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# ESL students' experiences of online peer feedback

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## Abstract

With the popularity of computer technology, online peer feedback has become common in university writing classes. This paper reports an exploratory study of 22 English as a Second Language (ESL) students' experiences of online peer feedback in a sheltered credit course at a western-Canadian university. Based on analyses of the electronic feedback (e-feedback) participants received, comparisons of their initial and revised drafts, and follow-up interviews, the study shows that e-feedback, while eliminating the logistical problems of carrying papers around, retains some of the best features of traditional written feedback, including a text-only environment that pushes students to write balanced comments with an awareness of the audience's needs and with an anonymity that allows peers to make critical comments on each others' writings. However, the participating ESL students expressed little confidence in peer commenting in general. Some shied away from the demand to express and clarify meaning, which turned online peer feedback into a one-way communication process, leaving a high percentage of peer comments not addressed. An intervention of face-to-face class discussion with teacher's guidance to clarify comments in question is suggested to maximize the effect of online peer feedback.

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## 1. Introduction

Peer commenting on each other's writing has been an important and useful instructional process in writing classes. Summarizing the advantages of peer feedback in second language (L2) classrooms, Jun Liu and Jette G. Hansen (2002) stated that peer feedback not only increases an awareness of audience needs by creating a collaborative drafting process but also provides opportunities for ESL students to practice English in a meaningful context. These advantages, however, as Liu and Hansen pointed out, are constrained by (a) students' cultural backgrounds, which influence their classroom behaviors and the amount of participation in peer discussions, (b) students' level of English proficiency, which affects their ability to provide and

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comprehend peer feedback, and (c) the mode of peer feedback. Compared with face-to-face peer feedback, written peer feedback using a checklist or comment form offers opportunities of anonymity and a text-only environment. With the development of information technology, the traditional written feedback has taken on a new dimension. As a digital written form, student commentary can be transmitted electronically without the logistical complications of copying and distributing papers (Tannacito & Tuzi, 2002). Such feedback can be in the form of synchronous chat system interactions, asynchronous email, and bulletin-board postings. Being relatively simple to use, these technologies are becoming popular in university writing classes. Of central concern is how such e-feedback differs from traditional feedback to affect students' commenting behaviors and the quality of revisions it generates.

To explore the effect of e-feedback, a growing body of research has compared traditional face-to-face peer response groups versus computer-mediated peer conferences in the context of university or pre-college writing classes. A number of such studies have focused on L2 or ESL/EFL (English as a foreign language) students (Braine, 2001; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Jones, Garralda, Li, & Lock, 2006; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Matsumura & Hann, 2004; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Tuzi, 2004). Researchers have examined the peer feedback interactions (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Honeycutt, 2001; Jones et al., 2006; Mabrito, 1991; Sirc & Reynolds, 1990; Strenski, Feagin, & Singer, 2005) and/or the effect of peer comments on revision and quality of the final paper (Braine, 2001; Hewett, 2000; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Matsumura & Hann, 2004; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Tuzi, 2004). Their findings have suggested that e-feedback has advantages in terms of its interactive textual exchange and greater student participation although its impact on revision seems to vary in individual studies.

### *1.1. Interactive textual exchange in online peer feedback*

Researchers have identified how peer feedback in cyberspace retains the advantage of traditional written feedback as students put words together to write about writing. As Mark Mabrito (1991) put it, "the situation demands not only writing but also the skillful verbalization of one's thoughts and ideas about writing and a peer's text" (p. 510). When focusing on writing in cyberspace, students, in Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry M. Maid's (1995) words, "are released from much of the responsibility that a face-to-face encounter sometimes forces on them. They are not affected, for instance, by students with bad breath, or by students who make them uncomfortable in some vague way, or by students who are angry with a teacher" (p. 212). While released from these responsibilities in the traditional mode, students take on new responsibilities in online feedback. For example, in peer e-feedback activities, students must still be sensitive to the audience's needs and follow a clear, concise, and informative style without having the benefit of facial cues or body language that face-to-face interactions offer (Breuch & Racine, 2000). These constraints pose more challenges to students engaged in peer e-feedback but perhaps also in a way persuade them to be better writers. According to Lee Honeycutt's (2001) analyses of students' conferencing transcripts, students in an online environment are only linguistically co-present, so they must make explicit references by using indexical devices, such as page numbers, quotations, and paraphrases to maintain common document focus and make coherent evaluative comments. One should note that Honeycutt's observations were made in online conferencing, and other methods such as exchanging

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