are desirable, it would not be practical in many contexts for teachers to spend one hour with each student.

Research design

This study investigated two of the classes taught by the teacher researcher. For the study, both classes were involved in three rounds of multi-draft composition writing for the same writing tasks, during which they were given parallel writing instruction, except for the feedback they received. In the teacher feedback class \( n = 41 \), the teacher followed her normal practice and wrote feedback on the scripts and provided oral feedback on matters of general interest when she returned the scripts. Students then revised their drafts and handed in their final products.
In the peer feedback class \((n = 38)\), feedback was given by peers working in self-selecting (following Paulus, 1999) pairs using the peer feedback sheet and oral communication (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). Students were allowed to use their mother tongue, Chinese, for oral communication so they could “more fully participate in developing their ideas for writing” (Pennington & Yue, 1996, p. 243). Afterwards, students revised their drafts and handed in the final products.

In the first round of writing in the peer feedback class, the teacher researcher modelled giving peer feedback, using the structured peer feedback sheet, covering organization, the development of ideas, grammar and vocabulary and mechanics, to comment on a student’s draft (Appendix A). The students were then given a blank peer feedback sheet with their partner’s draft and required to read the draft carefully and (following Connor & Asenavage, 1994) complete the sheet after class. In the next class, the students exchanged comments on each other’s draft and discussed them for about 30 minutes. Afterwards, both the draft and the peer review sheet were returned to the writers for revision. The same procedures were followed in the next round of composing and revising. In the third round when data collection began, there was no modelling.

The topic for the third round of writing was “Some people say that the Internet provides people with a lot of valuable information. Others think access to so much information creates problems. Which view do you agree with? Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.” The teacher chose this topic from a list of the test of written English in the Test of English as a Foreign Language because her students had been working on the theme of technology and would need to write an essay on an argumentative topic in the College English Test later in the year.

The teacher wrote comments on the drafts from the teacher feedback class and returned the drafts to the students when, with students’ permission, they were photocopied. She also gave oral feedback to the whole class while returning the drafts. The students in the peer feedback class received their partners’ drafts and peer feedback sheets. They had one week to read the draft and complete the sheets. Afterwards, oral peer response activities were held. Several days later, the final products of both classes were handed in again. The students in the peer feedback class handed in the feedback sheet as well (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background information on case study students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Semesters</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students from the teacher feedback class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luo</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jin</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>International Economy &amp; Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhu</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Applied Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Applied Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Industrial &amp; Commercial Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Industrial &amp; Commercial Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students from the peer feedback class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Applied Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhao</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Industrial &amp; Commercial Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeng</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Applied Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Industrial &amp; Commercial Management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Names: pseudonyms of students; semesters: semesters of College English.
Data sets

We collected three data sets related to the whole class. The first comprised first drafts, feedback and second drafts written by the students in the both classes. The second came from a questionnaire survey conducted two days after the final products were submitted to the teacher. The teacher allowed about 20 minutes of class time for the students to fill in the questionnaires. The questions (Appendix B) were adapted from Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, and Huang (1998) and Zhang (1995). Two main areas were covered: (a) to what extent did the students find the teacher/peer comments useful, and (b) if given several choices of feedback forms, which did they prefer? Thirdly we collected the teacher researcher’s field notes on the classes and their writing.

This was supplemented by two data sets related to six self-selected students from each class. The groups were not designed to be comparable, but as Table 6 below indicates, the pieces of writing from the case study students were similar in terms of words written and possible feedback points. The first data set for the case study students comprised video recordings of interactions between three pairs from the peer feedback class. These were transcribed and, if necessary, translated by the researchers. There was no equivalent of this oral interaction in the teacher feedback class but, as one reason for introducing peer feedback was to allow such interaction, this did not compromise the study.

The second data set comprised interviews with the case study students held the day after students handed in their final drafts (see Appendix C for interview prompts). We examined the case study students’ drafts and final products to locate revisions before the interviews. During the interviews, the drafts, the final products, and the written comments were presented to the interviewees for reference when specific feedback or revision was discussed. Chinese was used so the interviewees could clearly express their ideas. The interviews were audio taped with the permission of the interviewees. The researchers transcribed the interviews and translated them into English.

The case study data was intended to help us to understand the conditions under which students adopted or did not adopt feedback from the teacher or their peers and to provide a more in-depth view of students’ view of the different kinds of feedback.

Data analysis

Whole class data

This section covers the analysis of the students’ writing and the questionnaire. For the students’ writing the improvement of final products over the first drafts was measured on the basis of the teacher’s grades (see Appendix E for the scoring guide). An independent rater, an experienced English teacher in the same university, was asked to score the students’ writing, using the same scoring guide but without being told either which were the drafts and which the final texts or the purpose for grading the work.

As a measure of reliability the intraclass correlation coefficient was calculated for the scores given by the teacher researcher and the independent rater of (a) students’ drafts in the teacher feedback class, (b) students’ final texts in the teacher feedback class, (c) students’ drafts in the peer feedback class, and (d) students’ final texts in the peer feedback class. The coefficients ranged from 0.799 to 0.812, which indicates moderate reliability. Where there were differences between the two marks, we used the mean. Table 2 shows the
difference between the first and final drafts and indicates that revision helped to improve the quality of students’ writing, and teacher feedback appeared to contribute to greater improvement.

The results of the questionnaire were tabulated separately for the peer and teacher feedback classes. Over 90% of the students found teacher feedback “useful” or “very useful”, compared to 40% for peer feedback (Table 3). However, in the peer feedback class, over 60% of the students thought peer feedback was “useful” or “very useful”, a contrast to 22% in the teacher feedback class who held the same view (Table 4). This may indicate that experience of peer feedback has a positive impact on student perceptions (Table 5).

Table 2
Improvement in the quality of the writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>First draft</th>
<th>Second draft</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher feedback class</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer feedback class</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using a paired t-test the difference was significant for both groups at \( p < 0.05 \).

Table 3
Students’ perception of different kinds of feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View of teacher feedback</th>
<th>View of peer feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( n )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not useful</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little useful</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage totals may not equal 100 because of rounding.

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Table 4
Students perceptions of peer feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher feedback group</th>
<th>Peer feedback group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( n )</td>
<td>( % )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not useful</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little useful</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Students’ self-perception as English learners and writers (\( n = 77 \))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-perception as</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English learners</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English writers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case study data

We analyzed the drafts written by the case study students to identify three things: firstly, all possible aspects of feedback in the first drafts; secondly, all usable feedback provided by the teacher or peers and; thirdly, all changes between first and second drafts feedback produced by the students.

All possible feedback points in the case study students’ first drafts were independently identified by the two researchers who did not teach the classes. Any disagreement between the two was discussed until consensus was achieved. This is a relatively unusual procedure in the literature and, even though it was carried out independently by two researchers, is not a completely objective measure of the quality of the work. However, it does provide a means of judging how the amount and kind of feedback that the students receive relates to features of the text they have produced.

For the second kind of analysis, all the feedback that the 12 case study students were given, their first drafts, feedback sheets and/or transcripts of oral peer interaction, as well as the teacher’s notes, were analyzed in terms of feedback points, with each intervention that focused on a different aspect of the text treated as a separate feedback point. Following Hyland (1998), symbols and marks in the margins, underlining of problems, and complete corrections, as well as more detailed comments and suggestions were all taken to be feedback points. We defined “usable” feedback in Hyland’s (1998) terms, with, for example, the teacher’s comment on Lin’s draft, “Good organization and well-supported ideas,” considered “unusable.” and “WF” (wrong word form), under the word “economic” in Lin’s draft classified as “usable.”

The revisions made by the 12 students in their drafts were identified by comparing the final products with the drafts. The revisions that could not be traced to teacher or peer feedback were also marked and discussed in the post-interview.

The revisions were coded using Faigley and Witte’s (1981) taxonomy. This categorizes revisions as either surface changes (local changes altering the surface structure but not adding new or deleting old information) or meaning changes (global changes affecting the information present in the text by either adding, deleting, or rearranging the ideas). Examples of each category are shown in Appendix D. The two sets of data, one from six students in the teacher feedback class, the other from the six students in the peer feedback class, were compared to see if there were any differences in the amount or kind of revision between the teacher feedback group and the peer feedback group.

Two researchers classified revisions in terms of their success using Conrad and Goldstein’s (1999) taxonomy: successful revision, unsuccessful revision and no changes. “Successful revisions” were defined as “those solving a problem or improving upon a problem area discussed in the feedback”; “unsuccessful revisions” were defined as “those that did not improve the text or that actually further weakened the text” (p. 154). Revisions that made no changes were regarded as feedback points not acted on and so were excluded in the coding. Following Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti (1997), we added one more type: revision with mixed effect. Examples of each classification are also shown in Appendix D. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 6.

The teacher provided more feedback than the students, even though the number of possible feedback points was broadly similarly, with a total of 225 for the peer feedback students and 235 for the teacher feedback group. Altogether, the six students in
the teacher feedback group had 101 usable feedback points while the other six students received only 61 usable feedback points from their peers. Measured in terms of the number of words in the first draft, students received 65.6% more feedback per word from their teacher than from their peers. In terms of the quality of the draft, students received feedback on 43% of possible feedback points from their teacher as opposed to only 27% from their peers. This reflects both the teacher researcher’s level of English and her feeling that her job means she should provided as much feedback as possible without overwhelming the students.

**Findings**

**The impact of peer and teacher feedback**

The students adopted more teacher feedback than peer feedback. Of the usable feedback points in the teacher feedback group, 90% were incorporated as against 67% of the usable feedback points in the peer feedback group. In the interviews, students said the teacher was more “professional,” “experienced,” and “trustworthy” than their peers, and the most commonly reported reason for the non-incorporation of teacher feedback was that it was “ignored” (Table 7), which means that they did not read the feedback, rather than reading it and forgetting to follow it. The most common reason for the rejection of peer feedback was that the writers did not...
accept the feedback for the reason that it seemed “incorrect” to them. A typical example is found in Excerpt 1.

\textit{The impact of peer and teacher feedback: Successful revision}

Although the students in the peer feedback group adopted less peer feedback in their revision, when they adopted the feedback, slightly more successful revisions resulted. Forty out of the 41 (98\%) revisions that were traced to peer feedback were successful, as against 79 out of 91 (87\%)
for the teacher feedback group. See Table 6. The most common reason for unsuccessful revisions was misinterpretation. One example of this is shown in Excerpt 2.

The teacher researcher thought the original sentence would be improved by the insertion of a transition marker, such as a conjunction. But Luo told the researcher that she thought the teacher wanted her to use transitions to link the sentence to the previous one, so she added “but” at the beginning of the sentence.

Wang: An essay is easily understood if topic sentences are clear. I think the topic sentence in each paragraph is not obvious. For example, the third paragraph…

Pan: Isn’t this a topic sentence? (Pointing to the first sentence in the third paragraph)

Wang: I don’t think it’s a topic sentence. The meaning is not clear. You say “In the Internet you are not only a guest but also the host.” What do you mean? You are talking about something we can do with the Internet in the following sentences. But this sentence sounds irrelevant.

Pan: Maybe you’re right.

Wang: Here, the last sentence, “Surfing is also a good activity to relax yourself,” can be a good topic sentence.

Pan: Oh, right. So I’ve got a topic sentence here.

Wang: Each paragraph should have a topic sentence.

Pan: But a topic sentence can be put either in the beginning or at the end of the paragraph. .. But, OK, I’ll put it in the beginning. It’s better. The reader will find it easily.

Excerpt 3.
No unsuccessful revisions were found in the peer feedback group. Oral interaction between the pair probably contributed to better communication and avoided misunderstanding. An excerpt from the transcript of oral interaction is presented as an example here (Excerpt 3).

In a later revision, Pan followed the suggestion, deleted the irrelevant sentence, and made “Surfing is also a good activity to relax yourself” a topic sentence in the beginning of the paragraph, which improved the whole paragraph. Negotiation of meaning in the oral interaction allows participants to negotiate what is not understood. In this way, ideas are freely exchanged, which would be more difficult to bring about through either teacher written comments or oral feedback to the whole class.

The impact of peer and teacher feedback: kinds of revision

The peer feedback group made more meaning changes than did the teacher feedback group (Tables 8 and 9). Of the 41 revisions that were made as a result of peer feedback, 11 (27%) were meaning changes, whereas the meaning changes only accounted for 5 instances (5%) of the 92 feedback points made by the teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning changes</th>
<th>Surface changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhao</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeng</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P: possible feedback points; U: usable feedback points; S: students changes in response to feedback; S/P%: student changes as a percentage of possible feedback points; S/U%: student changes as a percentage of usable feedback points. Percentages are given to the nearest whole number.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning changes</th>
<th>Surface changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luo</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jin</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhu</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P: possible feedback points; U: usable feedback points; S: student changes in response to feedback; S/P%: student changes as a percentage of possible feedback points; S/U%: student changes as a percentage of usable feedback points. This may exceed 100% because of self-initiated changes. Percentages are given to the nearest whole number.
This is in line with Connor and Asenavage’s (1994) findings. It also revealed a gap between the teacher researcher’s perception that her feedback treated content and organization as important as grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, and her actual practice. The interview data also showed that students prefer feedback on meaning to feedback on surface features.

The reason peer-initiated revisions were concerned less with surface changes might be the writers’ perception of the low linguistic abilities of the students providing the feedback. In the questionnaire, 72.7% of the students in the two classes viewed themselves as “fair” or “poor” English learners and 79.2% thought of themselves as “fair” or “poor” English writers (Table 5). This might be thought to make them less capable of giving comments on grammar and vocabulary.

The impact of peer and teacher feedback: Self-correction

Any revision that was made by the writers themselves, not initiated by their teacher or peers, was considered to be self-correction. Different amounts of self-correction happened in the process of revision. The peer feedback group made 16 self-corrections and the teacher feedback group made 5, which suggests a stronger tendency for self-correction in the peer feedback group. Further analysis of the transcripts of the oral peer interaction and the post-interviews showed that several students did not completely depend on the feedback they got from their teacher or peers. The more they doubted the feedback, the more likely it was that they would develop their own independent ideas they had for revision. All students in the peer feedback group said they accepted peer feedback with certain reservations. Three of them explicitly expressed their doubts about the linguistic knowledge of their partners and claimed that they would not accept peer feedback until the comments were confirmed in some way, by checking grammar books or asking the teacher. Plate 1Excerpt 1 above is an example of this.

In contrast, exposure to teacher feedback seemed to reduce self-correction, perhaps because students believed that the teacher had pointed out all their mistakes and there was no need for further correction. All the case study students believed the teacher was more authoritative in giving feedback than their peers. The over-dependence on teacher feedback is likely to lower the students’ initiative and lead to fewer self-initiated corrections in the teacher feedback group. This is in line with the quote from Berg (1999, p. 232) cited above.

In summary, while students used peer feedback less than teacher feedback in their revisions, they appeared to be more actively involved in self-correction. Such a finding confirms Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti’s (1997, p. 334) claim that the lack of responsiveness to others’ comments “may ... rather indicate that the student is thinking creatively and functioning independently.”

Students’ views of teacher and peer feedback

When asked if feedback was useful in the revision, all the case study students gave positive answers. The usefulness of teacher feedback was confirmed absolutely while the usefulness of peer feedback was expressed with reservations. In the students’ words, peer feedback was “basically,” “partially,” or “sometimes” useful and several of our case study students would have preferred to received peer feedback and then teacher feedback. This acceptance of peer feedback is in line with the questionnaire data (Tables 3 and 4), where comments included:
Two heads are better than one.
My peers are closer to me in age and experience. We have more in common when we exchange ideas.
I can have more time communicating with my partner.
You can always learn something from your classmates.

On teacher feedback they said:
Teacher feedback is more accurate.
Teacher feedback is more to the point.
Teacher feedback is more trustworthy.

Such a finding is contrary to Zhang’s (1995) claim that ESL students overwhelmingly prefer teacher feedback, but it echoes Tsui and Ng’s (2000) result that learners see teacher comments as more authoritative but value peer comments. Villamil and De Guerrero (1998, p. 491) explicitly state that “peer revision should be seen as an important complementary source of feedback in the ESL classroom.” It seems reasonable to make a similar claim for peer feedback in the EFL classroom.

Furthermore, the usefulness of reading peers’ writing and giving peer feedback was acknowledged by 70% of the peer feedback class students as (a) learning from others’ strong points to offset their own weaknesses and (b) communicating with each other to enhance understanding and explore better solutions to writing problems.

Conclusion

We draw four main conclusions from this study. Firstly, feedback plays a very important role in Chinese EFL students’ revision of writing. Most of the teacher feedback and more than half of the peer feedback is incorporated, leading to successful revisions in most cases, with final versions being better than initial drafts.

Second, the impact of teacher and peer feedback is different. More teacher feedback is incorporated than peer feedback and leads to greater improvement, but peer feedback appears to bring about a higher percentage of meaning-change revision while most teacher-influenced revisions happen at surface level. At the same time, teacher-initiated revisions are less successful than peer-initiated revisions, probably because negotiation of meaning during the peer interaction helps to enhance mutual understanding and reduce misinterpretation and miscommunication.

Thirdly, our students value teacher feedback more highly than peer feedback but recognize the importance of peer feedback.

Lastly, peer feedback, though it had less impact than teacher feedback, does lead to improvements and appears to encourage student autonomy, so it can be seen as a useful adjunct to teacher feedback, even in cultures which are supposed to grant great authority to the teacher.

The results of this study are much more positive about peer review than studies such as Zhang (1995, 1999), Carson and Nelson (1994), and Nelson and Carson (1998) carried out in English speaking countries, though they are similar to studies such as Tsui and Ng (2000) carried out in Hong Kong. It is possible that the relative success of peer review reflects factors relating to particular students and teachers. However there are alternative explanations of the
difference. One plausible explanation is that the relative lack of exposure to English outside the classroom of the students in this study means that students are more positive towards the English their peers produce than they would be if they were attending classes in an English speaking country. A complementary account relates to the fact that the students in this study come from similar cultural backgrounds, and the resultant group solidarity may mean that students are more willing to take advice from their peers than they would be if their peers came from culturally different backgrounds. Both these issues need to be examined in further research.

Our findings argue against the universality of Carson and Nelson’s (1994) and Nelson and Carson’s (1998) findings that students from countries with a large power distance may find participating in peer feedback groups confusing. This may reflect the use of pairs rather than small groups and/or that our students were studying in monolingual classes in China rather than in multilingual classes in an English speaking environment.

The current research does however indicate that using peer feedback on drafts followed by teacher feedback on final texts can be a useful resource to enable teachers of English working in China to better help their learners develop their writing skills. To cite the words of He, one of the case student students:

if the teacher gives feedback first, the peer would feel the pressure and say nothing for fear of saying something wrong because we all trust the teacher more. But if the peer gives feedback first, he would be much freer to express his opinions. Teacher feedback that comes later could evaluate both the essay and the peer’s comments, which, I think, is of great help.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the help of our colleagues and students at Shantou University in making this research possible. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the article.

References


Appendix A. Peer feedback sheet

Draft Written by ________ Feedback Provided by ________
Date: __________ Composition: __________________

Your purpose in answering these questions is to provide an honest & helpful response to your partner’s or group member’s draft. You should also suggest ways to make his/her writing better. Before beginning your review, be sure to read the composition carefully. After that, respond to the following questions. BE SPECIFIC. BE CONSTRUCTIVE.

Content
1. What do you like the best or the worst about the ideas in this essay? Be specific. You can choose a tick for the best one and a cross for the worst or give your own comments (vocabulary, cohesive/linked ideas, clear/easy to follow, convincing, effective reasoning, well-developed ideas, attention-grabbing introduction, strong conclusion, intriguing style, well-supported topic sentences, understandable transitions, etc.)
2. Of the proofs, reasons or arguments given to support the writer’s opinion, which one/ones is/are irrelevant or illogical to the topic? Point it/them out and explain your reasons and, if you can, suggest improvements.
3. What part(s) should be developed more? Mark these with a letter D. Explain why you think this should be developed more and make some suggestions.
4. What part(s) are confusing? Mark these with a letter C in the draft. Explain why you think they are confusing and make some suggestions for improvement.

Organization
5. Does the first paragraph include an introduction expressing the writer’s position statement of opinion? Yes ___ No ___
   If yes, underline the sentence(s). If no, should the writer explicitly express his/her topic in the revision? Yes ___ No ___
6. Does each paragraph have a topic sentence? Yes ___ No ___
   Point out the paragraphs without topic sentences. Paragraph ___ ___ ___
   Should topic sentences be added to these paragraphs? Yes ___ No ___
7. Is there a conclusion in the final conclusion? Yes ___ No ___
   Is it effective? Yes ___ No ___

Grammar, Vocabulary & Mechanics
8. Use the following correction codes to point out the errors. Mark the codes in the draft.

   V  Error in verb tense/verb form
       (active/passive voice, present/past participle)
   S  Spelling error
   Art  Article/other determiner
        missing or unnecessary or incorrectly used
   Prep  Preposition incorrectly used
   Pron  Pronoun
   Conj  Conjunction incorrectly used
   NE  Noun ending (plural or possessive) missing or unnecessary
   WWW  Wrong word/wrong word form
   WO  Wrong word order
   SV  Subject and verb do not agree
       ^  Missing word
   SS  Unnecessary word
   Sentence structure: incorrect structures, sentence fragments
   P  Punctuation wrong
   CL  Capital letter
   ☐  Paragraph indentation
   //  run-on
Appendix B. Questionnaires

Feedback Questionnaire (For teacher feedback class)
The purpose of this questionnaire is to improve the teaching of composition. The aim is NOT to evaluate professors. Please do not sign your name: all responses are anonymous. Recall what you did with the feedback from your teacher and answer as honestly as possible.

1. What’s your major?  ________________  
2. How many semesters of English have you had at college level?  ________________  
3. Generally, did you find the teacher’s feedback useful in your revision?
   Very useful _____ Useful _____ A little useful _____ Not useful at all _____
   Your explanation:  ________________  
4. Do you think it will be useful if you have your peers’ feedback in your revision?
   Very useful _____ Useful _____ A little useful _____ Not useful at all _____
   Your explanation:  ________________  
5. Check one statement that best expresses your opinion about receiving feedback on your paper.
   ___ a. I prefer to receive only teacher feedback.
   ___ b. I prefer to receive only peer feedback.
   ___ c. I prefer to receive both teacher and peer feedback.
   ___ d. I prefer to receive no feedback (and to revise on my own).
   Your explanation:  ________________  
6. Rate yourself as an English learner? Excellent __ Good __ Fair __ Poor __  
7. Rate your skills in writing English compositions? Excellent __ Good __ Fair __ Poor __  

Feedback Questionnaire (For peer feedback class)
The purpose of this questionnaire is to improve the teaching of composition. The aim is NOT to evaluate professors. Please do not sign your name: all responses are anonymous. Recall what you did with the feedback from your peers and answer as honestly as possible.

1. What’s your major?  ________________  
2. Number of semesters of English at college level?  ________________  
3. Generally, did you find your peers’ feedback useful in your revision?
   Very useful _____ Useful _____ A little useful _____ Not useful at all _____
   Your explanation:  ________________  
4. Generally, did you find it useful to read and comment on your peers’ paper?
   Very useful _____ Useful _____ A little useful _____ Not useful at all _____
   Your explanation:  ________________  
5. Do you think it will be useful if you have the teacher’s feedback in your revision?
   Very useful _____ Useful _____ A little useful _____ Not useful at all _____
   Your explanation:  ________________  
6. Check one statement that best expresses your opinion about receiving feedback .
   ___ a. I prefer to receive only teacher feedback.
   ___ b. I prefer to receive only peer feedback.
   ___ c. I prefer to receive both teacher and peer feedback.
   ___ d. I prefer to receive no feedback (and to revise on my own).
   Your explanation:  ________________  
7. Rate yourself as an English learner? Excellent __ Good __ Fair __ Poor __  
8. Rate your skills in writing English compositions? Excellent __ Good __ Fair __ Poor __
Appendix C. Interviews prompts

Prompts A (For students from teacher feedback class)
Interviewee: ________________ Major: ________________
Age: __________
Previous experience of revision activities: Yes ____ No ____
Previous experience of peer review activities: Yes ____ No ____
How would you rate yourself as an English learner? Excellent _ Good _ Fair _ Poor _
How would you rate your skills in writing English compositions?
Excellent _ Good _ Fair _ Poor _

1. Was teacher feedback of any use to you when you revised your compositions? If so, what use were they? If not, why not?

2. What types of teacher feedback do you prefer? Use specific examples. (content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, etc.) (corrections, revision suggestions)

3. Did you use other sources to help you revise your draft? If so, which ones?

4. Would you rather receive feedback from both your teacher and your peers, or only from your teacher, or only from your peer? Why?

Prompts B (For students from peer feedback class)
Interviewee: ________________
Major: ________________
Age: __________
Previous experience of revision activities: Yes ____ No ____
Previous experience of peer review activities: Yes ____ No ____
How would you rate yourself as an English learner? Excellent _ Good _ Fair _ Poor _
How would you rate your skills in writing English compositions?
Excellent _ Good _ Fair _

Poor _

1. Was peer feedback of any use to you when you revised your compositions? If so, what use were they? If not, why not?

2. What types of peer feedback do you prefer?

3. Did you benefit from giving feedback to others? If so, what were the benefits? If not, why not?

4. Did you use other sources to help you revise your draft? If so, which ones?

5. Would you rather receive feedback from both your teacher and your peers, or only from your teacher, or only from your peer? Why?

Appendix D

D.1. Examples of revision levels and effectiveness

Surface change:
Excerpt from Yang’s draft: Internet was set up in 1969, at the beginning, it was only use in military affairs.
Excerpt from Yang’s final text: The Internet was set up in 1969. At the beginning, it was only used in military affairs.

Meaning change:
Excerpt from Zeng’s draft: Thirdly, in the field of culture, from the Internet, we can know the history of other countries or aplenty knowledge to enlarge our eyeshot. If you want to find some information to finish your work or article, computer will help you a lot.

Excerpt from Zeng’s final text: Thirdly, in the field of simple life, by the Internet, we can know what’s happened all over the world and find any information we need when we work or study. Of course, it is convenience to us to enlarge our eyeshot and improve the efficiency of working and studying if we learn the information from the Internet.

**D.2. Examples of revision effectiveness**

**Successful revision:**
Excerpt from Jin’s draft: Regardless of this information that as a negative effect on the healthy growth of the youth generation has been prohibit spreading by law, the result indicates that it is hard to be forbidden.
Excerpt from Jin’s final text: Although the information that has a negative effect on the new generation has been forbidden by law, the result indicates that it is very difficult to be forbidden.

**Unsuccessful revision:**
Excerpt from Luo’s draft: They forgot their homework, their lessons. Only play games in the Internet!
Excerpt from Luo’s final text: But they forgot their homework, their lessons. Only play games in the Internet!

**Revision with mixed effects:**
Excerpt from Li’s draft: According to the information from Internet, they can know much more about the market—the situation used to be and is being, also help them to predict it will be so that they can make accurate decision accord with the timely changeable information.
Excerpt from Li’s final text: According to the information from Internet, they can know much more about the market—the situation used to be, now, and in the future. All these help the managers make accurate decisions in accord with the timely and changeable information.

**Appendix E. Essay scoring guide**

6 Impressive
- Strong organization of essay and paragraphs
- Persuasive reasoning through varied and detailed examples
- Demonstrates style through sophisticated and varied vocabulary, complex grammar and sentence structure, accurate spelling, and effective transitions and punctuation

5 Clearly competent
- Clear organization of essay and paragraphs
- Relevant, detailed examples
- Correct use of most vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, transitions, spelling, and punctuation; minor errors do not interfere with communication

4 Satisfactory (sometimes only marginally)
- Organized essay and paragraphs
- Developed with adequate examples, but lacking detail
• Correct use of most vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, transitions, spelling, and/or punctuation; occasional errors sometimes interfere with communication

3 Unsatisfactory

• Some evidence of organization of essay and/or paragraphs
• Little development
• Frequent errors in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, transitions, spelling, and/or punctuation sometimes interfere with communication

2 Weak

• Slight evidence of organization of essay and/or paragraphs, but ideas confused and/or disconnected
• Very little development, but simplistic
• Frequent and varied errors in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, transitions, spelling, and/or punctuation interfere with communication

1 Severely limited

• No evidence of organization
• No development
• Limited to basic words, phrases, and sentences often with errors
• May be off topic or merely a copy of the Essay Test Topic


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