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Empowering EIL learning with a Web 2.0 resource: An initial finding from the cross campus *Storybird* feedback study

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ABSTRACT

Although much has been researched about feedback on traditional paper or wordprocessed compositions, responded to offline, little has yet been done on compositions published and responded to in a web 2.0 environment. This study therefore investigates the anonymous asynchronous non-reciprocal feedback given by 139 peers online to 56 English compositions published on the *Storybird* website by Taiwanese English major university students of two proficiency levels. Feedback responses were downloaded and submitted to detailed qualitative analysis leading to a taxonomy of feedback types which also provided quantitative findings. Overall the feedback was unlike that often reported in traditional studies of feedback given to non-native speakers by peers or teachers. Instead of a corrective and language oriented focus we found more attention paid to content, with a strong element of genuinely communicative response approximating feedback as conversation, consistent with the social function of Web 2.0. There was also evidence of respondents adjusting their feedback to the proficiency of the writer, not just in giving more language oriented feedback to weaker writers but also in mitigating its impact by greater use of interpersonal cues and communicative responses.

1. Introduction

This short paper reports part of a larger ongoing study of peer feedback on writing in English as an International Language (EIL) published online on the *Storybird* website. It aims to contribute to the study of peer feedback on EIL written compositions, by considering what sort of feedback occurs in an up to date internet based version of this. Second it adds to our knowledge of how Web 2.0 can impact on EIL learners, specifically what they communicate to peers about compositions they write using English online.

Computer assisted language learning has progressed to mobile assisted and web assisted language learning. With the arrival of Web 2.0, with its participatory culture, educators are naturally interested in all the ways in which the facilities it affords may impact on how the non-native speaker uses and learns English. Currently theorising and research however is often still at the level of broad concepts that are claimed to benefit learners. For instance McLoughlin and Lee (2007) outline four features that they see as valuable, of which two are relevant to the present study.

Connectivity and social rapport. This not only supported by well-known social networking sites like *MySpace* and *Facebook* but also by some sites also specifically encouraging language learning such as *Livemocha* and *Storybird*. They are examples of affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) in which users engage in informal learning, and expressive forms of behaviour along with developing social identities and communicative skills. This chimes with Vygotskian social theories of how people learn (Turuk, 2008).

Content creation. Web 2.0 highlights the importance of content creation along with use of existing content. Wikis and open source and open content facilities, allowing for open editing by users, provide obvious means for anyone to create, organise and share information, including educational content (Beshears, 2005). *Storybird* indeed is a site enabling such sharing of compositions created by users, and incorporates facilities for open review by other users of the site.

For real progress to be made in the investigation of the actual benefits of Web 2.0, however, we believe that more detailed studies need to be conducted of how it impacts on quite specific tasks, using particular web facilities (Wang & Vasquez, 2012). With this in mind we have

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chosen English composition writing by university English majors, using *Storybird*, which as we have seen exhibits two of the four potential benefits of Web 2.0, in this report focusing on the content of the peer feedback which was given.

2. Background review

2.1. Feedback on written compositions

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, provided either during the writing process or after a final draft has been produced. Research starts with what kinds of feedback these different sources give, on various dimensions such as corrective versus non-corrective (Ferris, 2012), direct (i.e. the correct form is given) vs indirect (the correct form is not given but an indication of an error is provided e.g. by a code such as SP for spelling error) (Aliakbari & Toni, 2009; Ellis, 2009; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010), directive versus mitigated (Treglia, 2009), oral vs written (Bilbro, Iluzada, & Clark, 2013), in native language vs in target language (Zhao, 2010), concise general versus elaborated specific (Strijbos, Narciss, & Dunnebier, 2010), global versus local (related to specific grammar, spelling etc. points: in the end all the types of errors recognised in Error Analysis may be differentiated) (Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Yang, 2011), and cognitive versus affective (Lu & Law, 2012). It is notable that most classifications focus on corrective feedback rather than feedback in general. Many further issues beyond the nature of the feedback are also researched. Although not the focus of the current study we mention here the one that continues to engender a great deal of debate at the present time, that of how effective this or that type of feedback, or indeed any feedback at all, is in speeding the writer's improvement. Opinions and research findings range from those who seriously question the value of feedback (e.g. Truscott, 1999), to those who demonstrate beneficial effects, usually where feedback is targeted systematically on a specific language point such as article use (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Kao, 2013).

Most feedback research has been on handwritten compositions where feedback is given on the hardcopy, often in a classroom setting. With the advent of wordprocessing the same emphases continued, with the addition of consideration of automated computer-based feedback, starting from spellcheckers and grammar checkers (Burston, 2001; Lee, Cheung, Wong, & Lee, 2013). Furthermore, where the composition is produced and revised electronically, there is the opportunity for a much more detailed capture of the revisions made after feedback than was possible hitherto (e.g. by keystroke logging, or screen video-capture). Increasingly, in the digital age, however, more and more writing, even in the context of classroom instructed learning, is not just written but also delivered electronically (e.g. as email attachment) and receives feedback through the same medium, whether from a teacher or from peers (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008) or an online writing centre (Rosalia, 2010) or from other readers. This may be supported by specialist error correction/annotation support software which assists the feedback-giver (Yeh & Lo, 2009).

With the arrival of Web 2.0, increasingly compositions are more widely published or shared in some way online via blogs (Vurdien, 2011), wikis (Pifarre & Fisher, 2011; Woo, Chu, & Li, 2013), *Moodle* (Diez-Bedmar & Perez-Paredes, 2012) or websites designed for this purpose, such as *iLap* (Lu & Law, 2012) or *Storybird* which is the subject of the current study. In this way compositions are available for feedback from anyone who is licensed to access the site and chooses to read them, including teachers, peers and complete strangers on the internet, 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 feedback has been relatively little studied and it is to this area that our study aims to contribute. The first task, as we perceive it, is to investigate simply what kind of feedback is given in this medium, and how far it resembles feedback traditionally found in studies of feedback on non-internet published compositions, and specifically in this small exploratory study we are targeting peer feedback.

From the traditional composition feedback literature there are a number of findings to follow up. First, feedback from both peers and teachers is typically presented as predominantly language oriented and corrective, i.e. targeting errors (Lee, 2008a): there is a paucity of reference to communicative feedback, in the true sense where the feedback giver responds to the message of what the writer has written or engages with the writer in some way other than about their composition as a language learning task. This may be because the traditional studies of feedback on writing are often done in formal classroom settings, and indeed many deliberately impose on the feedback givers the requirement to focus on certain aspects, such as grammar correction, so we do not get to see what feedback they would spontaneously give. Indeed often feedback studies are worded in a way that suggests that they work within a universe of discourse where the only feedback that exists or is seen as worth considering is corrective, or at least evaluative (e.g. Ellis, 2009). Nelson and Schunn (2009) for example, based on the literature, establish a coding of eight types of feedback: summarization (of the student's performance), identifying problems, providing solutions, localization (i.e. saying where in the composition there is a problem), explanation (of the nature of a problem), scope (of problem), praise, and mitigating language. All these appear to be evaluative and for the most part language oriented, though the use of the word problem rather than error suggests perhaps that suitability of content may be considered as well as of the language form used to express it. Similarly Patchan, Hawk, Stevens, and Schunn (2013) coding over 1100 comments given to writers by their peers recognised the following categories: type of feedback, type of criticism, focus of problem, focus of solution, and implementation, demonstrating that most of the distinctions of types of feedback that are commonly researched are purely subdivisions within the corrective category. Even the cognitive versus affective feedback distinction, which might appear to apply to feedback in a wider sense, is in fact often construed as applying only to types of corrective feedback, following the original formulation of this distinction by Vigil and Oller (1976).

Studies of feedback on writing from a clear Web 2.0 perspective are as yet relatively few. Finley (2006) concerns a tool called Create a Graph for delivering feedback, but as the following quote shows, it fails to deal with feedback in the full social sense that we might expect Web 2.0 to support, and remains at the traditional corrective level which we described earlier: “In three clicks a visual depiction of weaknesses or strengths can be downloaded, e-mailed, printed, or inserted into a multimedia presentation.” (202). By contrast, Alameen (2011) reports that for learners of English at university in the USA using VoiceThread “Digital stories provided an interactive venue for building learner communities, fostering collaboration, engaging learners in multiliteracies, and creating opportunities for global audience interaction and feedback.” (355).

In the area of cooperatively written wikis and blogs we are however beginning to see a departure from the narrow focus on correction. Though we have not found any thorough studies of the types of such feedback in an EIL setting, or consideration of how it might vary