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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Peer feedback in L2 English writing instruction

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This paper reports English writing instruction incorporating peer feedback activities and examines Japanese university students' perceptions of them. Students experienced both spoken and written feedback activities regularly for a semester. The post-instruction questionnaire asked what aspects of the activities they enjoyed, what kind of feedback they wanted to get from their peers, what kind of feedback they wanted to give to their peers, and what effect they perceived from the activities. The students' attitudes toward writing and perceptions of their writing abilities were also examined. Furthermore, the pre- and post-instruction English compositions were compared to examine whether students had improved their writing abilities. Overall, the results found that students had positive perceptions of peer feedback. After the instruction, however, they did not improve their English writing abilities significantly. Lastly, the paper suggests some directions for future studies.

本研究は、ピアフィードバックを取り入れた英語ライティング指導手順を紹介し、受講した大学生が実際にどのような活動を行い、ピアフィードバックをどのように捉えたかを報告する。学生は、1学期間、口頭及び書面によるピアフィードバックを継続して行った。学期後に実施した英語ライティング及びピアフィードバックに関する調査を基に、受講生がピアフィードバックのどのような点を楽しんだのか、どのようなフィードバックをピアから期待したのか、また自らはどのようなフィードバックをピアにしたのか、ピアフィードバックからどのような効果が得られたと思ったのかを探った。本調査では、英語で書くことに対して学生の意識が、指導後、変化したのかどうかも尋ねた。さらに、英作文力に向上がみられたかどうか調べるために、学期前後に受講生が書いた英作文を比較した。その結果、学生はピアフィードバックを総じて肯定的に捉えたことが明らかになった一方で、指導前後の英作文には統計上有意差はみられなかった。最後に、今後の研究課題をあげる。

**P**eer feedback (or response) is an activity in which students receive feedback about their writing from their peers. It is a familiar activity in second language (L2) writing pedagogy. According to Liu and Hansen (2002), theoretical justifications for the use of peer feedback have been made from numerous strands of theories, such as process writing theory, collaborative learning theory, and

psycholinguistic rationale for the use of group work in L2 acquisition theory, just to name a few. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of peer feedback is a controversial issue in L2 writing research and pedagogy. Previous research, mainly done in ESL settings, reported mixed findings. For example, Mangelsdorf (1992) found that ESL students perceived both advantages and problems with peer feedback. She examined what 40 advanced students thought about peer feedback in a freshman composition course at a U.S. university. On one hand, the students considered peer feedback especially beneficial in improving the content of compositions in terms of “clarifying, developing, generating, and comparing ideas” (p. 276). On the other hand, they did not trust peer feedback due to student inability to critique peers’ texts or due to disinterest in the texts.

In EFL settings, much less research has been conducted concerning the effectiveness of peer feedback in L2 writing instruction. Although group work is commonly used for oral work in English classrooms in Japan, peer feedback has not received much interest from teachers, and few teachers and researchers to date have conducted classroom-based research. Nevertheless, studies targeting peer feedback at university-level English writing instruction have started to emerge recently. Although the number of such studies is still small, these studies provide several perspectives for research on peer feedback.

First, the effectiveness of peer feedback was investigated by comparing students’ writings before and after the feedback. That is, did peer feedback help to improve subsequent student compositions? Kondo (2004), for example, compared students’ revised drafts with the drafts

before peer feedback and reported incorporations of peers’ comments into the revised drafts and their improvements.

Second, the effectiveness of peer feedback was examined by comparing student feedback with teacher feedback. In other words, was student feedback comparable to teacher feedback? Nakanishi and Akahori (2005) examined the validity of peer feedback by using point-scale evaluations of and descriptive feedback to three English compositions of different characteristics. Thus, this study was a cross-sectional study in which the participants did not give peer feedback to each other in the classroom. The validity of students’ rating points was not verified. However, descriptive feedback given by students with higher writing abilities was found valid in light of experienced Japanese English teachers’ descriptive feedback. In contrast, descriptive feedback provided by students with lower writing abilities was not found valid. In descriptive feedback, the participants wrote about the good points and gave suggestions for revisions in the first language (L1).

Third, the effectiveness of peer feedback was explored by examining students’ own perceptions after they experienced peer feedback in classroom-based research. The present study is in line with this perspective. Kashimura (2007) investigated how lower English level Japanese university students who experienced peer feedback three times a year perceived it and reported they had negative attitudes towards peer feedback. More specifically, the majority of students (66.7%) did not want to do peer feedback again after their third experience with it. Although the students’ experience of peer feedback was highly limited, Kashimura’s study was a longitudinal study which attempted to examine students’ attitudinal change toward peer feedback over a year.

Following these studies, it is clear that the effectiveness of peer feedback should be further examined. For example, the effects of peer feedback on subsequent student writing should be measured not only by comparing the compositions before and after peer feedback, but also by comparing students' writings over a certain period of time such as before and after a writing course. Furthermore, peer feedback can be extended to regular activities in a course and students' perceptions of them be examined. Thus, the effects of peer feedback on students remain to be investigated from multiple perspectives.

### The present study

The present study attempted to explore how university students perceived peer feedback based on their regular experience in a writing course and whether it had effects on their writing in English. The study had the following two research questions:

1. How do Japanese students perceive peer feedback?
2. Does English writing instruction incorporating peer feedback have an effect on the students' English writing?

### Method

#### Participants

The participants were 15 university students (1 male and 14 females) in an intact English writing class taught by the author in 2006-07. They were fourth-year students whose major was other than English, such as French, Spanish,

German, and Chinese, in the Faculty of Foreign Studies. It was an elective English writing course that was required only for those who intended to gain a teaching certificate of English. Therefore, the participants were heterogeneous in terms of academic major, but they were homogeneous in terms of English proficiency and motivation to take the course. While taking the English writing course, they took no other English classes at the university. It was ensured that no students had previously experienced peer feedback activities as implemented in the course.

### Course content

#### Writing assignments every week

The course met once a week for 90 minutes over a semester. For 12 weeks, prior to each class, the students were required to write a composition with the minimum length of one paragraph. They were free to choose any topic on which to write. The first half of the class time (45 minutes) was spent on peer feedback activities based on the writing assignments. The other half of the class (45 minutes) was used for one chapter from the course book that dealt with paragraph organizations such as *cause and effect* and *comparison and contrast*. After the peer feedback activities, the class read sample paragraphs and did the given exercises in English. The course book provided possible topics for assignments. Besides the writing assignment topics, the link between the peer feedback activities and the course book was maintained in class. For example, after the cause and effect chapter of the course book was finished, the students were encouraged to write a composition about cause and effect. In the next class, the teacher asked the students to underline words or

phrases of their own writing assignments that showed cause and effect relations and to make sure that they used them correctly and efficiently.

### *Spoken and written peer feedback in English*

In every class, the students exchanged writing assignments with partners and experienced both spoken and written feedback activities in pair work in English. The teacher decided to use English in written feedback to provide them another opportunity to write for a communicative purpose. In contrast, interestingly, the students themselves chose English for the spoken feedback. They spent about a quarter of the class time (20 minutes) reading each other's compositions and writing feedback (see the *Reader response sheet* section below), and another quarter talking about each other's compositions and responses. The total time allotment for peer feedback (about 45 minutes) resulted from the requirements of the students to do these activities, not from the enforcements by the teacher. In fact, it was sometimes difficult for the teacher to stop students from talking.

### *Reader response sheet*

In pairs, the students filled out and then exchanged an A4-sized *Reader response sheet* with each other (see Appendix 1 for a reduced version). The sheet included identification of the topic sentence; explanation of what the reader liked and what confused him or her; underlining the incomprehensible parts; and making suggestions of what he or she wanted further details about. Thus, written peer feedback was geared to these points. After reading the partner's responses, each

pair was free to talk about any topic that emerged from each other's compositions and responses.

### *New pairs every week*

The students had new partners to work with every week. New pairs were formed to give them a chance to communicate with as many classmates as possible, not only those they knew well but also those they did not know. The students were from four different departments (recall the *Participants* section), and thus did not necessarily know each other well. By the end of the semester, they were paired up with almost all of their classmates.

### *Spoken and written teacher feedback*

The students also received spoken and written feedback on all their writings from the teacher. During peer feedback activities, the teacher walked around from pair to pair and gave comments, answered questions, and joined in discussions. After the peer feedback activities, she gave spoken feedback to the whole class in English by taking up some discussion topics or language questions from the peer activities. In the next class, she gave written feedback in English on both their assignments and their partners' responses.

### *Data*

#### *Post-instruction questionnaire of student perceptions*

At the end of the course, the students answered the post-course questionnaire (see Appendix 2 for excerpts). The

questionnaire took the form of statements answered on a 5-point scale (1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neither disagree nor agree; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree) and was divided into four sections (30 items). The first section (4 items) inquired about the students' general views of the course and perceptions of their writing abilities. The second section, on peer feedback (16 items), questioned what aspect of the peer feedback activities students enjoyed most, what kind of feedback they wanted to get from their partners, what kind of feedback they wanted to give to their partners, and what effects they perceived from the activities. Although the questionnaire included other items about the teacher feedback and what students perceived as influencing peer feedback effectiveness (see Hirose, 2008, for an analysis of these items), the present paper focuses on student responses to the peer feedback activities and perceptions of the course and their writing abilities. The reliability of the questionnaire was measured through Cronbach's alpha. The reliability of the peer feedback section was 0.77, whereas that of the course and writing section was 0.55. The group means of their ratings on each statement were also calculated.

### *Pre- and post-instruction English compositions*

The students wrote a 30-minute English composition at the beginning and the end of the course. The topics were different but were both considered familiar and close to the students because they were expected to already have personal experience and/or views about the topics. Students were not informed about the topics beforehand and did not use a dictionary. For the pre-instruction composition, the following prompt was given:

In the readers' column in an English newspaper, there has been a heated discussion about the issue of *university students and part-time jobs*. Some think that students should not have part-time jobs, whereas others believe they should work part-time. Now the editor of the newspaper is calling for the readers' opinions. Suppose you are writing for the readers' opinion column. Take one of the positions described above, and write your opinion.

At the end of the course, the following prompt was given:

In the readers' column in an English newspaper, there has been a heated discussion about the issue of *English learning and studying abroad*. Some think that people have to study abroad to improve their English, whereas others believe people can improve their English in Japan and don't need to study abroad. Now the editor of the newspaper is calling for the readers' opinions. Suppose you are writing for the readers' opinion column. Take one of the positions described above, and write your opinion.

Both compositions were scored by three English-speaking university instructors according to the adapted version of Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey (1981) ESL English Composition Profile (Yamanishi, 2004). Ratings were assigned equally (10 points each) for the five criteria of content, organization, language use, vocabulary, and mechanics. Each participant's composition score was the sum of the three raters' scores (the full total score=150). The interrater reliability for the pre- and post-instruction English composition total-scores were acceptably high (0.7 and 0.81,

respectively). The pre- and post-instruction compositions were compared using Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, a non-parametric equivalent to the matched-pairs *t*-test.

## Results

### *Research question 1 (RQ1): How did the students perceive peer feedback?*

#### *What aspect of the peer feedback activities did they enjoy?*

Overall, the students had positive perceptions to every aspect of peer feedback. They most enjoyed reading their partners' compositions ( $M=4.73$ ) and reading their partners' responses to their own compositions ( $M=4.73$ ), talking with their partners about each other's compositions ( $M=4.6$ ), and writing responses to their partners' compositions ( $M=4.2$ ).

#### *What kind of feedback did they want to get from their partners?*

The students especially liked having their compositions commented on by their partners ( $M=4.87$ ). That is to say, 13 out of 15 students strongly agreed with this statement. This statement received the highest mean score of all the questionnaire items. Students even liked having their compositions corrected by their partners ( $M=4.6$ ). These high group mean scores about peers' comments and corrections seem to give support to their highly positive perceptions of reading peers' responses as well as peers' compositions reported in the previous section.

#### *What kind of feedback did they want to give to their partners?*

They wanted to say good things about their partners' compositions ( $M=4.33$ ). However, they were less likely to want positive comments on their own compositions ( $M=3.33$ ). Similarly, they did not want to find mistakes in their partners' compositions ( $M=3.13$ ) as much as they wanted their partners to find mistakes in their own compositions ( $M=4.33$ ). It seems they were *nice* to their peers but did not want their peers to be so nice in return.

#### *What effect did they perceive from the peer feedback activities?*

The students thought peer feedback had helped them to communicate with their partners in English ( $M=4.47$ ), and their partners could give helpful suggestions about their compositions ( $M=4.4$ ). In fact, they thought their partners were as good at giving suggestions as the teacher was ( $M=3.93$ ), slightly less than the *agree* level. Thus, it seems they trusted their peers' feedback. However, they did not necessarily show confidence in their own abilities to give helpful suggestions to their peers. In fact, the statement, "I think I can give helpful suggestions about my partners' compositions," received the lowest group mean ( $M=3.07$ ) of all the items.

**Research question 2 (RQ2): Did the instruction have an effect on the students' English writing?***Have the students' attitudes to or perceptions of English writing changed?*

The students shared a relatively positive view of the course and writing. They agreed with the statement, "Writing instruction (through reading the textbook, writing, and peer feedback activities) in the course has had a positive effect on my English ability" ( $M=4.4$ ). They slightly agreed with the statements, "I enjoy writing in English more now than I did 3 months ago" and "I can express my ideas better in writing than orally" ( $M=3.8$ ). On the other hand, they only marginally agreed with the statement, "I feel more confident in my written English now than 3 months ago" ( $M=3.53$ ). They were not so sure of their improvement in English writing ability. This question of whether they improved their writing abilities will be reported next.

*Have the students improved their English abilities?*

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the total scores, the five subscores, and the total words of the pre- and post-instruction English compositions. As shown in the table, the students slightly improved scores in all measures. They also wrote about 20 words more for the post-instruction compositions. However, the results of Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test revealed that there were no significant differences in any measure examined in this study. Thus, the non-significant results seem to support students' own assessments of their writing as discussed in the previous section.

**Discussion**

Regarding RQ1, this study found that Japanese university students had positive perceptions of peer feedback after their semester-long experience. Their positive perceptions

**Table 1. Pre- and post-instruction English composition scores**

Measure (total possible)	Pre-instruction			Post-instruction		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Content (30)	20.67	2.64	16-26	21.07	2.94	13-25
Organization (30)	19.73	2.31	17-24	20.13	3.20	18-26
Vocabulary (30)	19.70	1.10	18-21	19.87	1.69	18-24
Language Use (30)	18.07	1.75	15-20	18.80	2.98	12-24
Mechanics (30)	19.87	1.55	18-22	20.20	1.78	16-23
Total (150)	97.93	7.32	88-110	99.80	11.14	70-118
Total number of words	178.07	33.46	119-222	197.67	52.30	144-318



derived partly from their already relatively high English proficiency levels and partly from their already high intrinsic motivation to communicate in English. This finding is in contrast with the above-mentioned Kashimura (2007), which found students of lower English abilities showed negative attitudes. Besides differences in the amount and content of peer feedback, these two studies had different participant groups not only in English proficiency levels, but also in gender make-up and ways of grouping. Kashimura's (2007) participants were dominantly male students and got into pairs or groups with whom they liked, whereas the participants of the present study were all female except one and formed pairs regardless of their preference. Thus, we should be cautious not to generalize these research findings and to claim that students have different perceptions of peer feedback relative to their English levels.

This study also found that the students especially liked having their compositions commented on by their partners. In fact, they liked reading peers' comments more than the teacher's comments (Hirose, 2008). As mentioned above, Nakanishi and Akahori (2005) found descriptive peer feedback (i.e., writing good points and suggestions for revisions) to be valid, and thus predicted it would produce beneficial effects if provided by students of higher English writing abilities. The finding of the present study seems to confirm their finding and prediction. The students of the present study showed trust in peer feedback, whereas they did not show much confidence in giving helpful suggestions themselves. The latter finding appears to have much to do with the findings regarding RQ2.

This study found that although the students had a positive view of the writing instruction incorporating peer feedback, they did not gain much confidence in their English writing abilities. Furthermore, there were no significant differences between the pre- and post-instruction compositions in any way. Follow-up studies should be conducted to examine the effects of such writing instruction longer than a semester and possibly with lower English proficiency level students.

### Conclusion

This study was a small study and more research is certainly required to confirm its findings. However, the results are sufficiently encouraging to implement peer feedback in English writing classrooms in Japan. The students enjoyed the activities, and some students actually improved their scores on the post-instruction compositions. From a pedagogical viewpoint, many other ways of peer feedback should be devised. Peer feedback can take many forms depending on its purposes. Students can give feedback in pairs, just as done in this study, or in groups of three, four, or more. Both spoken and written peer feedback can be done either in L1, L2, or both. There are many other factors that might influence student perceptions of peer feedback. For example, when grouping students for peer feedback, there are such influencing factors as students' English proficiency levels in relation to each other, relationships between peers, and differing motivational levels. Further research and implementation of peer feedback should help to elucidate these issues.



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## Appendix 1

### Reader response sheet

Writer's Name _____	Date _____
<b>Reader Response</b>	
A. <u>Underline</u> the topic sentence (the sentence that states the dominant idea).	
B. Explain what you like.	
C. Describe where you are confused and <u>wavy underline</u> the words/phrases you do not understand.	
D. Write what you would like further details about. Write any other comments if you have them.	
<b>Reader's Name</b> _____	

## Appendix 2

### Excerpts of the post-course questionnaire

Read the following statements and indicate the degree of your agreement/disagreement in the blanks. Your answers will have no bearing on your grade in this course.

1 strongly disagree	2 disagree	3 neither disagree nor agree	4 agree	5 strongly agree
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#### I. Writing in English

2. ( ) I think writing instruction (through reading the textbook, writing, and peer feedback activities) in this course has had a positive effect on my English ability.
3. ( ) I feel more confident in my written English now than 3 months ago.

#### II. Peer feedback

5. ( ) I enjoy **reading** my partners' compositions.
6. ( ) I enjoy **writing** responses to my partners' compositions.
7. ( ) I enjoy **reading** my partners' responses to my compositions.
8. ( ) I enjoy **talking** with my partners about each other's compositions.
9. ( ) I like having my compositions **corrected** by my partners.
10. ( ) I like having my compositions **commented** on by my partners.