EFL College Students’ Attitudes on Peer Review Practices: A Case Study

Hohsung Choe*, Ho-Jung Yu*

Abstract

This study aimed to examine EFL students’ attitudes toward peer feedback practices in an L2 writing course where the students used English to provide for feedback. In the process of writing, peer feedback has been widely practiced due to instructional implications. The implications involves its positive impacts on writing quality, affective filter, a sense of audience, and a sense of learning community. In a similar vein, this study examined peer feedback carried out in group and delivered in English in one L2 writing course. Data for this study were students’ reflective journal entries in which they elaborated on their insightful understanding of peer feedback practices. The analysis of the data showed four marked areas. That is, the students made critical comments on writing problem, audience, credibility of feedback, and group formation and interaction. The findings have pedagogical implications about how and what EFL writing instructors can facilitate the process of peer review.

Keywords: audience, credibility of feedback, peer feedback, writing problem, EFL writing

1. Introduction

Peer feedback may be one of the most highly favored teaching strategies implemented by writing instructors in the process of writing. This is because it promotes proactive and autonomous learning. Many research studies have confirmed that peer feedback has instructional benefits in an EFL or L2 writing classroom. That is, it is said that peer feedback serves to enhance a sense of audience, L2 writers’ cognitive development, affective benefits, writing quality, and interactive classroom environment. In actual writing classrooms, peer

Received(April 5, 2018), Review Result(April 16, 2018), Accepted(May 11, 2018), Published(July 31, 2018)

1) The part of this study was presented at the 2017 Fall Conference of the Convergent Research Society among Humanities, Sociology, Science and Technology.
2) Professor, 17035 Dept. of TESOL & English Linguistics, Hankuk Univ. of Foreign Studies, Yongin-si, Gyeonggi-do, Korea
   email: choe@hufs.ac.kr
3) (Corresponding Author) Associate Professor, 38428 Dept. of Global Trade, Kyungil Univ., Hayang-eup, Gyeongbuk, Korea.
   email: hjyu2007@gmail.com

* This study was supported by Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2018.
feedback has been implemented in diverse ways, such as pair, group, written, oral, and CMC modes.[1][2][3]

Of many research studies to have demonstrated peer feedback in EFL writing courses, there are several studies that show pedagogically marked peer feedback practices. One of them is Moon's study that is about exploring students' growth as writers and reviewers.[4] In the writing process of his study, the instructor designed peer feedback practices to be better prepared for students' reviewing peer drafts. In the first session, he provided a variety of information such as goals, peer review guidelines, and samples of authentic comments and afterwards asked students to practice feedback in pairs. In the second session, he started with explicating different aspects in feedback, then asking students to provide feedback in a group and check challenges in conducting it. He ended this practices to cover appropriate strategies of revision.

In an extended body of peer feedback studies, this study explored students' attitudes toward peer review in an EFL writing context where peer feedback was predominately implemented, with the instructor's intervention minimized.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants and Setting

This study was conducted in a second language writing classroom over the course of a 15-week semester at a university in the Seoul Metropolitan Area, South Korea. Since its foundation right after the Korean War, the university has stressed foreign language teaching and learning. Over forty five different foreign languages are currently being offered to learners at the university.

The course for the present study met two times per week, which lasted for around one semester. A total of nine junior students (one male and eight female) took the course, all of whom were pre-service teachers of English. Their ages ranged from 20 to 28, with a mean of 23. The students were estimated to have a very good command of English, because they scored over 800 points in the TOEIC test. Three students had stayed in English-speaking countries; two of them had received language training for about a year in England and Australia, and one student had been educated in New Zealand for six years from elementary to high school. The rest of the students never went abroad for study.
The course was made of five modules, each of which lasted for three weeks. The modules consisted, respectively, of small group and whole class discussions on assigned readings (first week), brainstorming and free writing (second week), and a peer feedback session (third week). The peer feedback was conducted in a group of 3 or 4 students. The writing question for each module is presented in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modules</th>
<th>Writing Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Which has more merits, classic library or bookless library?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How do we make college cheaper?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Do you think the Internet expands/limits the ideas?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>If you are a teacher, what will you do when you see some of your students cheat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>What is a good homework?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To be specific, in the first week of each module, the students read assigned readings, and then they shared opinions and impressions and responded to each other. The second week of each module was dedicated to brainstorming and writing the first draft of an essay. In the third week of each module, the students were divided into three groups, three for each group, for peer feedback. The three groups were maintained without changing any member throughout the semester. Students were required to submit their final drafts electronically within five days after the peer feedback session. Such writing process recurred throughout the period of the research.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

To investigate Korean college students' attitudes toward peer review, we collected journal entries from the students that were a course requirement. The students were required to submit journals right after each peer feedback session. They pondered over what happened during their peer feedback activities in the journals. A total of 45 journal entries were collected, five from each participant.

The journal entries of the nine students were closely examined on the basis of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the most common qualitative data analysis methods, which is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data."
This qualitative analysis helps researchers to lead to the identification of recurrent, emerging themes.

In the first phase of data analysis, we read all of the journal entries thoroughly several times and highlighted frequently repeated words and phrases and patterned responses meaningful to the research topic. In the second phase, we tried to find emerging themes focusing on highlighted parts of the data in the first phase. The first two phases were done individually. In the third phase, we joined together to compare and contrast each other’s themes and made an agreement. In the final phase, we reexamined the emerging themes, including problem awareness, audience awareness, matter of credibility, and group formation and interaction, and selected the most illustrative excerpts for each theme. When presenting the findings of the study, we provided what they students stated verbatim, indicating their names with pseudonyms.

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1 Problem Awareness

One of the conspicuous benefits from feedback, regardless of whether feedback is from peers or the writing instructor, is that student writers are supported in finding their own writing problems that many times recur in making drafts. The outcomes of such problem awareness can be extended for student writers to learn new writing strategies, which are associated with the expressions, sentence constructions, and rhetorical organizations of the target language. Thus, the writing problem awareness that occurs through critical peer reviews has been confirmed outcomes from many research studies about peer review. This study also found that students had valuable and critical time to find their weaknesses in writing, as one of the student, Suji, stated:

“I think it gave me a chance to look back on what my problem areas were in writing by doing peer feedback. Normally, they pointed out similar problems, such as sentences being too long, missing out objects, and commas. I guess I was more aware of the errors that came out repetitively when writing. Although I have not changed my habit of writing long sentences, I believe I could solve the problem eventually because I am aware of my faults.”
3.2 Audience Awareness

Another significant point about peer feedback is that student writers are given an opportunity to build a sense of audience, which means that they will be able to construct a piece of writing with readers in mind throughout peer review practices. The ultimate goal of writing like speaking is to communicate with someone else. To accomplish this goal, a writer should make his or her meaning clear to target readers, not just to himself or herself. Thus, having audience awareness encourages student writers to become more responsible for their own writing by pursuing the clarity of writing.[9]

This group peer feedback also helped students to create the similar outcome. Jisun expressed his reflection about audience awareness, as follows.

“What I liked most about peer feedback was to check whether my argument was made appropriately. When my group members did not understand the points of my argument, I came to think that I should have constructed my argument in a different way. They checked the flow or the main point of my writing meticulously.”

3.3 Matter of Credibility

Research studies about peer feedback to date have indicated that students have reservations about feedback quality or correctness of feedback from peers.[10] However, the concern about credibility of feedback has mostly appeared among students with the low proficiency of English since their feedback is very limited in local aspects like grammar. Even in grammar, they tend to only provide comments within their knowledge. What matters is that there is also an issue over whether other students can trust the comments. On the contrary, advanced students can provide grammatical feedback confidently enough, or they know how to deal with them by referring to resources, making reliable comments on global aspects such as content and organization.

However, interestingly enough, this study disclosed different results. Although most of the students were advanced in this study, they showed similar concerns about feedback quality as the low level students of English normally had, expecting an expert’s feedback. Jeonsun was not confident in her feedback on peers’ drafts, and Suhee wanted to check her improvement through the instructor’s feedback, as stated respectively.
"I wanted to have the instructor's feedback. While providing feedback, I was afraid that I might make comments on my friends' writing incorrectly, which caused them to be confused in revising their drafts."

"Personally, I was not sure about whether my writing was improving and what changes I had to make for my writing, so I missed the instructor's comments on my weaknesses."

3.4 Group Formation and Interaction

Group formation indicates how an instructor arranges students to help them to support each other for peer review. Forming a group is critical because it can lead the success or failure of peer review. The way of forming a group involves many issues. One issue is associated with the level of students. Students may believe that they need peers who are capable of finding weak points in their writing and persuading them to correct the points. The appropriate number of students is also an important matter. The appropriate number of students can guarantee enough and meaningful discussions about peer writing. In that sense, too many students in one group might not effective because they do not have enough time to have enough and meaningful discussions for each piece of writing. The most important matter is to build a close rapport with students. Students with the high level of language proficiency might be able to provide popper and correct feedback. However, unless they have a rapport with each other, they might keep themselves eager to receive feedback from an expert like an instructor. Successful interaction in a peer group is closely related to the three issue. In an EFL context, there is another matter to affect peer interaction, which is the language of communication. The present study required students to use English for peer feedback communication. Students disclosed many reflections on group formation and interaction. The two students, Jisun and Minji, respectively elaborated on their feelings at the end of the writing course.

"I believe a group of three students is most appropriate. If a group consists of two, we can not receive enough feedback from many people. However, if the number is more three, we will not have enough time to provide feedback. Through this semester, I have found out that it takes time to read an essay especially for reviewing."
"I think it would be a good idea to read the drafts that students in other groups made. I realized that the students in our group had similar ideas, but I wonder what students in a different group thought about on the same issue. I thought that if we had had diverse readers even without changing group members for every writing task, we would have received more meaningful feedback and would have challenged by more readers.”

4. Conclusion

This study examined college students’ perceptions toward peer feedback in an EFL writing classroom where peer feedback was an important instructional strategy and the students with the high proficiency of the target language were communicatively competent in conducting peer feedback. The results of this study showed that the students could have opportunities in recognizing their own writing weaknesses, which became the chances of making their drafts better. This might not be possible if there was not any reader to review the writer’s drafts. In the process, they acknowledged that they came to have a sense of audience. Along with the positive attitudes on peer review, they also addressed the feeling that it would have been better if they had received the expert’s review from the instructor, in order to confirm their review or writing was good. Some studies maintain that advanced learners tend to be pleased with peer review, compared to learners with the low level of English proficiency. However, this study demonstrated a different result. Finally, many students in this study elaborated their own opinions about the group formation and interaction. Regarding this matter, the students agreed that they had adequate time in sharing their opinion, although some wanted to have the new aspects of feedback from different groups of students.

Although the findings, such as problem awareness and a sense of audience, are the same as the previous studies have showed, all of the findings are not identical. This implies that carrying out peer feedback productively requires the instructor’s continuous observation and efforts to fine-tune peer feedback according to each unique writing context. Therefore, it is important that writing instructors should not take it for granted that peer feedback is always productive. Peer review practices need to keep adjusting and changing according to student writers’ needs.

For the future study, it might be meaningful to delve into finding effective instructional strategies to enhance autonomous peer review, particularly for advanced learners of English. Peer feedback strategies can be varied, for example, considering students, instructors, and even
class environments. However, researchers can end up with key components to lead a successful peer feedback practice. Most importantly, effective instructional strategies should be a set of dynamic adjustments to fulfill the needs of student writers.

References