

# Japanese college students' perceptions of peer editing activities

Tomoka Kaneko  
Ibaraki University

## Reference data:

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This study investigated the nature of interactions during peer editing activities between Japanese university students who were not familiar with these types of activities. Three students from the same English class did peer editing activities in pairs. The data collection methods are: 1) video and audio taped observations, 2) interviews, 3) students' original drafts, and 4) students' revised drafts. The analysis of the data indicated that the students had little resistance to the peer editing activities and viewed the peer editing activities as an opportunity to exchange suggestions to make their writing better and thus were willing to accept the peer feedback. However, at the same time, the students felt that there were limitations on the extent to which it was possible to deal with grammatical issues by themselves. This study shows that the students' good relationships as classmates contributed to their positive perceptions of the peer editing activities.

本研究では、ピア・エディティング活動の経験がない大学生がピア・エディティング活動にどのように取り組むかを調べた。同じ英語のクラスを履修する3人の大学生がペアでピア・エディティング活動を行った。データはビデオ録画・テープ録音をしながらの観察、インタビュー、ピア・エディティング活動前に書いた原稿、そしてピア・エディティング活動後に改訂した原稿である。データ分析の結果、学生にはピア・エディティング活動に対する抵抗がほとんどないことが分かった。加えて、原稿をよりよいものにするためのアドバイス交換の機会だとピア・エディティング活動を捉えることにより、学生はパートナーからのフィードバックのほとんどを改訂に反映させていた。またそれと同時に、学生は文法事項を彼ら自身で解決することへの限界も感じていた。本研究において、クラスメートとしてのよい関係の構築がピア・エディティング活動に対する肯定的な認識につながるということが明らかとなった。

**P** EER EDITING activities have become common in L2 writing classes over the last two or three decades. In peer editing activities, students exchange feedback on their peers' writing. It is generally believed that these activities help students develop their understanding of good writing as well as improve their peers' writing. Many different aspects of peer editing activities have been studied, including advantages of collaborative peer editing (e.g., Donato, 1994; Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Lockhart & Ng, 1995); students' perceptions of peer editing (e.g., Carson & Nelson, 1996); students' preferences of feedback type (e.g., Zhang, 1995); and degrees of peer feedback reflection in revisions (e.g., Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Paulus, 1999). The findings from past literature greatly benefit researchers and educators; however, the findings need to be interpreted and generalized to other contexts with caution



because each study might be distinctive in its own way to a lesser or greater extent, influenced by factors such as research designs, participants, different contexts and individual variations even within the contexts. Therefore, a collection of studies in numerous contexts would contribute to a better understanding of research in the effects of peer editing activities. To add a research finding in another specific context to a body of literature on peer feedback, the present study aims to investigate the nature of interactions taking place during peer editing activities between Japanese third year university students who are not familiar with peer editing activities.

## Methodology

### *Participants/context/situation*

Three participants (given pseudonyms here) were involved in this study, Tomomi (female), Ryota (male), and Yusuke (male). They were Japanese third year university students taking the same English course taught by the researcher of this study. At the end of the semester, they were expected to do an English presentation on a current issue of interest using PowerPoint. The draft was to be about 300 words long. The students were asked to edit their drafts based on their peer's feedback from peer editing activities. None of them had experienced peer editing activities before. The peer editing activities were done in Japanese, their first language, for the sake of efficiency, given the students' level of proficiency. During the peer editing sessions, they were asked to refer to six basic points to check in the drafts. They were told that they would have a chance to ask the teacher questions about their drafts sometime afterwards before their presentation day, not during the peer editing sessions.

### *Six basic points to check in the drafts*

Six basic points to check were selected and put together by the researcher considering the course objectives for the students. Before the peer editing sessions, the students were instructed on how to do the peer editing activities with the basic points to check presented on a checklist sheet.

1. Passage structure – Whether a topic sentence and supporting details are included.
2. Coherence – Whether the passage flows smoothly.
3. Grammar – The students were asked to make the best use of their grammatical knowledge.
4. Words which should be presented with Japanese translations in the PowerPoint slides – The option of presenting difficult English words with Japanese translations in the PowerPoint slides was given to the students so that the audience could follow the presentation including difficult English words. The students were encouraged to do this especially when difficult words were important to understand the content of the presentation. Because the students could choose any current topic they liked, words above the students' current vocabulary levels are often used for the chosen topics such as "Desertification", "Genetically Modified Food", "Fake Marriage Scam" and so on.
5. Writer's opinions with which a peer editor agrees.
6. Writer's opinions with which a peer editor disagrees.

### *Data collection methods and methods of analysis*

The data for this study were collected in the following four ways: 1) video and audio taped observations, 2) interviews, 3) students' original drafts, and 4) students' revised drafts.

Peer editing sessions were observed while they were video and audio taped, and then the data from the observations were



transcribed. There were six combinations of the three students so that each student was matched with the other two students. The sessions were done in order from session 1 to session 6 on one day. Each session included time for reading the drafts, in which they exchanged their drafts and read the partner's draft individually, and actual interaction time, in which a peer editor provided feedback for the writer and they discussed the writing together. Time for reading the drafts varied from one student to another: It took from 12 minutes to 16 minutes. Actual reaction time also varied from session to session: It took from 6 minutes to 33 minutes.

The three students were interviewed one at a time by the researcher in Japanese and the audio recorded data from the interviews were transcribed. The interviews were conducted either before or after the English class taught by the researcher in their English classroom on different days. Tomomi had an interview first, Ryota second, and Yusuke last. No one except the interviewer (the researcher) and an interviewee (one student at a time) was in the classroom during the interview sessions. Each interview session lasted about 50 minutes. Based on the data from the observations, the researcher set four main areas of questions to ask all the students during the interviews.

1. Students' impressions of and attitudes toward peer editing activities (How do the students see these peer editing activities? Do they like them or not? Why or why not?).
2. Students' ways of providing feedback for their partner (Are the students worried about how they sound when they give feedback? Do they sound too direct? Do they attempt to be indirect?).
3. Students' emotional reactions toward feedback from their peers during the peer editing sessions (How do the students feel when they receive feedback from their partner? Do they feel resistant? Do they feel happy? ).
4. Students' opinions on the basic points to check in the drafts during the peer editing sessions (Are some of the basic

points to check not beneficial to the students or difficult to work on? Are there any of the basic points to check that they feel more comfortable with or find more helpful for them?).

The students' original drafts that they exchanged during the peer editing sessions were collected on the last day of the course. These data were used to cross-reference findings of this study with the other data. During the peer editing activities, on the partner's original draft, students were expected to mark or underline parts that they would like to comment on, and to write down corrections or suggestions there or in a margin close to them. The students were asked to bring two copies of their original draft with them so that they could avoid a situation in which the second peer editor might be affected by the draft already marked by the first peer editor.

The students' revised drafts were also submitted on the last day of the course. As with the students' original drafts, the data from the students' revised drafts were used for cross-reference. The students revised their original drafts based on the feedback from the peer editing sessions and the teacher's answers to their questions. As mentioned before, they had a chance to ask their teacher questions about their drafts. The teacher answered only questions asked by the students. She did not correct anything unless the students asked questions.

## Findings and discussion

The data obtained in this study were examined to illustrate the four main areas that were investigated in the interview sessions: 1) students' impressions of and attitudes toward peer editing activities, 2) students' ways of providing feedback for their partner, 3) students' emotional reactions toward feedback from their peers during the peer editing sessions; and 4) students' opinions on the basic points to check in the drafts during the peer editing sessions. In the sections below, interview excerpts are included.



In those excerpts, “I” refers to the interviewer, “T” refers to Tomomi, “R” refers to Ryota, and “Y” refers to Yusuke. The excerpts are translated into English even though the interviews were done in Japanese.

### ***1. Students' impressions of and attitudes toward peer editing activities***

None of the students had negative feelings about peer editing activities. Many of the students' statements in the interviews concern the effectiveness of the peer editing activities in which they discussed their partner's and their own writing on an equal footing. The interview excerpt 1 shows that Tomomi had a chance to analyze her draft based on the peer feedback.

#### ***Interview excerpt 1***

- I: Did you have any resistance?  
 T: No, I didn't.  
 I: You didn't.  
 T: No. My partners gave me suggestions from the same angle, (1.5) on the same status as mine.  
 I: The same angle, the same status as yours?  
 T: Yes. One of the good points about peer feedback is to give us a chance to discuss a matter together in detail. We sometimes didn't know if peer feedback is correct or not. This encouraged us to work hard on our writing. The peer feedback was very helpful when I revised my writing because it really made me think about how to make my writing better. I tried to come up with all the possibilities that I could think of to make my writing better. By doing this, I felt like I was analyzing my writing very carefully. I wouldn't have worked this hard if I had asked the teacher

from the beginning because we can usually get correct answers right away from our teachers.

Tomomi mentioned that peer editing activities provided her with an opportunity to think about ways to revise her writing carefully as well as an opportunity to work on her writing in detail.

Also, all of them mentioned that their peer editing activities were not affected by factors such as gender or how well they knew each other. In addition, Yusuke stated that their proficiency level played an important role as to whether they felt resistant to the peer editing activities, as shown in interview excerpt 2.

#### ***Interview excerpt 2***

- I: You worked in pairs when you engaged in the peer editing activities. Do you think some factors such as gender or how long you had known each other affected how you engaged in the peer editing activities?  
 Y: Certainly, these were not problems.  
 I: Why do you think these were not problems?  
 Y: Well, we were almost at the same English proficiency level. I didn't see a big difference in our proficiency level.  
 I: I see.  
 Y: We knew that we were all the same. (1.0) That's why we didn't feel pressured.

Yusuke believes that his peer editing activities worked well without pressure because he worked with a partner whose proficiency level was almost the same as his.



## 2. Students' ways of providing feedback for their partner

If the three students are compared in terms of the way they provided feedback for their partner, Ryota and Yusuke used more indirect ways of speaking such as statements starting with "it might be ~" than Tomomi. As Tomomi noticed, she attributed her more direct way of speaking to her personality. In the interview, Ryota was asked how he felt when he worked with Tomomi with a more direct way of speaking and when he worked with Yusuke with a more indirect way of speaking, as shown in interview excerpt 3.

### Interview excerpt 3

- I: You worked with two partners: one with a more direct way of speaking and the other with a more indirect way of speaking. How did you feel when you worked with each partner?
- R: Well, (1.5) um, the difference, it's nothing to me. It was just a difference about how they provided me with feedback.
- I: You said "Nothing". Do you mean that the different ways of speaking didn't affect anything, such as how willing you were to interact with each partner?
- R: The different ways of speaking did not influence my willingness to interact with my partners. I think ways of speaking reflect who they are, their personalities. Through the semester, I've learned who they are and what they are like. We are all classmates. I understood that they helped me to make my writing better when they provided me with their feedback. In relationships that we built as classmates through this semester, I believe the different ways of speaking, more direct or more indirect, don't matter to me or the others.

Ryota suggested that the different ways of speaking didn't have any influence on the interactions during the peer editing activities because of their good relationships as classmates. Throughout the semester, they experienced a variety of communicative tasks in pairs and in small groups with different classmates. It seems that through the tasks they got familiar with one another and finally established good relationships.

Related to their good relationships as classmates, they viewed the peer editing activities as a chance to work cooperatively to make their drafts better. Therefore, they see their comments as suggestions rather than something that their partners have to follow, as shown in interview excerpt 4.

### Interview excerpt 4

- I: In the peer editing activities, I assume that you needed to make corrections or tell your partners that you didn't agree with certain parts of their opinions. In those cases, did you ever hesitate to say something and was there anything you couldn't say?
- Y: Not in my case.
- I: You didn't have moments when you hesitated to say something.
- Y: No. Not at all. I believe my peer editing sessions went well because my partners and I gave feedback as suggestions, not as orders.
- I: Suggestions, not orders. I see. What's the difference between them?
- Y: Well, (1.0) Suggestions are something we could choose to use or not to use. But, orders are something that we have to follow. If we suggest, don't order, we don't make waves. But, if we think we are ordered to do something, I guess we probably will feel upset.



Yusuke's statements indicate that Yusuke and his partners had a common understanding about how they should provide feedback: whether they treated peer feedback as suggestions or orders. This common understanding might have been reached through the communicative tasks where they were expected to work cooperatively to accomplish the same goals of the tasks.

In addition, Yusuke mentioned that one on one peer editing created a more friendly learning atmosphere to provide feedback than in a larger group, as shown in interview excerpt 5.

#### *Interview excerpt 5*

- Y: It was a good opportunity to learn that my opinions and my partners' opinions differ.
- I: I see.
- Y: If I had not done the peer editing activities, I would have missed a chance to know what my partners thought about my writing and opinions.
- I: But you could hear about what your classmates think about your opinions in a question and answer session after the presentation.
- Y: Um, (1.5) A question and answer session after the presentation is a good opportunity to hear about classmates' opinions on my presentation. But it is usually done in front of the whole class. So, it is different from the peer editing activities.
- I: What is the difference between the whole class and one on one peer editing activities?
- Y: Well, in one on one peer editing activities, I guess we are more likely to offer honest opinions with less pressure than a question and answer session in front of the whole class. In one on one peer editing activities, we could have friendly and casual conversations.

I: I see.

Y: It is great to hear about classmates' opinions on my presentation draft before the presentation.

Yusuke points out that one on one peer editing activities facilitate exchanges of honest opinions with less hesitation in a more friendly atmosphere.

### **3. Students' emotional reactions toward feedback from their peers during the peer editing sessions**

Because the students had a stance in which they gave suggestions to the partners in the peer editing sessions, all of them said that they did not feel bad or upset about the feedback from their peers. All of them related their willingness to listen to the feedback from their peers to their lack of confidence in their English proficiency. From their statements, it can be indicated that they were trying to learn from each other as classmates at approximately the same proficiency level, as shown in interview excerpt 6.

#### *Interview excerpt 6*

- I: How did you feel when you received feedback from your partners?
- T: It was very useful. So, I was happy with it.
- I: You found the feedback useful and you were happy with it.
- T: Yes.
- I: When your partner suggested some corrections or pointed out that some parts of your writing should be corrected, how did you feel?
- T: I appreciated it.



- I: Did you feel resistant?
- T: Not at all. I think my English is poor.
- I: Do you mean that you didn't feel resistant because your English is poor?
- T: Well, I know that I am not good at English, so I would like to make my writing better based on feedback from peers.
- I: I see.
- T: I know I say things in a more direct way than others. I don't use a roundabout way of speaking. That's who I am. But it doesn't necessarily mean that I don't listen to others. I am willing to receive feedback from my classmates.

Tomomi mentioned that she was happy to receive and use peer feedback to make her writing better. The students' willingness to accept their peers' feedback as suggestions was confirmed by cross-referencing their statements with their original drafts used in the peer editing sessions and their revised drafts after the peer editing sessions. Except for grammatical issues, which will be discussed later, almost all suggestions from peers are reflected in their revised drafts.

#### **4. Students' opinions on the basic points to check in the drafts during the peer editing sessions**

Although they were told to refer to all the basic points to check, their foci on the points varied from one participant to another. Tomomi discussed all the points to check spending almost the equal length of time for each point with both of the partners. Ryota and Yusuke checked all the points, but they spent much more time on a certain point of interest or preference, grammar and coherence respectively. Ryota mentioned that his comments centered on grammar since he believed that grammar was very important to make the drafts better. On the other hand, Yusuke

stated that he focused on coherence because he thought the flow of passages was important to make a good presentation draft. Also, he said that there seemed to be limitations to their ability to correct grammar by themselves due to their proficiency level. As to grammatical issues, all of the students mentioned that they decided to ask their teacher about grammatical problems that they could not solve by themselves after the peer editing sessions, considering their similar proficiency level.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the nature of interactions during peer editing activities between Japanese third year university students who were not familiar with the peer editing activities. The data obtained in this study show that the students had little resistance toward the peer editing activities, viewed the peer editing activities as an opportunity to exchange suggestions to make their writing better and thus were willing to accept the peer feedback. However, at the same time, they felt that there were limitations to solving grammatical problems by themselves. In such a case, they did not stay with the grammatical problems too long and decided to ask their teacher about them after the peer editing sessions. These findings can be considered to derive from the students' good relationships as classmates. They recognized their equal status as novice English learners with lack of confidence in their English proficiency. In the interviews, all of them mentioned that they enjoyed working cooperatively with their partners. They engaged in the peer editing activities in a friendly and supportive atmosphere having no concerns for losing their own face or threatening their partners' face. The positive effects of their collaborative stances on their peer editing activities can be well explained by the sociocultural concept of scaffolding which is associated with Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. Although studies on scaffolding in L2 have traditionally looked at social



interactions in tutor-learner relationships and assistance by a more proficient learner to a less proficient learner, Donato (1994) confirmed the positive effects of scaffolding even between novice learners on their second language development by examining their social interactions during a task. The cooperative and supportive attitudes observed in the study support the argument that collaborative attitudes facilitate second language development better than authoritative ones (e.g., Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Lockhart & Ng, 1995). Such attitudes seemed to allow the free exchange of honest opinions and feedback. This finding does not validate Carson and Nelson's (1996) finding that Chinese students' emphasis on group harmony resulted in their avoidance of criticism of peers' work and their disagreement with others, although both Chinese and Japanese cultures can be characterized as highly collectivist compared to Western countries. Their attitudes also seemed to positively influence their preferences of feedback type. The students appeared to view both teacher feedback and peer feedback as beneficial. This is confirmed by their reports on the benefits of peer feedback and their decisions to ask their teacher about grammatical problems that they could not solve by themselves. This finding isn't consistent with Zhang's (1995) finding that ESL students, more than 80% of whom had Asian origins, predominantly preferred teacher feedback over peer and self-directed feedback. Although their positive perceptions on peer feedback had a great influence on their peer editing engagement, it should be noted that almost all of the peer feedback, except the grammatical problems that they could not solve by themselves, was reflected in their revisions. Their lack of confidence in their English proficiency and their belief about the benefits of peer feedback might have resulted in the students rather blindly accepting peer feedback without doubting its quality. This is in contrast with other studies that show peer feedback reflected much less in revisions (e.g., Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Paulus, 1999).

Although further research will benefit from an increased sample size controlling variables such as gender, how long participants have known each other, personality, and how much participants actually improve the quality of their writing through peer editing activities, this study goes some way towards indicating the importance of establishing good relationships as classmates, which leads to positive perceptions of peer editing activities. The students' good relationships as classmates were developed through a variety of communicative tasks in which they worked with different classmates together throughout the semester. The establishment of good relationships as classmates can be an important pedagogical implication from this study, which could be applied to all contexts. Good relationships as classmates are fundamental to effective peer editing activities.

### Bio data

**Tomoka Kaneko** is interested in the nature of Japanese students' interactions in English classrooms and ways to facilitate their language learning and development. <tomokakaneko@hotmail.co.jp>

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