

Incorporating Peer Response with Teacher Feedback in Teaching Writing to EFL Learners: A Literature Review

Yuyao Zhang¹

¹ School of Humanity, Nanjing University of Science and Technology Zijin College, Nanjing, China

Correspondence: School of Humanity, Nanjing University of Science and Technology Zijin College, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210023, China.

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Abstract

Peer response has gradually gained popularity in teaching English writing to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in recently years. A number of researches have proved its advantages while Chinese English teachers are still doubting its validity and possibility. This paper aims to prove that incorporating peer response and teacher feedback is advantageous to EFL learners' English writing. It would start with the explanation of some key terms and then first examine the benefits of peer response to verify the necessity of introducing it to an English writing class for EFL learners. Then drawbacks of teacher feedback would be argued with the certification that it is corresponding to some advantages of peer response. Finally, the contribution of using peer response and teacher feedback together would be discussed to further attest the argument mentioned above. At the end of the paper, a conclusion will be made to generally summarize what has been discussed and how this relates to being a language professional. Hopefully, it could be informative and constructive for Chinese English teachers to take a closer step into the theoretical base of this teaching strategy which has been established by former researchers and seek for the possibility of its implementation in the real-setting classroom in EFL context.

Keywords: EFL learners, peer response, teacher feedback, teaching writing

1. Introduction

Corrective feedback (CF) plays an important role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, especially for teaching writing. It is obviously verified that offering CFs in students' writings are beneficial to students' autonomous learning (Malini & Indrawati, 2014). Besides, numerous researchers have claimed that CFs can facilitate students' writing ability and improve their overall English proficiency.

CF has different forms and to be more specific, peer response and teacher feedback are most often adopted as techniques to evaluate students' English writing ability. In recent years, a number of scholars have suggested significant benefits brought by peer response to EFL learners (e.g. Jiang, 2011; Nguyen, 2016). At the same time, the drawbacks of the teacher feedback have been gradually obvious in real context (e.g. Anson & Anson, 2017). However, both of them cannot completely substitute the other, so incorporating peer response with teacher feedback will be more beneficial for most EFL classroom. Furthermore, peer response is seldom used in Chinese tertiary writing classes. Therefore, it is essential to introduce it first as an assistance to teacher feedback in order to get teachers and students to become familiar with this technique.

This paper aims to verify the positive relationship between CF, especially the combination of peer response and teacher's feedback, and the writing ability of EFL learners in order to help Chinese college English teachers see and practice such CF form to improve their students' writing ability. Hoping that more Chinese teachers could make some tries or take some practices in their classes to gain the benefits of this CF form.

2. Literature Review

So far, a number of researches have proved benefits of peer response, especially the great advantages taken for students' L2 writing ability (e.g. Memari Hanjani & Li, 2014; Wang, 2014; Yu & Hu, 2017). Some of studies have been undertaken in this perspective to see effectiveness and efficiency of this technique in learners' self-learning (e.g. Malini & Indrawati, 2014). Also, some research looked into the difficulties and problems of learners when providing peer responses to classmates and even the qualities of the feedback are examined (e.g.

Memari Hanjani & Li, 2014) Besides, some paper gained new insights into whether teacher should prepare students for peer response through relevant training (e.g. Memari Hanjani, 2021).

Teacher's feedback is also investigated to see its qualities, efficiency and effectiveness in current situations. It is shown that most of teachers still believe that teacher's feedback is useful and necessary at present. It is important and essential for learners' writing skill development for the teacher's feedback remains the authority compared with other CF forms (e.g. Srichanyachon, 2012). However, some drawbacks of this technique are also recognized (e.g. Anson & Anson, 2017).

Thus, it is vital to incorporating peer response with teacher's feedback to provide various written CF to students to improve their English writing ability from different aspects. It is confirmed that some advantages of peer response can make up the drawbacks of teacher's feedback (e.g. Anson & Anson, 2017). It can maximize the benefits of these two techniques if they are used together. Therefore, this paper will further verify this statement through confirming the benefits of peer response and then discuss the drawbacks of teacher's feedback and draw the conclusion at the end.

3. Key Concepts

Corrective feedback (CF) is provided as the response to learners' expressions which are perceived as involving errors (Ellis & Shintani, 2013). Generally, the student initially gives the response which contains the target language structure. Then, the teacher offer feedback to point out his/her errors explicitly or implicitly and the student might uptake and comprehend this feedback with revision or the whole process ends with the teacher's CF. Ellis and Shintani (2013) described this process as 'trigger – feedback move – uptake' (p. 249).

Written corrective feedback (WCF) is one form of CF and usually used in students' writing to help them identify issues in the grammar or the structure and revise for a better version than the original text. It could be further divided into teacher feedback which is provided by the teacher and peer response which is offered by the peer. The former simply indicates the WCF given by the instructor in a direct, indirect or metalinguistic way. The latter refers to the activity that students offer WCF on peers' writing and gain WCF from peers on their writing (Zhu, 2001), and systemically consists of the process of critiquing others' writing and the comment given as the response (Yu & Lee, 2016).

With the shift from the teacher-centered classroom to the learner-centered classroom, peer response has been greatly investigated in decades and is called 'peer feedback' or 'peer review' in some studies (eg. Yu & Lee, 2016). Some researchers strongly advocated that it should be introduced to the EFL classroom where only teacher's feedback on students' writing might lack effectiveness and high quality (e.g. Anson & Anson, 2017). With the combination of two types of WCF, it is expected that multiple benefits could be uncovered as they are complementary to some extent (e.g. Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006). Therefore, it is advisable to incorporate peer response with teacher feedback in teaching EFL learners English writing as this pedagogical approach could be contributable to students' development of the second language (L2) writing.

4. Advantages of Peer Response

Some advantages of peer response could be observed in the micro-level situation that it particularly improves learners' writing ability from various aspects. Through peer response, students could develop the consciousness of the audience and the ownership of writing. In their study, Tsui and Ng (2000) closely investigated the effectiveness of peer response in a Chinese secondary school. Through the interview for the participants, they found that students could gradually raise the awareness that someone would read their texts when peer response was taken as one way of evaluation. Participants couldn't stop thinking about what kind of comments their classmates would give when their compositions were read. They might mentally act as the peer rater at the same time of writing, which prompts them to write with the idea that potential audience exists. Berggren (2015) also echoed this benefit in his research and further added that despite the audience, students would also raise the consciousness of writing genre as expectation changes with the type of writing. Students' sense of ownership also heightened through the implementation of peer response as they could make a judgment on acceptance of peer's feedback and whether use it or not when to revise for the final version (Tsui & Ng, 2000). During this process, learners act as the owner of their texts as they could decide on the feedback rather than passively receive it. As a result, their awareness of ownership of the writing would be increased as well as the consciousness of the audience through peer response, which could finally improve their L2 writing quality and ability.

Another micro benefit appears as that students could help with others' writing issues and improve own writing quality at the same time. In a Taiwanese university, Min (2005) examined the effect of peer response with advanced training. After interviewing some of the participants, the findings of the research showed that through

peer response, feedback givers could detect errors or issues that occurred in others' writing and pay more attention to similar problems in later personal writing. When they found some writing issues in classmates' writing products, they would subconsciously review own work to see if they had the same problem. In later writing, they might try to avoid such problems and go through the passage at least one time before giving it for peers' comments. This teaching strategy encourages learners to reflect on own writing after reviewing others' work and help them notice the problem that is hard to be detected by themselves. Therefore, peer response is beneficial to learners when they act as feedback givers and writers, which further enhance their writing quality and ability.

Through the implementation of peer response, learners could hold more positive attitudes toward L2 writing and feel more easy to give comments to peers at similar language proficiency level. In the same study, Min (2005) also discovered that participants show positive feelings towards the use of peer response as they actually could perceive the advantages of this pedagogical approach. Also, considering the face-saving issue, feedback givers would use a more gentle tone in giving negative feedback to make it like suggestions or advice. Consequently, learners could have the discretion to accept the feedback or not just like what has been mentioned above. Under this circumstance, peer response might prompt learners to be a more confident L2 writer and adopt a more positive attitude towards L2 writing. Min's (2005) study further uncovered that participants got a relatively relaxed feeling when peer response was undertaken among learners at a similar language proficiency level that they could have more comprehensible communication through this teaching strategy without the worry of losing face. Furthermore, as they were familiar with each other and had the same cultural background, it was easier for them to understand what their classmates wanted to express, which could prevent misinterpretation of writers' ideas to a large extent. Yang, Badger, and Yu (2006) also got close findings in their study on the comparison between teacher feedback and peer response in a Chinese university. They found that students could hardly misinterpret or misunderstand peers' writing in that they could communicate with each other freely compared to teacher feedback. Based on this result, students might find their peer response more contributable as it has a low occurrence of confused and cumbersome feedback and they are happier to receive peer response in the future. As a result, peer response could encourage students to become confident and relaxed writers, which might improve their writing quality and ability from the long term.

In terms of language learning strategies, it could enhance students' learning autonomy (Tsui & Ng, 2000) and encourage their critical thinking (Berg, 1999). As a long-term consequence of learners' increased awareness of writing ownership, Tsui & Ng (2000) noticed that the learning autonomy of participants is improved. Peer response leaves ample space to students' discretion about what kind of feedback given by peers should be accepted and what kind of feedback should be taken into consideration in revision. This process happens without the supervision or assistance from the instructor, through which it could be expected that some strategies for reviewing or critiquing texts might be acquired by learners. They could apply these strategies in self-review and become more independent and confident in L2 writing with less reliance on the teacher, which might benefit their writing development and enhance the quality of future writing products. Critical thinking could be cultivated after the adoption of peer response as indicated in Berg's (1999) research on the effect of peer response on ESL learners' writing quality. As to give comments to others' work, participants needed to think critically with the structure, ideas or logic of peer's writing. They had to handle with the occasions when their opinions are against or their knowledge is challenged. Critical thinking is necessary for defending own ideas or convincing the writer to reach the agreement with a persuasive tone. Besides, both positive and negative feedback needs to be provided to classmates' texts in which critical thinking is indispensable. From a long-term perspective, critical reasoning is particularly essential for the argumentative essay which accounts for the majority of assignments in college. Thus, peer response could be advantageous for improving the writing ability of a certain type of genre and then promote the overall development of L2 writing.

At the macro level, peer response contributes to the whole L2 learning development from two perspectives. One is that it facilitates L2 learning through various sources of input from peers and multiple opportunities for output (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Peer feedback could be considered as one source input in that students might have variance in language proficiency and skills. This variance could provide learners with the opportunity to learn from others and interact with them for deeper understanding and comprehension. Once they get sufficient comprehensive input, they would try to reformulate their output to test their hypothesis about language principles and notice the gap between their current ability and the level that could be reached with help from peers. This process might be repeated several times until the learner could finally acquire the target language structure, which exactly corresponds to the Input Hypothesis put forward by Krashen (1985). At the same time, peer response also pushes students to make the modified output as a demonstration of accepting classmates' feedback.

According to Swain's (1995) theory of pushed output, students could make improvements on L2 writing as peers' critiques push them to revise original texts. Under this circumstance, their revised version might be more accurate and precise with detailed feedback on their issues and contextualized target language knowledge to help them to understand. With new sources of learning input and more opportunities for learning output, students' L2 learning could be improved.

The other macro benefit of peer response is that it promotes peer interaction and negotiation of meaning, which is essential for L2 learning development (Hu & Lam, 2010). Peer review is a communicative activity rather than an individual assignment. Students could communicate with peers on giving comments to others or explaining reasons for the feedback. During this process, they might have a negotiation of meaning for further clarification of what kind of feedback should be given or why the feedback is given in this way. This kind of interaction might happen in a more relaxed situation compared with that between teachers and students. Moreover, this communication is two-way as both sides have an equal status while the communication between teacher and students is often one-way that is from the teacher to the student and the teacher takes the leading role with the authority that is hardly challenged by students. Therefore, interaction in peer response could trigger students' more reflection and they could gain new insights into language learning. Their L2 knowledge might be increased through this process with the support and scaffolding from peers.

5. Drawbacks of Teacher Feedback

The benefits of peer response account for the partial reasons that it should be introduced into the EFL classroom to assist learners with English writing. Another important factor is that it could make up some drawbacks of teacher feedback which has been gradually exposed during the shift of the classroom center. In Anson and Anson's (2017) study on the comparison between teacher feedback and peer response, they examined the data from a writing corpus to analyze whether the action of teacher and students corresponds to the pedagogical inferences made by linguistical experts. The result showed that although teacher feedback is of higher quality than peers', it mainly focused on the local issue which is generally related to grammar, spelling, word order and so on. It seems that the instructor puts less emphasis on the content, structure or idea of the writing. This kind of feedback might be easily accepted by learners, but it could hardly promote their writing development from a longer perspective. By contrast, findings in Yang, Badger, and Yu's (2006) research demonstrates that peer feedback tended to contain more information about global issues like validity of the argument or consistency of the logic which could contribute to the meaning-changed revision of learners' previous writing. This might result from the peer interaction happened during the process of peer response which contains negotiation of meaning to further help feedback receiver comprehend the issue existed in the current writing. As teacher feedback lacks negotiation of meaning, even mutual communication between the teacher and student, it could hardly prompt learners to revise issues related to structure or content as they might not understand or know how to make the change. This result echoes that in Xu and Liu's (2010) study on peer response in the Chinese context. This research further claimed that peer response includes not only feedback related to issues of a higher level, but also that associated with grammatical level to a similar degree as the teacher feedback does. Moreover, students were inclined to incorporate more peer response into revision than teacher feedback, which implies the potential of this teaching strategy in L2 learning (Xu and Liu, 2010). Thus, it is suggested to adopt peer response in the EFL classroom.

Another disadvantage of teacher feedback was uncovered by the large student size of the EFL classroom in Chinese context, which results in the low possibility of providing high-quality feedback to all of the students continuously (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013). With limited competence, providing feedback with high quality to all students' writing is unrealistic for the instructor. Peer responses could greatly lighten the teacher's workload and provide more qualified feedback to students at the same time. According to Anson and Anson's (2017) research, feedback from classmates might have the same quality as the teacher in terms of grammatical and lexical issues and higher quality in terms of structural and logical problems. Although the peer comment on local issues is located separately, which makes it hard to be as meaningful as that given by the instructor, its accurateness is as high as that of teacher feedback (Anson and Anson, 2017). Besides, students would incorporate a similar amount of peer response and teacher feedback into their final revision (Xu & Liu, 2010), which represents the reliability of peer feedback and the possibility that it could substitute teacher feedback to some degree. Therefore, it should be introduced into the EFL classroom as a means of evaluating writing for the sake of both teachers and students.

6. Contributions of Incorporating Peer Response with Teacher Feedback

With the collaboration of peer response and teacher feedback, it is expected that the combination of two pedagogical approaches could facilitate learners' overall L2 learning (e.g. Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006). As discussed above, the benefit of peer response could make up some of the drawbacks currently existed in teacher

feedback, but it cannot substitute teacher feedback at all as teacher feedback still has a greater impact on students' L2 writing (Tsui & Ng, 2000). It is acknowledged by experts that teacher feedback includes more important features of high-quality responses (Anson & Anson, 2017). Thus, it is suggested to incorporate peer response with teacher feedback to provide multiple benefits to students' L2 competence, especially in writing.

The teaching strategy of using peer response and teacher feedback together is also welcomed by learners and it could lead to more successful revision. In the investigation of students' perceptions towards teacher feedback and peer response, Yang, Badger, and Yu (2006) found a general tendency that teacher feedback appears more useful than peer response in the EFL classroom. Learners intuitively give teacher feedback more confidence, which causes the question of peer feedback's expertise. Students would hesitate whether to use peer feedback or not and the decision directly relates to the effectiveness of responses given by peers. If learners reject others' feedback, they could not gain any benefit from this kind of feedback, though it might be of high quality. Thus, Yang, Badger, and Yu (2006) examined the effectiveness of the combined strategy, surprisingly finding that if students incorporated both teacher feedback and peer response into their final revised version, they were inclined to have successful revision in most cases. Successful revision refers to the situation that 'solving a problem or improving upon a problem area discussed in the feedback' (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999, p. 154). It implies that the collaboration of peer response and teacher feedback could improve learners' L2 writing ability and facilitate their writing development as well. Thus, this teaching strategy should be adopted and implemented in the EFL context to promote students' L2 learning.

7. Conclusion

This paper argues the validity of incorporating peer response with teacher feedback to teach EFL learners English writing from three perspectives. It initially verifies the necessity of introducing the peer response into the EFL classroom as it contributes to learners' writing ability and quality. It could help students raise awareness of audience and ownership of the writing (Berggren, 2015). At the same time, they not only identify issues in others' work but also prevent the same problem from occurring in their writing. This teaching strategy enhances students' learning autonomy and ability of critical thinking (Tsui & Ng, 2000), which further facilitates their L2 learning from the macro-level perspective with new sources of input from peers, more opportunities for modified output and increase of peer interaction for negotiation of meaning (Hu & Lam, 2010). Thus, it is suggested that peer response should be adopted and implemented in the EFL context.

Furthermore, peer response could make up some drawbacks of teacher's feedback in order to improve EFL learners' writing ability. For instance, students also show positive attitudes towards this pedagogical approach and feel more relaxed to the feedback from peers than from the teacher (Min, 2005) and it relieves the teacher's burden on giving high-quality responses constantly. However, it cannot completely substitute teacher feedback as teacher feedback still holds the authority and provides with more accuracy and higher quality. So a combination of them could provide multiple benefits to learners and result in more successful revision for learners' L2 writing, like peer response leads to more meaning-changed revision while teacher feedback focuses more on issues related to grammar or vocabulary (Yang, Badger, and Yu's, 2006). In conclusion, teacher feedback should be used together with peer response to better facilitate learners' L2 writing and learning.

For Chinese English teacher, these theories and findings could equip them with the necessary experience and preparation for the greater teaching performance and results. They could testify their expectations in the real-setting classroom in their teaching career to see whether the implementation of peer response could assist teacher feedback with better language learning performance. Before the implementation, they are suggested to give students enough relevant training about how to give peer response to others in order to increase the efficiency and effect of this pedagogical approach. Hopefully, they are expected to receive more positive feedbacks and gain more benefits when trying this new method.

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