Understanding university students' peer feedback practices in EFL writing: Insights from a case study

Shulin Yu[a,*], Guangwei Hu[b]

[a] Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, Room 3007, E33, Av. da Universidade, Taipa, Macau, China
[b] National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

A B S T R A C T

While research on peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom has proliferated over the past three decades, only limited attention has been paid to *how* students respond to their peers' writing in specific contexts and *why* they respond in the ways they do. As a result, much remains to be known about how individual differences and contextual influences shape L2 students' peer feedback practices. To bridge the research gap, this case study examines two Chinese EFL university students' peer feedback practices and the factors influencing their feedback practices. Analyses of multiple sources of data including interviews, video recordings of peer feedback sessions, stimulated recalls, and texts reveal that the students took markedly different approaches when responding to their peers' writing. The findings also indicate that their peer feedback practices were situated in their own distinct sociocultural context and mediated by a myriad of factors including beliefs and values, motives and goals, secondary school learning and feedback experience, teacher feedback practices, feedback training, feedback group dynamics, as well as learning and assessment culture.

1. Introduction

As a popular pedagogical activity in L2 writing classrooms, peer feedback has received increasing attention from writing researchers and instructors in recent years (Chang, 2015; Yu, 2016; Yu & Lee, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Hu, 2005a, 2005b; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). The extant research has investigated various issues of peer feedback such as its effects on text revision and students' writing development, factors influencing students' incorporation of peer comments into new drafts of writing, peer feedback training, students' perceptions and attitudes regarding peer feedback, and peer interaction and group dynamics in peer feedback (e.g., Chang, 2015; Diab, 2016; Lee, 2015; Min, 2016; Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Rahimi, 2013; Hu & Lam, 2010; Zhao, 2010; Zheng, 2012). Although feedback is a contextualized practice (Goldstein, 2006), there has been little research on how students respond to their peers' writing in specific contexts and why they respond in the ways they do. Consequently, we still lack a clear understanding of what individual differences and contextual factors may influence L2 students' peer feedback practices and how. In this paper, we report a case study conducted to add to our understanding of this important topic by providing context-specific and illustrative evidence of the influences of some individual differences and contextual factors on two students' peer feedback practices. Drawing on multiple sources of qualitative data, the study examines two Chinese EFL university students' peer feedback practices with a view to uncovering the nature of their peer feedback practices and various individual and contextual influences on their feedback practices.

2. Previous research on peer feedback practices in L2 writing

Of particular relevance to our study is previous research on peer feedback practices in L2 writing. A survey of the published literature has identified three crucial aspects of peer feedback practices in L2 writing: (a) the focus of peer feedback, (b) language use in peer feedback, and (c) specificity and stance of peer feedback.

Previous research has yielded inconsistent findings about the focus of peer feedback in various educational contexts. Some studies revealed that L2 students focused primarily on surface language errors in their peers' writing while neglecting macro textual issues concerning content, organization, rhetoric, and idea development (Leki, 1990; Mendoca & Johnson 1994; McGroarty & Zhu 1997; Nelson & Murphy, 1992, 1993). Other studies, however, found that L2 students can provide useful peer feedback that deals with global aspects of writing such as content, organization and rhetoric (Min, 2005; Ruegg, 2015; Hu, 2005b; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996; Xu & Liu, 2010; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006). For instance, Min (2005) found that 57% of peer comments made by the students in her study focused on global issues, whereas 43% addressed local features. These results demonstrated the students' focus on global issues and their ability to attend to and offer suggestions on such issues. Hu (2005b)'s study also found that students could provide useful comments concerning both rhetorical issues and language use.

An understanding well documented in the peer feedback literature is that L2 students should pay more attention to global issues in their feedback activities. It is suggested that a greater focus on idea development and organization than on grammar and spelling can lead to more useful peer feedback (Leki, 1990). However, some researchers caution that deliberate overlooking of grammatical errors and word usage may not be beneficial for EFL students since they "are constantly grappling with English in expressing their ideas while composing academic essays ….[and] need input on both content and form so that they can generate writings that are rich and organized in content and acceptable in form" (Min, 2005, p.305). These researchers believe that EFL writing instruction, including peer feedback, should assist students in developing and organizing ideas, and expressing them in appropriate language. Such beliefs have drawn support from recent studies on peer feedback training in L2 writing(e.g., Min, 2006; Rahimi, 2013), which suggest that students should provide a balanced coverage on form, content, organization, and genre in their feedback.

In addition to the focus of peer feedback, research has looked into language use – L1 vs. L2 – in peer feedback practices (Yu & Lee, 2014; Yu, 2015; Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Thorne, 2004; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996). These studies showed that although peer feedback targeted L2 writing, students – especially those in EFL contexts – tended to use both L1 and L2 to give peer comments. For instance, Villamil and Guerrero (1996) found that Spanish EFL students made much use of L1 to deliver feedback and that L1 use was one major mediating strategy in peer feedback. In Zhao's (2010) study, the use of L1 (i.e., Mandarin Chinese) was similarly found to contribute to the participants' improved understanding of their peers' feedback on their writing. Furthermore, Yu and Lee (2014) investigated the use of L1 and L2 in peer written comments and the factors that might influence students' switch between L1 and L2. The results showed that L1 was employed by the EFL learners to give peer feedback that focused more on content and organization, whereas L2 was used to mainly give feedback on language. However, the potential benefits of L1 use have been contested by those who favor the use of the target language in collaborative language learning activities such as peer feedback. They believe that such L2-mediated collaborative activities provide students with opportunities for 'verbalization' or 'languaging' on meaning-focused language tasks, where students work in pairs or small groups to solve linguistic problems, deepen their understanding of language use, and co-construct new knowledge of and about language (Swain, 2006; Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki, & Brooks, 2009).

Previous studies also examined peer feedback practices in terms of the specificity and stance (i.e., positive vs. negative) of peer comments. A number of researchers reported that some L2 students in their studies were unable to provide concrete and specific peer feedback (Leki, 1990; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Tsui & Ng, 2000). Other studies showed that ESL/EFL students tended to offer vague/ formulaic comments or "rubber stamp advice" in peer feedback (Stanley, 1992, p. 219) and misinterpret writers' intentions (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Min, 2005, 2006). Several earlier studies also revealed that L2 students could be overly critical or even sarcastic about their classmates' essays, turning peer feedback activities into unpleasant experiences (Liu & Hansen, 2002; Nelson & Murphy, 1992). Student writers, on the other hand, can become rather defensive when their work is criticized by their peers. The opposite tendency, however, was also reported in a number of studies, which found that L2 students from collectivist cultures, Chinese societies in particular, may refrain from providing negative and critical comments to avoid tension and disagreement and to maintain interpersonal harmony (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Hu & Lam, 2010). In general, the literature on peer feedback has recommended that students provide specific, concrete comments and include both praise and constructive criticism (Liu & Hansen, 2002; Min, 2006).

The preceding review highlights some of the inconsistent findings from previous research on peer feedback practices in L2 writing. These inconsistent findings have variously been attributed to factors such as students' varying L2 proficiency, differing knowledge of L2 writing, and the (un)availability of student training and teacher intervention (Min, 2006; Zhao, 2014). However, insufficient attention has been given to the influences of contextual variables and individual differences on peer feedback practices (Goldstein, 2005). The inconsistent findings also suggest that generalizations about students' peer feedback behaviors/practices are often untenable when we look at how individual students approach peer feedback in their specific sociocultural context. Some of the recommendations from previous studies may not be useful if we do not relate them to the specific context in which learning takes place. While several researchers identified the social nature of teacher feedback and the significance of contextual factors in influencing teacher feedback practices (Goldstein, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lee, 2008), little attention has been paid to how peer feedback practices are, in a similar vein, shaped by students' personal belief systems and their sociocultural contexts (Yu & Lee, 2016a, 2016b). In contrast to the extensive research on whether students are capable of providing useful comments, much remains to be known about *how* students respond to their peer's writing in specific contexts and *why* they respond in the ways they do.