

EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices regarding Peer Feedback in L2 Writing Classrooms

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Abstract

The qualitative case study reported in this paper explored 26 Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the use and role of peer feedback in second language (L2) writing classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data. It found that the teachers held various beliefs regarding the effectiveness and value of peer feedback for students' writing development and L2 learning, and their practices tended to vary a lot according to their beliefs and the context of teaching. This study also found that although teachers generally practice what they believe, their practices sometimes do not match their beliefs when it comes to peer feedback in L2 writing and teachers' practices may change over time if their beliefs change. The findings of the study suggest that EFL teachers may not be aware of the value and potential of peer feedback for their students' learning which prevents students from engaging in and benefiting from peer interactions in L2 writing. Therefore, there is a need to train EFL teachers about the value of and implementation of peer feedback activities in L2 writing classrooms.

Key terms: L2 writing, peer feedback, teaching beliefs, teaching practices

Introduction

Much work has been done to explore issues in L1 and L2 writing feedback in recent decades. Among the literature, some studies have investigated teachers' beliefs and practices regarding teacher feedback while some other studies examined students' views on teacher and peer feedback (Lee, 2008; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Paulus, 1999; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010). However, little attention has been paid to teachers' beliefs about peer feedback, particularly in EFL contexts. We still know little as to the relationship between EFL teachers' beliefs about peer feedback and their actual practices of implementing peer feedback in classroom.

Although previous studies have confirmed the contributions of peer feedback to L2 writing revisions and development (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Hu, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000), and these studies also indicate that students' attitudes towards peer feedback play a central role in its implementation and effectiveness (Connor & Ase-navage, 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Yang et al., 2006; Zhang, 1995; Zhao, 2010; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012), whether to use peer feedback as a learning activity and how to use it depends on the teachers rather than students in writing classes. Teachers' beliefs have been revealed to have an important influence on teachers' practices (Borg, 2003; Tsui, 2003), both of which "have a direct bearing on the teaching and learning process" (Griffiths 2007, cited in Lee, 2008). From this perspective, teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to peer feedback are central to its implementation and efficacy in L2 writing classes and will decide whether students have the opportunity to engage in and benefit from peer reviewing activities. Therefore, EFL teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to peer feedback are worth exploring to fill this research gap and enable teachers to have a voice about peer feedback in L2 writing instruction.

The current study is to make a qualitative analysis of 26 Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the use and role of peer feedback in writing classroom. Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate these teachers' attitudes towards peer feedback and how they use peer feedback in their own classes. We are interested to find out how these teachers' beliefs influence their practices. Such a study may have potential to contribute to knowledge, research and pedagogy related to L2 writing peer feedback.

The study

Research questions

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Do EFL teachers use peer feedback in their classes? If yes, how do they use it?
2. What are the teachers' perspectives regarding peer feedback in EFL classes?
3. How do their beliefs influence their practices?

Participants

The participants were 26 English teachers who were working in various universities in Shandong, Zhejiang, Beijing, Henan, Hubei, Guangdong, and Shanghai in mainland China. Their ages ranged from 20 to 55 and their experiences of teaching English reading and writing to university students ranged from 2 to 27 years. All had master degrees in TESOL or related fields and 5 had PhD degrees in applied linguistics, language education or literature.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was used to elicit teachers' perspectives about peer feedback, their experiences of implementing peer feedback in their own classes, the reasons for using or not using peer feedback, as well as the effectiveness of peer feedback.

The interview data was coded according to Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis scheme – data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. We first categorized the interview items and the participants' responses into the relevant research questions and then read the answers again and again. From the extensive reading of the responses, it is possible to identify the common patterns and themes as to the nature of the responses. Based on the preliminary coding analysis, we summarized the teachers' perspectives, practices, roles and reasons respectively.

Results and discussion

The results of the study are reported and interpreted with reference to the four research questions that guided this investigation.

Research question one: Do EFL teachers use peer feedback in their classes? If yes, how do they use it?

The interview data reveals that most of the participants (20/26) have used peer feedback in their classes, but the frequency of use varies widely. Some teachers (6/26) stated that they frequently used peer feedback in their classes. These teachers always required their students to work in pairs or small groups to comment on each other's L2 writing. Mostly they implemented such activities in the classroom and sometimes they asked the students to give peer feedback outside the classroom. For example, teacher D stated that *"I often use peer feedback in my classes. Sometimes I ask my students to work in pairs or small groups to do peer feedback activities in the classroom. Sometimes they are required to finish this task after class. I ask the students to point out the problems in the essays, correct the grammatical errors, write comments and provide scores. Besides, the reviewers should also provide their signatures when they finish their reviewing. I like using this activity in my classes."* Before peer feedback, the teachers always presented explicit instructions as to how to give comments and for each round of peer feedback they usually asked the students to focus on one aspect of their writing, such as tense, subject-verb agreement, and the use of conjunctions. Four of them reported that they included peer feedback as one part of the students' final scores of this course. For example, teacher O responded that *"Peer feedback is often used in my writing classes and it is one section of the formative assessment in this course. I provide a detailed guideline to students before they start to review the essays. I usually ask the students to focus on several aspects of writing in each review. For example, I require my students to comment on the content and structure of the essays for the first round of review. For the second time, they can focus*

on the grammatical errors and vocabulary use. I will collect all the essays and the students' written comments and have a look when they finish their reviews."

However, the majority of the participating teachers (14/26) answered "not so often" when asked how often they used peer feedback. Most of them used peer feedback twice or three times a semester. For instance, teacher E has not often used peer feedback in her classes due to the limited in-class time. She answered that *"I used peer feedback in my previous classes, but there were many teaching tasks and I didn't have much time to ask students to comment on their peer's writing in class. I usually comment on my students' writing in the final several weeks of each semester."* Teacher N also responded that *"Sometimes I encourage the students to comment on their classmates' essays, but not so often since the in-class time is too limited."* For these teachers who do not often adopt peer feedback activities in their classes, they do not train the students to give comments. For example, teacher Q mentioned that *"I seldom use peer feedback in the writing class. I haven't provided any training yet. The students can give comments in the way they like."* Teacher N also said that *"Peer feedback is not an important section in my classes, so I didn't train them regarding how to comment on the essays. Sometimes I provide the students with a list which shows the major aspects of English writing for reference."*

Teachers, who have used peer feedback in their classes, play multiple roles in the implementation of peer feedback activities. In general, the teachers worked as trainers, organizers, demonstrators and models, as well as checkers and commentators. Although some of the teachers did not train their students as to how to give effective feedback, most of them tended to intervene in the peer feedback process or give instructions and training before peer feedback and summarize the problems involved in peer feedback when students finished the activities. Some teachers preferred to demonstrate as a model how to give peer comments and what aspects of writing should be given attention to. From the interview data, we also know that most of the teachers would collect students' essays with peer comments and give another round of teacher feedback before they explained the problems in students' writing and comments in classes.

In addition, 6 participants (Teachers F, L, S, U, X, and Y) stated that they had never used peer reviewing as an activity in the teaching and learning of L2 writing. For these teachers, they showed concerns about the effectiveness of peer feedback and the students' ability to identify problems and language errors in their classmates' essays.

Research question two: What are the teachers' perspectives regarding peer feedback in EFL classes?

The teachers' perspectives regarding peer feedback in EFL classes focused on the effectiveness and benefits of peer feedback, and students' competency to give peer comments. As for the effectiveness of peer feedback and to what extent peer feedback can benefit students and their learning, teachers' perceptions vary a lot, too. The interview data indicates that most of the participating teachers think peer feedback is useful, but they also show concerns about its use in classes. For the majority of teachers, peer feedback is helpful for their students to become aware of the common errors in their writing, to learn from their peer's writing, to raise the audience's awareness, to enhance their own writing quality, to stir self-reflections, and to promote interest and motivation in L2 writing. For example, teacher H answered that *"I don't think only the teacher is the reader or the reviewer of the students' essays. Students shouldn't hold a belief that they write essays in English because their teachers ask them to do so. By means of peer feedback, the students can see that apart from their English teacher there are other readers who may read, review, appreciate and comment on their work. ...My students like this activity. They want to be recognized by their peers. So they pay more attention to their writing now. ... The students can identify the basic errors in their peers' essays. In this way, they can also remind themselves about not committing similar mistakes.... I think peer feedback can help students to improve their English writing. This task is also helpful for the training of their critical thinking."* Teacher D also mentioned that *"I would like to use peer feedback in my classes and it is also effective in en-*

hancing the students' writing proficiency. Peer review is also a learning process in which the students can learn from their peers' writing. They also try to avoid making similar mistakes in their own writing. "

For some teachers, peer feedback is a peer interactive process that can promote their learning. For instance, teacher K responded that *"I think peer feedback has good potential to improve students' writing. Learning can take place when students engage in group discussion. The partners can be changed so that the students can learn from different classmates."* Teacher P mentioned that *"During peer reviewing, students have opportunities to make use of knowledge like the grammatical rules, vocabulary, and writing skills to make comments. In this way, students can enhance their learning and improve their own writing skills. Furthermore, peer feedback can stimulate their interest in writing."* In addition, some teachers think that peer feedback could benefit feedback givers rather than feedback receivers. For example, teacher B held that *"I think student reviewers can learn more than student writers in peer feedback activities. From a reviewer stance, students could have a better understanding of the writing tasks and will be more sensitive to the language accuracy. The reviewers can reflect on their own writing as well."*

Some teachers never/seldom use peer feedback as for them the value of peer feedback is limited. For instance, Teacher S maintained that it was a waste of time since he did not see where the effectiveness of peer feedback was. Teacher F responded that peer feedback primarily focused on spelling and grammatical errors rather than the contents and organizations of the writing. Teacher Q reported that *"The effectiveness is not obvious. That's because the students have similar language proficiency and cannot recognize the errors in their peers' essays. Besides, there is also a 'face' problem, i.e. the students are unwilling to point out the shortcomings of their classmates' writing."* Teacher L responded very critically with several rhetorical questions, *".....NEVER [use peer feedback].First, CAN students make appropriate comments? Second, will students take peer reviewing seriously? How can a student with a low English proficiency help the other one with a high English proficiency? Do you really think the students can be objective while commenting on their classmates' essays? Are their comments correct? "* Teacher Y also doubted the students' ability to give comments on their peer's writing, *"I haven't used peer feedback in my class. Reviewing is quite a challenging task for students. The reviewers should be good English learners and writers. I don't think my students can do this job well."* Teacher X echoed that *"I think peer feedback is not suitable for year-one and year-two university students. Their writing ability is not good enough to produce good comments. Some students may give incorrect and inaccurate comments, which are not good for students' writing development."*

Research question three: How do their beliefs influence their practices?

Based on the results and findings of research question one and two, I interpreted how teachers' beliefs have influenced their practices when it comes to peer feedback in this section. In brief, three cases/relationships can be identified from the above data analysis. For case one, EFL teachers' beliefs do influence their practices as to whether or not and how to implement peer feedback in their classes. While some teachers adopted peer feedback activities in their classes since they believed in its value of contributing to students' writing development and L2 learning, some other teachers seldom or never use peer feedback as they doubt the effectiveness of peer feedback and students' L2 proficiency to pointing out the problems in their peer's writing. For those teachers in case one, they tend to practice what they believe.

In case two, EFL teachers' beliefs mismatch their actual practices. Although some teachers thought that peer feedback was useful for their students' learning, they still did not use it in their teaching practices. For example, teacher U considered that peer feedback is meaningful, but she has not used peer feedback since peer feedback is rather complicated to implement. As such, she adopted the traditional teacher feedback in her classes. She said that *"It is not easy to manage peer feedback in the classroom. For example, when students finish peer reviewing, I need to spend more time reading their comments and essays. I once thought of using peer feedback, but I gave up finally*

since I was afraid that I couldn't control the whole class. So I would rather use only teacher feedback in the teaching of English writing."

For case three, teachers' practices tend to change with their changing beliefs. For example, Teacher A once thought that "It is necessary to let students comment on their classmates' writing. The students can avoid making those errors which are found in their reviewed essays. Peer collaborative learning is a good way to improve students' writing skills." She once tried to use peer feedback in her classes, but she gave up as she found the effectiveness of peer feedback to be limited. She reported that "I taught two classes last semester. In Class A, the students' English is quite good while the students in Class B are low-proficiency English learners. I used peer feedback in both classes and found that students in both classes could find very limited errors in students' writing. Thus, I don't use peer feedback now and I think it wastes much in-class time." After reflection, she decided to change her practices, "However, I ask students to do peer feedback after class. They work in groups and find more time to read and comment on their peer's writing." The above findings seem to reveal that teachers' beliefs and practices are interrelated to each other in a specific context in which students' reactions and the effectiveness of peer feedback would influence teachers' beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

This study has explored EFL teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to the implementation of peer feedback activities in L2 writing. The teachers in this study held various beliefs as to the effectiveness and value of peer feedback for students' writing development and L2 learning, and their practices tended to vary a lot according to their beliefs and the context of teaching. Although teachers generally practice what they believe, their practices sometimes do not match their beliefs when it comes to peer feedback in L2 writing. It was also found that teachers' practices may change if their beliefs change. The findings of the study suggest that some EFL teachers may not be aware of the value and potential of peer feedback for their students' learning which prevents students from engaging in and benefiting from peer interactions in L2 writing. Therefore, there is a need to train EFL teachers about both the value of and implementation of peer feedback. EFL teachers should be also encouraged to learn from and negotiate with each other regarding the use of peer feedback in their teaching practices. Another implication of the current study is that teachers can adopt both in-class and out-class peer reviewing task and they can train the students how to do peer feedback outside the classrooms since many teachers reported that they do not often use peer feedback since in-class time is limited.

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Appendix Interview guide

1. How do you teach English writing?
2. What do you think of the role of peer feedback in students' writing development?
3. Do you use peer feedback in your teaching of English writing? Why or why not?
4. If yes, how often do you use it? Would you please describe how you use it in the classroom?
5. What training (if any) did you provide to students before they do peer feedback activities?
6. Is peer feedback effective in improving your students' English writing?