CrossMark

Peer feedback in second language writing: Investigating junior secondary students' perspectives on inter-feedback and intra-feedback

Man-Kit Lee[*]

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 8PQ, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The practice of peer feedback has driven an array of studies over the past few decades. Prior research on students' perspectives on peer feedback has mainly focused on reviewer–writer exchange at university and senior secondary levels. The present study examines junior grade learners' perspectives on various peer feedback stages, including the conventional reviewer–writer exchange and the proposed practice of intra-feedback (a peer-feedback-on-peer-feedback reviewer-centered task), with reference to teacher feedback. The study also seeks to address a validity concern relating to measuring perceptions in comparative feedback research. A class of 30 Chinese junior secondary students in Hong Kong participated in this intervention study. Questionnaire results show that like in the case of more senior learners, teacher comments were rated more positively but some participants indicated their preference for having both peer and teacher feedback. Interview responses reveal that peer feedback could foster mastery goal orientations, trigger task interest, offer training on perspective-taking at different feedback stages, and enhance language and writing development. Intra-feedback was well received by the junior students because it provided assurance for peer assistance, promoted task engagement, enhanced reviewers' capability and reflective awareness, and eased feedback quality concerns, suggesting that it deserves a place in peer feedback practice.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, writing pedagogy has seen a paradigm shift from the traditional product approach to a learner-centered, process-oriented approach (Graham & Sandmel, 2011; Lee, 2006). In process writing, learners "discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" in various interconnected production and regulatory activities, including planning, drafting, reviewing, and revising (Zamel, 1983, p. 56; also see Badger & White, 2000; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Peer feedback, one of the central components at the reviewing and revising stages, has captured the interests of second language (L2) writing researchers. A substantial number of studies have examined learners' perceptions and the psychological or motivational impact of peer feedback as well as how peer feedback could affect writing and language development (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). However, the research literature, especially studies on learners' perspectives, has mainly involved students at university or senior secondary levels. Thus, the findings may not be of direct relevance to language teachers who practice or intend to practice peer feedback in classes involving younger learners (e.g. junior secondary or

* Tel.: +44 759 215 7863.
E-mail address: MKL27@cam.ac.uk.

primary levels). The present study aims to address this issue by examining junior secondary L2 students' perspectives on peer feedback. It compared the students' perceived usefulness of peer and teacher feedback and looked at their preferences for different feedback modes with reference to the conventional peer feedback practice and a proposed "intra-feedback" practice. This study also seeks to address a validity concern in relation to measuring comparative perceptions in feedback research.

2. Literature review

The extensive literature on L2 peer feedback has focused on a range of learner variables, including students' perceived helpfulness of peer comments and their psychological attributes. Mixed perceptions have been reported regarding the usefulness of peer feedback. Some studies have suggested that peer feedback could help learners raise their awareness of the shortcomings of their work and by aiding their sense of audience (Hu, 2005; Hu & Lam, 2010; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006; Zhao, 2014). Other studies have mentioned quality concerns as they found that peer responses were sometimes not specific or lacked elaborations or explanations and thus could not facilitate revision (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Wang, 2014). Some learners stated that their peers' advice could help with the writing content (McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994), while others noted that their peers placed too much emphasis on surface errors (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000).

From the psychological perspective, it was found that L2 students could gain a sense of ownership over their writing (Tsui & Ng, 2000) and felt the environment less intimidating (Hu & Lam, 2010; Jacobs et al., 1998; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010, 2014). In addition, a lower level of general L2 writing apprehension was evident after peer review (Jahin, 2012). Nonetheless, peer feedback might not be as effective as teacher feedback in terms of enhancing general L2 writing self-efficacy (Ruegg, 2014). On the other hand, some learners were found not to have much confidence in their peers' competence; they put their trust in their teachers, whose comments were considered authoritative and of a higher quality (Hu & Lam, 2010; Jacobs et al., 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Wang, 2014; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010). Some students were frustrated or even left amotivated because their peers did not treat peer feedback seriously (Best, Jones-Katz, Smolarek, Stolzenburg, & Williamson, 2014; Wang, 2014). A decline in interest in peer feedback over time was also reported due to mechanical practices (Wang, 2014).

This paper extends the scope of those studies that compared L2 learners' perspectives on peer feedback and teacher feedback. One of these earlier studies is the quantitative research conducted by Zhang (1995) in university programs of English as a second language (ESL) in the United States. The results from a questionnaire tapping preferences for distinctive types of feedback revealed that the participants significantly favored teacher feedback over peer feedback. Tsui and Ng (2000) adopted a fine-grained approach by examining via a questionnaire their Chinese ESL senior secondary (Grades 12 and 13) participants' perceived usefulness of various stages of peer feedback (reading peers' essays, reading peer feedback, and discussing peer feedback) with respect to teacher feedback. The results showed that the participants had a significantly more positive attitude toward teacher feedback, which corresponded to the findings by Zhang (1995).

In response to Zhang's (1995) study, Jacobs et al. (1998) argued that Zhang's providing distinctive preference options in his questionnaire did not represent the process approach accurately in that peer feedback should be construed as an element that supplements rather than supplants teacher feedback. The authors suggested "a middle path" approach (p. 314). Accordingly, they surveyed their Chinese undergraduate participants in Hong Kong and Taiwan as to whether they preferred having peer feedback as one type of feedback; significantly more participants (93%) expressed a preference for including peer feedback. Yang et al.'s (2006) study adopted Jacobs et al.'s (1998) middle path approach and asked their Chinese university participants, divided into the peer and teacher feedback groups, about what they preferred when given choices of teacher feedback, peer feedback, a combination, or no feedback; the statistical results, however, were not reported. The authors also asked the participants whether they found the comments useful. Although only 40% of all the participants found peer feedback useful or very useful (98% for teacher feedback), 61% and 22% of the participants in the peer and teacher feedback groups, respectively, thought peer feedback was useful or very useful. It should be cautioned, however, that there was no peer feedback in the teacher feedback group and no teacher feedback in the peer feedback group. Students' preferences similar to those examined by Yang et al. (2006) were also elicited by Hu and Lam (2010) and Zhao (2014). Positive results were reported, with the majority of the Chinese university participants in both studies stating a preference for a combined feedback mode, a finding in line with that of Jacobs et al. (1998).

Interview data collected in these comparative studies, as briefly reviewed earlier, consistently showed that teacher feedback was perceived as more authoritative and more accurate or helpful than peer feedback, though peer comments could raise awareness of language or writing problems and offer richer feedback. Notably, peer feedback could provide more social or affective support than teacher feedback. The participants found that peers were "less threatening" (Jacobs et al., 1998, p. 312), that they felt "more in common" when exchanging ideas with peers (Yang et al., 2006, p. 193), and that they had "greater freedom" when approaching peers for feedback discussions (Hu & Lam, 2010, p. 385). Also, as peer feedback could enhance a sense of audience and text ownership (roles that teacher feedback may not have fulfilled) (Tsui & Ng, 2000), the existing evidence shows that peer feedback plays a supplementary or complementary role in feedback practice (Jacobs et al., 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000).

While comparative perspectives on peer and teacher feedback have been extensively researched, the focus of previous studies, as seen above, has been mostly restricted to the case of university or senior secondary students. Little is known about the perspectives of younger learners (i.e. students at junior secondary or primary levels). The need to understand junior students' relative perspectives on peer and teacher feedback is particularly vital in educational settings such as that of the present study, where process writing is part of the English writing teaching strategy in junior grades (Education Department, 2002).