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Exploring Chinese students' strategy use in a cooperative peer feedback writing group

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ABSTRACT

While research on peer feedback has proliferated over the past two decades, little attention has been paid to the strategies L2 learners employ while they are engaged in peer feedback activities in the L2 writing classroom. To fill such a void in the research literature, this case study explores the peer feedback strategies adopted by four Chinese EFL learners from an Activity Theory perspective. Multiple sources of data were collected, including video recordings of peer feedback sessions, semi-structured interviews, stimulated recalls, and student drafts of writing. The study reveals that this group of engaged and collaborative EFL students adopted five major strategies in peer feedback: Using L1 (Mandarin Chinese) (Artefact), employing L2 writing criteria (Rule), adopting rules of group activity (Rule), seeking help from teachers (Community), and playing different roles (Division of labor). The findings show that students as agents of the activity employ these strategies to facilitate their group interaction. The reconceptualization of peer feedback from the Activity Theory perspective highlights that peer feedback is a socially mediated activity in which students use strategies to facilitate their group interaction.

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1. Introduction

As a form of collaborative learning, peer feedback can serve as an effective pedagogical activity to improve the teaching and learning of L2 writing (Min, 2005; Yu & Lee, 2015; Zhao, 2014). One strand of recent studies on peer feedback has investigated the peer interactions of students, focusing on various issues including patterns of interaction and group dynamics (Zheng, 2012; Zhu, 2001), cultural issues (Hu & Lam, 2010; Nelson & Carson, 2006), student stances (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012), and motives and goals (Yu & Lee, 2015; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). While this body of research has enriched our knowledge about peer interaction in peer feedback, little research has addressed the specific strategies EFL students use during peer feedback to cope with the linguistic and cognitive challenges that arise during the peer interaction process. As strategy use plays a pivotal role in helping L2 learners develop their writing abilities (Kang & Pyun, 2013; Lei, 2008), there is a need to address how L2 writers employ strategies to mediate their peer feedback activities.

With the rise of Activity Theory (AT) (a sub-branch of sociocultural theory) in the field of second language education and L2 writing (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Lee, 2014), much can be gained by using AT as an analytic lens to understand strategy use

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during peer feedback. Although several previous studies have addressed strategy use in peer feedback (e.g., Villamil & Guerrero, 1996, 2006), to the best of our knowledge little research has adopted AT to investigate strategy use in peer feedback of L2 writing. AT conceptualizes peer feedback as a collective and situated activity, during which students use a range of (cognitive and sociocultural) strategies to facilitate collaborative learning. The typology of strategies informed by AT, namely artefacts-mediated, rule-mediated, community-mediated, and division of labor-mediated, as expounded in the conceptual framework in the following section, can provide a useful analytic framework for investigating the complex mediation process of peer feedback. Research on strategy use informed by AT can show the mediation roles of a range of strategies students use during peer feedback, and uncover the complex nature of the interaction process. The present study set out to investigate the strategies a group of EFL writers adopted as they engaged in group peer feedback activities. The research question that guided the present study is:

What strategies did EFL writers use during group peer feedback, and how did the strategies impact the peer interaction process?

In this paper, by strategies, we refer to socially mediated actions and behaviors consciously taken to facilitate peer feedback activities and successful revision-learning (Kang & Pyun, 2013). This study can provide useful pedagogical implications about how students can be supported to employ strategies to maximize learning during peer feedback in the writing classroom.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Activity theory

The study is anchored in activity theory, a part and extension of SCT (Sociocultural Theory), which maintains that socially-organized and goal-directed mediated activities play a crucial role in language learning (Engeström, 2001). As the central construct of SCT and AT, mediation sees humans use physical instruments (e.g., computer, machine, clocks, and paper) and symbolic artefacts (e.g., language, religion, and sign) to meditate their relationships with others and the world (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Apart from the artefact/tool mediators, the activity system comprises other interrelated mediators: community (multiple individuals and/or subgroups who share the common learning goal), rules (the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions), and division of labor (social roles, power relationship between the members of the community) (Engeström, 2001). The subject of the activity system can be an individual or a group working on the object, the target of the activity, which refers to “the ‘raw material’ or ‘problem space’ at which the activity is directed and which is molded or transformed into outcomes” (Engeström, 1993, p. 67), leading to an outcome with the help of the artefacts. This action takes place in context, where the rest of the components – the community, the rules, and the division of labor are located. Within the activity system, the various components interact with each other and act upon the subject’s behaviors and lead to the outcome (e.g., students’ learning) of the activity.

Informed by AT, peer feedback is conceptualized as a mediated collective activity system defined by its “community” (e.g., teachers and peers who may share the same goal), the “rules” (e.g., rhetoric rules, collaboration, and time), “division of labour” (e.g., reader, writer, and relationship), and “mediating artefacts” (e.g., physical and cultural artefacts like language), which direct at the “object” (i.e., to give feedback and transform the original essays to be ones with better quality) and help achieve the “outcome” (i.e., learning from peer feedback) of the activity (see Fig. 1).

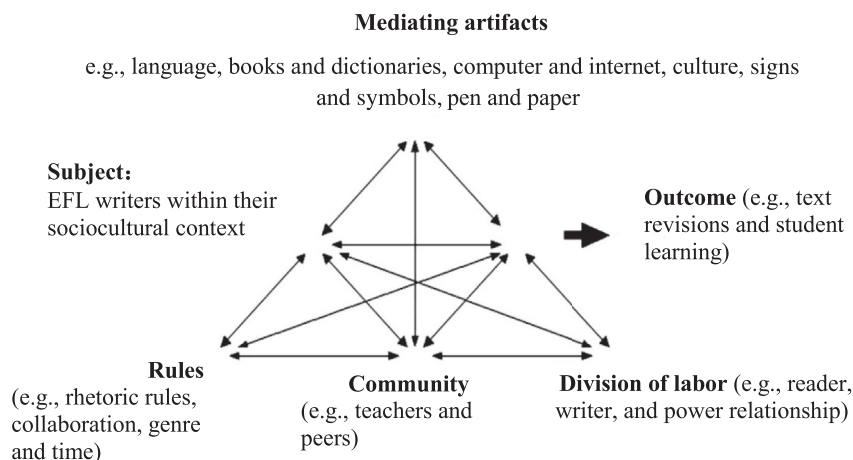


Fig. 1. An L2 writing peer feedback activity system (based on Engeström, 1999, p. 31).

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