Application of Online Peer Feedback in the Teaching of College English Writing

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Abstract—**Online peer feedback can motivate students; Interests in English writing and improve their writing ability. It is to explore the effectiveness of online peer feedback by comparison it with the traditional teacher feedback with some data analysis from the application research in Linyi University**

Keywords—***Online peer feedback; Teacher feedback; English writing***

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is the most difficult and complicated among the four basic languages skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) but it is also the most creative one which can show learner's overall abilities in language. Professor Wang Shouren once said "English writing is equally important as the spoken English in communication, sometime it is even more important than oral English and more widely used in daily life, such as in the communication with foreigners on the internet and writing blog in English". However, English writing has been a big headache for a long time, not only for the English learners but also for the English teachers.

Researches state that during the process approach to writing, language learners' autonomy and individual personality can be encouraged and students regard writing as a discovery of meaning not merely as a dull assignment. Peer feedback, the main part of the process approach to writing, is an activity in which the students not teachers read and revise their peers' writing, that is, students receive the writing feedback from their peers. Usually students take actively part in raising questions and discussions, hence heighten one's own confidence, and improve his ability of self-expression.

Therefore, it is to have more insights into the mentioned matter with the case of non-English majors, with the intention of indicating the differences between the teacher feedback and online peer feedback and exploring the students' attitudes toward online peer feedback, the effect of online peer feedback in improving college students' English writing proficiency, and their opinions on the application of online peer feedback in future writing class. In addition, this study attempts to promote college English writing teaching after exploring the strategies for the incorporation of online peer feedback in the college English writing teaching. I also hope to offer my students an effective means to practice academic writing in such a collaborative but less stressful learning environment.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

A. The process-oriented Approach to Writing

Process-oriented approach, "as a great development of traditional approaches of writing instruction" is becoming more and more prevalent and being proved to be effective and useful in improving college students' writing ability in many countries, China included.

One of the important parts of process approach to writing is feedback which can be presented in the five stages of process writing, concluded by Gail Tompkins, with prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and sharing included. During the different stages, students' audience awareness, creativity and motivation are valued. However, the writing is not a linear process of collecting information, outlining and writing, but relates to many different steps, which are not independent but made up of three elements: the task environment; the writer's long-term memory. It is "an exciting, eventful, evolving process" (Murray, 1982), which is similar to the idea of Zamel that it is "a process of discovering and creating significance."

B. Collaborative Learning Theory

Collaborative Learning or cooperative learning is another backup for online peer feedback. It was firstly promoted by Slavin, in America in the 1970s. According to Slavin (1980), it is a kind of class techniques that encourages students to do all kinds of learning activities in a small group or small team, helping each other, studying some materials and rewards students for the achievements or performance of the entire group, valuing the interactions among teacher and students as well as students and students, promoting students to have a cooperative learning sufficiently.

Peer feedback, as one kind of the cooperative learning, may provide more chances for students to discuss and exchange their ideas in a group in order to help each other and learn from each other. What's more, with the help of internet, peer feedback will enhance its goodness, relaxing students and promote more interest in writing.

III. Research Methodology

A.Research Questions

(1) Does the online peer feedback improve Chinese college students' English writing performance?

(2) How can the online peer feedback improve Chinese college students' English writing performance?

B.Subjects

The subjects involved in the study were 42 physics majors, in Grade 2011 from the researcher's college English writing classes in this University. All of these participants were in their first semester with the same English teacher, who is also the author and researcher of this study. Among these participants, aged from 18 to 20, there were 22 boys and 20 girls. The participants have been arranged randomly in two separate groups by teacher. One was the control group with 21 students (boys: 11; girls: 10) and the other was the experimental one with 21 students (boy: 11; girls: 10). All the students in each group continued to be divided randomly into four groups with 5 or six students in each sub- group. All the activities of peer feedback have been conducted in such small group.

C. Instruments

To answer the research questions in the study and achieve the purpose of the study, the instruments employed in this study includes: (1) the pre-study questionnaire on students' attitudes towards the use of online peer feedback; (2) the pretest and post-test on college English Writing; (3) the follow-up interview on students' conception of the use of the online peer feedback. In the following sections, these three instruments will be described in detail.

D.Research Procedures

Beginning form Sep.4, 2011 to Dec.24, 2011, the whole program lasted one academic semester. During the experiment, the traditional teacher feedback was employed in the CG while the online peer feedback was adopted in the EG. In this section, the procedures of the empirical research are presented including (1) the training of online peer feedback project and (2) the session of feedback, which includes the pre-study questionnaire, the pre-test on English writing and four topics writing, as well as the post-test on English writing and follow-up interview added.

E.Data Collection and analysis

with the help of Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) , quantitative analysis from results of the pre-test and post-test and the results of the feedback session is to be accomplished; and by the means of the qualitative analysis from the following aspects: results of the pre-study questionnaire; results of the follow-up interviews. All of these are carried out with the purpose to answer the research questions: Does the online peer feedback improve the Chinese college students' English writing performance and how can it improve?

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Results and Discussion of the Pre-study Questionnaire

As to the first item, over half of students (52.38%) disagree and strongly disagree with the statement of "I like English writing". Besides, the mean value is only 2.67 in the experimental group, which informs us that it is very critically important to change the present condition that students are in lack of interest in English writing class. As to the young students in E-age, when facing to the item 2, about 38.1% of them in the experimental group like to communicate with their friends online by email or writing blog, which presents us an ideal answer to the former confusion. What's more, the majority of them (66.67%) with 42.86% of the students strong agreement, have the habit of commenting on peers' writing online, as expressed in item 3. Meanwhile, over 71.42% of the students facing item 4 agree that they feel relaxed and comfortable to write English essay online. And much to our surprise, only 19.04% of them, a few students dislike to share their writing with others as to item 5.

All of these data mean that most students in the experimental group accept and welcome the fact that their peers can read and comment their writing with the help of internet.

B.Results and Discussion of the Pre-test and Post-test

From Table 4-1 in the pretest and post-test, EG's mean score rise from 6.38 to 7.62. And the standard deviation in the post-test (1.322) is lower than that of the pretest (2.037). So the differences of all the scores from the mean have been greatly reduced. Meanwhile, from Table 4-2, the paired samples t-test shows there is statistically significant difference (0.014< 0.05) between the pre-test and post-test. In other words, after the writing instruction based on the online peer feedback, participants' writing proficiency improved sufficiently. And what's more, the gap of the students' writing proficiency has been surprisingly reduced. The detailed description of the comparison is shown in the table.

Table 4-1 EG's Mean Score in the Pre-test and Post-test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
EG	Pre-test	6.38	21	2.037	0.444
	Post-test	7.62	21	1.322	0.288

Table 4-2 Comparison of EG's Mean Scores in the Pre-test and the post-test

Paired Differences						t	df	Sig.
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				(2-tailed)
				lower	upper			
E	-1.238	2.119	0.462	-2.203	-0.274	-2.677	20	0.014

For CG the mean score increases from 6.14 to 6.38 after the writing instruction session, and the standard deviation is slightly lowered (from 2.007 to 1.962) as shown in the table 4-3. However, compared with that of deduction of the standard deviation in the EG, 0.715 (2.037-1.322), the deduction in the

CG, 0.045 (2.007-1.962), is much lower. That is to say, the gap of writing proficiency among the students' in the control group has remained almost the same. In the mean time, a paired samples t-test in the table 4-4 indicates a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test. To put it another way, CG also achieves the progress in writing. However, the gap of writing proficiency among the students has remained almost the same. The detailed statistics is seen below in Table 4-3 and Table 4-4.

Therefore, from the above analysis, the online peer feedback conducted in the experimental group is as effective as the teacher feedback in the control group. Differently, in the experimental group, the students' drafts have been revised by peers with the help of blog and email while in the control group, all the drafts have been done by the teacher. What's more, the online peer feedback can make for a lower difference in the performance of students' writing, that is to say, the online peer feedback seems to promote more interests of all students in writing and improve their writing performance, compared with the teacher feedback.

Table 4-3 CG's Mean Score in the Pre-test and Post-test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CG	Pre-test	6.14	21	2.007	0.438
	Post-test	6.38	21	1.962	0.428

Table 4-4 Comparison of CG's Mean Scores in the Pre-test and Post-test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				(2-tailed)
				lower	upper			
CG	-0.24	1.841	0.402	-1.076	0.6	-0.593	20	0.56

C.Discussion of the Follow-up Interview

In response to the first question (Do you like the use of online peer feedback in English writing? Why or why not?), all held the favorable attitude toward it. In their words, firstly, with the help of internet, they could not feel nervous but relaxed in the process of feedback which would give more confidence and inspiration to speak out freely. Secondly, they regarded it as the convenient and quick way to communicate with peers and comment their writings without the embarrassment made by facing to facing meeting. They also stated briefly the online feedback really benefited them in improving English writing, such as pointing out the weakness in their compositions and getting more information to enrich their minds.

In response to the second question (Now, do you feel your writing ability has been improved than before?), the majority of the interviewees (7 out of 9) believed that their writing ability had been improved a bit than before, especially the boys. They continued that after the training and practices of the online peer feedback, they had known clearly of the

elements excellent essay should have, so that they could know the weak points and strong points in their writing. What's more, they had widened their vocabulary and broadened their mind during the communication with peers, and their grammatical mistakes had been less and less during the reading and commenting writing of peers. What's more, by reading peer's feedback, most of students could revise their first drafts and make the sentences more fluent and words more accurate while by commenting peers' essay, most of them could be aware of the similar mistakes in their writing and avoid them in the later writing.

However, two students, girls, said they had not improved writing ability through the online peer feedback. Several reasons mentioned by them are listed in the followings. Firstly, because of the limit of computer skill, such as typing words and the knowledge of blog and email, they had spent a plenty of time on reading and commenting one draft with about 2 or more hours, which they said it has wasted time and energy. Secondly, they kept to the idea that only the teacher feedback could be trustworthy while peers' feedback were suspicious and did not give any constructive and concrete suggestion, even sometime only with more facial praise but less criticizing words.

As to the question 3 and 4, "Have you benefited from giving online feedback to others? If so, what aspects were they?" and "Has the online peers' feedback benefited you? If so, what aspects were they?" most of them (6 out of 9) also expressed that the benefit of the online peer feedback was only to a certain degree. The followings they mentioned can count for it: (a) because of the lack of proficiency in English language, peers usually provided feedback about surface errors, for example spelling, collocations and grammatical mistakes, peers seldom responded to the organization and content problems which they needed most; (b) peers gave more praise than direct criticism in their comments, which was not useful for revisions; (c) peers' feedback seemed questionable sometimes and they did not have confidence in their judgments; (d) too often the peers prescribed what they should do instead of giving concrete suggestions, which resulted in the confusion of the problems; (e) the online peer feedback led to the common plagiarism, which was the worst aspect in the writing they thought.

Very surprisingly, the answers to the fifth question (Would you like if there were only online peer feedback in English writing class?) are unanimous negative. All answered the online peer feedback was very useful. But teacher feedback was a must for its more reliability and valuable aspect while the online peer feedback was a necessary help for their compositions. Some said the teacher was better able to provide suggestions to the depth-level of writing such as content and organization. A girl said "I think the grammatical comments from the teachers are much more authoritative than those from the peers. I will rest assured when my teacher point out my grammatical errors." As to the relationship between these two, most students believe "the online peer feedback supervised and managed by teacher is the best."

In a word, from the interview with five questions, several conclusions can be got. Firstly, students like the use of online

peer feedback in the English writing because they can get the sense of the fulfillment on the website by the cooperation with multi-peers through the easy and quick service of the internet. Secondly, most of students claim that after the training and practices of the English writing, their writing ability has been improved than before, especially in the choices of vocabulary and the perfect of the content as well as the fluency of the sentences, even though the negative effect of the online peer feedback is still in existence, such as the time-consuming. Thirdly, the majority of students believe that the online peer feedback can benefit them to some degree not in all aspects due to lack of language proficiency and other reasons which have been discussed in the section 4.3. Fourthly, facing to the hypothesis condition that only the online peer feedback was left in the writing class room, all students give the negative answer because of the much- needed teacher feedback as the authority while the online peer feedback as the complement.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on data analysis and discussion in chapter four, the following three major findings of the present study can correspond to the above questions: Firstly, the online peer feedback can improve the students' writing performance than teacher feedback. Secondly, the online peer feedback can promote the motivation of students significantly both in learning to write in English and writing performance after the research; and the qualities of their written texts have been obviously improved.

Although this study can ray out some light on the teaching of writing for college English in China, more or less inevitable limitations could be pointed out in this research as presented in the following words, owing to the constraint conditions of the objective and personal aspects.

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