

Effect of peer response on perceptions, beliefs and behavior: Reflective accounts of a Japanese EFL writer

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Introduction

Peer response is an informative as well as a constructive approach to facilitating writer's processes and revisions. Much of the peer feedback research to date has been conducted in various settings and represented both positive and negative influences on writing development. The effective results were generated by sufficient feedback, experience or training, leading to more successful revisions (Berg, 1999; Nelson and Carson, 2006; Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Saito and Fujita, 2004). On the other hand, disapproving outcomes have stemmed from cultural factors such as mismatches of discourse manners, attitudes, and values. As there is some controversy as to whether or not peer response has potential benefits regarding a learner's revision process and products, writing scholars have kept up comprehensive research on peer review sessions in a wide variety of classroom contexts.

The empirical studies of peer feedback so far have highlighted how learners incorporated peer comments into their subsequent drafts or what factors bring a positive/unfavorable impact on the quality of revisions. However, very few of the inquiries into peer feedback provided the clearest picture of the representation of human nature and individual unique frame of reference. Thus, a new research trend of peer response in a field of second language writing has recently comprised writers' behavior or beliefs toward peer reviews (Fujieda, 2007; Hyland and Hyland, 2006).

The present study explores the influence of peer written comments. Specifically, this inquiry delves into a research participant's writing process, development, and perceptual change towards peer feedback as well based on reflective accounts of peer feedback sessions. The investigation does not determine the writer's degree of text-level achievement but depicts the holistic picture of the phenomena during the experience of peer feedback activities.

1. Review of the Literature: Peer Response

Research on peer response has been investigated in both L1 and ESL/EFL settings for years. Most of the empirical studies of peer response had a relatively positive impact on the students' writing development. Researchers argue that peer work sessions are

important and instructive for students in various aspects such as cognitive, social, and linguistic perspectives (Min, 2006). Peer feedback encourages students to improve the writing quality and to influence the revision processes, offering more thought-provoking details about other's written papers. Therefore, peer reviews are advantageous in that learners can sufficiently enrich their subsequent drafts and texts. Despite the potential merits of such collaborative work, scholars raise a critical issue, that is, how writers will adopt written/oral comments into revisions. Few studies have been undertaken to reveal how ESL/EFL students manage and utilize their peer responses in the later revision processes. Nelson and Murphy (1993) investigate whether ESL writers revised their drafts employing peer suggestions. Their results show that the writers facilitated their writing in response to peers' comments when peers encouraged them (i.e., Goldstein and Conrad, 1990).

Carson and Nelson (1996) examine peer feedback by Chinese ESL students and investigate their behavior during a peer feedback activity with video recording. This result shows that Chinese learners treasured conformity among peers and attached great importance to building a sense of camaraderie in the collaborative session.

Moreover, Connor and Asenavage (1994) measure peer comments against teachers', tutors', and writers' and try to see how each feedback facilitates ESL writers' later drafts. The finding demonstrates that peer feedback had little impact on further drafting, whereas the other suggestions were more effective. Another finding is that students sometimes hesitated to provide their impressions and put statements with a tone of concern instead.

These previous pieces of research on peer feedback in ESL/EFL settings indicate controversial issues (Liu and Hansen, 2002; Miao, Badger, and Zhen, 2006). Especially, various learners who have culturally idiosyncratic norms join ESL writing classes. Cultural beliefs and assumptions have a strong impact on learners' behavior and peer feedback management. As Carson and Nelson (1996) clearly point out homogeneous cultures like China do not encourage criticizing. On the contrary, it is significant to establish a close rapport with others. Such cultural blocks pose a large burden on the peer response evaluation and the subsequent revision process.

Peer response still needs further inquiry into the effectiveness of writing development. Although much controversy over the benefits of peer feedback still exists, many scholars affirm the validity of such interactive approaches in writing classrooms.

2. Research on Peer Response

Previously conducted analyses of peer feedback revealed both positive and negative views for the learners' writing development. However, there has been a dearth

of evidence on the perceptual impact of learners' further writing. Some prior research reveals that effective revisions resulted from peers' thoughtful comments as well as from the negotiation of textual meaning. However, such results lack the writer's insider aspects such as beliefs or values towards a peer feedback approach. To explore the learner's inner perspectives, writer's reflective accounts validate a certain portion of the psychological issues of affective management and take fully into account a personal point of view.

Therefore, the present study examines the effect of peer response based on reflective accounts of a Japanese EFL writer and puts an emphasis on understanding and illustrating the holistic picture of the phenomena, not measuring the degree of textual attainment. Thus, this investigation contains two questions:

- (1) How does peer feedback influence the participant's writing process and the later revisions?
- (2) How do peer written commentaries change the writer's beliefs or values of peer feedback sessions?

This research was conducted in "Written English I & II" at Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College, which is one of the core classes of English-major freshmen throughout the academic year of 2006 (April-July and October-January). During the period, the researcher collected the data (reflective journals and in-depth interviews) and analyzed the results.

2-1. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore how one Japanese EFL writer changes her perception toward peer feedback as well as the behavior of her further writing activities. This study employs a qualitative methodology (a case study) underlying the research participant's reflective as well as interpretive accounts of peer response sessions.

The primary emphasis of this inquiry is not to measure the development of writing statistically (e.g., grammatical accuracy) but to describe the subject's spectrum of peer response experiences in the writing classroom. Since the principal goal of this study is to examine the phenomena of perceptual change of peer feedback, a holistic view of deeper personal background would be of great benefit.

2-2. Procedures

In each semester, students had to produce three essays (an expository, a comparative and an argumentative paper) spending about three weeks on completing the essay. After finishing the essay, a peer feedback activity was held (a total of three times in each semester). Students were divided into 4-5 groups and read the classmates' final draft (not group members' papers). Then, all students had to make remarks on the "Peer

Response Sheet” that the writing instructor prepared.

The research participant, Kyoko (pseudonym), was asked to write an episodic experience of each peer feedback session in Japanese. To better understand the subject’s actual experience, the researcher gave an in-depth interview. When the peer response work was over, the participant met the researcher with the reflective notes and response sheet to talk about the peers’ written commentary (interviewed in Japanese). The interviews were tape-recorded, with permission, and continued for 40-50 minutes in the researcher’s office. After the discussions with Kyoko, recorded data as well as her reflective journals of peer feedback were carefully analyzed.

2-3. Background of the Participant: Kyoko

Kyoko is a female Japanese EFL learner (a freshman) at Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College. Kyoko has a high motivation toward learning English since she wants to work for a leading company. Her English level is intermediate. Her TOEIC score is approximately 450. Kyoko started to study English when she was in the first year in junior high school (13 years old). Although many of her friends went to a preparatory school to develop English, she did not enter any outside institute.

In terms of English writing experience, Kyoko did not have any chance of paragraph writing in English during her secondary school age. She just memorized high-level vocabulary and translated Japanese into English in junior/senior high school. However, she wrote a long English essay for a university entrance examination when she was eighteen years old. According to Kyoko, the examinees were required to do research on a specific topic which the target university assigned and completed a written essay in English, roughly 10 pages. After making an essay, Kyoko took an oral test for the written paper. Even though she had written a formal English essay, making a paragraph-style essay was not an easy process for her. It was the first time to make paragraphs in English in Written English class.

3. Results

3-1. First Semester 1

The initial experience of the peer feedback session had a relatively positive impact on Kyoko’s further writing development. In fact, Kyoko had never shared written products in Japanese and English in the classroom during her junior/high school age. Kyoko talked candidly that she was very reluctant to show her own writing to others because sharing her written products was loathsome and embarrassing. Thus, the text negotiations of meaning with peers provoked a great deal of anxiety for her later revisions. She stated that receiving feedback was a natural event between teacher and student, however, she had difficulty in accepting peers’ comments because she just

worried about negative critics of her writing such as “I don’t understand this story,” “There are several grammatical mistakes in the paper,” and “Your writing skill is poor.” In the first interview, Kyoko addressed the initial feedback experience as follows:

R (Researcher): How did you feel when you received some comments from your classmates?

K (Kyoko): Very nervous! It was heart-pounding to see the classmates’ comments. I just wonder how they felt about my written report. I could only imagine if my texts were grammatically clear or not because I just focused more on grammatical things to write sentences. If I had received some bad comments about my grammatical accuracy, I would have got completely shocked.

When the peer feedback activity began, Kyoko felt nervous about receiving feedback. However, she became satisfied with the notes from a few peers after the feedback activity. The suggestions essentially indicated the remarks of her grammatical performance such as inappropriate verb tense or misuse of prepositions. In parallel with the corrections of linguistic accuracy, the peer reviewers made a subtle observation of the content, leading to offering more details in support. The research participant was extremely impressed with the peers’ obvious insight into the criticisms. These content-oriented remarks contributed greatly to her writing processes.

R: So, you felt that feedback based on the content was really helpful, right?

K: Yes, I believe so. Actually, grammar corrections are very important for me, but I also wonder whether the story is meaningful and comprehensible or not. As I mentioned, I checked grammar too much.

R: Then, how did you feel when you received no comments about the content?

K: I just... just felt nervous and unconfident, and thought “Is this story seriously OK?”

As Kyoko clearly pointed out, she consciously emphasized the mechanical as well as linguistic structures while making a draft. Writing out sentences had a priority over being rich in content. The feedback which investigated into the coherence facilitated the development of the subsequent products.

In addition, Kyoko grumbled about several weak points of the peer feedback activity. There was a paucity of any critical as well as positive suggestion from the audience. The simple response, even a positive comment, impeded her further writing

performance. On a final draft of the second essay, one reader just put a compliment, “Your writing is wonderful. I can understand this story. Good.” Such opinions made her even more perplexed, bemoaning the absence of explicit comments for her writing itself.

R: When I saw a response sheet that you received, I found the typically unhelpful notes. Let’s see, here. “I think this writing is OK.” And... the other message is like “Interesting story.” You think these comments aren’t useful, right?

K: Absolutely! Well, this kind of feedback is not necessary because it really made me puzzled as to how interesting my paper was or in which parts my paper is good. I noticed that this reader would be not involved in reading peers’ writing.

3-2. First Semester 2

The second feedback activity seemed to contain more meaning-based comments. The major change of peer feedback compared with that of the first stage resulted in making Kyoko’s perception of writing in English change from writer-based to reader-based. While making sentences at the initial stage, Kyoko focused heavily on mechanical components rather than meaning texts. She was incapable of concentrating on the clear content during her writing processes.

In the second session, Kyoko strongly felt that the peer feedback she received became more qualified and sophisticated. Although she had received both positive and negative comments from peers before, she was delighted to receive any message from her colleagues, especially when the comments Kyoko obtained were constructive, thoughtful, and critical as well (see Appendix 1). When the subject looked back on this feedback activity, the feedback illustrated the detailed descriptions of what the writer needed to revise. Such comprehensible statements encouraged her to be more aware of the issues as was pointed out in the collaborative sessions from the next writing work. As Kyoko recognized a change of her writing attitude towards “reader-friendly,” she attempted to produce a written product being conscious of wider audience at the initial draft stage. She focused more on the linguistic aspects and rarely did highlight the organizing structure and the content. As she had several content-oriented suggestions, she learned to pursue a thoughtful and in-depth suggestion for the meaning of texts and for coherence of writing in order to make the reader oriented to her writing.

K: I still felt that there were few comments in total, but compared with the feedback

in the first session, the opinions were getting more at least. This is nice for me.

R: Yes, sounds good for me, too.

K: Yes (Laughing). I also discovered that I got a question about the texts, “What do you mean?” So, I thought that I should be careful and write some details. Since I received that response, I have tried to consider the audience so that readers can understand my written work.

3-3. Second Semester 1

The responses that Kyoko received in the second semester had a strongly positive impact on her subsequent revision successes compared to the written comments in the first semester. According to Kyoko’s reflective journal of the feedback activity in the second semester, the written commentary adequately changed and indicated more critical thoughts towards her writing. In fact, Kyoko was exasperated at the unspecific and inconducive response such as simply put, “Good writing,” or “Interesting story.” Yet, these types of message had not been illustrated at all in the second term. In the face of the plain statements, peers revealed various suggestions and opinions on the response sheet which facilitated Kyoko’s further processes of revisions.

R: You told me that the quality of peer feedback was totally changed. Why do you think so? Are there any differences compared with the first peer response?

K: One of the differences is that feedback itself is really changed. I mean the feedback included more comments, and the comments have very thoughtful and sometimes critical comments towards my written paper.

R: Did these responses pointed out your grammatical performance or the content?

K: Basically, many of them indicated the suggestions and put a few questions about the content. I was very glad to get these types of feedback because I was able to easily find out how I should revise the next draft and what the paper lacked.
..... It was also easy to apply the feedback to the final product.

3-4. Second Semester 2

In the final interview, Kyoko appeared to show a pleased expression. She reflected on her peer feedback sessions for one year and alluded to a positive impact on the writing development during the last meeting with the researcher. The written commentary which she obtained in the final collaboration demonstrated various types of notes (content-based questions, grammar/vocabulary suggestions, the discourse

suggestions, format corrections, and so on). Kyoko strongly believed that her peers themselves had become more sophisticated and grown to capable critics.

Finally, Kyoko demonstrated a noticeable change in attitudes toward her writing performance. At the beginning of the writing class, she hesitated to write in English and to exchange written products with her classmates. She had no fun to write in her second language because a writing activity was just done under coercion. However, as time passed, peer response became to a quality high enough to facilitate her writing processes and revisions (see Appendix 2). Such peer encouragement contributed greatly to her revision success, her audience awareness, and assessment of feedback exchange.

R: So, do you notice your perceptual change toward peer feedback?

K: Yes. my mind toward peer work really changed, I guess.

R: Why? Why do you feel so? And how did your feelings change?

K: I don't know exactly....., uh... At the beginning of this class, I was so nervous to show my paper to others as I described before. But the quality of peer feedback was getting much better. Probably this is a big impact for me. I looked forward to getting peer comments every time and reading them. Then, I gave no resistance to sharing my papers. And, I have become much interested in writing in English. I didn't use to like writing papers in English because I felt like being forced to make a product.

Kyoko also mentioned that she still felt unconfident about writing in a second language. Even though she realized that her writing ability has improved, she often wonders whether or not the written texts are meaningful and rewarding. Peer commentary is a significant component for Kyoko to develop her writing because she feels that she is still a “callow writer” of English.

4. Summary

This study aimed to analyze the phenomena of one Japanese EFL writer's beliefs and values towards peer feedback and to explore how the subject, Kyoko, experienced behavioral changes through the collaborative work during one academic year. The findings indicated positive effects on the Japanese writer's writing process and performance in whole. In the first semester, Kyoko gradually attained the desired effect and tended to fully understand her peer written comments even though she felt anxious in the initial peer feedback. Moreover, Kyoko accomplished her subsequent revisions and writing development with her peers' more critical, thought-provoking, and substantial commentary in the following semester.

Over a long period, peer response became something much more meaningful to Kyoko's cognitive and behavioral perspectives as well. Whereas the research participant considers her writing proficiency at a formative stage, it is ensured that she performed at her full potential of writing in English with help from the positive influence of peer response.

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Appendix 1: Kyoko's Reflective Journal 1

クラスの友人など多数の意見を聞くことによって、自分の文章の良い所、悪い所がはっきりするので、書き直しやすかった。文章を書く時に誰かに読んでもらって、自分の言いたいことを正確に伝えようとする意識があるので、できあがった文章が自分でも読み手にもわかりやすくなると思う。自分でもそうするようになった。

(Written on July 21st, 2006)

Appendix 2: Kyoko's Reflective Journal of Peer Response through one year.

最初の頃の feedback 活動は本当に恥ずかしかった。自分の書いた英語を誰かが読むということも恥ずかしかったが、それよりも自分で作った作品が読む人＝クラスの人に伝わらなかったらと思うと、とても恥ずかしかった。1年を通して名前を書かないで活動するというのはとても良かったと思う。(中略) この1年間の feedback 活動を通じ、Feedback の内容を参考にし、やり直しができたことは本当に良かったと感じる。

(Written on January 17th, 2007)

要旨

仲間添削が及ぼすライティングの意識、信念、行動への影響

日本人英語専攻学生の記録から

藤枝 豊

ピアレスポンス（仲間添削）はライティングプロセスやライティング力の改善を手助けする効果的な方法である。過去のピアレスポンス研究は、様々な教室環境で実施され、ライティング発達に肯定的及び否定的な効果が発表されている。仲間添削の効果についての議論は現在も続いており、ライティング教師や研究者によるピアレスポンス研究も多く発表されている。

過去のピアレスポンス研究は、書き手が仲間からのコメントを後の訂正にどう組み込むかを調査したものや、どのような要因が作品改善の肯定的及び否定的影響をもたらすのかを調査したものが多くある。しかし、昨今のピアフィードバック研究は、学習者（書き手）の人間性や個人独特の枠組みからピアフィードバックの有効性や書き手の行動を分析する新しい調査方法で展開されている。

本研究は被験者の仲間添削の活動記録（前期と後期の1年間分のデータ）を参考に、被験者のライティング過程と発達、ピアレスポンスの意識変換を探究した。被験者は当初、仲間添削に不安があったが、効果的な意見を聞くことができ、コメントを十分に利用した。また後期では、仲間からの批評的で建設的な意見を得て、ライティングの訂正や被験者自身のライティング力にも肯定的な影響を及ぼした。