

# Study on the Limited Roles of Peer Feedback\*

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**Abstract**—Peer feedback is a practice where feedback is given by one student to another. It has been studied at home and abroad for many years. More research is about its effect on improving students' writing, less about its limited roles. This paper first introduces peer feedback and then discusses its limited roles based on some studies. Although peer feedback is popular in English writing teaching, some researchers hold the beliefs that peer feedback is not as effective as it is expected.

**Keywords**—peer feedback; limited role; writing

## I. INTRODUCTION

Feedback is an important part in English writing teaching. It is the input of the reader to the writer, and the purpose is to provide the writer with the information to modify the composition so as to make them understand that their compositions are either not logically organized, or lack of content development or errors in terms of words and tenses, so that writers can modify their compositions according to these information and improve the quality of their compositions (Keh, 1990). Ferris (1995) defined feedback as input provided by readers to writers and it can affect writers' revision of their writings. Feedback is widely seen as crucial for encouraging and consolidating learning, and this significance has also been recognized by those working in the field of second language (L2) writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Many researchers hold the belief that feedback plays a crucial role in English learning and can help improve the ability of writing and language output. (Arndt, 1993; Ur, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Feedback in writing is generally divided into teacher feedback and peer feedback, and teacher feedback is preferred while peer feedback is less used.

As an important formative assessment method, its effectiveness of peer feedback is unsatisfactory and even controversial in College English writing classes in China.

## II. PEER FEEDBACK

### A. Definitions of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback, also known as peer review, or peer evaluation, etc., refers to an activity in which a companion exchanges writing essays, negotiates opinions, and provides suggestions for modifying compositions. The most common way is for students to exchange drafts and make revisions

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after writing, or to evaluate their own articles in groups and teacher participates in it as a trainer, monitor and evaluator (Mangelsdorf, 1992; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994). In the activities of peer review, learners provide and receive written or oral feedback for peer writing in pairs or groups. The core of the peer feedback is the information exchange and negotiation between the peers in the writing processes. The purpose of peer feedback is to help students to enhance readers' awareness, reduce writing anxiety, make up for the shortcomings in their compositions, and promote the quality of text output (Stanley, 1992).

Peer feedback, in fact, is collaborative learning. It happens between or among group members who give and receive feedback which is good to both readers and writers. It has strong theoretical stances: process writing, collaborative learning, Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development and interactionist theories of L2 acquisition. Collaborative learning theory (Bruffee 1984a) encourages students to 'pool' their resources and both complete tasks they could not do on their own, learning through dialogue and interaction with their peers (Hirvela 1999). Vygotsky's (1978) theoretical construct of the Zone of Proximal Development suggests that writing skills can emerge with the mediation and help of others. All the theories suggest peer feedback is an important support for the drafting and redrafting of process approaches to writing.

### B. The Previous Studies About the Effect of Peer Feedback

In the 1980s, foreign countries began paying attention to the empirical study of peer feedback in the teaching of first language writing, and then introduced it into the teaching of second language writing. Some researchers have proposed that peer feedback has many advantages through experiments. For example, it can effectively stimulate students to learn independently and practice simultaneously, and enhance students' enthusiasm in revising compositions (Villamilos, 1998).

Peer feedback has been studied for many years abroad and at home. Scholars hold different views about the effects of peer feedback.

In the 1990s, foreign researchers have done a lot of research on peer feedback in writing teaching. There is no doubt that peer feedback does good to students' revision of their writing. Peer review has many benefits for learners and is universally applicable to students with different language proficiencies (Nelson & Murphy, 1993: 141). Connor & Asenavage (1994) found that only 5% of students' revisions

to their compositions were triggered by peer feedback, which rose to 14% in Paulus (1999) and 53% in Mendonca & Johnson (1994). Peer reviews and teacher reviews have the same or even better role in helping students improve their compositions (Cho & MacArthur, 2011: 73-84). Sima Sengupta (1998) surveyed middle school students in Hong Kong and found that it difficult to produce the "reader perspective" of peer response. Students with different proficiency have different views about peer feedback. Mangelsdorf (1992) found that 55% of respondents favored peer feedback. In the study of Mendonca & Johnson (1994), students even consider peer feedback as important as teacher feedback.

In China, Most of the students (62%) like peer feedback and think that peers can find problems and help more in the content of their compositions (viewpoints). According to Yang Miao's study (2006:293-301), more than 60% of the students in the peer feedback class think peer feedback is useful or very useful. Deng Liming & Cen Yue (2010) conducted an experiment on the students of Wuhan University, and they found that the peer feedback mechanism has a very positive impact on the revision process of Chinese students' English writing. The results of the experiment made by Bai Hongquan et al (2017) showed that integrating peer review into the cultivation of normal students' informationized teaching ability can increase the interaction between students and students, between students and content, and between students and teachers.

According to the studies made by the researchers abroad and at home, it is clear that peer feedback has positive influence on students' revision and writing. But is peer feedback as satisfactory as it is mentioned above?

### III. THE LIMITED ROLES OF PEER FEEDBACK

Many studies have proved that peer feedback has a positive role in helping students to revise their writings and promote the interaction between students and students, between students and teachers. Peer feedback, of course, has its advantages. However, it is difficult to implement peer feedback because of different reasons. Some researchers found peer feedback is not as satisfactory as we expect and doubt the roles of peer feedback.

In the past decades, the value of peer feedback was reassessed. L2 students' ability to offer useful feedback to each other has been questioned and the extent to which students are prepared to use their peers' comments in their revisions has been also queried. Mendoca & Johnson's (1994) study, for example, suggested that students were very selective about using peer comments in their revisions. Connor & Asenavage (1994), moreover, claimed that peer feedback made only a marginal difference to student writing, finding that only 5% of revisions could be directly linked to peer comments compared with 35% related to teacher comments. Students tend to trust their teachers rather than their peers, believing that the teacher is the expert whereas their peers might not be knowledgeable enough to diagnose their problems (Sengupta, 1998). In the interviews with L2 university students, Nelson & Carson's (1998) found that students preferred teacher feedback and were much more

likely to incorporate it in their revisions. Tsui & Ng (2000) found that Hong Kong secondary students viewed the teacher as a "figure of authority that guaranteed quality" and were reluctant to trust their peers. An empirical study about 91 Japanese English learners by Matsuno (2009) shows that both high-level and low-level learners are very tolerant in evaluating peer compositions, with low scores for good compositions and high scores for poor compositions.

In China, Zhang's study (1995) showed that students preferred teacher feedback to peer or self-feedback. Eighty-one L2 college freshmen were asked to state their preference between teacher and non-teacher feedback and, for the latter, between peer and self-feedback. It was found that 76 chose teacher feedback over non-teacher feedback. Gao Ge's study (2010) indicated that 70.5% of the students couldn't accept their peers' opinions because they couldn't believe their English writing ability. Bai Liru (2013) conducted a comparative experiment between "teacher review + Peer review" and peer review in five natural classes of freshman English majors. The results show that there are significant differences between students and teachers in terms of subject norms and language use. Luo Heng et al (2017) found students tend to give higher marks to their homework by peer feedback. The experiment by Wu Helan & Ding Ruijun (2018) showed that the evaluation quality of Chinese students is lower than that of American students. Students' feedback is found to be still focused on the form and some or even all of them are directed at the language problems in peer composition; moreover, most of the students' feedback is very general and does not point out the problems in the writing (Wang Xiang, 2014). In the process of peer review, Cai Jigang (2011) found more than 55% of the students are worried about their limited ability to correct their peers' mistakes accurately. As a result, the average time they spend correcting peer compositions is 40 minutes, at least 30 minutes, and at most two hours.

All in all, peer feedback is not as effective as it is expected and it is also time-consuming. Meanwhile, grouping is a difficult problem if peer feedback/review is used by many teachers.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Peer feedback is popular in English writing teaching, and there are many studies on peer review in China and foreign countries, but how to make use of peer review effectively to help students improve their writing is what we should concern. It is quite necessary for teachers to learn about some theories underlying peer feedback so that the goal of peer feedback to help students effectively revise their writing can be achieved.

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