Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Attitudes toward peer collaboration within the EFL writing context in Japan

Robert H. Taferner
Tama University, School of Global Studies/Lancaster University

This study examines the attitudes of 33, 1st-year university students toward peer feedback as part of the revision process during their first process writing class. These students were asked to complete pre- and post-course surveys to explore their attitudes regarding writing in English and peer feedback. For the purpose of this study, feedback and review refer to the reading of and commenting on students' compositions by a teacher or a classmate for the purpose of improving their written product, as part of draft revision included in process writing. The results from the pre-course survey indicated that most students felt that they would be unable to provide helpful feedback to their peers on organizational and linguistic features of their composition. Students also believed that they could only give feedback that was superficial, and lacked the knowledge and skill to give the comprehensive comments and suggestions that their peers required. The post-course survey revealed that most students altered their attitudes toward the efficacy of peer review, and that they would be willing to continue using peer review in future writing classes. However, many students maintained skepticism toward their peer's comments and the peer-review process under the conditions of this study.

　本研究では、パラグラフ・ライティングの授業を履修している英語専攻の日本人大学生１年生を対象に、ピア・レビューに対する考え方を調査した。データとして、ピア・レビューに関しての受講前と受講後のアンケートに加え、テキスト分析をしてピア・レビュー後のドラフトの書き直しで実際にどのような修正がされたかを調べた。受講前のアンケートから、学生はクラスメートに有益なフィードバックを与える能力が無い、 自分が提供したフィードバックが表面的である、クラスメートに理解してもらえるコメントや提案をする知識や能力が無いと信じていることがわかった。受講後のアンケート結果では、ほとんどの学生がピア・レビューはライティング・スキルの上達に有効であると捉えるようになったことが明らかになった。その一方で、クラスメートのコメントには懐疑的であるが教師のコメントは全面的に取り入れる傾向があることもわかった。

I n 2003, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) proposed objectives to improve Japanese students' ability to give opinions in both English and Japanese (MEXT, 2003). To support MEXT's action plan, adopting process writing pedagogy, including both teacher

and peer feedback on a students' opinion and expository compositions, may contribute to the development of an approach that could lead to actualizing some of these objectives.

Process writing is commonly categorized into the stages of planning, formulating, and drafting. In the pre-writing planning stages, the writer obtains contextual and rhetorical knowledge and proceeds to construct a working model of the written product (Faigley & Witte, 1981; White & Arndt, 1991). As for the drafting stages, many researchers including Paulus (1999) and Zhang (1999) assert that multiple drafts improve the final product. And the consensus is that teacher and peer feedback are valuable to English as a Second Language (ESL) writing pedagogy and should be incorporated into the writing curriculum where appropriate (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001; Cho, 2003; Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hu, 2005; Lee, 2003; Roca de Larios, Murphy, & Manchon, 1999; Sasaki, 2000; Suzuki, 2008; Tsui, 2000; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; Zamel, 1985).

While the previous cited research indicates peer feedback is useful, further investigation is necessary to determine how useful it is and how this feedback could be improved (Min, 2005; Neff, 2006). Within the Japanese context, corrective feedback has been the responsibility of the classroom teacher, with marginal peer interaction for the development of either declarative or procedural skills. Recently there been detailed research on the incorporation of peer feedback into writing pedagogy with the Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context (e.g. Suzuki, 2008; Taferner, 2008; Wakabayashi, 2008). For novice writers such as 1st-year Japanese EFL learners, sentence level problems may attract

their full attention, allowing less emphasis on issues relating to the content and organization (Hyland, 2003). Also, when engaged in peer-review and teacher feedback, there is the possibility of miscommunication, lack of confidence, or over-confidence in the value of the information received (Hyland, 2002, p. 169). Additionally, cultural issues such as criticizing peers' work may make students uncomfortable (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) as students are seeking to minimize conflict and establish group harmony (Nelson & Carson, 2006) within the classroom and institution. The goal of this study is to determine Japanese EFL students' attitudes toward peer review in aiding their development of procedural writing skills over the period of one term. To meet this objective, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Do 1st-year university students' attitudes toward receiving peer feedback change over time?

2. Do 1st-year university students' attitudes toward giving peer feedback change over time?

Method
Participants

The 33 participants (twenty-four female and nine male students) in this study were selected from two 1st-year university writing classes of students over a period of 15 weeks, starting in April 2008. These students have been studying in an academic English program, in Kanagawa, Japan, that provides 12 hours per week of English language instruction dedicated to developing reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills for academic purposes. The

students selected for this study ranged from intermediate to advanced levels of English. Most of these students had never written beyond the paragraph level prior to their enrolment into this program, but were now expected to write opinion and expository essays covering a wide selection of topics as part of their studies. To encourage writing fluency, these students were asked to write weekly journals, which classmates would share with each other and be required to provide comments on the content.

Data collection and analysis

Quantitative data were collected from pre- and post-course surveys and tabulated as yes-no answers and Likert-scale data for descriptive analysis. The reason for conducting these surveys was to ascertain the connection between their perceived need for feedback, and whether these needs were met through a process-writing approach involving a combination of teacher feedback and peer review. The pre-course survey was administered on the first day of their writing class, after students completed a writing task that asked students to write a narrative using a sequence of pictures depicting the activities of an individual over a period of one day. To create similar conditions for the post-course survey, students were asked to complete a similar narrative writing task and then completed the survey.

The current format of the surveys evolved over a period of four years after conducting numerous pilot surveys resulting in refinements in question type and response options (Taferner, 2006). The surveys were conducted in Japanese rather than in English to ensure that language comprehension would not interfere with the students' responses.

Process-writing tasks

Students were instructed to follow the process writing stages beginning with pre-writing tasks, i.e., theme and topic selection, brainstorming and listing, and paragraph organization (topic sentence, introduction, body, and conclusion). Once pre-writing heuristics were covered early in the course, editing and proofreading skills were also practiced. Following this training, the first process-writing assignment was given to students to complete. Over the duration of this study, three process-writing tasks were utilized to provide students with multiple experiences with peer review and teacher feedback. The writing prompts included a description of a social issue and two opinion papers ranging from 200 to 300 words in length.

When students reached the drafting stage, bilingual self-revision and peer-review checklists were introduced as tools to focus on ideational, organizational, linguistic features, and format for the students to use on their own during class-time or for homework. During these learner-centered activities, the teacher monitored and helped students when they requested assistance. When the drafting process was completed, students wrote three drafts and then received teacher feedback on their composition prior to final submission and grading.

Results and discussion
Beliefs about writing in English

Students' background beliefs and attitudes regarding the writing process and the expectations of a final product are important factors to consider when designing a learning

task. In Table 1, an attempt to elicit the central features contributing to a well-written composition was made. Here typical linguistic components such as grammar, vocabulary, expressions, and punctuation, were all highlighted as important and unvarying throughout the course as revealed by the pre- and post-course responses in the *somewhat agree* to the *agree* range (see Items *a* to *g*). The other items relating the topic and the writing process, were scored slightly higher as the students' responses were mostly in the *agree* to *strongly agree* range. It is evident from this data that students feel a need for some autonomy in topic selection and the development of their ability to understand the content and convey their ideas. Items *i* to *m* indicate that a means to express ideas clearly about the content to fellow students and the teacher are important to the writing process. Item *n* confirms that students desire more latitude when selecting a topic to write about. Additionally, students agreed that the drafting process is an important exercise in improving the final written product (see Items *o, p,* and *q*).

Table 1. Conditions for writing a good composition

Q1: Under what conditions do you think you can write a good English composition?		
Item	**Pre**	**Post**
a. I should have good vocabulary in English.	5.12	5.06
b. I should know many expressions in English.	5.21	5.09
c. I should know lots of synonyms.	4.58	4.85
d. I should be able to translate Japanese sentences into to English.	4.21	4.45

Q1: Under what conditions do you think you can write a good English composition?		
e. I should have a good understanding of English grammar.	4.97	5.12
f. I should know how to use punctuation.	4.42	4.88
g. I should have a deep understanding of the topic.	5.24	5.27
h. I should have writing assignments repeatedly corrected.	4.85	5.09
i. I should support my opinions to convince readers.	5.06	5.48
j. I should get grammatical corrections from a teacher.	4.94	5.18
k. I should have classmates to point out grammar mistakes.	4.25	4.64
l. I should get comments on content from a teacher.	4.97	5.27
m. I should receive comments on content from classmates.	4.47	5.00
n. I should have teachers select the topic to write about.	3.38	3.64
o. I should be able to select the topic to write about.	4.77	4.94
p. I should have an opportunity to rewrite my draft.	5.03	5.39
q. I should have the skill to delete unnecessary sentences and/or add necessary information and explanation in revising.	5.22	5.48

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6	5	4	3	2	1

Note: N =33

The results in Table 2 specifically address students' attitudes regarding the types of feedback desired. For Items *a* through to *e*, students appear to agree that they are of equal importance as they all relate to organizational factors such

as coherence, cohesion, and comprehension. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, pre- and post-course responses for Items *f* and *g* hint at the necessity for encouragement during and writing process, balancing the adherence to learning objectives and the necessity to point out positive aspects of the composition for encouragement.

Table 2. General attitudes toward feedback

Q2: What kind of feedback do you think will be helpful to improve your writing ability?

Item	Pre	Post
a. I think feedback regarding paragraph coherence would help my writing ability.	4.55	4.66
b. I think feedback regarding sentence cohesion would help my writing ability.	4.35	4.63
c. I think feedback regarding sentence level comprehension would help my writing ability.	4.57	4.78
d. I think feedback regarding vocabulary would help my writing ability.	4.33	4.72
e. I think feedback regarding the content would help my writing ability.	4.87	4.78
f. I think feedback pointing out good points in my writing would help my writing ability.	4.47	4.88
g. I think feedback pointing out all inappropriate points in my writing would help my writing ability.	4.50	4.24
h. I think feedback from a classmate with the same English level as mine would not help my writing ability.	2.29	2.58

Furthermore, students reaction to Item *h* illustrates that language proficiency levels during peer interaction may not be of primary concern (Watanabe & Swain, 2008), as students' traditional teacher-fronted experiences appear to play a dominant role superceding pedagogical goals.

Students' attitudes toward peer review

Pre-course survey responses from Table 3 reveal that 61% of the 33 participants have worked with classmates in a previous course. Results from Question 1b indicate that these students were sometimes asked to do group presentations, share their opinions and conduct research with other students, however, they were rarely asked to read their classmates' writing assignments and make comments.

Table 3. Experience with peer interaction in the classroom

	Yes	No
Q1a: Do you have any experience working with a partner or group in any of your previous courses?	61%	39%
Q1b: If yes, what did you do?		

Item	Pre
a. I did a group presentation.	4.50
b. I did some research with classmates.	3.95
c. I shared my thoughts and opinions with my classmates.	4.20
d. I read my classmate's writing assignment and made comments on it.	3.10

						Yes	No
Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Not Often	Never		
6	5	4	3	2	1		
						Yes	No
Q2: Have you ever read your classmates' English writing?						36%	64%

In Table 4, students were specifically asked whether they had ever made comments on their classmates' English compositions. Only 12% responded affirmatively that they had commented on their classmates writing in the pre-course survey. Subsequently, these students were asked how this experience aided their English writing skills.

Unfortunately, the results tabulated in Table 4 for the pre-course survey do not represent a large enough sample size to be statistically significant to compare pre- and post-course results with full confidence. Nonetheless the results of their pre-course responses to Question 3b suggest that students believed their classmates could help them with their textual revisions through peer comments on content, linguistic features, and motivation. After completing their process-writing course, all responses to the post-course survey continue to indicate that peer review can have a positive influence on their learning.

Students were then asked about their general attitude toward the use of peer review in future courses in Table 5. Their responses suggest that they are not completely convinced of the efficacy of receiving or providing comments on their own or their classmates' compositions,

Table 4. Experience with peer review

	Yes	No
Q3a: Have you ever made comments on your classmates' English writing? (* pre-course survey response)	12%	88%

Q3b: If yes, how did it help your English writing?

Item	Pre N=4	Post N=33
a. It helped me think about grammar.	5.50	4.91
b. It helped me realize my weaknesses in my writing.	4.25	4.47
c. It helped me learn new expressions which I did not know before.	5.25	4.58
d. It helped me to learn new vocabulary which I did not know before.	5.25	4.55
e. It helped me learn new sentence structure which I did not know.	5.25	4.27
f. It helped my motivation to write better.	5.50	4.91
g. It helped me understand that I need to write more details to make the content more comprehensible.	5.00	4.82
h. It helped me check my writing more objectively.	4.50	4.97
i. It helped me learn new views about the topic.	4.50	5.00
j. It helped me notice my own mistakes in my writing.	4.75	4.53
k. It helped me make my writing more comprehensible.	4.50	4.36
l. It helped me to learn how I can make my writing more understandable to a reader.	4.75	4.64

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6	5	4	3	2	1

Table 5. Attitudes toward the use of peer review

	Yes	No	I don't know
Q4a: Do you think your writing will improve if a classmate makes comments on your writing?	67%	0%	33%
	64%	**3%**	**33%**
Q4b: Do you think you can help your classmates by giving some comments on their writing?	42%	6%	52%
	24%	**9%**	**67%**
Q4c: Would you like to try peer-feedback (in the future)?	36%	9%	55%
	76%	**6%**	**18%**

Note: Bold type items represent post-course responses

and would likely need more time to fully assess the value of the peer-review process. However, 76% of the students would like to continue using peer review in future courses, indicating that the peer-review process has potential as a pedagogical tool in the Japanese EFL classroom.

The pre- and post-course surveys used in this study have helped further understand students' attitudes and actions during process-writing tasks. Returning to this study's research questions:

1. Do 1st-year university students' attitudes toward receiving peer feedback change over time?

2. Do 1st-year university students' attitudes toward giving peer feedback change over time?

It appears that over time, students are more likely to accept the comments of their peers to improve the comprehension of their compositions as they adapt their attitudes to

promoting intellectual exchanges during the co-creation of knowledge. In addition, students' past learning experiences focusing on sentence level declarative exercises that are teacher centered within the context of a collectivist society cannot be ignored when trying to introduce a western process approach that is centered on developing an individuals' procedural writing skills (Braine, 2003). There may also be concern over imposing such a system that may enhance deductive critical reasoning skills in a society that historically has favored inductive reasoning. Under these conditions, ensuring a classroom atmosphere that balances social harmony while encouraging sound pedagogy that promotes learning is still a challenging paradox that needs further exploration and sensitivity (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Conclusion

This study has provided 1st-year university students' perceptions of EFL writing tasks, and their attitudes toward peer review for improving their final written product. The results show promise that efficient use of peer feedback in the Japanese context is possible and has potential to become an important tool in encouraging learner development as well as the simultaneous maintenance of harmony in the classroom. Further research on a larger scale is needed to confirm the results of this study to fully understand the use of feedback during writing revision, and how best to implement the peer-review process within the context of Japanese EFL writing pedagogy. To better meet guidelines established by MEXT in 2003, specifically the development of students' ability to give their opinions, research focusing

on the problems associated with altering traditional classroom norms that prescribe the teacher-fronted delivery of declarative knowledge may provide a deeper understanding of this sensitive issue.

Robert Taferner holds a MAT-TESOL from the School for International Training and is a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University, U.K. His research interests include materials development, student motivation, and teacher training. He can be contacted at robert_taferner@yahoo.ca.

References

Boud, P., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (2001). *Peer learning in higher education: Learning from and with each other*. London: Kogan Page.

Braine, G. (2003). From a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach: A study of peer feedback in Hong Kong writing classes. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, *13*, 269-288.

Cho, Y. (2003). Assessing writing: Are we bound by only one method? *Assessing Writing, 8*, 165-191.

Cohen, A. D. (1987). Student processing of feedback on their compositions. In A. L. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), Learner strategies in language learning (pp. 57-69). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Cohen, A. D., & Cavalcanti, M. C. (1990). Feedback on composition: Teacher and student verbal reports. In B. Kroll (Ed.), Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom (pp. 155-177). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Faigley, L., & Witte, S. (1981). Analyzing revision. *College Composition and Communication, 32*, 400-414.

Galbraith, D., & Torrance, M. (2004). Revision in the context of different drafting strategies. In L. Allal, Chanquoy, L., and Largy, P. (Eds.), *Revision of written language: Cognitive and instructional approaches* (pp. 63-86). Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Hu, G. (2005). Using peer review with Chinese ESL student writers. *Language Teaching Research*, *9*(3), 321-342.

Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing*. London: Longman.

Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K., & Hyland F. (Eds.). (2006). *Feedback in second language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lee, I. (2003). L2 writing teachers' perspectives, practices and problems regarding error feedback. *Assessing Writing, 8*, 216-237.

PAC7 at JALT2008: Shared Identities

MEXT (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). (2003). Action plan to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities." [Online] Available: <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm>

Min, H.-T. (2005). Training students writers to become successful peer reviewers. *System, 33*(2), 293-308.

Neff, P. E. (2006). Peer review in ESL/EFL writing course: A look a five studies. *Doshisha Studies in Language and Culture, 9*(2), 345-371.

Nelson, G., & Carson, J. (2006). Cultural issues in peer response: Revisiting "culture." In K. Hyland, and F. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in second language writing* (pp. 42-59). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paulus, T. M. (1999). The effect of peer and teacher feedback on student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 8*(3), 265-289.

Roca de Larios, J., Murphy, L., & Manchon, R. M. (1999). The use of restructuring strategies in EFL writing: A study of Spanish speakers of English as a foreign language. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 8*(1), 13-44.

Sasaki, M. (2000). Toward an empirical model of EFL writing processes: An exploratory study. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 9*(3), 259-291.

Suzuki, M. (2008). Japanese learners' self revisions and peer revisions of their written compositions in English. *TESOL Quarterly 42*(2). 209-233.

Taferner, R. H. (2006). *EFL process writing: An exploratory study of the revision process.* Unpublished study. Lancaster University. Department of Linguistics and English Language. Lancaster, U.K.

Taferner, R. H. (2008). Toward effective EFL writing revision: Peer review. *OnCue Journal, 2*(2), 76-91.

Tsui, A. B. M., & Ng, M. (2000). Do secondary L2 learners benefit from peer comments? *Journal of Second Language Writing, 9*(2), 147-170.

Villamil, O. S., & Guerrero, M. C. M. de (1996). Peer revision in L2 classroom: Social-cognitive activities, mediating strategies, aspect of social behavior. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 5, 51-75.

Wakabayashi, R. (2008). The effect of peer feedback on EFL writing: Focusing on Japanese university students. *OnCue Journal, 2*(2), 92-110.

Watanabe, Y., & Swain, M. (2008). Perception of learner proficiency: Its impact on the interaction between an ESL learner and her higher and lower proficiency partners. *Language Awareness, 17*(2), 115-130.

White, R., & Arndt, V. (1991). *Process writing.* New York: Longman.

Zamel, V. (1985). Responding to student writing. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 79-101.

Zhang, S. (1999). Thoughts on some recent evidence concerning the affective advantage of peer feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(3), 321-326.