Written Peer Feedback by EFL Students: Praise, Criticism and Suggestion

Nancy Shzh-chen LEE

Abstract

Research has indicated that peer feedback improves the process and product of students' English writing. However, the different types of peer feedback have not been systematically studied. This research examines written feedback produced by students in an EFL academic writing program in the University of Tokyo. In a 14-week semester, 15 first-year science students peer reviewed each other in the course of completing an experimental research paper. Students' comments were collected weekly throughout the semester and were categorized into functions of praise, criticism or suggestion based on Hyland and Hyland's classification system (2001). It was found in this study that students had an exceptional high tendency for using suggestion feedback and least tendency for praise feedback. This paper concludes with a discussion for teacher implications.

Introduction

Providing effective written feedback is one of the most important tasks for English writing teachers (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). While teacher feedback has been indicated to be desirable for the development of student writing (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 2004; Goldstein, 2004; Zhang, 1995), debate continues over whether written feedback should be provided as it is often neglected and misunderstood by students (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Guénette, 2007; Truscott, 1996). Teacher feedback has been criticized for being product oriented because it occurs most frequently at the end point due to time and class

size constraints (Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006). It has also been argued that while higher-achieving students seem to respond positively and benefit from teacher feedback, lower-achieving students respond poorly and constantly need to be encouraged to comprehend the teacher's comments (Guénette, 2007). Research has even suggested that feedback may not play a significant role in student writing due to teachers' usage of vague and 'rubber stamp' comments as well as over reliance on grammar correction (Paulus, 1999). Ineffective teacher intervention can result in students' inattention and negative attitudes toward feedback (ibid, 1999).

Advantages of Peer Feedback

Research on the other hand has indicated that peer feedback can also contribute to students' writing (Jacobs, 1987; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006). Peer review is now commonly practiced in the writing classroom as it has been shown to have positive effects on students' writing process and product (Paulus, 1999; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). While research has indicated that teacher feedback tends to generate more comments at the grammatical level, peer feedback can generate more comments on the content, organization, and vocabulary (Paulus, 1999). Besides beneficial effects on the quality of writing, peer feedback has advantages such as developing critical thinking, learner autonomy and social interaction among students (Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006). The practice of peer feedback allows students to receive more individual comments as well as giving reviewers the opportunity to practice and develop different language skills (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

Drawbacks of Peer Feedback

Besides different positive results advocated by different past research, some critics have argued that peer review has limited value in the L2 classroom (Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Zhang, 1995). Research has shown that teachers are concerned with the quality of peer review because of students' limited knowledge, experience and language ability (Saito and Fujita, 2004). Therefore, the practice of peer feedback may discourage the usage of target language among students (Jacobs, 1987). Another major criticism of peer feedback is that although students express posi-

tive attitudes toward the usage of peer feedback, they tend to significantly favor feedback by the teachers (Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006; Zhang, 1995).

Different Types of Feedback

Writing is a personal process where motivation and self-confidence of the students as writers may expand or contract depending on the type of comments incorporated in the feedback. According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), there are three broad types of written feedback: praise, criticism, and suggestion. Praising encourages the reoccurrence of appropriate language behaviors where writers are accredited for some characteristics, attributes or skills (Holmes, 1988). However, praise needs to be credible and informative as false praising is likely to discourage good writing (Cardelle & Corno, 1981, cited in Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Furthermore, premature praise may confuse writers and discourage their self revisions. On the other hand, criticism is a negative comment used by reviewers in expressing their dissatisfaction with the text. Suggestion is the third category of feedback which is related to criticism but has a positive orientation. Suggestion differs from criticism in containing commentary for improvement. Productive suggestion is also known as constructive criticism which includes clear and achievable actions for writers. Overall, students remember and value encouraging remarks but also welcome constructive criticisms rather than false positive appraisals (Ferris, 1995).

Despite the important role of praise and criticism played in feedback, only a small number of studies have been published even in the area of teacher feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Past studies with teacher feedback have suggested that most comments tend to focus on negative aspects of writing (ibid, 2001). In a corresponding study by Dragga (1985), it was found that 94% of written teacher comments were negative in nature. However, teacher feedback and peer feedback are different and it is unknown whether peer feedback would incur similar high tendency of negative comment usage as teacher feedback. The present research analyzes students' written peer feedback by following Hyland and Hyland's (2001) categorization of praise, criticism and suggestion.

Method

Description of Writing Course, Subjects and Data

Feedback used for the analysis consisted of comments produced by students in a mandatory first-year English academic writing course at the University of Tokyo. The course was taught by the author over a 14-week, once per week semester. The aim of the course was to facilitate students' communication skills as future scientists through the development of English academic writing skills. The class consisted of 15 science students with mixed English speaking and writing abilities[1]. As the core assessment of the course, students were required to design a scientific research project, conduct an experiment and compose a research paper based on their experimental results. From the middle to the end of the course, students produced one section of science research paper per week as homework which included: introduction, method, results, discussion and abstract (in that order). In order to help students complete their research papers, the practice and importance of peer review was introduced at the beginning and was advocated throughout the course. Students received training on peer review in the initial classes of the course because none of them had experienced it prior to the course.

In the process of the course, the students were asked to bring their homework to class which was different sections of the research paper per week in a chronological order. Each week in class, students spent approximately 30 minutes peer reviewing each other where they examined the content, language and format of writing. Students were encouraged to make comments in English but the use of Japanese was not prohibited. Based on peer review comments, students were required to rewrite their composition and submit the revised section in the following week. This process of peer review was repeated throughout the course for all sections of the research paper. Limited written teacher feedback was given to individual students.

Student's peer reviewed drafts with comments were collected weekly for analysis. A total of six pieces of writing were collected from each student, consisting of abstract, introduction, method, results, discussion, and complete draft of the research paper (90 pieces of student writing were collected altogether).

Data Analysis

The feedback classification of this study was adapted from Hyland & Hyland's classification scheme (2001). In-text language or grammar corrections which occurred in the body of the text were ignored (Truscott, 1996). Only comment-style feedback produced at the end, beginning or on the margin of the paper were analyzed as they were longer and more substantive. A total of 368 feedback comments were collected. Among the comments, those written in Japanese were translated into English by the author. Comments were categorized into praise, criticism, or suggestion. Although some suggestion and criticism comments overlapped, comments were classified as suggestions if they had included words such as: *need to*, *could*, *should*, *would*, *try*, *it is better to, it might be better* and *have to*. Negative comments without these key words were classified as criticisms.

Results and Discussion

The results of this research indicated that 5% of all comments were related to praise, 17% were related to criticism and more than three quarters, 78% were related to suggestion (Table 1).

Table 1: Students' Usage of Praise, Criticism and Suggestion in Peer Review

	Praise	Criticism	Suggestion	Total
Number of comments	19 (5%)	64 (17%)	285 (78%)	368

These results contradict significantly with Hyland and Hyland's (2001) research, in which 44% of comments in their research were related to praise, 31% were related to criticism and only 25% were related to suggestion. This difference may be a result of the fact that Hyland and Hyland conducted their study on teacher feedback whereas the present study focused at comments by students. Nevertheless, the small percentage of praise comments made by students in this research supports earlier study by Connors and Lunsford (1993) in which they found positive comments to be unusual because of the negative nature of feedback. Students might have produced less praise comments because limited written teacher feedback was given in the classes. Due to lack of teacher demonstration on producing posi-

tive feedback, students were not confident with making appropriate praise feedback and consequently produced less number of comments. Furthermore, a large number of comments produced by students were short and were "rubber stamp" in style. The following are common praise comments made by students:

1) Very good.
2) I cannot make any further comment. Perfect.
3) Very interesting.

On the other hand, students have produced more than three times the number of criticisms compared to praise comments. The number of criticisms found in the present study is only however less than half the figure located in Hyland and Hyland's (2001) research concerning teacher feedback. Based on this difference, it may be suggested that peer feedback has less negativity compared to teacher feedback. An analysis of comments collected in the present research revealed that students added a soft touch in their criticisms by using close-ended questions, for example, "this sentence is too long, isn't it?"

Besides praise and criticism, textual analysis of the suggestion comments indicated that many students used hedged expressions in giving feedback. For example, students used expressions such as "it might be better to . . . " in their comment instead of "it is better to . . . ." A high degree of hedging suggests that students did not feel confident at making suggestions for their peers. However, this interpretation contradicts with the high percentage of suggestions made by students in the present study (78%) as suggestion comments can be interpreted as a sense of confidence expressed by the reviewers.

The three types of peer review comments produced by students were arranged into different sections of the science research paper in a chronological order (See Table 2). Apart from the complete draft of research paper, most comments were produced in the discussion section. Discussion is often perceived to be the most difficult section by students as it requires elaboration of results in the light of previous literature (Lee & Tajino, 2008). Many first-year students found the discussion section to be difficult because they have difficulties in searching for appropriate references to support their arguments. Across all sections, stu-

dents have produced most number of suggestion comments, followed by criticism and praise comments.

Table 2: Students' Usage of Feedback in Different Sections of Research Paper

	Praise	Criticism	Suggestion	Total
Introduction	1	13	37	51
Method	1	7	41	49
Results	4	6	38	48
Discussion	6	12	63	81
Abstract	2	12	27	41
Complete draft	5	14	79	98
Total	19	64	285	368

Note: writing pieces are arranged in a chronological order

Through the progress of the writing course, it appeared that students gradually became more confident with peer review as the number of comments increased with the chronological order of writing different sections in a research paper (Table 2). As students progressed into the course, they also became more willing at making longer and more constructive comments rather than short and grammar level comments. The following comments were made by three students in their discussions respectively:

> Student A (comment in Japanese):
> It might be more persuasive if you use previous literature. It is easier to understand if you write the hypothesis first and then discuss your results against your hypothesis. It might be easier to understand if you divide your writing into paragraphs. It is better if you talk about the meaning of your experiment here.
>
> Student B (comment in English):
> You have to explain and discuss why. The structure of discussion is first, write the results, and tell the hypothesis is right or not. Second, you have to think and search in literature. To answer why your hypothesis is not right or your experimental method was wrong. Third, after discussing the reason, rethink what the results meant. Fourth, you can

write implications.

Student C (comment in partially Japanese and English):
List some results? You should use hedging. Ambiguous. It is better if you write if the temperature has increased or decreased here. Do not repeat. Maybe this part does not sound like implication. The procedures of washing and drying were not evenly done, and the absorption rate is calculated without considering the outflow of starch and rice-bran.

Both Student A and Student B produced comments about the structure of discussion section. Student A used hedged suggestions such as "it is better if you . . . ", "It might be . . . " and "It might be easier if you . . . " Student B on the other hand made more directive suggestions such as "you have to explain . . . ", "you have to think . . . " and "to do . . . " By comparing comments made by Student A and Student B, it can be suggested that feedback comments in Japanese tend to be more tactful and indirect whereas English comments are more instructive and direct. Nevertheless, both students sounded confident and constructive in their comments. Student C produced both criticism and suggestion comments. The last sentence of his comment was an example sentence he produced to assist the rewriting process of the writer, "The procedures of washing and . . . "

Conclusion and Teaching Implications

This paper examines peer feedback by focusing on the types of comments made by students. Comments made by 15 first-year science students were categorized into praise, criticism or suggestion according to Hyland and Hyland classification system (2001). Based on an analysis of these comments, the present research attempts to suggest four teaching implications for writing teachers.

First, more explicit teacher encouragement and demonstration for producing positive comment is needed throughout the writing course. Students in this research generated an outstanding high percentage of suggestions and low percentage of praises. It can be interpreted from these results that many stu-

dents did not feel confident about praising their peers due to lack of experience and knowledge with peer review.

Second, more class time should be spent for developing students' peer review vocabulary as training determines the number of comments made by students (Montgomery & Baker, 2007). An analysis of suggestions and criticisms indicates that students tended to use hedged expressions in their comments. These students are likely to have used hedged expressions because they did not have enough vocabulary in producing suitable and precise comments for their peers.

Third, more training of peer review should be provided by teachers at the beginning as well as throughout the writing course in order to develop students' confidence and skills for peer review. Students produced most number of comments in the discussion section compared to other sections of research paper. In addition, it was found in this study that students also produced longer and more constructive comments in discussion. Due to the chronological order of science research paper writing, it is considered that students have already had many practices in producing review comments in earlier sections before reviewing the discussion which resulted in higher student confidence.

Finally, although the effectiveness of L1 and L2 usage is beyond the scope of the present study, it can be suggested that the inclusion of both Japanese and English usage enables both reviewers and receivers to have more productive peer review experiences. Comments produced by students would have different nuances when they are expressed in Japanese and English respectively. As indicated earlier by the transcription of three students' peer review comments, comments in English were more instructive and sounded more negative whereas comments in Japanese were more tactical and positive. Although producing English only review comments allow reviewers to practice more writing skills and receivers to practice more reading and comprehension skills, it is considered that Japanese review comments are also crucial for allowing students to critically review and revise the content of their writing.

Notes

1. Most students had moderate to proficient reading and writing English abilities.

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