Peer editing online in the writing classroom: A timely tool

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To get a picture of how information technology contributes to English learning, we conducted a BBS online peer editing activity in 2002 with students in a university-level beginning writing class. In 2005, in a more IT-friendly environment, we made a second trial of this BBS activity with students at the same level. The participants, divided into six groups, submitted their most preferred papers, which were posted on our webpage, accessed, checked, and commented on in the BBS by other students. They then read comments, rewrote, and submitted final drafts. This study analyzed their online group peer editing exchanges and a follow-up questionnaire that asked their impressions about their experience. We found that they freely and comfortably worked online. Their exchanges in 2005 were notably more active than those of the 2002 trial, suggesting that working online may now be a more acceptable tool to motivate students in writing.

今日ITは英語学習に貢献していることは間違いない。2002年に我々は大学初級ライティングクラスでBBSを使ったオンラインピアエディティング活動を行った。ITがより身近な環境となった2005年に再度BBSによる活動を試してみることにした。参加者は6つのグループに分かれ、課題から学生自身が選んだものを提出した。学生はウェブページにアクセスし、掲載した作文を読み、BBSにコメントを書き込む。彼らはそのコメントを読んで自分の作文を書き直し、最終稿を提出する。さらにアンケートをとり、感想を聞いた。オンライングループピアエディティングとアンケートを分析した結果、学生は生き生きと活動を楽しんだとわかった。2002年に比べて2005年のほうがより活発にやりとりを行った。これは、ライティングにおいてオンライン活動は、学生をよりやる気にさせられるのではないかということを示唆している。

In theory and practice, the benefits and criticisms of peer response have been extensively discussed (Rollinson, 2005). Teachers and researchers in favor of peer response emphasize its applicability at all stages of process writing, support for collaborative learning, and focus on the importance of interaction for L2 development. They claim that peer feedback activities in the classroom offer numerous

advantages: students' active roles in their own learning; re-conceptualization of their ideas; a less threatening environment; feedback from authentic readers; and building of critical thinking skills. It is possible that collaborative and communicative settings can be realized through working in pairs or groups in peer editing, allowing students more interaction and motivation.

On the other hand, peer response has been criticized because it has practical limitations such as focus on surface errors, and vague and unhelpful comments; cultural issues (students in collectivist cultures such as Japan often admit that they cannot criticize their peers); and affective factors (i.e., students often prefer teacher feedback over that from other students) (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). In real classroom situations, some students express their concerns about receiving feedback from peers whose English level is almost the same or poorer than their own. In most cases, however, students soon realize that peer feedback is beneficial and contributive to their revision in many ways (Matsuhata, Kondo, & Gardner, 2003).

Computer-mediated instruction nowadays plays an increasingly important role in foreign language education, particularly in the teaching of writing. Students are increasingly accustomed to computer technology and they use computers, especially the Internet, with much enthusiasm. Incorporation of computer technology in the classroom seems especially realistic and useful compared with the environment surrounding PC technology several years ago. It was a time—especially in Japan, it seemed—when many students still thought of technology as a tool for entertainment rather than as a tool for learning. There are

studies indicating that students' levels of computer anxiety relate to a greater tendency toward exhibiting behaviors associated with avoiding computers in learning situations if circumstances permit (Matsumura & Hann, 2004).

Over the years, though, many teachers have come to realize that technology has a logical place in learning, and that face-to-face classroom interaction could be supplemented by online, and even virtual, forms of interaction. Warschauer (1997) indicated that "CMC [computer-mediated communication] can encourage real communication by temporally and geographically expanding the opportunities for interaction" (p. 477).

Background

A bulletin board system (BBS) is like a mailing list except that instead of receiving information via email, the user goes to a specific Web site to read messages posted on the bulletin board (Pennington, 2003).

During the fall term of 2002, we attempted our first BBS-mediated peer editing activity with 32 university students in a beginning writing class (Matsuhata, Kondo, & Gardner, 2003). Overall, students at the time felt that it was fun and rewarding because they received more useful advice from several readers rather than just one, as they had previously experienced in face-to-face peer editing sessions in the classroom. However, some students had technology-associated complaints (e.g., difficulty accessing the Internet and computers).

In 2005, we tried again to have writing students at the same level try BBS peer editing, in a slightly altered form,

to see if student attitudes and abilities concerning this form of interaction had changed. We thought that with more availability of computers and accessibility to the Internet, students may feel more comfortable utilizing IT in their class.

The research questions we address in this paper are:

1. Do students feel that BBS peer editing is useful?

2. Are there any differences in the students' attitudes between 2002 and 2005?

3. Is BBS peer editing a feasible tool in the writing class?

Method

Participants

The participants in the fall 2005 study were 21 students enrolled in a weekly elementary writing class in the Education Faculty at a major public Japanese university. Many of them had been enrolled in the writing class during the spring term so they were already familiar with regular face-to-face peer editing. The experiment actually took place in February 2006 for three weeks as part of their final assignment for the class.

In the activity students were given instructions to select their favorite or best paper among papers previously written and submitted during the fall semester (or one from the spring semester, if they preferred). This paper would be put up on the BBS site, and several other students would be able to read the paper and make comments about the paper on the BBS. The paper assignments during the fall semester included:

1) a problem/solution paper,

2) a summary and evaluation of a book or movie, and

3) a short opinion paper with research.

All of these papers had been written earlier in the semester, and had already been through face-to-face peer editing at least once.

Procedure

In 2002, there were no network services available for classroom use at the university, and we had to make our own private site for this online peer editing activity, using software provided free by the BBS provider. Although services on campus had improved in 2005, we chose to use the same site that we had developed for the earlier study. We did, however, remodel the old web pages a bit based on what we had learned previously.

The procedures for BBS editing were:

1) Students chose their best or most preferred paper they wrote during the term and emailed the teacher, telling their choice.

2) Drafts (which had previously been submitted) were uploaded to the webpage.

3) Each student accessed the site, read the drafts of the other group members, and wrote comments on the group's BBS so that everyone could read them.

4) The writer rewrote or revised his/her paper based on the members' comments and sent it to the teacher.

Students were permitted to write in Japanese on the BBS, considering their limits and frustrations in expressing their thoughts freely. (Their previous face-to-face peer editing experiences were also largely in Japanese.) They were also encouraged to kindly acknowledge comments from the other group members.

Analysis

BBS comment categorization

In our previous study (Matsuhata, Kondo, & Gardner, 2003) we used Mendonça and Johnson's (1994) coding categories of peer editor feedback: question, explanation, restatement, suggestion, and grammar correction. However, for the present study we created an original coding consisting of editor's content and form comments, authors' comments, and BBS-medium-related comments, since our primary goal was only to see the overall tendency in students' comments and to find differences between the two classes.

In the study, after students had seen their papers uploaded and had finished making comments in their groups, we collected and analyzed all the exchanged comments the students had written. First, we counted the number of English words and Japanese characters by group from the collected comments. The total number of postings by group was also counted. The paper type of their selection for this assignment was checked (i.e., problem/solution, summary/evaluation, opinion, other). The comments were then coded

into four types: content, form, author's response, and BBS-related. The content and form comments were further categorized into three subtypes: comments, questions, and suggestions. In total there were eight categories in our coding, including responses from authors and comments on the BBS method itself. We followed this categorization procedure for data from both 2002 and 2005.

Questionnaire

At the end of the semester, very soon after the BBS activity, we distributed a questionnaire asking students to evaluate their experiences. The questionnaire included general questions on the BBS and asked for overall impressions about in-class peer editing and BBS editing and about the writing class. The questionnaire responses from BBS-related questions were analyzed to assess their overall opinions of BBS peer editing. (For this study we only summarized the results of the 2005 questionnaire, since the 2002 BBS trial was performed as part of a mixture of IT-mediated activities—floppy disc, E-mail, and BBS—and the questionnaire made at that time used a different form with different question items.)

Results

BBS comments

Table 1 shows how students contributed to the BBS activity. There were eight groups in 2002 and six groups in 2005, each having three or four members.

Table 1: How students participated in the BBS activity

Group	Number of Members	English (words)	Japanese (characters)	Number of Postings	Paper Type Selected
1 (2005)	4	180	3222	15	b[3] c[1]
2	4 (1)	211	4610	18	b[2] c[2]
3	3 (2)	195	3868	12	a[1] b[1] c[1]
4	3 (1)	351	3700	22	b[2] c[1]
5	3 (4)	329	5618	15	b[2] c[1]
6	4 (3)	433	5386	35	b[2] c[1] o[1]
1 (2002)	4	33	1897	9	b[4]
2	4	647	991	10	b[4]
3	4	1018	540	9	b[4]
4	4	552	6	10	b[4]
5	4	51	1778	10	b[4]
6	4	10	1557	10	b[4]
7	4	579	31	10	b[4]
8	4	223	1156	10	b[4]

Paper Type: a: problem/solution b: summary/evaluation, c: opinion, o: other (from spring semester)

The table shows that the total number of participants in the activity was 21 in 2005 and 32 in 2002. However, some 2005 groups had "unauthorized" visitors from other groups (shown in parentheses) while 2002 had none. These visitors were members of other groups who decided to make comments on their friends' BBS sites, despite being in different groups. Although we didn't encourage this group-hopping, we found that the additional comments were still constructive.

The numbers in brackets show how many of each type of paper appeared in the BBS per group. As is seen in the table, the 2002 papers were all *b*, movie or book reviews. English was counted by word and Japanese by letter. More comments were made in English in 2002 than in 2005, and the 2005 comments, which were mostly made in Japanese, were much longer than the 2002 comments. Many English comments in 2005 were directed toward the teacher, who participated marginally in the BBS interaction, to start it off and check in from time to time. The students seemed to welcome the teacher's visit and courteously responded.

Some groups were more active than others in their exchanges; for instance, some students responded to problem/solution papers or opinion papers by writing long comments giving their own opinions, especially if those papers covered topics related to the students' field of study (primary and secondary education) or topics of special interest to certain participants (e.g., eating disorders).

Table 2 shows the students' comments according to the types of our coding: content comments, content questions, content suggestions, form comments, form questions, form suggestions, author's response, and BBS-related. The figures were obtained by rough coding of all individual comments posted in the BBS.

Table 2: BBS interaction

CC	CQ	CS	FC	FQ	FS	AR	BBS	Total	
82	14	44	14	1	32	17	10	214	2005
116	3	8	31	0	97	0	0	255	2002

CC: content comment, CQ: content question, CS: content suggestion, FC: form comment, FQ: form question, FS: form suggestion, AR: author's response, BBS: BBS-related comment

In *content comments*, which described impressions and statements about content and relevant topics, the representative comments included general impressions (i.e. "I like it"; "I want to see this movie"), and statements (i.e.: "In education, people think that…"; "I'm afraid you are off-topic toward the end of the essay"). *Content questions*, which were requests for explanation or unclear points, included "What cons are there against merger?"; and "Is your essay mainly describing your own complex?" *Content suggestions*, suggesting ways to improve clarity of content, included "Why don't you add points why you disagree?"; "You need more detailed explanation." *Form comments* were general or specific comments about structure, as represented by "Grammatically, you were perfect"; or "You explained well how his works are attractive." *Form questions*, questions about verb tense, antecedents, etc., included "Is 'convenience' referring to 'the inhabitants'?" *Form suggestions*, suggesting changes in word, syntax, or grammar, included "'Were' is not necessary in this sentence."

Authors' responses saying "thank you" or committing to rewrite included "I will reconsider my draft based on your advice"; and "Thank you for such wonderful advice. I will add the type and the number of training." There were also a number of *BBS-related comments*, which might reveal their overall interest in this medium. They included "This is my first BBS experience so I am a little nervous"; "I can say more than I usually say"; "Peer editing [on a BBS] is good because we can review the paper with different viewpoints."

The 2002 papers were all movie or book reviews, leading students to concentrate on comments about the book or movie being reviewed, such as "I have seen this movie," etc. This shows in the number of content comments from 2002. The number of suggestions on content, however, was fairly low in 2002 and increased substantially in 2005. This could be due to a number of factors, including the type of paper being discussed. The comments on form in 2002, additionally, far outnumbered those in 2005.

One interesting phenomenon that must be pointed out in relation to BBS-mediated feedback is that once one peer editor made the initial comment on a certain writer's paper, the other comments that followed tended to be of the same type. For example, if the first feedback entered for a certain paper was mostly in the form of content comments (e.g., "I like your paper"), followed by suggestions for the writer's subsequent revision (e.g., "How about adding more about the movie characters?"), the subsequent entries in the BBS on that same paper tended to follow the same slant. This was true in 2002 as well as 2005.

Questionnaire

The 2005 questionnaire consisted of questions asking for overall impressions about the BBS and the writing class. Students were allowed to make free comments in it.

Half the students said that they had not had any experience with a BBS before this activity. However, most students indicated that they had taken the initiative to check the other groups' BBS entries. One student wrote that it was good to do so because other students knew what to do and how to comment. Another student wrote that it was interesting to read papers and feedback even from other groups. For

questions of overall impressions about in-class and BBS group editing, most students preferred the BBS to the in-class, face-to-face peer editing, in terms of usefulness, motivation, and ability to do. However, in the question, "Which did you find more difficult?" many students said that the BBS was more difficult.

There were a number of comments for and against the activity. Affirmative comments included "I found BBS better because I could read many comments from many peers (only one peer in face-to-face)"; "It's good because I could take time to read authors' drafts and think about them." Negative comments included "I do not have easy access to the Internet"; "Page scrolling annoyed me (too long)."

Discussion

Concerning research question 1, "Do students feel that BBS peer editing is useful?", both in the BBS and the questionnaire comments, many students wrote that it was fun and good to interact with many students online. Undoubtedly they were amusing themselves in their exchanges with each other. We could easily read between the lines that they were having fun. In many cases, comments were heated when they discussed education or teacher-related issues. It is natural that they would be concerned about the occupation they have chosen to enter. And some students who eavesdropped on exchanges in other groups noted in the questionnaire that "Wow, some groups had a hot debate going on. It was exciting!" The interaction and debate generated on the BBS, both on topic and off, was perhaps the most beneficial aspect of this activity.

As for research question 2, "Are there any differences in the students' interaction between 2002 and 2005?", over the years the environment surrounding the students seems to have changed. Back in 2002, many students were anxious about the activity. They were nervous and cautious before they started. Once they started, however, they said that they enjoyed it greatly. From what we witnessed in the 2002 interaction, we thought that eventually this kind of online activity could easily become a regular part of writing instruction, and in 2005, the students were more familiar with information technology so they were perhaps more upbeat about the activity. In fact, one of the 2005 students was actually a BBS administrator herself. She had made her own blog with a BBS for the students of the faculty to discuss education, college life, and plans for class parties. So the students may have been more familiar with BBS interaction through this one student's recreational use of it. When we think of the advancement of the environment surrounding us over the years, it is apparent that for young people computers have become indispensable for collecting information, communicating with family and friends, entertaining themselves, and for study. Thus, they took much greater advantage of the technology to bend the assignment to their needs and get and give as much feedback as they could (by group-hopping, etc.).

One notable difference in students' interactions between 2002 and 2005 is that the 2002 students made many comments in English while the 2005 students mostly did so in Japanese. Additionally, the 2005 groups produced far more feedback than the 2002 groups. We do not know why there was such a tendency. We only know that in 2005,

students' thoughts and opinions were often expressed in their native language so that they could write more freely. In view of the enhancement of their overall English ability, the use of Japanese may not be preferable. However, more feedback from active exchange with their peers, even if done in the native language, may be more helpful for them in terms of improving their papers, which was the primary goal in using the BBS.

For research question 3, "Is BBS peer editing a feasible tool in the writing class?", if the networking is easily available to students, BBS peer editing is definitely a feasible tool that allows a greater variety of feedback in a more convenient and reviewable format. Perhaps it should not be used exclusively, because conventional face-to-face interaction is still highly valued, but online interaction may be used alongside other means of student-student peer interaction and feedback.

The large difference from 2002 to 2005 in the percentage of different types of feedback was an interesting phenomenon. It's a typical pattern that students in peer editing situations tend to focus more on local, formal factors such as grammar and spelling than they do on global factors like content and support. The 2002 results demonstrated this pattern. The 2005 results, on the other hand, balanced out a bit more to where the content suggestions actually outnumbered the form suggestions. Again, the wider variety of topics in the latter papers may have influenced students' willingness to make suggestions on content. The greater variety of responses offered by 2005 students on the BBS may have been influenced by other factors such as language (i.e., more Japanese in 2005) or experience with the technology (e.g., the one student mentioned above, whose private BBS page was already familiar to students).

Some students complained that they did not have enough time to do the extra work of online peer editing outside the class. Reading from their comments in the questionnaire, this might be because they had to spend extra time reading all the drafts and commenting for everyone in the group. Or this may simply have been because it was something they had to do outside class. From the question, "Which could you do better?" we can imagine that they were eagerly trying to do a good job to cooperate with others. However, this is possibly the old "too much homework" complaint expressed differently, and we couldn't draw a definite conclusion that using the medium took more time than doing an equivalent peer editing activity in another form.

Another possible negative characteristic of BBS peer editing is the fact that for some students BBS is so popular and familiar that they may easily be sidetracked and begin "chatting" about things irrelevant to the improvement of writing. In our case, at times the students continued small opinionated discussions about their field of study, which might not have occurred to such a degree if the exchange had taken place in a classroom. However, such sidetracking is not unheard of in regular face-to-face peer editing sessions. It is not uncommon for students, when the teacher is occupied elsewhere, to spend some of the peer editing time discussing their special interests or talking about matters unrelated to paper revision. Luckily, for the most part the students in this activity were honest and tried to contribute to the writing of their peers.

The tendency for later feedback to *copycat* previous feedback in terms of whether it came in the form of comments, questions, or suggestions, was another feature possibly unique to this kind of BBS exchange. Sullivan and Pratt (1996) noted that in a computer-assisted class, responses followed a pattern of suggestion following suggestion, comment following comment, etc. Our findings are consistent with their observation. Whether or not a three- or four-member group sitting face-to-face and commenting on one writer's paper would follow the same kind of parallel responding is an interesting question for possible future research.

One final drawback is that despite the prevalence of information technology in society, Internet access may still not be easy for some students, putting them at a disadvantage to those with more exposure, experience, or perhaps even money, and IT still proves prohibitively challenging for some teachers as well, for reasons of time, training, or teaching situation.

Yet with all these drawbacks, computer-mediated activity has great potential. Research has noted that students are naturally becoming more adept at computer use: showing more interest, doing more work, and working more confidently on their own at computer tasks (Bump, 2000). Our study demonstrated the following advantages to online BBS usage: students were actively involved in the activity; they largely focused on their task at hand; and they were willing to contribute ideas to their fellow group members.

Conclusion

In BBS peer editing, the students felt they could make comments and exchange thoughts more actively and freely in groups than in face-to-face peer editing. Our impression is that students' characteristics change over the years and now they may feel less anxiety and be less technophobic than the students three years before. Some students more openly expressed their suggestions, or sometimes critiques, with a sense of contribution to their peers probably because they noticed the importance of such comments regarding their own papers. It was a pleasant surprise for us. Overall, the characteristics of classroom interaction in Japan may be changing. This qualitative change, possibly at the cultural level, is good for active interaction in peer editing.

Some questions remain for future study. We have to explore ways to improve online peer interaction for better student writing. In doing the activity, BBS exchanges are useful and fun, once students are accustomed to the medium. Teachers must strive to provide a more desirable, techno-capable school environment. Online interaction furthers students' self-reflection on their own writing guided by peer feedback, gives them a different and stronger sense of community, motivates them to share their views and to write, and most importantly changes their attitudes about revision. We believe that BBS or online peer editing is rewarding even if it requires extra time and energy for both teachers and students. Technology is around us in every social milieu. For language teachers, bulletin board services are of value for building a sense of community. Thus, it has become and will continue to be a viable tool in the writing class of the present day.

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Appendix 1

Categories of student feedback on the BBS

(note: some of these are translations from Japanese)

Content comments: impressions, statements, about content and relevant topics

> I like it. It is very good. I want to see this movie.

> Teachers are focused here. In education, people think that…

> I had a similar experience myself.

> Bulimia, in my view, is to protect almost broken down mind.

> I'm afraid you are off-topic toward the end of the essay.

Content questions: request for explanation, unclear points

Why did you recommend it?

What cons are there against merger?

Is your essay mainly describing your own complex?

I'm curious about how the movie depicts love.

Content suggestions: suggest ways to improve, clarify/understandability of content

Why don't you add points why you disagree?

You need more detailed explanation.

Form comments: general or specific comments about structure of paper

Grammatically, you were perfect.

You explained well how his works are attractive.

Wow, did you know his lines are rhymed?

You repeated the same word.

You made a spelling error.

Form questions: questions about verb, tense, antecedents, etc.

Is "convenience" referring to "the inhabitants"?

Form suggestions: suggested changes in word, syntax, or grammar

"were" is not necessary in this sentence.

You have to recheck the last 'nnth'.

You'd better change this word to avoid repetition.

Authors' responses: thank you, pointing what to rewrite

Thank you.

I will reconsider my draft based on your advice.

Thank you for such wonderful advice. I will add the type and the number of training.

BBS-related

This is my first BBS experience so I am a little nervous.

This group's BBS is hot. I'll go back to my group and be a hot shot myself.

I can say more than I usually say.

What will happen to these BBS pages when we finish the activity.

Peer editing (of BBS) is good because we can review the paper with different viewpoints.

Appendix 2

Content and result of the questionnaire

BBS questionnaire

General questions:

Have you had experience with BBS before?

Yes/10 No/10

Did you find BBS peer editing interesting?

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 strongly agree/20

Did you check the other groups' BBS entries?

Yes/18 No/2

Overall impressions about in-class peer editing and BBS group editing

Which did you find better?

In-class/3   BBS/16   cannot choose/1

Which motivated you more?

In-class/8   BBS/11   cannot choose/1

Which did you find more useful?

In-class/4   BBS/12   cannot choose/4

Which peer comments did you find more useful?

In-class/3   BBS/14   cannot choose/3

Which did you find more difficult?

In-class/7   BBS/13

Which could you do better?

In-class/4   BBS/16

Representative comments written in the questionnaire

Affirmative (BBS)

I could read many comments from many peers.

It's good because I could take time to read authors' drafts.

It's not face to face so I could say anything.

I thought seriously for the author to improve the draft.

Many editors pointed out my weak points so it was clear what to correct to improve my draft.

I can be candid.

Negative (BBS)

It took me much time to comment in BBS.

I was reluctant to do this kind of activity outside the class (I had to spend extra time for this assignment.)

I do not have easy access to the Internet.

Page scrolling annoyed me (too long)

I had to read many people's drafts.

I had to write more.

Affirmative (in-class)

Direct talking is much easier.

It's good to ask for comments at real time.

I was the only partner for the author, so I had to do right.

I could explain my thoughts better (it's difficult to express in writing)

Peer editing sheets made a good guide for me.

It's good to talk to my partner face to face.

I tried hard to do the right thing for my partner.

Negative (in-class)

The time is limited.

Only one partner means that the partner may comment only good things.

Others

I wish we can do group peer editing in class.