Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

System

Relative second language proficiency and the giving and receiving of written peer feedback

CrossMark

David Allen[*], Akiko Katayama

University of Tokyo, 3-8-1, Komaba, Meguro-Ku, Tokyo, Japan

A B S T R A C T

Peer feedback is a potentially beneficial yet highly complex process that can be influenced by a variety of social, historical and cultural factors. Here, we focus on learner proficiency and learners' perceptions of their own and their peer's proficiency, in addition to other factors, and we describe how these factors may influence the quantity and type of feedback given and utilized during feedback sessions. In the context of an undergraduate academic writing course, data was collected from six undergraduate Japanese learners of English who participated in dyadic peer feedback. Written texts, interview data and classroom observation formed a triangulated data set that was used to inform our inquiry. The writers' initial and revised drafts and the reviewers' comments were used in individual interviews as a basis for discussing the feedback process and the factors that influenced it. Differences in language proficiency and perceived relative proficiencies of the peers appeared to be important factors influencing the process. The results of the study are discussed with reference to pedagogical applications during peer feedback.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Peer feedback in the writing classroom is a well-established methodology that has received increasing attention in the applied linguistics literature (e.g., Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Liu & Hansen, 2002). While most scholars and educators agree on the potential for learning afforded by the activity, it is also widely agreed that multiple factors can influence the process and teachers need to be aware of these factors when forming pairs or groups in classrooms (Ferris, 2006; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Nelson & Carson, 2006; Villamil & De Guerrero, 2006). Recent research has pointed to a range of factors that can potentially influence the peer feedback process: The use of first and/or second language (Villamil & De Guerrero, 2006; Yu & Lee, 2014), language proficiency of peers (Allen & Mills, 2015), gender (Chavez, 2000), the language of the reviewer (NS vs. NNS; Zhu, 2001), learner's motives (Yu & Lee, 2015; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012), and shared cultural background (Nelson & Carson, 2006).

As the organizer and facilitator of peer activities, it is the writing teacher's role to actively monitor pairings in order to maximize their success. Thus, there is a clear need for research on the various factors that can influence feedback activities in order to empower teachers to make informed decisions in the classroom. One of the most under-researched factors is language proficiency, which has only directly been addressed by one previous study (Allen & Mills, 2015). While the findings of Allen and Mills (2015) suggest that language proficiency is indeed an important variable, the study addressed language proficiency using objective measures only and did not consider *perceived* proficiency differences, which must be assessed

* Corresponding author. Ochanomizu University, 2-1-1, Otsuka, Bunkyo-Ku, Tokyo, Japan.
  E-mail addresses: allen.david@ocha.ac.jp (D. Allen), aktayama@aless.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp (A. Katayama).

through more qualitative methods of investigation. The present study develops this line of investigation by focusing on the influence of language proficiency on the peer feedback process, as measured objectively and as perceived by peers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Proficiency and peer feedback

Second language (L2) proficiency has been defined as a learner's ability to *use* L2 knowledge in different tasks (R. Ellis, 2008, p. 976). While language proficiency is traditionally considered in terms of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), there is considerable inter-dependence across skills. For example, giving feedback requires the ability to comprehend the writer's text (reading) as well as knowledge of written texts (writing) in order to allow the reader to make appropriate comments and suggestions, which then must be delivered orally (speaking/listening) or through writing (writing/reading), or both. Dyadic peer feedback, which involves both the giving and receiving of suggestions, thus potentially, involves all four skills.

L2 proficiency has been suggested as a key factor in peer feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Nelson & Carson, 1998), though most studies have tried to control, rather than investigate, its impact on the process (e.g., Hu & Lam, 2010; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Suzuki, 2008). Allen and Mills (2015) dealt directly with the issue of proficiency and peer feedback, by investigating the type and quantity of feedback given and incorporated when proficiencies varied across participants. Fifty-four undergraduate novice academic writers wrote sections of a science report, which was followed by peer feedback in which each writer became the reviewer in a dyad. Participants were classified in terms of L2 proficiency as assessed using a C-test, which requires both receptive and productive abilities. Using logistic regression with the quantity of suggestions made by reviewers as the response variable, the researchers showed that the proficiency of the reviewer strongly predicted the number of suggestions made in dyadic peer feedback, with higher proficiency reviewers making more suggestions. This difference was most apparent when higher proficiency reviewers were paired with lower proficiency writers, in which case the most suggestions were made. On the other hand, when lower proficiency reviewers were paired with higher proficiency writers, the fewest suggestions were made. In a second logistic regression analysis with the number of suggestions incorporated by the writer as the response variable, the writer's proficiency influenced the number and type of suggestions that were incorporated in the revised drafts, such that lower proficiency writers tended to incorporate fewer of the meaning-related suggestions made by their peers, which supports research that has shown lower proficiency learners make fewer meaning-related revisions (Berg, 1999; Paulus, 1999).

Based on the findings of Allen and Mills (2015), L2 proficiency appears to be an important factor affecting the outcomes of peer feedback. Additionally, not only the actual proficiency of the individual (as measured by a test) but also his/her *relative* proficiency compared to that of his/her peer in the dyadic interaction may be an important factor affecting the number/type of suggestions made and incorporated. Another study offers support for this idea: Amores (1997) found that the perception of peers' relative proficiency was an important factor that mediated feedback interactions. She found that when participants perceived themselves as lower in proficiency relative to their peer, they were more likely to accept their peer's suggestions uncritically, thereby relinquishing ownership of the text. Moreover, the peer who could give more feedback on their peer's text gained authority or 'power' from the interaction. Importantly, this gaining of authority, and also the relinquishing of ownership of the text, were both tied to the *perceived* proficiency differences.

While Amores (1997) showed that perceived language proficiency is a salient factor affecting the outcome of peer feedback, there was little information provided about the type of feedback provided by the reviewer and incorporated by the writer. Thus, it is not clear exactly whether or how differences in perceived proficiency lead to different types of feedback.

3. The present study

Silva and Brice (2004) note that a one-size-fits-all approach to writing pedagogy is not suitable and we must take into account the differences in learners, text types and contexts. Ferris (2006) suggests that we 'form pairs or groups thoughtfully', which means considering the variety of factors that research has shown to be potentially important factors. As we assume language proficiency may influence giving and receiving of feedback and thus impact writing skills development, it is important to better understand its role so that teachers can make informed decisions about interventions in pairing students based on the goals of the feedback activities and the proficiency of the learners. In the present study, we use learners' texts, classroom observation and interview data to inform our investigation into the role of proficiency in peer feedback.

3.1. Research questions

The following research questions were addressed:

1. Do perceptions of relative proficiency influence the giving and incorporating of peer feedback, in terms of the quantity and the type feedback?