

The effect of blog peer review and teacher feedback on the revisions of EFL writers

Wen-Shuenn Wu

Instructor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature,
Chung-Hua University

Abstract

This exploratory study investigated ELF adult learners' reactions to once highly acclaimed writing pedagogic techniques: peer review and teacher feedback in EFL composition class. Both the peer review and teacher feedback were given and transmitted via the web to learners' blog. The author examined 7 first drafts, 32 peer reviews, and 8 revised drafts (one student made two revisions), trying to find out what effects online peer review have on the revisions of low-intermediate EFL writers. Then, teacher feedback given to these seven students was also reviewed to see whether teacher feedback made tangible impacts on their revised drafts. Finally, another 7 articles written by the same group of students which received little or no peer review and teacher feedback were compared with their final drafts to see whether EFL learners can do a substantive revision without peer review and teacher feedback. As expected, while teacher feedback appeared to lead to both positive and negative revisions, depending on learners' attitude and English proficiency, a significant proportion of the peer review did not serve a linguistic function to give meaningful and constructive comments but serve a pragmatic function to give complimentary praise or blessings.

Keywords: peer review, teacher feedback, EFL writing, revisions, blog

部落格同儕評論和教師回饋對英語為外國語文寫作者在 在作文修訂時的影響

吳文舜

中華大學外國語文學系講師

摘要

這項探索研究在調查以「英語為外國語文」(English as a foreign language; EFL)的成人學習者對曾經被廣為稱道的寫作教學技巧的反應如何：就是英文寫作課中的同儕評論和教師回饋。在此次研究中同儕評論和教師回饋都是藉由網路傳送到學習者的「部落格」(blog)裡。作者研究檢視了7篇初稿、32次的部落格同儕評論、和8次的修訂稿(其中有一位學生寫兩次修訂稿)，希望能夠發現部落格同儕評論對低階中級(low-intermediate) 英語為外國語文學習者作文修訂的影響為何。這7位學生的教師回饋也做了分析，檢視教師回饋是否對學生作文修訂有具體的影響。最後，這7位學生的另外一篇作文，在沒有或極少量同儕評論和教師回饋情況下，也被拿來和他們自己的作文修訂相比較，看是否有實質的修訂。如所預期的一樣，當教師回饋會因為學習者的態度和英文流利度而有一些正面和負面的修訂，絕大部份的部落格同儕評論並沒有呈現實質而有意義的語言結構修訂功能，而是呈現稱讚或祝福等語用功能。

關鍵詞：同儕評論、教師回饋、英語為外國語文的寫作、修訂、部落格

Introduction

Influenced by structural linguistics and behaviorists in the 1960s, most writing teachers usually treated writing as a product and often put strong focus on grammatical features of texts. Writing teachers naturally emphasized linguistic knowledge, vocabulary choices, and syntactic patterns that are essential for the formation of written texts as a product (Hyland, 2003, p. 3). When the process approach to writing was introduced in 1980s, a model most widely accepted by L2 writing teachers is the planning-writing-reviewing framework established by Flower and Hayes (as cited in Hyland, 2003).¹ Since then L2 teachers have encouraged their students to write multiple drafts of their papers with the help of peer review and teacher feedback². As L2 writers move through the stages of the writing process, many activities involve brainstorming, outlining, peer responses, teacher-student conferences, and multiple drafts. The process-oriented pedagogy seemed to have become the mainstream of writing classroom instruction. With the development of computer-mediate communication (CMC) and Internet, peer review and teacher feedback have not been limited to the traditional face-to-face peer response in a brick-and-mortar classroom.

Online peer review and teacher feedback on students' blog are not new to some L2 instructors. In fact, because blog features its easy-to-use interface, frequent text update, and interactive comment area, many educators have applied their blogs to reading and writing classes (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Oravec, 2002; Wilder & Merritt, 2004; Wu, 2005). This study attempted to explore how the between-draft peer review and teacher feedback would influence L2 learners' revised draft in a cyberspace setting.

Literature Review

The rationale behind collaborative peer review is "based largely on the fact that writing and learning are social processes" (Hyland, 2003, p.198) and many L2 researchers and instructors were quite optimistic about the efficacy of peer feedback for L2 writers. However, as more and more research results showed that the effects of peer response have been mixed and even conflicting, some L2 teachers have already had an ambivalent attitude toward peer feedback (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Ferris, 2003). The potential pros and cons of peer feedback are still hotly debated. The oft-cited practical benefits of using peer review are that it helps students develop critical thinking skills needed to analyze and revise their own writing (Leki, 1990; Zhang, 1995), brings active learner participation and a genuine sense of audience into the writing classroom (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994), and offers a nonjudgmental environment in an authentic communicative context (Hyland, 2003), to name just a

few.

Whereas first language studies provide a convincing argument in favor of peer response, the findings of L1 research did not necessarily apply to L2 learners. Nelson and Murphy (1993) argued that in terms of peer response groups, L2 students differ from L1 learners in at least two ways. First, English is not the native language of L2 learners; therefore, it is likely that L2 students feel uncertain about the validity of their classmates' responses. Second, peer response group involves culture-specific behavior and techniques. For example, in Chinese culture the teacher is usually considered as the only authority in the classroom so that most Chinese students have "the perception that fellow students are not knowledgeable enough to make worthwhile comments about their work" (p. 136). In addition to these two issues just mentioned, another prominent complaint about peer review is that students, especially untrained L2 learners, do not know how to give specific, meaningful, and helpful peer responses, which are either vague comments or empty compliments (Ferris, 2003, p. 70). Finally, although peer feedback may reduce teacher's workload if most students can give suitable comments, the peer review procedures also take up much of the classroom time.

Well-modeled peer response training sessions suggested by Berg (1999) may significantly enhance the effect of peer review on fellow students' revised drafts. Stanley's study (as cited in Tuzi, 2004) also proved that responders, who had been systematically trained, could offer specific and meaningful feedback. Therefore, much time should be spent in training students to understand what appropriate genre they deal with and cultivating learners' strategies for reading and responding so that they can easily know what to look for and how to comment on it (Hyland, 2003, p. 203).

In terms of online peer review, not too many studies specifically about asynchronous online peer feedback can be found. Compared to face-to-face oral or written comments, online peer review has the following advantages: (1) time independent; (2) place independent; (3) no pressure to quickly respond; (4) the ability to monitor conversations (Tuzi, 2004). Although email was long seen as a useful tool to facilitate authentic forms of communication via interaction of relevant topic with real people (Kroonenberg, 1995), to enhance critical thinking and writing (Sullivan, 1993), and to improve communicative language skills (Kost, 1999), blog, with its introduction in 1998, has rapidly become a popular learning and teaching aid in a writing class (Wu, 2005). Because blog design and maintenance is so easy compared to using other traditional web creation software (e.g., *Frontpage*, *Dreamweaver*, etc.), it is an ideal tool for non-technie L2 writing instructors to construct and manage their own websites (for an extensive review of the advantages of using a blog in an EFL writing class, see Wu, 2005).

Surprisingly, the results of research on the effectiveness of teacher feedback are similar to those of peer review. They are inconclusive and even conflicting. For example, in terms of forms and content of teacher feedback, Zamel (1985) found that “ESL composition teachers make similar types of comments and are even more concerned with language-specific errors and problems” (p. 79). Therefore, it is not surprising that teacher comments are often “confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible”. As far as the effectiveness of teacher feedback is concerned, research reviews by Leki (1990) suggested that no matter how written teacher feedback was delivered, there was no evidence that it would produce significant improvements in students’ subsequent writing. Zhang (1995) gave a survey to 81 university ESL students, asking them their preference about the affective values of teacher-, peer-, and self-directed feedback. He found that the respondents overwhelmingly preferred teacher feedback over peer or self-directed feedback. Therefore, L2 learners’ concept and preference for different types of feedback at the revision stage should be carefully treated. However, in a study examining over 1,600 marginal and end comments written on 110 first drafts of papers by 47 advanced university ESL students, Ferris (1997) concluded that “a significant proportion of the comments appeared to lead to substantive student revision, and particular types and forms of commentary appeared to be more helpful than others” (p. 315).

The Study

The cover story of the first issue of Fortune magazine in 2005 introduced “10 teach trends to watch in 2005”, and blog ranked the first one. Although blogs were not well-known around the young generation in Taiwan in 2004 (Wu, 2005), it seems that right now more and more young L2 learners know about blog and create one of their own. The main purpose of this study is to explore how L2 students approach the task of online peer review and whether they use teacher feedback in their revision.

The research questions underlying the study were:

1. How do low-intermediate L2 students in Taiwan give blog peer review? What functions does it serve? Does this blog peer review have any impact on their fellow students’ revisions?
2. What effect does blog teacher feedback have on the revised drafts of low-intermediate L2 students in Taiwan?
3. Can low-intermediate L2 students in Taiwan do a substantive revision on their draft without blog peer review and teacher feedback?

Subjects

There are 39 adult students in the two-year program of the Department of

Foreign Languages and Literature at Chung Hua University. Most of them have full-time jobs, some of whom are housewives. Their average age is 33. In this 18-week required writing course, students meet three hours on Saturdays. In order to collect enough peer responses to analyze their impact on revised drafts, only 7 students who received three or more feedback were chosen as subjects for analysis. These students of two-year program, who are on their second year of study, can obtain their bachelor's degree in English once they finish their second-year courses. However, writing skill is one of their worst skills and their English writing level, in general, is about low-intermediate.

Materials and Procedures

In the beginning of the semester, students were taught, in another required course named "Multimedia Application", how to set up a blog with three easy steps on the *Blogger* website (<http://www.blogger.com>) featuring free blog hosting services. No textbooks were used in this writing class, but students were given handouts every session. As to the content of this writing class, it includes the following key points: (1) the use of punctuation, (2) run-on sentences, (3) comma splices, (4) sentence fragments, (5) choppy sentences, (6) topic sentences, (7) paragraphs, and (8) participial construction. In addition, students were given a handout and half-an-hour lecture about peer editing guide before they had to give the first peer review. They were also told that they did not have to correct classmates' grammar; instead, they should comment on ideas or organization.

Students were asked to post their two writing assignments on their personal blog and were also required to give at least one peer response to their classmates' writing assignment. Students were given authentic reading materials as an input and a stimulus about two weeks before they had to turn in their writing assignments. The first writing assignment required students to write one job-related paragraph – "What is your first priority in your next job hunting and why? Salary? Chances to get promoted? Year-end bonus? Working environment? Write one paragraph to explain your ideas. Give some examples, figures, or anecdotes to support your argument". The second writing assignment was a movie review. Students watched a movie named "*Extreme Measures*", a thriller starring Hugh Grant as Dr. Guy Luthan who found out a horrible crime committed by Dr. Lawrence Myrick, a role played by Gene Hackman. The movie was played with English caption and some pauses with my explanation. Finally, students were also required to make at least one revision to their two writing assignments and also post their revised/final drafts on their blogs.

Results and Discussion

Peer Review

Although a brief peer editing session had been given in the class, almost none of them followed the peer editing guide. For instance, none of them commented on thesis statement, topic sentences, organization, coherence, clarity, or style. Instead, students used peer review to give hearty support and extravagant compliments. It appears that the peer review served more pragmatic function than linguistic function. In order to classify and analyze students' peer review, a sentence-level pragmatic analysis rubric was made as in Table 1.

TABLE 1

The pragmatic analysis rubric of peer review

Components	Example*
Agreement	"I totally agree that Dog is the best friend to human!"
Surprise	"Wow! I can't believe your dream is becoming an English teacher."
Suggestions	"The suggestion I give was that you could go to the Venessa's school, find some chances to practice."
Praise	"Well, sounds really wonderful!"
Blessing	"Anyway, I wish you good luck and make your dream come true!"
Requests	"Plz don't forget to give Tabo discount when she is doing manicure in your shop!"
Questions	"Why don't I know your dream is to be an English teacher?"
Statements	<i>These components did not fit any of the other categories.</i> "And that's a fresh opinion for me, I had never think about this before."

*All the examples are directly duplicated from the subject's peer review. Grammatical errors were not corrected.

One peer review example is used below to show how it has been analyzed:

"Being a teacher is a new challenge for you, but I think you can do it and your students will love you because you have a great sense of humor. Besides, I believe you can handle this job well because of your earnest attitudes and having enough patient to treat children. Hope next time you are a teacher when I see you after graduation. Good luck for us!"

There are 4 sentences in this peer review example given by one student named Jess. It is natural that one sentence may contain more than one pragmatic element; therefore,

the following pragmatic elements are counted: sentence 1: statement + praise, sentence 2: praise, sentence 3: blessing, sentence 4: blessing. The summary of peer review that students received was shown on Table 2 in which its sentence counts and pragmatic components were tabulated. In-depth statistical analysis was not made because of the limited sample.

TABLE 2
Summary of peer review and its number of pragmatic components

	Rene	Anne	Judy	Jennifer	Jess	Banana	Ijico	Total
Peer review received	6	3	5	9	3	3	3	32
Sentences	25	14	23	40	17	19	11	149
Agreement (11.7%)	2	2	2	5	3	1	3	18
Surprise (1.9%)			3					3
Suggestions (1.9%)			1	1	1			3
Praise (16.9%)	10	3	6	3	1	3		26
Blessing (15%)	5	2	6	6		3	1	23
Requests (5.2%)	2			5	1			8
Questions (3.9%)			3			1	2	6
Statements (45%)	8	9	3	20	9	12	8	69

It is not surprising that statements take about 45% of the total pragmatic components. Then, the next three highest pragmatic components are praise (16.9%), blessing (15%), and agreement (11.7%). Obviously, students used peer review to offer mutual support, to show their general agreement, and to wish good luck to their classmates. They did not follow the peer editing instruction given. Therefore, no traces of peer-influenced changes can be found in their revised drafts.

The fact that the effect of peer feedback on student writing is unproductive is also proven by other L2 writing researchers (Carson & Nelson, 1996). For instance, in

a research analyzing 11 ESL students essay, Paulus (1999) explored the effect of peer and teacher feedback on students writing. Although she concluded that “[L2] students did use both the peer and teacher feedback to influence their revisions” (p.281), however, only 14% of total revisions were made as a result of the peer review feedback compared to 34% teacher-influenced revisions and 52% self/other-influenced revisions.

Finally, another characteristic of blog peer review was that students were inclined to use informal expressions that they often typed in instant messengers like MSN. For instance, they used a couple of abbreviations (e.g., plz) and emoticon (e.g., :-)) even though they had been told not to do so, which also reflected the fact that L2 students writers treated themselves as casual “real readers” rather than strict “writing assessors” (Caulk, 1994, p.186).

Teacher Feedback

It is not easy to find a model to assess the impact of teacher feedback on the students’ revised drafts. A subjective rating scale (Fig. 1) developed by Ferris (1997) was adopted to evaluate how the teacher’s commentary influenced low-intermediate L2 students’ revisions.

FIGURE 1
Rating Scale for Revisions

0	No discernible change made by student in response to this comment
1	Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect generally negative or negligible
2	Substantive change(s) made by student in response to comment, effect generally negative or negligible
3.	Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect mixed
4	Substantive change(s) made by student in response to comment, effect mixed
5	Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect generally positive
6	Substantive change(s) made by student in response to comment, effect generally positive

Source: Ferris, 1997.

Most teacher feedback given to students’ writing assignments are global comments on their thesis, topic/concluding sentences, organization, or ideas. One minimal change with negative effect (rating 1) was given below as an example from students’ sample:

Excerpt from student’s first draft:

The period that I can company with him is only every night. But every night I need to do some

housework and my homework. I just let him watch DVD or play himself. I am not a good mother. I am really sorry to my son.

Excerpt from teacher's comment:

You can try to combine some of your sentences, most of which are simple sentences.

Excerpt from student's revision:

The period that I can company with him is only every night, but every night I need to do some housework and my homework, I just let him watch DVD or play himself. I am really sorry to my son.

Another example of substantive change with mixed effect (rating 4) was given below:

Excerpt from student's first draft:

Therefore, I think he is the best example.

Excerpt from teacher's comment:

You gave a good example of ambition, but it will be better if you can give us a clear concluding sentence.

Excerpt from student's revision:

Therefore, I think he is the best example that people who have ambition are very highly motivated, eager and impatient to be successful.

Since it is empirically challenging to provide a persuasive answer to how effects on revision are measured, Ferris (1997) also admitted that in a research when four independent raters (two readers per paper) had analyzed the first drafts and revisions using the rating scale she created (see Fig. 1), "interrater reliabilities were a bit lower (around .82) as a result of some disagreements over what constituted a minimal versus a substantive change" (p. 322). In fact, it is also debatable whether it is fair to give 4 points to substantive revisions with mixed effect while minimal revisions with generally positive effect got 5 points. One passage from Ferris (2003) probably can give us a clear picture of how difficult it is for teacher to determine the effects of teacher feedback on students' revisions.

It is probably even more difficult to determine the effects of teacher feedback on subsequent student revisions. As students make additions and deletions, rearrange ideas or change them altogether, it can be hard to say with any certainty what the influence of a particular teacher comment may have been. (p.35)

The average score of student revisions, given by the author only, is 3.1, which definitely can not mean something significant in the research of L2 writing. Because

most subjects' English level is low-intermediate, they might have hard time making substantive and positive revisions even if they understood teacher's text-specific, content-focused feedback.

Revisions with Little or No Peer Review and Teacher Feedback

Students were asked to self-edit and revise their second writing assignment with little or no help of peer review and teacher feedback; four of them still received minimal peer review. It was similar to the peer review of the first writing assignment; the majority of the peer responses were supportive. Generally speaking, most of them did not make substantive and positive changes to their first draft. One subject did receive the text-specific feedback, but the student writer did not make significant revision:

Excerpt from student's first draft:

I should train my critical thinking. My choice would be modified and considered by my ripe deliberation. I like the movie. I strongly recommend this movie.

Excerpt from peer's text-specific feedback:

Your essay is great, but I suggest you to give a stronger concluding [conclusion] and give more supporting ideas about why the Dr. Lawrence Myrick did wrong. I suggest that you can put more your thoughts to support it. That is just my opinion. Never mind!! ^^

Excerpt from student's revision:

I should train my critical thinking. My choice would be modified and considered by my ripe deliberation. Otherwise, when we do something whatever it is, it is hard to tell the result. But I hope I do everything harmless. I like the movie. I strongly recommend this movie.

Again, it seems quite sure that low-intermediate L2 writers in Taiwan can hardly make positive revisions with the help of peer review and teacher feedback, not to mention the circumstances without the input of peer responses and teacher comments. In a research investigating a secondary school writing class in Hong Kong, Sengupta (1998) concluded that notions of peer evaluation are probably not viable options within "an examination-driven, accuracy-oriented L2 curriculum" (p.19), for those L2 students were not linguistic and cognitive mature to evaluate and act upon the peer evaluation. This conclusion may also apply to the low-intermediate L2 writers here in Taiwan.

Limitations of the Study

There are a couple of limitations in this research. First of all, In order to collect enough peer feedback, only students who got more than three peer responses

were counted as subjects. Therefore, the sample of this study is scarce. Second, although a brief peer editing session was administered in the class, it is not comprehensive and long enough. Moreover, students did not have a hands-on training to practice giving peer review to some sample writings. Third, because of time constraints and huge class size, no face-to-face teacher-student writing conferences were conducted during this research. Teacher-student conferencing, a highly endorsed type of teacher feedback in a process-oriented composition instruction, can supplement the limitations of one-way teacher written feedback (Ferris, 2003; Hyland, 2003). Without teacher-student conferences, it is not easy to find out why students made some certain revisions, including add redundant and ungrammatical phrases or deleting necessary and suitable expressions. Finally, it probably would be more valid if students had revised their drafts two or even three times.

Pedagogical Implication and Conclusion

Whereas peer response group and traditional marginal comments or end comments given by writing teachers are popular forms of collaborative learning in writing classes, online peer review and digital teacher feedback delivered through blogs could become conveniently time-independent, place-independent teaching/learning approaches available to both L2 teachers and students in today's networked classrooms (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Tuzi, 2004). A blog, with its user-friendly browser-based interface, can be easily created on many free blog hosting services. With its "word verification option", a user can prevent automated systems from adding unsolicited comment spam to his/her blog.

There are a number of pedagogical implications for L2 writing instruction and L2 writing from this study. First, using blogs in the L2 writing class can expand the audience of students and allow L2 writers to feel that they are writing to more than just their classmates or instructor (Tuzi, 2004). In fact, some subjects in this research did unexpectedly receive a couple of supportive comments from Internet users of other countries. Furthermore, most students will write more carefully if they know that they are going to publish their articles online for authentic readers who may comment on their postings (Wu, 2005). Second, thorough and practical online peer review training should be provided especially for L2 learners from Chinese culture. Because Chinese culture is "highly collectivist", Chinese students are usually reluctant to initiate comments and often give comments that can maintain group harmony and mutual face-saving (Carson & Nelson, 1996). It may take much more time for Chinese/Taiwanese students to learn that the teacher is not the only content provider in the classroom community. Students should also be taught that they should respond to meaning first and to form in later drafts; at the same time, examples of

quality blog peer review and response rhetoric including suggestions, questions, advice, praise, and criticism should also be modeled by L2 writing teachers. Third, some L2 students failed to respond to teacher feedback probably because of their low English competence. Additional grammar instruction should be given or online grammar lessons and vocabulary exercises can be introduced so that students have adequate linguistic knowledge, lexical mastery and syntactic patterns to deal with functionally complicated writing process. Finally, a blog are an effective tool that can provide a forum for social interaction, learning collaboration, negotiation of meaning. Some of the students in this study have already developed a habit of writing English journals on their blogs after they finish this writing class. This is definitely an important step to become an effective English writer.

Notes

1. Although there is obviously cultural and learning differences between ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language), most writing-related papers and books the author referred to use L2 (second language). Therefore, a more generic term L2, rather than ESL or EFL, has been adopted throughout this paper to mean EFL.
2. Peer review, peer response, and peer feedback in this paper are used interchangeably.

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