A Multiple Case Study of Second Language Writers’ Response to and Use of Teacher and Peer Feedback in a Web-based Feedback Platform

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Summary

Despite at least three decades of research on feedback on writing, both in first and second language writing instruction, the specific impact of feedback on student learning is far from clear, even as its role and significance are widely acknowledged. Feedback, which now encompasses more than the traditional mode of teacher feedback to include peer feedback in its various forms (oral, written, computer-mediated, single peer, multiple peers), remains an area of active research as scholars and practitioners alike seek definitive answers to the question of the roles of both teacher and peer feedback in relation to each other in the writing classroom. Specifically, the use of both types of feedback used in tandem is an area with scant research. Further, there is a need for research with second language writers as peer feedback, which originated in a first language context, is increasingly used in the L2 writing classroom. Specifically, Chinese learners who form the majority of L2 learners of English globally, deserve attention.

The present study seeks to address the gaps mentioned above by investigating twelve Chinese writers responding to and using teacher and peer feedback made available concurrently through a web-based feedback platform - SWoRD (now called Peerceptiv). By focusing on the writers’ perception of, response to and use of both types of feedback in the process of revising their writing, it was hoped that much-needed insights could be gained on the influence of a web-based peer review platform on the process of responding to and using
feedback on writing of L2 writers. By setting up three cases of four writers each bounded by proficiency level, it was also hoped that answers could be yielded to the question of whether there are differences between writers of different proficiencies in the way they respond to and use both teacher and peer feedback. The concurrent use of both teacher and peer feedback in the study would also allow some conclusions to be made as to the issue of preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback among L2 writers reported in the literature and whether this preference translates to a greater use and effectiveness of teacher feedback.

The research design of a multiple instrumental case study, drawing on multiple sources of data (stimulated recall interviews, semi-structured interviews, focused diary entries, semi-structured questionnaire, first and second drafts of writing, records of web-based feedback on writing), allows for rich data from which robust conclusions could be derived. Adopting the theoretical lens of Activity Theory and specifically focusing on the concepts of mediation, agency and contradiction, both within-case and across-case analyses were carried out.

There were three major findings. First, the web-based feedback platform was found to have mediated the Subject-Rules, Subject-Community and Subject-Division of labour relations in the activity system of responding to and using feedback on writing of L2 writers. Second, writers of different proficiencies differed in terms of level of independence in revising, comparative influence of teacher and peer feedback on revisions, and improvement in quality of writing. Implications in terms of an optimal configuration for peer review based on proficiency were discussed. Third, two key contradictions in the activity system were
surfaced: that between “Teacher Expert” (Division of Labour) and time constraint (Rules); and that between “Writer as Author” (Division of Labour) and preference for teacher feedback (Rules). The first contradiction illustrates how time constraint is an important factor in explaining why teacher feedback is not as effective as anticipated. The second contradiction delineates three important reasons why learners might reject teacher feedback: sense of text ownership, lack of understanding of and lack of proficiency to deal with teacher feedback. In the final chapter, the theoretical, research, methodological contributions of the study and the pedagogical implications of the findings are discussed and limitations of the study and recommendations for future research enumerated.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Feedback on writing has been and remains a research topic of crucial interest as its role in the writing classroom is hardly disputed even as its specific impact on student learning is far from clear, as highlighted by Lee (2014a) in a recent journal issue on feedback in writing:

While feedback has a pivotal role to play in the writing classroom, much of the existing literature has highlighted its limited impact on student learning. Whether it is teacher feedback, self-/peer feedback or computer-mediated feedback, there is yet no conclusive evidence about its efficacy across different contexts. It is therefore not surprising that feedback has remained one of the most vibrant research topics in writing… (Lee, 2014a, p. 1)

Feedback, which encompasses the entire range of teacher feedback, peer feedback, oral and written modes of feedback and computer-mediated feedback, remains an area of controversy and active research as there is an intuitive sense about its crucial role in facilitating learning (Hyland, 2013a; Lee, Leong & Song, 2017) and yet the picture is far from clear with regards to the type of feedback (e.g., teacher or peer), mode of feedback (oral or written), the combinations of feedback (e.g., computer-mediated peer and face-to-face teacher or both face-to-face teacher and peer) and conditions (e.g., single peer or multiple peers) in which it can be effective, and lead to learning, both short term and long term.
A working definition of ‘feedback’ which applies to the current study is: “feedback on a learner’s writing for the purpose of improving the quality of student writing, whether in subsequent drafts or on a longer term basis”. Hence, the scope of this study precludes discussion of another important area of feedback, that of written corrective feedback, traditionally known as grammar correction (e.g., Truscott, 1996, 1999), which SLA researchers are interested in. The focus of the current study is on the role and effect of feedback in improving written texts, the concern of writing researchers and teachers.

Part of the unanswered question regarding the efficacy of feedback on the learning of writing has stemmed from the fact that much earlier research had been conducted without due consideration of contextual factors or had a narrow focus of only one or some aspects of feedback, and hence lacking a holistic perspective. Hence, there has been an increasing recognition of the need for research with a greater focus on context, which considers “feedback within the whole context of learning and on the learner’s role in interpreting and using feedback” (Hyland, 2010, p. 181).

The picture becomes even more complex when both teacher and peer feedback are considered together, that is, comparative studies of both types of feedback used in tandem. However, such studies are much needed as there is still much that is unanswered with regard to the use of both types of feedback in the writing classroom, in contrast with the traditional classroom which utilizes only teacher feedback. For a fuller understanding of this issue, comparative studies focusing on the use of both types of feedback at the same time, are in
order if a true comparison is to be made so that informed decisions can be made with regard to how both can be used judicially and to maximum benefit in the writing classroom.

Another important reason for the lack of definitive conclusions on the topic of feedback in writing stems from the issues in both teacher and peer feedback on student writing. The key issues in teacher feedback are those of the multiple roles that the teacher plays in giving feedback and the danger of text appropriation. The first refers to the fact that apart from being the assessor of student writing, teachers also play the roles of reader, facilitator, consultant, coach, amongst others. The latter refers to the risk of students adopting teacher feedback blindly, such that they relinquish the ownership of their texts to the teacher whose feedback directs the development of the text in revisions. The key issues in peer feedback in the L2 classroom are encapsulated in the terms, the ‘L2 factor’ and the ‘cultural factor’ (Hu & Lam, 2010, p. 374). The first refers to the common concern that all involved in peer feedback have about the capability of L2 learners to give valid and constructive feedback and evaluate the validity of feedback they receive on writing as they are in the process of mastering the target language and unlike native speakers, would not be expected to have the implicit knowledge of the language to rely on. The latter refers to potential cultural impediments to the productive use of peer feedback such as sociocultural rules in communication which militate against honest expression of one’s opinions for fear of offending the other party, and cultural beliefs such as the supremacy of the teacher in the classroom which translates into a clear preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback. These issues with teacher and peer feedback may
explain why teacher feedback may not be as effective as expected and why peer feedback may not be as feasible as in the L1 classroom where it has originated.

Before proceeding to the purpose of the present study, it is helpful at this juncture to consider the perspectives of both teachers and students on feedback.

1.1 Teachers’ perspectives on feedback

While much has been researched on the nature, form and impact of teacher feedback, it is only in recent years that attention has shifted to what teachers themselves think about the task of giving feedback on student writing. The following are some findings which document teachers’ awareness of the multiple roles they play in giving feedback and the practical reality of time constraint in giving feedback. Some expressed frustration about the difficulty in giving feedback which reflects their beliefs about teaching, in the face of external pressures such as institutional requirements in giving feedback or the need to justify grades in the feedback. Others expressed frustration with regards to the challenge of giving feedback to hundreds of students:

“I feel that feedback is a mixed bag of motives- to help students improve, that’s true. But it’s also determined by course requirements, marking schedule, institutional requirements (including self-preservation motives), and doesn’t always reflect my most deeply held, personal beliefs about teaching” (participant in Lee et al.’s study, 2017).
“Now since joining the university, I have changed the way I give feedback. Because, you know, they are so concerned about the grades. So I have learnt from my colleagues, and from my own experience, to write more and more comments to justify the grade. So I have become more explicit in that way” (participant in Lee et al.’s study, 2017).

“I am teaching 5 different courses this semester. Two in Shanghai, one in Cyberport and two here! Altogether about 350 to 400 students this semester alone. It’s impossible for me to sit down with every single one. Even if it is about 5 minutes per student, that would be 2000 minutes which is, you know, 300 hours. I mean it is impossible” (participant in Hyland 2013a’s study).

Apart from the recognition of multiple roles that they play and the time constraint they face in giving feedback, there is also evidence that teachers are aware of the value of peer feedback as a means to address the problem of time constraint in giving feedback and also to promote learning. One acknowledged the value in the amount of feedback that students can receive from peers, while another recognized the increased awareness of one’s strengths and weaknesses students could derive from critiquing others’ work:

“This year, I am actually allowing students to give feedback to one another. In my Company Law class, I created a class blog and the writing assignment for each student was that they had to post each week responding to the group member who wrote the essay. So, everyone wrote a paper and got nine responses to it from their classmates. So, it’s an ongoing class discussion and all online” (participant in Hyland 2013a’s study).
“The reason I asked them to do this was by critiquing other people’s work they also learn to critique their own. It’s always easier to see problems in the work of other people and hopefully they learn to read their own work in a more critical way” (participant in Hyland 2013a’s study).

In sum, teacher perspectives on feedback reflect the issues with teacher feedback such as the multiple roles that teachers play, the time constraint they face in giving feedback and their recognition of the potential of peer feedback as an alternative source of feedback on student writing.

To have a fuller picture on the topic of feedback, it is important to consider student perspectives on the feedback they receive on their writing.

1.2 Students’ perspectives on feedback

L2 students have, on the whole, shown appreciation for both types of feedback, though there is sufficient evidence to say there tends to be a preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback among Chinese learners (Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam 2016; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006). The following quotations from various studies show a range of opinions on these two types of feedback. The positive opinions regarding peer feedback are that peers have more time to give more detailed feedback which can be more easily understood because peers share similar backgrounds. Teachers’ feedback is valued for its quality, reliability and the fact that it reflects assessment requirements. The negative opinion regarding peer feedback stems from students’
lack of confidence in their peers’ ability to give accurate feedback while the negative opinion regarding teacher feedback is that it tends to elicit passive acceptance:

“With three peers giving comments in a four-member group, the comments can be very rich, much richer than those of the teacher’s who has to rush through all the compositions in a short time” (participant in Tsui & Ng’s study, 2000).

“My peers are closer to me in age and experience. We have more in common when we exchange ideas” (participant in Yang et al study, 2006).

“I don’t know but I think everyone thinks so. There is surely more confidence in teacher comments. They guarantee quality” (participant in Tsui & Ng’s study, 2000).

“I view teacher feedback as the revision requirement but peer feedback as suggestions” (participant in Zhao’s study, 2010).

“Their [peers’] English level may not be quite good to give the right suggestions. Sometimes, the suggestion might be misleading…” (participant from Hu & Lam’s study, 2010).

“I prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback. This has to do with the traditional thinking about the teacher’s role” (participant in Hu & Lam’s study, 2010).

“I accept teacher feedback more passively whereas peer feedback more actively” (participant in Zhao’s study, 2010).

“I think students may be more responsible than teachers. Our teachers usually don’t have enough time to comment on our essays. We students have a lot of time to read and review
the texts. And peer feedback provides an opportunity for us to compare our writing and ideas with others (participant in Yu & Lee’s 2016 study).

The aforementioned voices from L2 writers reflect both the value they see in teacher and peer feedback and the issues they face in responding to either type of feedback. Clearly, there are still unanswered questions about the place of both types of feedback in the L2 writing classroom. These include the following:

- Does the different nature of either form of feedback affect how students respond to it?
- How exactly can teacher feedback and peer feedback play complementary roles in the L2 writing classroom?
- How can the potential of both types of feedback be harnessed to the benefit of the writing development of an L2 writer?
- If indeed there is a preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback among L2 learners, how should peer feedback be integrated with teacher feedback in writing instruction?

1.3 Research on teacher and peer feedback

While earlier research on feedback focused on teacher feedback, followed by peer feedback as it emerged as a possible additional form of feedback on writing, to date, there are far fewer comparative studies which have considered both teacher and peer feedback together. In many cases, the focus was on peer feedback, and a comparison with teacher feedback was incidental. Early studies with a comparative focus include those by Caulk (1994), Sengupta (1998) and Paulus (1999); in which the feedback from teachers and peers were examined and
compared (Caulk, 1994), a survey on students’ opinions on both types of feedback was made (Sengupta, 1998) and the impact of feedback on revisions examined (Paulus, 1999). More recent studies with a comparative focus on teacher and peer feedback are only a handful: Anson and Anson (2017); Cho and MacArthur (2010); Gielen et al. (2010a), Hu and Lam (2010), Loan (2017), Ruegg (2015), Zhao (2010).

The main areas covered by studies which involved both types of feedback are: differences between peer and teacher feedback (Anson & Anson, 2017; Cho et al, 2006a, 2008; Cho & Schunn, 2007; Gielen et al, 2010a); preference of one type of feedback over another (Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Liu & Chai, 2009; Ren & Hu, 2012; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006); adoption of feedback in revisions (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Hyland, 2000; Lam, 2016; Zhao, 2010); and effectiveness of feedback on subsequent revisions (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Ruegg, 2015; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al, 2006).

With the advent of peer feedback, it is no longer viable to consider the sole use of teacher feedback in writing instruction, given issues with teacher feedback such as the multiple roles teachers play and the time constraint they face, and the growing recognition of the potential benefits of peer feedback. Hence, it is pertinent that studies with a comparative focus on teacher and peer feedback be conducted so that a better understanding of the unique strengths and drawbacks of either type of feedback, and especially when used concurrently, may be arrived at. This will pave the way for judicious decisions to be made.
in writing instruction with regard to the use of both types of feedback such that their fullest potential may be harnessed to the benefit of students.

1.4 The Research Gaps

As can be seen, the foci of the above studies illustrate the lack of a holistic approach to the study of both types of feedback on writing as the attention of researchers has been on disparate and discrete aspects (e.g., preference of one type of feedback over another or impact of feedback on subsequent revisions) of the feedback phenomenon, rather than a broader perspective which considers factors in the context in which the phenomenon takes place.

While there are some findings such as the L2 learner’s preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback, an acknowledgement of the value of peer feedback, and the potential of peer and teacher feedback playing complementary roles, a holistic approach is necessary if contextual factors (e.g., sociolinguistic rules of communication, number of assignments students are required to complete, high status accorded to teachers and hence teacher feedback in certain cultures) are to be accounted for in the investigation. The lack of a holistic approach in these comparative studies means that the understanding gained is usually confined to certain aspects of the phenomenon of giving and responding to feedback (such as the characteristics of either type of feedback or the impact on subsequent revisions of either type of feedback), rather than a broader perspective that takes into account the L2 learner in the larger contexts of the classroom and the society in which his learning is embedded. In other words, a holistic approach seeks to go beyond discrete aspects of the feedback
phenomenon to encompass considerations of the learner’s agency and interactions with the context in which his learning takes place, some factors of which are mentioned above. Hence, there is a need for more comparative studies into both types of feedback which take into consideration contextual factors which influence the whole process of responding to and using feedback.

To adopt a holistic approach, a multiple case study would be a suitable methodology to employ. This is because the case study is suited for investigations where multiple sources of data may be drawn upon to maximize our understanding of the object of study. The need to pay attention to contextual factors already mentioned also highlights the appropriateness of the case study design as its characteristic of drawing on multiple sources of data lends itself to the need to capture contextual factors.

In addition, earlier studies on teacher and peer feedback adopted predominantly Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of the mind as a theoretical framework. As this framework precludes a consideration of social, cultural and historical factors, it is inadequate, especially for comparative studies with a focus on both types of feedback. None of the studies cited in the previous section adopts the Activity Theory framework which allows for a focus on the contextual factors of a phenomenon under investigation. This is because the Activity Theory is an extension of Vygotsky’s theory in that it expands on the concept of mediation to include mediators other than Vygotsky’s original mediators of tool and signs: social-cultural-historical contexts and learner agency in the form of motivation and goals (in essence,
contextual factors). Hence, there is a need for comparative studies which adopt a theoretical framework which allows for consideration of contextual factors, such as Engeström’s Activity Theory.

The undeniable currency of computer-mediated peer review also means that research on feedback would be deficient if it does not take into account the influence of technology, including the use of web-based peer review. The increasing use of technology, especially in higher education, renders any comparative study on teacher and peer feedback which does not include computer-mediated peer review to be of limited currency and relevance. In addition, computer-mediated feedback offers new modes of feedback and interaction between teachers and also between students (Hyland, 2010; e.g., synchronous or asynchronous, single peer or multiple peer, various configurations of peer and teacher review), for which there is yet to be sufficient research to create a good understanding of its impact in the writing classroom. Hence, there is a need for not only studies with a comparative focus on teacher and peer feedback but also one that includes the use of computer-mediated peer review.

Finally, given that Chinese learners form the majority of L2 learners of English in the world today (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006), investigations into the use of both teacher and peer feedback focusing on this group of L2 learners are in order as peer feedback is increasingly used with L2 learners though it originated in the L1 classroom. Hence, greater understanding of how teacher feedback may be used with peer feedback for this increasingly important group of L2 learners is necessary.
1.5 Purpose statement and Research Questions

Based on the research gaps delineated above, the following research questions are drawn up:

RQ1 How does the use of a web-based peer review system affect the process of responding to and using feedback on writing for L2 writers?

RQ2 How do second language writers respond to and use peer and teacher feedback on their writing?
   
a) Are there differences in the way L2 writers of different proficiency levels, respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing? If so, in what ways do they differ?

b) Is there indeed a preference for teacher feedback as reported in the literature among second language writers? If so, does this preference translate to a greater use and effectiveness of teacher feedback?

The purpose of this case study was to understand the process of L2 writers’ response to and use of teacher and peer feedback on writing, through investigating 12 People’s Republic of China learners engaged in writing, responding to both types of feedback and revising. Using an Activity Theory framework, it was hoped that this multiple case study (Creswell, 2012) would yield much-needed insights and enlighten the L2 writing teacher on how best to harness the potential of both types of feedback, and fill the gaps in knowledge with regard to the nature, form, processes and relative effectiveness of both types of feedback.
1.6 Significance of the study

This comparative study adds to the relatively sparse collection of research which investigates the use of both teacher and peer feedback in L2 writing instruction. This is likely to be of value as increasingly, there is recognition of the potential of using both types of feedback in the writing classroom, and in particular, with a web-based platform for feedback.

The use of the case study approach offers a holistic picture which goes beyond the disparate and discrete aspects of feedback investigated so far, and addresses the call for greater emphasis on contextual factors in the literature (Hyland, 2010). This multiple case study offers further breadth in terms of data so as to generate more insights which may proffer more weight to the conclusions derived from the study. The multiple case study would also allow certain factors of interest such as those of the writer’s proficiency and the preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback among L2 learners, to be foregrounded and investigated. The study would, therefore, be able to throw more light on how these key factors impact the process of responding to and using feedback on writing for the L2 writer.

The use of the Activity Theory as a theoretical framework, coupled with the multiple case study methodology, does not only address the need for contextual factors to be addressed, but also offers possible new insights with a new theoretical lens. In particular, looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of an activity system, the present study can contribute to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of responding to and using feedback, rendering more visible the factors which have a bearing on this phenomenon. This is possible with the
expanded version of Vygotsky’s concept of mediation reflected in Activity Theory (e.g., additional mediators in the form of the social-cultural-historical contexts) which offers a more holistic picture, as shown in the concept of the activity system (see Figure 5.1 for details and Chapter 3 for an elaboration on this system).

Finally, the focus on Chinese learners who form the majority of L2 learners of English globally (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006) means that insights generated from the study may be of relevance to the greater proportion of the population of L2 learners worldwide.

1.7 Organisation of the thesis

I presented in the above sections the introduction to the thesis which includes the background to the study, the research gaps and the research questions and objective and the significance of the study. Chapter Two presents the literature review on teacher feedback, peer feedback and studies which involve both teacher and peer feedback, including those with a clear comparative focus on both types of feedback and end with a review on computer-mediated peer review. Chapter Three presents the theoretical framework adopted in this study: the third generation Activity Theory. The three key concepts used in the study – mediation, agency and contradictions - are explained and illustrated, with reference to existing literature. Chapter Four details the methodological approach adopted; namely, the multiple case study. The sources of data, methods of data collection and analysis are described. Ethical considerations and concerns for trustworthiness of the study are presented. Chapter Five
presents the key findings on research question one, the mediating influence of SWoRD on the response to and use of teacher and peer feedback of an L2 writer, illustrating how the use of a new tool, a web-based peer review platform (SWoRD) mediated other components of the activity system such as “Rules” and “Division of Labour”. Chapter Six presents the key findings for the sub-question on the differences in the way L2 writers of different proficiency levels, respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing. The data were generated through the theoretical lens of “agency”. Chapter Seven presents the key findings for the sub-question on preference for teacher feedback and whether this preference translates to a greater use and effectiveness of teacher feedback. The data were generated through the theoretical lens of “contradictions”. Chapter Eight reiterates the key findings of the study and presents the conclusions and recommendations made based on these findings. I then discuss the limitations of the study and suggest directions for future research. I end with enumerating the contributions of the study in terms of theory, research and pedagogy.
Chapter 2

Literature review

Feedback in writing (defined as “feedback on a learner’s writing for the purpose of improving the quality of student writing, whether in subsequent drafts or on a longer term basis”) has been a key focus in research for decades as researchers and practitioners alike recognize its centrality in the writing classroom (Lee, 2014) and its great influence on learning (Hyland, 2013a). Though initially focusing on teacher feedback, research over the years has developed to encompass peer feedback in its various forms. According to Hyland (2010), feedback has taken centre stage in writing research in the past two decades as developments in writing pedagogy have been informed by findings in this research and advances in technology have engendered significant changes in feedback practices leading to greater emphasis on peer and collaborative feedback, oral feedback and the use of computer-mediated feedback.

In this chapter, I review studies on written teacher feedback, studies on peer feedback, comparative studies on peer and teacher feedback and studies on computer-mediated peer review to illustrate the following gaps in the literature: 1) a lack of comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback, especially on Chinese learners, 2) the necessity of investigating the impact of web-based technologies for peer feedback on the process of responding to and using feedback, 3) the need for a holistic approach which allows for a focus on the key issues
of proficiency level and preference for teacher feedback, 4) a research methodology which allows for consideration of contextual factors and 5) a theoretical framework which supports such a methodology. Such a framework would complement the open-ended and multi-perspective approach afforded by a research methodology which captures contextual factors. Then, I will end with the objective of the present study.

2.1 The importance of teacher feedback on writing

Despite the crucial place that teacher feedback on student writing plays in the writing classroom, research findings are far from conclusive with regard to its effectiveness across different contexts (Lee, 2014a). However, this question is of perennial interest to both L2 writing teachers and SLA researchers: the former are concerned about whether the time-consuming task of giving feedback on students’ writing actually translates to improvements in subsequent drafts at least, if not eventual improvement in the students’ writing ability (e.g., Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006c), while the latter are interested in what kind of feedback would facilitate the students’ learning to write in a second language, acquiring the necessary target language forms and the rules of the social discourse community (e.g., Ellis, 2003). While there is evidence that L2 students do value teacher feedback, especially in relation to error correction, its effectiveness seems to be more short-term (as in improvement in terms of a subsequent draft) rather than long-term learning/development in writing (Hyland, 2013b).
With the shift from the product-focused approach to writing instruction to a process-focused one (Elbow, 1973; Flower & Hayes, 1981), feedback becomes all the more important as feedback can be seen as a form of intervention in the process of writing which can help the student to arrive at a product closer to the standards of the target language. Hence, in the process-oriented writing classroom, feedback has a definite place. According to Hyland and Hyland (2006a), “Feedback is widely seen in education as crucial for both encouraging and consolidating learning” and is “a central aspect of ESL writing programs across the world” (p. 1). The crux of the matter, then, is understanding the characteristics of feedback, the process of giving feedback, and the contextual factors that affect how feedback is received and processed so as to be able to provide effective feedback for learning to take place. This is in line with the “shift towards a more developmental view of feedback, with greater emphasis on its formative potential for improving both student writing and their writing and language learning processes” (Hyland, 2010, p. 172).

2.2 Studies on written teacher feedback

Traditionally, teacher written feedback has dominated the feedback scene as it is the most common and convenient form of feedback given on students’ scripts. It was also often the only form of feedback that students received on their writing. Since Zamel’s (1985) indictment of teacher feedback as being in the form of “abstract and vague prescriptions and directives that students find difficult to interpret” (p. 79) and thus not acted upon by students, there has been a growing body of research on the characteristics of teacher feedback,
especially written feedback, and its impact or lack thereof, on student revisions. Studies on teacher feedback may be broadly grouped into five categories: studies which looked at the focus of teacher feedback, the form of feedback, the impact of teacher feedback on revisions and improvement in student writing, student opinions on teacher feedback and more recently, teachers’ own views on their feedback practices. I will now review studies in these categories.

2.2.1 Studies on the focus of teacher feedback

The first group of studies (e.g., Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 1997; Ferris, Pezone, Tade & Tinti, 1997; Lee, 2008a; Lee et al., 2017) dealt with the issue of what teacher feedback focused on: language, content or organizational issues, or a combination of these areas, given the earlier focus on error correction that research on responding to L2 writing appeared to have, especially in the 1990s (Ferris, 2003). The fact that the prevailing model of writing instruction then was that of the product-based approach could perhaps explain this earlier emphasis on teacher feedback on form (Lee, 2008a). Since Zamel’s (1987) indictment that writing teachers are “so distracted by language-related problems that they often correct these without realizing that there is a much larger, meaning-related problem that they have failed to address” (p. 700), it has been found that teachers do give feedback on a range of issues, ranging from mechanics, grammar, vocabulary to organization and content (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris et al., 1997; Lee, 2008a; Lee et al., 2017). The study by Lee (2008a) showed that 94.1% of teacher feedback focused on form, 3.8% on content, 0.4% on
organization, and 1.7% on other aspects (such as general comments on student writing). It should be noted that this study used a product approach to writing where texts examined reflected ‘one-shot writing’ (p. 75). In a more recent study by Lee et al. (2017), teachers reported giving feedback on a range of issues: grammatical issues, the objective of the writing task, organizational concerns and issues such as context of communication.

2.2.2 Studies on the form of teacher feedback

The second group of studies dealt with the form in which teacher feedback is communicated (e.g., Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 1997, 2001; Ferris et al, 1997; Goldstein, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). These studies raised the issue as to whether certain forms of teacher feedback are more effective in helping students to revise successfully. The studies by Ferris (1997, 2001) and Ferris et al. (1997) found that the form of teacher feedback does affect students’ ability to comprehend, process and use it. Specifically, imperatives, information questions, comments about grammar appear to have more impact on subsequent revisions, than questions/challenges of students’ thinking. On the other hand, Conrad and Goldstein’s (1999) study, apart from providing much detail on the different forms of teacher feedback – declaratives, questions, imperatives - surfaced some contradictory findings. Though initially the form in which teacher feedback is given appeared to influence the quality of subsequent revisions, the researchers concluded that the type of revision problem to be revised seems to be more important than the form of teacher feedback. Specifically, problems related to explanation, analysis and explicitness seem to cause difficulty as they were revised
successfully only ten percent of the time while problems not dealing with development of ideas were revised successfully 90 percent of the time. A similar finding is found in Ferris’ (2001) study where students revised less successfully when dealing with problems of logic and argumentation.

Hence, it seems inconclusive whether the specific form of teacher feedback has a significant effect on subsequent revisions, but there is stronger evidence (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 2001) that the type of problem to be revised has a greater impact on subsequent revisions than the form of teacher feedback. Further, there is evidence in the literature that students find teacher feedback in general difficult to address (e.g., Weaver, 2006; Walker, 2009), because “students may need advice on understanding and using feedback before they can engage with it” (Weaver, 2006; p. 379). Other possible reasons for teacher feedback being difficult to address are that it tends to be vague or too general (Sommers, 1980; Weaver, 2006; Zamel, 1985); not related to assessment criteria (Weaver, 2006). Finally, it could be due to the type of problems teacher feedback tends to raise as teachers are experts and tend to look at things from the perspective of experts (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; p. 329). In sum, the form that teacher feedback takes does not seem to matter as much as the kind of problems that teacher feedback tends to focus on, which explains its apparent lack of effectiveness in helping students to revise.
2.2.3 Studies on the impact of teacher feedback on subsequent revisions

The third group of studies considered specifically the impact of teacher feedback on subsequent revisions (e.g., Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1997, 2001; Goldstein, 2004; Hyland, 1998; Kepner, 1991; Paulus, 1999). The key question that these studies seek to answer is: Does teacher’s written feedback help students improve their writing? In general, the answer is ‘Yes’ (Ferris, 1997, 2001; Kepner, 1991; Paulus, 1999) and specifically, certain kinds of teacher feedback seem more effective. Some studies show that text-specific comments appear to be more effective (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Ferris, 1997; Goldstein, 2004). Others show that feedback on content/message-related seems to be more effective in improving subsequent writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Kepner 1991; Shepard, 1992). Studies that looked at both teacher and peer feedback showed that teacher feedback was more likely to be incorporated than peer feedback (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010). Tsui and Ng reported that “students favour teacher comments more than peer comments” (p. 158), and “all six subjects incorporated more teacher comments than peer comments” (p. 160). Zhao’s study found that 74% of teacher feedback was acted on. On the whole, teacher feedback has positive impact on students’ writing. However, though it is encouraging that teacher feedback seems to be taken seriously and hence influences student revisions, it does not always lead to successful revisions. Instances of unsuccessful revisions resulting from teacher feedback (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 2001; Yang et al., 2006) and feedback being ignored (Ferris, 1997) have also been reported - “This generalization
suggests two conflicting but coexisting truths: that students pay a great deal of attention to teacher feedback, which helps them to make substantial, effective revisions, and that students ignore or avoid the suggestions given in teacher commentary” (Ferris, 1997; p. 330). One possible reason for students ignoring teacher suggestions could be due to their lack of understanding of the feedback (e.g., Weaver, 2006); or inability to deal with the feedback given (e.g., Walker, 2009). A possible reason for lack of understanding is the lack of explanation in the feedback (Walker, 2009) or the need for guidance in interpreting the feedback (Weaver, 2006).

While it is still unclear whether teacher feedback does impact positively student revisions (Hyland & Hyland, 2006c), there is evidence in the literature that students have positive views about teacher feedback. The next section deals with studies which considered student opinions of teacher feedback.

2.2.4 Studies on student opinions on teacher feedback

The fourth group of studies investigated student opinions on teacher feedback. (e.g., Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Ferris, 2003; Hegdgock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Lee, 2008b; Leki, 2006; Weaver, 2006; Walker, 2009). On the whole, students value and appreciate teacher feedback (Weaver, 2006; Yang et al., 2006) despite earlier misgivings about its value and impact (Zamel, 1985). Apart from this main finding, other findings include the following: 1) L2 students expect teachers to give feedback on form (Ferris, 1995;

A review by Hyland and Hyland (2006c) concludes that “Surveys of students’ feedback preferences generally indicate that ESL students greatly value teacher written feedback and consistently rate it more highly than alternative forms such as peer and oral feedback from peer or teacher” (p. 87). However, despite such a positive attitude towards teacher feedback that students seem to have, it is still unclear if teachers are really giving them the help they need to become proficient and independent writers in the target language. It is of interest to researchers to know what exactly L2 learners need – language guidance, input on academic and disciplinary expectations, rhetorical issues, organization, idea development or help in facilitating their development as writers – and whether teacher feedback is meeting their needs. In Section 2.3, I consider issues with teacher feedback which may throw light on how teacher feedback may not have been able to meet the needs of L2 learners. In the next section, I turn to the focus of more recent studies on teacher feedback which take a fresh angle on teacher feedback – the teachers’ perspective.
2.2.5 Studies on teachers’ views on teacher feedback

More recently, researchers have turned their attention to teachers themselves in seeking a greater understanding of teacher feedback as there is a growing recognition of a gap in this area. As Lee (2014a) put it, despite the many ‘best practices’ principles which have emerged from research on feedback on writing, much remains unclear about what in reality teachers do in responding to student writing, why they give feedback in the way they do and to what extent they give feedback in accordance with their professed principles in giving feedback.

In this section, I review three recent studies (Ferris, 2014; Hyland, 2013a; Lee et al., 2017) which looked at what teachers actually do and why they do what they do.

Lee et al.’s study (2017) surfaced the tension that the writing teachers of the study faced in giving feedback: their beliefs about the purpose of feedback and their students’ needs versus institutional constraints such as the requirement of a grade distribution in norm-referenced marking. This meant that despite their desire to give feedback that would help students in their learning to write effectively, they were constrained by the need to justify the grade awarded for the assignments, and hence, the feedback given was often shaped by such a concern. This study illustrates the impact of contextual factors on the act of giving feedback for teachers.

Ferris’ study (2014) filled the gap by investigating if writing teachers do as they say; i.e., whether their feedback practices match their espoused philosophies in giving feedback. The main finding of the study was positive: most teacher respondents were consistent in that their
feedback practices observed matched what they said in the interviews about what guided their feedback practices but there were also others who displayed a discrepancy between what they believed they should do and what they did. The unique contribution of the study was its focus on investigating why teachers responded to student writing the way they did. Four main types of writing teachers with regard to their motivation/stance in giving feedback were identified: the ‘idealist’ who believed in being non-directive in their feedback and that “all students benefit equally from the same response strategies” (p. 18); the ‘pragmatist’ who had tried various response strategies is convinced that what matters most is “‘getting the job done’ as efficiently as possible” (p. 19); the ‘outsider’ who was not likely to use the process approach in teaching writing and “tended to express cynicism about students in general and response in particular” (p. 19), assuming that students are not interested in reading teacher feedback on their writing; and the ‘dedicated veteran’ who was generally cognizant of a principled approach to giving feedback “yet readily admitted that they struggled with aspects of it” (p. 19). What this study shows is that the act of giving feedback is subject to a host of contextual factors, one important one being the beliefs and attitudes of teachers towards the act of giving feedback. Put simply, the underlying values or beliefs that teachers have, whether about teaching and learning writing, or even about students, would affect how they approach the task of giving feedback.

Hyland’s (2013a) study focuses on the views of faculty members rather than writing teachers and elucidates the focus of feedback of faculty members from various disciplines.
The main concern of faculty is that students should be able to write in a way that is accepted by their disciplinary community, rather than language accuracy which has been a prime focus of writing teachers. However, it is also found that often faculty members do not see it as their responsibility to equip L2 students with the language they need to effectively write in their disciplines. A prevalent view is that students would acquire the ability to write in the discipline as they immerse themselves and read in the subject, as they view “academic literacy as a naturalized, self-evident, and non-contestable way of participating in their discipline, treating writing conventions as common sense knowledge” (p. 251) and hence, they rarely give the kind of support that is necessary to help L2 students become competent in writing in their discipline. The question which arises from this study is: what role, then, should a writing teacher play in the writing classroom for L2 students involved in academic writing in institutes of higher learning? How can writing teachers help L2 students write in a disciplinarily acceptable way?

The review on studies on teacher feedback in the five categories has surfaced the following unanswered questions: 1) while teachers may have moved away from a narrow focus on form in giving feedback to include a range of issues, it is still unclear whether teacher feedback does impact positively student revisions and improvement in writing in the long term, 2) whether the form of teacher feedback matters or whether the question of the kind of problems that teacher feedback focuses on and the general difficulty that students have in addressing teacher feedback is more important, 3) while it is generally true that teacher
feedback is taken seriously and does impact subsequent revisions, it is uncertain whether it leads to successful revisions, 4) while students do esteem teacher feedback, it is not clear if teachers are giving students the help they need to become proficient writers and 5) interviews with teachers on their views on the feedback they give to students highlight the importance of the context of giving feedback.

These unanswered questions may have arisen as these studies have focused on disparate aspects of feedback and ignored the contexts which influence both the acts of giving and receiving feedback. This is a gap that my study seeks to address. Additionally, there may be some inherent issues with teacher feedback which may throw light on some of these unanswered questions. The next section elaborates on these issues.

2.3 Issues with teacher feedback

In this section, three key issues with teacher feedback which might explain why teacher feedback may not be as effective as expected, given students’ generally positive views about it, are discussed in relation to the literature.

2.3.1 Teachers’ multiple roles

The main problem with teacher feedback stems from the multiple roles that the writing teacher plays and the subsequent ‘confusion’ that students might get from receiving feedback from a source that is not definite in its stance/focus. As mentioned by Muncie (2000), the L2 writing teacher often takes on several conflicting roles: those of "audience", "assistant", 
"consultant", "reader", and "evaluator" (p. 48). Similarly, Cho et al. (2006a) acknowledged that instructors have been observed to assume various roles, such as “judge”, “coach”, “typical reader”, with “judge” being the most frequent one. As a result, students might be encouraged by praise or affirming comments at one point, and “assaulted” by prescriptive advice about what to remove or add or what language errors to correct, which may lead to teacher comments being ignored altogether. This explains why earlier researchers were often faced with the question as to whether teacher comments lead to student revisions, let alone successful revisions.

The presence of this tension in the multiple roles that teachers play highlights the need to understand teacher intention in giving feedback when investigating the impact of teacher feedback on student revisions. This is shown, for example, in Ferris et al.’s study’s (1997) where it was reported that “the teacher had a variety of apparent aims for her commentary … and these manifested themselves in a range of linguistic forms” (p. 175). For example, one major aim of teacher comments in the study (about a third of all comments at the margin) was asking for information, which was reflected in the form of questions, while the aim of making a suggestion or request occurred in either a statement or a question.

Apart from teacher intention, there is a host of other teacher factors which affect the whole process of giving feedback, such as teacher beliefs about the purpose of the feedback, and teacher attitudes towards the students or the content of their texts. Lee (2008a), for example, identified four important factors which influenced the feedback practices of teachers
in secondary schools in Hong Kong: “accountability, teachers’ beliefs and values, exam culture and (lack of) teacher training’ (p. 69). For example, the examination culture in Hong Kong schools predisposed the teachers to focus on accuracy of writing in their feedback as that was the focus of the examinations authority in grading student writing.

### 2.3.2 The importance of contextual factors

The need for consideration of contextual factors which impact the process of giving feedback for teachers has been voiced by several researchers (Conrad and Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 1997; Ferris et al., 1997; Goldstein, 2004; 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006c; Lee, 2008a, 2014).

Apart from teacher (e.g., teacher beliefs and values) and student (e.g., students’ commitment to the course enrolled in) factors, there are also contextual factors to do with the larger context in which the process of giving and receiving feedback takes place. As Goldstein (2006) puts it, these can include “(1) sociopolitical issues that influence teacher status, the number of classes teachers need to teach; 2) program and institutional attitudes toward second language writers; (3) program and curricular requirements; (4) program philosophies about the nature of effective feedback; and (5) entrance and exit requirements” (p. 185). A recent study by Lee et al. (2017) highlighted the tension that teachers felt between what they believed was good and what they were obliged to do in giving feedback on student writing:

‘I feel that my feedback these days is a mixed bag of motives – to help students improve, that’s true. But it’s also determined by course requirements, marking schedule,
institutional requirements (including self-preservation motives), and doesn’t always reflect my most deeply held, personal beliefs about teaching (John).’ (p. 65)

The researchers concluded that even while teachers believed that feedback should help students to learn, they were also constrained by the need to justify the grades awarded to student assignments, illustrating the influence of context on teachers’ act of giving feedback. Indeed, as highlighted by Lee (2008a):

teachers’ feedback practices are influenced by a myriad of contextual factors including teachers’ beliefs, values, understandings, and knowledge, which are mediated by the cultural and institutional contexts, such as philosophies about feedback and attitude to exams, and socio-political issues pertaining to power and teacher autonomy. (p. 69)

Regarding contextual factors at the individual rather than institutional level, Hyland and Hyland (2006b) reported that the teachers studied made use of what they knew of their students to establish some rapport with the students and tailor their feedback to suit the students’ needs and personality. This highlights the importance of the relationship between teacher and student in the practice of giving and receiving feedback. Studies by Lee and Schallert (2008a, 2008b) confirmed the importance of the personal relationship between teacher and student in how the feedback is received by the students. A relationship of trust between teacher and student encouraged uptake of teacher feedback and its incorporation in revisions.
Feedback, indeed, is “the unique constellation and interaction of variables – contextual, teacher and student” (Goldstein, 2006, p. 203). However, there have not been many published studies that have considered the contextual factors which affect how feedback is given and received. According to Goldstein (2001), research on feedback “has largely been non-contextual and non-social, focused largely on texts and conducted within a linear model of teacher respond and student revise” (p. 77). Lee (2008b), however, did attempt to understand student reactions to teacher feedback in context by triangulating three sources of data (i.e., questionnaires, checklists, and protocols) so as to situate student reactions in the specific context in which feedback was given. More recently, Lee et al. (2017) found that “teacher beliefs and contextual factors appeared to be the main influences on the respondents’ (i.e., writing teachers) practices” (p. 67). Even though the teachers’ feedback practices were shaped by their perceptions of students’ needs, in actuality, they were constrained by contextual factors such as the institutional requirement for a grade distribution in the grading of student assignments.

In summary, it is important to note that, to arrive at a better understanding of teacher feedback, teacher, student and contextual factors need to be considered.
2.3.3 Appropriation and feedback

1It has also been noted that, because of the role of the teacher as evaluator/judge, students also tend to accept teacher suggestions passively and blindly (when they do respond to them), incorporating them without question nor reflection (Zhao, 2010), which minimizes the chance of students learning from the recommendations and subsequent revisions and progressing towards being independent writers. It also raises the issue of text appropriation, the danger of the student relinquishing control and ownership of his text as he responds dutifully to the teacher’s comments (Hyland, 2000). This issue is especially pertinent in many L2 classrooms which are teacher-centred and examination-oriented, and where students place a lot of premium on the teacher’s evaluation.

2However, Reid (1994) argues that in ESL classrooms, this possibility of text appropriation is ‘largely a mythical fear’ (p. 275). She further argues that, in response to this fear, ESL teachers have deprived L2 writers of the help they need, because “they are confusing intervention with appropriation” (Hyland, 2000, p. 35). She highlights ESL teachers’ roles as “cultural informants and facilitators for creating the social discourse community in the ESL writing classroom” (Reid, 1994, p. 275). In other words, she is saying that, unlike L1 writers, L2 writers are more in need of specific guidance from the teacher, especially with regard to

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1, 2 The high degree of matches (reflected in the Turnitin report) between these paragraphs and the CELC Symposium 2013 conference proceedings, “A qualitative study of second language writers’ response to and use of teacher and peer feedback - a proposal”, may be explained by my participation in this conference in which I presented the proposal for the research project of the current study.
the rhetorical conventions and cultural values of the discourse community of the target language. A recent study by Lam (2016) confirms that L2 students put more premium on teacher feedback over peer feedback because “Students are less competent than the teachers and need to know what is clearly right or wrong” (p. 35), pointing to L2 learners’ need for clear guidance.

That L2 writers need clear guidance from their writing teachers in matters regarding rhetorical structure and organization has some evidence in the literature. Radecki and Swales (1988) found in their study, that as their ESL participants moved to higher levels at university, they perceived their writing instructors more as guides with regards to language rather than content owing to their limited knowledge in their disciplines. Leki’s study (2006) found that the L2 graduate participants wanted input on how native speakers would articulate the same ideas they had communicated, implying that they recognize that this is where the writing teacher’s expertise is valued - help in expressing their disciplinary knowledge in accurate language.

On the other hand, Tardy (2006) proposed that appropriation may not necessarily be negative; it may also act as a means for L2 learners to imitate and eventually acquire the native-like forms expected in the discourse community they seek to be part of. In Tardy’s notion of a “dialogical view of appropriation” (p. 73), apparently passive appropriation of the teacher’s feedback can evolve as the L2 writer gains confidence and familiarity with particular genres, to a greater sense of personal voice, reflecting the writer’s unique style. This is the
role that teacher feedback can play as L2 students in English for Academic Purposes classrooms are often more knowledgeable in their subject area than their writing teachers, and hence, what L2 writers really need from their writing teachers is guidance regarding language matters and rhetorical issues.

Despite the issues of the multiple stances that writing teachers adopt in giving feedback and the possibility of appropriation of text by the teacher, it is clear that L2 writers do value and appreciate teacher feedback; and have shown their positive use of teacher feedback (as shown in the earlier literature review) and hence, it has to remain as a key component in L2 writing instruction. Having said this, it is not surprising that an alternative form of feedback of growing importance in the L2 writing classroom has emerged in the last three decades, perhaps in response to the issues with teacher feedback mentioned above. While there are concerns about the teacher taking over ownership of text from the student, in giving feedback, peer feedback may be seen to be a way of giving more autonomy to students since it encourages them to reflect on and make decisions whether to act on their peers’ feedback instead of passively acting on teacher feedback, given the authority of the teacher, especially in the context of L2 classrooms.

2.4 Peer feedback – background and benefits

Given the abovementioned issues with teacher feedback, it is not surprising that an alternative form of feedback – peer feedback – emerged about three decades ago as a viable option in helping learners to write. Peer feedback can be defined as the “use of learners as
sources of information, as interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other’s drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing” (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p. 1). Through peer feedback, L2 writers receive another source of feedback on their writing. Though it originated in the first language context, it has been readily adopted in L2 writing classrooms and has since been shown to be a viable option in addition to, if not as an alternative to the traditional form of teacher feedback (Liu & Hansen, 2002).

Over the years since peer response has been adopted by writing teachers, the strengths of peer feedback have been acknowledged by various researchers. Among the benefits researchers have found are: a greater sense of audience awareness (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Ho & Savignon, 2007; Paulus, 1999; Rollinson, 2005), critical reflection and critical reading on the part of the student-writer and student-reviewer respectively (Berg, 1999; Ching & Hsu, 2016; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Novakovich, 2016; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui and Ng, 2000); a sense of ownership of text (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al, 2006), and a sense of social support from peers in the process of writing (De Guerrero, 2000; Jacobs et al, 1998), an opportunity to improve on writing by revising based on feedback from peers (Baker, 2016; Hu & Lam, 2010; Villamil & Guerrero, 1998; Zhao, 2010). It has also been shown that students learn about writing through giving feedback (Baker, 2016; Cho & Cho, 2011; Lundstrom and Baker, 2009) and peer feedback is more easily understood (Topping, 2003). Gielen et al. (2010a)
added to this list of benefits: peer feedback increases the frequency and amount of feedback made available to students, peer feedback is quicker, individuation of feedback is more feasible with peer feedback than with teacher feedback.

Five theoretical frameworks have been said to support the use of peer feedback in writing. Apart from the four frameworks mentioned by Liu and Hansen (2002) – the process approach to writing, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), theory of collaborative learning (Bruffée, 1984) and interactionist theories of L2 acquisition (Long and Porter, 1985), Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999; Leont’ev, 1978, 1981) has been added to the list (Storch, 2004; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). Peer feedback is seen as an integral part of the sequence of drafting and redrafting that is advocated by the process approach to writing. According to Vygotskian theory of learning, peers are able to provide the necessary scaffolding for learning to take place, through interaction. From the perspective of collaborative learning theory, peer feedback is seen as leveraging on one another’s resources to complete learning tasks which may not be possible on one’s own; while interactionists see in peer feedback, the opportunity for interaction and negotiation of meaning, which increases the likelihood of acquisition (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994). While Leont’ev’s approach to Activity Theory allows for an understanding of the motives of learners as they participate in the peer review process, Engeström’s offers a holistic perspective of the peer review process embedded in contextual factors. This array of theoretical frameworks which undergird the activity peer feedback
explains to some extent the positive findings about the potential effectiveness of peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom so far.

I have presented in the above section the emergence of peer feedback and its benefits as well as theoretical frameworks which support its use as shown in the literature. In the next section, I review the major studies on peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom in the last three decades.

2.5 Research on Peer Feedback


Some important findings on peer feedback based on the areas mentioned above are: 1) L2 students are able to give and/or use peer feedback on writing effectively (e.g., Hedgecock & Leftkowitz, 1992; Hu, 2005; Hu & Lam, 2010; Saito & Fujita, 2004; Sengupta, 1998; Tang & Tithecott, 1999; Tsui & Ng, 2000). 2) Peer reviewers respond to peer writing in a variety of stances; some more helpful than others (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). Lockhart and Ng (1995), for example, found that the interpretive and collaborative stances adopted by the reviewer more helpful than the authoritative or probing stances. Zhu and Mitchell (2012), for example, found that the two participants in her study had different motives in participating in peer feedback which resulted in different stances adopted in the peer review process. 3) Feedback from peers does impact the revision process, but possibly in a different way from teacher feedback (Caulk, 1994; Connor & Ascenavage, 1994; Hu & Lam, 2010; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Min, 2005, 2006; Rollinson, 2005; Tang & Tithecott, 1999; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1998; Yang et al., 2006). Hu and Lam (2010) found that students incorporated a relatively high percentage of peer suggestions (82.76% of valid suggestions on language; 45.45% on content and 50% on organization). On the other hand, Yang et al. (2006) found that students incorporated more teacher suggestions than peer suggestions. 4) Prior training will improve the potential effectiveness of peer feedback (Berg, 1999; Chang, 2015; Hu, 2005;
Min, 2005, 2006, 2008; Rahimi, 2013; Stanley, 1992; Zhu, 1995). Chang (2015), for example, found that peer reviewers showed improvement in audience-awareness, the number of revision-oriented comments made and proportion of global feedback instead of feedback on local concerns, after training in the form of teacher-modeling was given. 5) The cultural expectations of L2 students are an important consideration in the use of peer feedback (Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Jacobs et al., 1998; Hu & Lam, 2010; Leki, 1990; Nelson & Carson, 1998, 2006; Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Ren & Hu, 2012; Sengupta, 1998; Zhang, 1995, 1999). Ren and Hu (2012) highlighted that one key potential impediment to the use of peer feedback with Chinese learners is the cultural value of group harmony which discourage Chinese learners from being critical about their peers’ writing. 6) The proficiency level of reviewer and writer does impact the revision process (Allen & Mills, 2016; Allen & Katayama, 2016). Allen and Mills found that the proficiency of the reviewer impacted positively the number of suggestions given while the proficiency of the writer did not significantly influence the number of suggestions given. Differences in the number of suggestions given and incorporated were also found between different pairings of participants based on proficiency level.

Despite the various findings highlighted above, there remain unanswered questions as well as issues regarding the use and impact of peer feedback. The key questions are:
• How is the impact of peer feedback different from that of teacher feedback? What factors affect the impact of either type of feedback?
• How do the cultural expectations of L2 writers affect the peer feedback process?
• How does the proficiency level of reviewer and writer impact the peer review process?

My study seeks to address these questions by investigating both teacher and peer teacher feedback made available at the same time, and incorporating the cultural expectations of participants and the proficiency level of the reviewer and writer in the set-up of the study so these two key issues with the use of peer feedback with L2 writers may be foregrounded in the investigation, thus potentially yielding some insights on the phenomenon of feedback in writing. In the next two sections, I elaborate on these two issues with the use of peer feedback.

2.6 Issues with peer feedback

While the potential benefits of peer feedback in the L1 context seem more or less established (Bruffee, 1984), it is not unequivocally the case in the L2 writing classroom, given the often multicultural composition of such classrooms or at least a cultural background that is different from the native-speaker/Western context. The host of reasons which might explain the reservations that both teachers and students have about the use of peer feedback may be summarized in what Hu and Lam have termed ‘the L2 factor’ and ‘the cultural factor’ (Hu & Lam, 2010, p. 374). The former refers to “L2 learners’ limited knowledge of the target language and its rhetorical conventions” (p. 374) as they are in the process of mastering the target language
and do not have the implicit knowledge of the language like native speakers do (Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Villamil & Guerrero 1998); while the latter refers to “a complex of cultural and social differences” (Hu & Lam, 2010, p. 374) between L1 and L2 learners, which may impede the productive use of peer response in L2 contexts. Such differences include those in sociolinguistic rules of communication (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 2006) and cultural beliefs about the different statuses of the teacher and students which will cause students to put more value on the teacher’s feedback and distrust their peers’ recommendations (Hu 2002, 2005a; Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Ren & Hu, 2012; Sengupta, 1998; Zhang, 1995).

The differences between first language learners and second language learners form the basis of these two concepts of the ‘L2 factor’ and the ‘cultural factor’.

2.6.1 The L2 factor

Early studies such as Nelson and Murphy’s (1993), Mangelsdorf’s (1992) and Leki’s (1990) surfaced concerns regarding the use of peer feedback that second language writers have – not being native speakers themselves, they doubt their ability to give acceptable feedback and to assess feedback given to them. Nelson and Murphy highlighted, as one main difference between L1 and L2 students, the fact that “English is not the native language of L2 students” (and they are in the process of mastering the target language) and hence “they may mistrust other learners’ responses to their writing” (p. 136). Leki (1990) raised the question – “How can an
inexperienced ESL writer know what to accept and what to reject from among the comments made by another inexperienced ESL writer/reader?” (p. 11). More recent research has confirmed such concerns (Gielen et al., 2010b; Hu & Lam, 2010; Hyland & Hyland, 2006c; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Hyland and Hyland; 2006c; Zhao, 2010). The findings in Gielen et al. (2010b)’s study confirm that students perceive their peers’ feedback as less than valid compared with teacher feedback who are seen as “knowledge authority”. The students in Zhao (2010)’s study consider teacher feedback as more trustworthy than peer feedback. Hyland and Hyland cited “questions about the quality of peer feedback” (p. 91) as one of two explanations for the failure to use peer feedback shown in some studies. In summary, it seems that the proficiency level of the peer reviewer and the writer is a key factor in influencing the effectiveness of peer feedback. The ‘L2 factor’ may be understood as concerns arising from the proficiency or lack of proficiency of L2 learners involved in peer review and may be reflected in these two questions: the ability of L2 writers to give valid feedback; and their ability to evaluate and use peer feedback. The importance of proficiency in peer feedback has been suggested in the literature (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Liu & Hansen, 2002) and revisited in recent studies which have identified language proficiency of peers as one important factor that can influence the process of peer feedback (Allen & Mills, 2016) and highlighted that “one of the most under-researched factors is language proficiency” (Allen & Katayama, 2016, p. 96).
2.6.1.1. Research on the issue of proficiency

Despite the importance of proficiency level of peer reviewer and writer in influencing the effectiveness of peer review, it is a relatively under-researched area. However, more recently, researchers have begun to pay more attention to this factor. This section will review some of these studies.

The Hu and Lam study (2010) did not find any statistically significant effect of proficiency on the participants’ behaviour as peer reviewers and writers. Their perception as to whether their peers’ proficiency level mattered to them did not affect the number for suggestions they gave or the number of peer suggestions taken up. However, as the researchers cautioned, this result does not mean that “L2 proficiency has no effect on learners’ response to peer review as a pedagogical activity” (p. 388). They acknowledged the limitation of the small sample size and hence, the need to interpret the result with caution. They also highlighted that according to the qualitative data, L2 proficiency was a major factor influencing the participants’ preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback.

Two recent studies (Yu & Hu, 2017a; Yu & Lee, 2016) sought to find some answers to the question as to whether students of low English proficiency could contribute to group peer review and whether students of high English proficiency could benefit from peer review with partners of low English proficiency. Yu and Lee (2016) surfaced positive findings which
showed that the three low proficiency students in the study gave feedback on a range of writing issues such as content, organization and style and their feedback was considered useful by their group members who incorporated 76.6% of their comments in their revisions, 88.1% of which were considered an improvement over the original versions. Conversely, Yu and Hu’s (2017a) study garnered evidence of three higher proficiency students benefitting from the peer review with lower proficiency peers in the following ways: the second drafts of these higher proficiency students improved after adopting feedback by lower proficiency peers and two out of the three case study participants reported that they found that they benefitted from reviewing their peers’ papers. However, in both studies, certain conditions were highlighted as facilitative to either low proficiency students being able to contribute to the peer review process or the high proficiency students benefitting from peer review with weaker peers. Four factors highlighted in the Yu and Lee (2016) study are: the use of L1, the good relationships between students in the peer feedback group, a positive attitude towards peer feedback and training in giving peer feedback. Yu and Hu (2017a) highlighted three factors that influenced the higher proficiency students’ learning in peer review with weaker writers. The higher proficiency students in the study benefitted from the activity as they focused more on giving than receiving feedback, focused on the comments rather than the proficiency level of the reviewer, and used L1 in giving feedback. While these two studies focused on the involvement of students of different proficiency levels in peer review, the findings do imply the viability or advantage of particular configurations for peer review based on proficiency. While it is
only implied in the Yu and Lee (2016) study, that mixed groupings of students in terms of proficiency for peer review should be viable, Yu and Hu (2017a) concluded that mixed groups can be used as L2 proficiency is not the only factor which influences learning in peer review. Though it is encouraging that both studies have yielded positive findings with the regards to the viability of having learners of different proficiency levels involved in peer review, it should be noted that the sample size in both studies was too small (three in each case) for the results to be generalizable. More research is needed before firm conclusions could be made. The studies reviewed in the next section involve specific recommendations with regards to peer review configurations based on proficiency level.

2.6.1.2. Research on the optimal configuration for peer review based on proficiency

The study by Strijbos (2010) which investigated the effect of both peer feedback content and competence level (i.e., proficiency level) of the source of feedback had the finding that the group that received feedback from low proficiency level peers improved more than those who received feedback from high proficiency learners. Another finding is that the group which received specific and elaborated feedback from high proficiency peers experienced a negative affective impact which led to a negative impact on performance. In this study, participants were assigned to one out of five groups, four experimental and one, control. The experimental groups varied in terms of feedback content (concise general feedback versus elaborated specific feedback) and the proficiency level of the feedback giver (high versus
low). The performance measure was the difference between pre and post-test scores in a revision of text task, based on text comprehension criteria. In short, it measured the participants’ improvement in identification, explanation and correction of errors. The researchers concluded that it is not to be assumed that learners could not benefit from feedback from a low proficiency peer whose feedback can be equally effective as shown in the study. In addition, they advised against peer feedback groups with a huge difference in proficiency levels as it could lead to a negative affective impact and less effectiveness in terms of performance. In other words, groups with members whose proficiency levels do not differ much, are advisable.

A recent study by Allen and Mills (2016) focused on the influence of proficiency level of writer and reviewer on quantity and type of feedback given and adopted for revision. It was conducted with 54 Japanese undergraduates who had studied English for an average of six years. The findings of the study showed that the proficiency of the reviewer significantly predicted the number of suggestions given while the proficiency of the writer did not have any statistically significant influence. However, lower proficiency writers adopted fewer meaning-related suggestions compared with higher proficiency writers. The researchers’ conclusion was that mixed proficiency groupings for peer review where there is a great difference in proficiency level is not advisable. Peer review groups with members whose proficiency levels do not differ much (i.e., matched proficiency pairs) may encourage the optimal amount of suggestions given and level of engagement with the task. However, they
also cautioned that their conclusion did not preclude learning happening in mixed proficiency groupings.

In another recent study, Allen and Katayama (2016) investigated the impact of both actual and perceived proficiency level of writers’ own and their peer reviewers on the amount and type of feedback given. Results showed that differences in the writers’ proficiency level and the perceived proficiency level of their peer reviewers appeared to have influenced the peer feedback process. Specifically, the amount and focus of feedback given varied according to the proficiency level of the reviewer. Higher proficiency peers tended to give more feedback and focus more on “meaning preserving” and language issues. The recommendation is that there should be variations of proficiency pairings in peer review so as to encourage different types of feedback and interactions and to maximize the learning.

In conclusion, the Yu and Hu (2017a) and Yu and Lee (2016) studies recommend mixed proficiency groupings while the Strijbos (2010) and Allen and Mills (2016) studies would support matched proficiency groupings; and the Allen and Katayama (2016) study advocates variations of proficiency pairings over time. Hence, there are to date, mixed findings and no firm conclusions on the issue of optimal configurations for peer review based on proficiency level.

What the studies reviewed have not established is whether the proficiency level of the participants would significantly impact the peer review process such that specific
considerations regarding the pairing/grouping of writers and reviewers based on proficiency level should be made in the use of peer review with L2 writers. Hence, my study seeks to fill this gap by setting up different cases comprising writers and reviewers of both same and different proficiency levels so as to throw more light on this issue.

2.6.2 The cultural factor

The second difference between first language students and second language students that Nelson and Murphy (1993) highlighted is “cultural differences in classroom techniques” (p. 136) which reflect the differences in how teachers are viewed in different cultures. In this case, he cited specifically how in China, the teacher is accorded much authority and respect and hence, giving peers the “authority” to give feedback on students’ work may not seem to work. This observation is similar to the finding by Mangelsdorf (1992) that “almost all of the students with totally negative views came from cultures that stress teacher-centred classrooms” (p. 281). In addition, it was noted that even students who were positive about peer feedback showed a preference for teacher feedback. Such a preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback is confirmed by later studies such as Zhang (1995, 1999), Tsui and Ng (2000), Yang et al. (2006), Hu and Lam (2010), Zhao (2010) and more recent ones by Lam (2016) and Yu et al. (2016). Hyland and Hyland (2006c) highlighted “student preferences and their beliefs about the relative value of teacher and peer feedback” (p. 91) as one of two explanations for the lack of success of peer feedback with students reported in the
literature. Hence, this preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback is an important aspect of this cultural factor which includes other cultural considerations such as differences in rhetorical expectations (Leki, 1990) and sociolinguistic rules of communication (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 2006) which deem making negative comments as impolite or the act of disagreeing, unacceptable in collectivist cultures.

The preference of teacher feedback over peer feedback constitutes the first aspect of the ‘cultural factor’. This preference has been reported in studies with Chinese learners (Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Ren & Hu, 2012; Sengupta, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Yu et al., 2016; Zhao, 2010). A closer look at these studies will follow in Section 2.8 on comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback. At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that this may pose as a potential impediment in the use of peer review with Chinese learners as a privileged status accorded to teacher feedback stemming from the influence of the Chinese culture of learning, may lead to a less than serious attitude towards peer feedback, hence rendering peer review ineffective at best, and not viable at worst.

The second aspect of the ‘cultural factor’ is the cultural impediment of “face”. Several studies involving Chinese students have highlighted the issue of “face” which impedes a productive use of peer review as it inhibits the expression of honest but helpful feedback from reviewers as they are concerned that their comments might cause offense or embarrassment to others. Ho and Savignon’s study (2007) reported that many of their participants found it
stressful to review peers’ writing face to face: “They were afraid that in pointing out their peer’s problems they might hurt the other’s feelings or even damage their friendship” (p. 285). In a recent study, Yu and Hu (2017b) reported similar concerns that one out of the two case study participants had: as his partner in the peer review was initially resistant to his feedback on several errors, this participant felt his partner was concerned about face-saving and hence, decided not to comment any more on grammatical errors in his partner’s writing subsequently.

It is important to note that, despite the good relationship that these two participants in Yu and Hu’s (2017b) study had, such concerns of “face” still exist. These are examples of one of the sociolinguistic rules of communication which govern interaction in the L2 classroom and which may differ from those for L1 learners. Nelson and Carson (2006) have highlighted how culture contributes to the context of peer review and should be seriously considered: “It is reasonable to assume that a shared pattern of socialization or culture among students participating in peer response groups contributes to the context of peer review and that culture may be a factor in peer group effectiveness” (p. 44).

They further explained the rationale behind the need to save “face” for others in cultures such as the Chinese culture: “In our earlier work we explained the Chinese students’ behaviour in terms of social-psychological dimensions of collectivism and individualism…Important values for collectivists are maintaining cohesion and harmony within the group” (p. 46).
Hence, it is understandable when research shows Chinese students’ difficulty or reluctance in giving negative though helpful feedback on their peers’ writing as they are “accustomed to attending to the feelings of others and obtaining correction from the teacher” (p. 47). In fact, this concern for or maintenance of face has been acknowledged as one of the components of what has been termed the Chinese culture of learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). A culture of learning has been defined as “socially transmitted expectations, beliefs, and values about what good learning is” (p. 749). The concept highlights unspoken rules regarding the interactions between teachers and learners, what is considered suitable or efficacious teaching and learning styles and methods and generally what is considered “good work in classrooms” (p. 749).

One firm belief in the Chinese culture of learning with regards to the roles and relations of teachers and learners is the superior status accorded to teachers. It is rarely disputed that Chinese learners perceive teachers as the authority and repository of knowledge and hence, there is a prevalent preference of teacher feedback over peer feedback.

Given the apparent importance in the literature, of the preference of teacher feedback over peer feedback in the practice of peer review among Chinese learners, I have chosen to focus on this aspect of the ‘cultural factor’ in the design of the study. Specifically, one of the research questions sought to ascertain if there was indeed such preference among the participants of the study and if so, whether it was translated into its greater use and effectiveness.
2.7 The place of peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom

Despite the potential benefits that one can garner from the use of peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom, there are several unanswered questions regarding its use in the L2 writing classroom:

1a) Is peer feedback an acceptable form of feedback with the L2 learner?
1b) If so, what is its place in the L2 writing classroom?

2a) Is the preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback shown in some studies representative of L2 students?
2b) If so, how should peer feedback be integrated with teacher feedback?

3) Is there an optimal sequence in the use of peer and teacher feedback?

4) How could one maximize the benefits of both types of feedback in the teaching of L2 writing?

It seems that these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily if research is focused on the external aspects of peer feedback only (i.e., whether students respond to peer feedback, whether they approve of its use, whether they act on the feedback given by peers). This is because we need to understand what goes on in the mind of the L2 learner in the act of responding to feedback (whether from teacher or peer) so as to better understand the impact and value of any kind of feedback. Secondly, there has been an increasing emphasis on understanding the influence of contextual factors, including individual factors on L2 learning.
(Breen, 2001). There has already been some acknowledgement of its importance in the studies on teacher feedback already mentioned earlier. Finally, to understand how peer feedback may be optimally used in the L2 writing classroom, both teacher and peer feedback need to be investigated together because focusing on any one type of feedback will not be able to help us understand how one relates to the other in effective instruction in writing in a second language. The next section of this review looks at such studies – comparative studies on peer and teacher feedback.

2.8 Comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback

The literature on feedback had been dominated by research on teacher feedback, it being historically, the first kind of feedback given to students. However, in the last three decades or so, research on peer feedback has been growing. Nevertheless, studies with the specific focus of comparing both types of feedback are relatively scarce. In many cases, the focus of the study was on peer feedback, and comparison with teacher feedback was incidental. A possible reason is that it is inconceivable to find an absence of teacher feedback in most L2 classrooms, it being the traditional and most common form of feedback on L2 writing, not to mention the commonly acknowledged supremacy of the teacher in many L2 learning cultures (Hyland & Hyland, 2006c). Studies with a comparative focus on teacher and peer feedback are only a handful: Anson & Anson (2017); Cho and MacArthur (2010); Gielen et al. (2010a), Hu and Lam (2010), Loan (2017), Ruegg (2015), Zhao (2010).
The main areas covered by comparative studies on both types of feedback are: 1) Differences between peer and teacher feedback (Anson & Anson, 2017; Caulk, 1994; Cho et al., 2006a, 2008; Cho & Schunn, 2007; Gielen et al., 2010a); 2) Preference of feedback (Hu & Lam, 2010; Jacobs et al, 1998; Lam, 2016; Liu & Chai, 2009; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Ren & Hu, 2012; Sengupta, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Zhang, 1995); 3) Use of feedback (i.e., incorporation of feedback in revisions) (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Hyland, 2000; Zhao, 2010); 4) Effectiveness of feedback on subsequent revisions (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Connor & Ascenavage, 1994; Paulus, 1999; Ruegg, 2015; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006).

A review of these studies has shown some important findings: 1) There are qualitative differences between peer and teacher feedback (Anson & Anson, 2017; Caulk, 1994; Cho et al., 2006a, 2008; Cho & Schunn, 2007; Gielen et al., 2010a; Ruegg, 2015); 2) Students do prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback (Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Liu & Chai, 2009; Sengupta, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Yu et al., 2016; Zhao, 2010); 3) However, students see value in peer feedback (Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Tsui & Ng, 2006; Yang et al., 2006); 4) L2 learners tend to incorporate more teacher feedback than peer feedback in their revisions (Lam, 2016; Paulus, 1999; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010); 5) Peer and teacher feedback have the potential to play complementary roles (Caulk, 1994; Gielen et al., 2010a; Ruegg, 2015; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Villamil & Guerrero, 1998; Yang et al., 2006). In the following sections, I elaborate on these five key findings.
2.8.1 Differences between teacher feedback and peer feedback

As pointed out by Cho et al. (2006a), studies comparing the nature of peer and teacher feedback are rare. To date, there are a small handful of studies showing the differences between teacher and peer feedback. Comparative studies on both teacher and peer feedback are important as they offer judicial comparisons between these two types of feedback so that a better understanding of how one type of feedback relates to the other in effective instruction in L2 writing may be arrived at. An early study by Caulk (1994) showed that peer comments tended to be more specific while teacher comments were more general and targeted at the whole piece of writing. In other words, the former tended to be focused on specific aspects of the writing (e.g., language errors) while the latter tended to be directed at the whole piece of writing, as a summative kind of comment. A series of studies by Cho and other researchers (Cho et al., 2006a, 2008; Cho & Schunn, 2007) report that peer feedback contain more requests for clarification and elaboration, more praise and a range of comments, with directive comments and praise being most frequent. On the other hand, teacher feedback had more ideas and longer explanations, less praise and predominantly directive comments (i.e., explicit suggestions of specific changes). In addition, undergraduates found directive and praise comments most helpful (Cho et al., 2006a). When the source of the feedback is unknown (i.e., whether peer or teacher), students perceived both kinds of feedback as equally helpful (Cho et al., 2008). The question, then, is: does the different nature of either form of feedback affect how students respond to it?
Another study by Gielen et al. (2010a) proposes several advantages of peer feedback over teacher feedback. Peer feedback may increase peer pressure on learners to take their assignments seriously so as to do well. There is some evidence that peer feedback is more readily understood because peers “are on the same wavelength” (Topping, 2003). Peer feedback may increase learners’ ability to understand feedback as they experience the task of an assessor in giving feedback on peers’ work. Peer feedback is usually more immediate as it does not suffer a time delay which teacher feedback suffers from owing to the heavy workload of teachers. In addition, peer feedback can increase the amount of feedback as students, unlike teachers who have to give feedback on the writing of an entire class or classes of students, have fewer papers to review and hence, can give more feedback or give feedback more frequently. Finally, peers may able to give more individualized feedback owing to the fact that students, unlike teachers, do not face as much of a time constraint in giving feedback on students’ writing. However, these proposed advantages of peer feedback over teacher feedback, though reasonable propositions, are yet to be verified in empirical research. The current study, which made both teacher and peer feedback available on the same piece of writing, has made it possible to compare and contrast the nature and characteristics of both types of feedback and thus, help fill this gap in the research.
2.8.2 Preference of source of feedback

The preference of teacher feedback over peer feedback constitutes the second aspect of the ‘cultural factor’ (see Section 2.6.2). This preference has been reported in studies with L2 learners (e.g., Jacobs et al., 1998; Zhang, 1995, 1999) and in particular, Chinese learners (e.g., Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Ren & Hu, 2012; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Yu et al., 2016). This preference is either indicated in direct choices for teacher feedback over peer feedback in questionnaire studies (e.g., Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam 2016; Ren & Hu, 2012) or translated into a higher proportion of teacher feedback over peer feedback being incorporated into revisions (e.g., Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010).

Several reasons have been proposed for this preference for teacher feedback, one of which is encapsulated in the concept of the ‘cultural factor’ already mentioned as one of the issues with the use of peer feedback in Section 2.6.2. In a word, it stems from the Chinese culture of learning where teachers are accorded a higher status than students with regards to knowledge/expertise, and hence, their feedback would be taken more seriously than feedback coming from peers. Ren and Hu (2012) proposed three possible reasons for the preference of teacher feedback over peer feedback among Chinese learners: “limitations of students as reviewers and writers, cultural influences, and inappropriate implementation of peer review as a pedagogical activity” (p. 5). Other reasons for this preference which have surfaced in empirical research are: the teacher has more knowledge and experience and is more
‘professional’; the teacher is the one who gives the grades for students’ writing; the teacher is the ‘authority’; students are less competent than the teachers and need to know what is clearly right or wrong (Lam, 2016). The last category of reasons is similar to Ren and Hu’s “limitations of students as reviewers and writers” and echoes the ‘L2 factor’ mentioned in Section 2.6.1. In brief, the ‘L2 factor’ refers to “L2 learners’ limited knowledge of the target language and its rhetorical conventions” (Hu & Lam, 2010; p. 374). This may result in learners not taking their peers’ feedback seriously and hence, not incorporating their suggestions in revisions.

While both the ‘cultural factor’ and the ‘L2 factor’ may be possible reasons why L2 learners prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback, cultural reasons may be seen as ‘intrinsic’ in nature as they are less amenable to mitigating measures, given that they predispose learners against a productive use of peer feedback in the first place. In contrast, the ‘L2 factor’ may be mitigated if learners are given proper training in giving feedback or learners are grouped with learners of the right level of mastery of the target language for peer review to be a productive exercise. For the purpose of this study, the preference for teacher feedback is considered an aspect of the ‘cultural factor’, rather than a manifestation of the ‘L2 factor’.

Apart from the preference for teacher feedback being a potential hindrance to the productive use of peer feedback, of interest to researchers is also the question of whether such a preference for teacher feedback would be translated to greater effectiveness of teacher
feedback which justifies it being accorded a privileged position in writing pedagogy. To fill this gap, the second sub-question of the second research question in the current study seeks to find some answers to this question.

2.8.3 Acknowledgement of the value of peer feedback

Despite this clear preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback, there is also some evidence that L2 learners acknowledge the value of peer feedback. An early questionnaire survey study by Jacobs et al. (1998) aimed to investigate L2 learners’ attitudes towards peer feedback in response to Zhang’s (1995) finding of an overwhelming preference for teacher feedback among his predominantly Asian respondents. The finding was that a statistically significant proportion (93%) of respondents reported that they preferred to have peer feedback as one type of feedback on their writing. In the Hu & Lam’s (2010) study, it was reported that 80% of the participants preferred to receive peer feedback as one kind of feedback they would like to receive, in addition to teacher feedback. Also, interview data surfaced comments supportive of the benefits of peer feedback. In the Tsui & Ng (2000) study, it was reported that “whether the students incorporated a higher percentage or a relatively lower percentage of peer comments, they saw peer comments as having certain roles to play” (p. 166), which perhaps teacher feedback cannot fulfil. Yang et al. (2006) reported that their “students value teacher feedback more highly than peer feedback but recognize the importance of peer
feedback” (p. 193). In Lam’s study (2016), it was reported in the questionnaire findings that 72% were positive in the response to the question, “Will peer review work in the Chinese classroom?”, and 93% were positive in response to the question, “Is peer response useful?”, reflecting students’ acknowledgement of the value of peer feedback. Given the evidence of L2 learners’ appreciation of peer feedback as one of the sources of feedback on their writing, it is of value to researchers and practitioners alike to arrive at some conclusions regarding the place of peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom, in relation to the use of the traditional form of feedback – teacher feedback (see Section 2.7).

2.8.4 Use and understanding of written feedback on writing

One indicator of the influence of either type of feedback (peer or teacher) on student writing is the number of revisions it triggers; in other words, whether the feedback is incorporated in subsequent revisions. However, whether these revisions lead to improvement in the quality of writing is another thing altogether. Yet another consideration is whether there is understanding of the feedback given even when it is incorporated in subsequent revisions. In this section, I discuss the issue of the use and understanding of feedback in the studies reviewed.

2.8.4.1 Inconclusive findings regarding the relative impact of teacher and peer feedback

A few studies investigated the issue of the relative effectiveness of both types of feedback on subsequent revisions/improvement. The results are inconclusive as to which type of
feedback resulted in a greater amount of revisions and/or improvement in subsequent revisions. An early study by Chaudron (1984) found no significant difference in impact on subsequent improvement or revisions between teacher feedback and peer feedback though the scores for all revised essays resulting from peer feedback were on average higher than those resulting from teacher feedback. Two other studies (Hedgecock & Leftkowitz, 1992; Paulus, 1999) found a greater impact from peer feedback, with higher scores for the final drafts of the group which received peer feedback. Paulus’ study, however, had a greater proportion of teacher feedback being incorporated compared with peer feedback (87% versus 51%). Other studies, Yang et al. (2006) and Tsui & Ng (2000) also reported a higher proportion of teacher feedback being incorporated compared with peer feedback (90% of teacher feedback versus 67% of peer feedback in the Yang et al. study). In both cases, participants significantly valued teacher feedback more than peer feedback and incorporated more suggestions from teachers than from peers. In short, though teacher feedback seems to result in a higher number of revisions, the impact on the resulting quality of writing is not clear.

2.8.4.2 Difference in quality of impact between teacher and peer feedback

It is noteworthy that in the Yang et al. (2006) study, teacher-influenced revisions were more surface-level while peer-influenced revisions were more meaning-changing. In addition, teacher-initiated revisions were less effective than peer-initiated ones in effecting positive revisions (i.e., revisions are positive changes). Hence, it seems that the impact of peer and teacher feedback is different. Another study by Connor and Ascenavage (1994), which
surfaced unfavourable findings for peer feedback with regard to the impact of feedback on subsequent revisions (overall only 5% of revisions came from peer feedback compared to an overall of 35% of revisions which came from teacher feedback) highlighted the issue of the quality of impact of feedback on subsequent revisions. The revisions arising from teacher feedback were mainly surface changes while 70% of peer-influenced changes were meaning-level changes (compared to 22% of teacher-influenced changes being so). What these findings show us is that the impact of feedback on subsequent revisions cannot be measured by the number of revisions alone but one should take into account the quality of the revisions made.

A recent study by Ruegg (2015) has drawn attention to the lack of consensus regarding the impact of peer and teacher feedback. The study found teacher feedback resulting in a greater impact on the improvement in grammar scores compared with peer feedback, and teacher feedback elicited more meaning-level changes. Hence, whether it is the case that peer feedback, though less ‘popular’ in terms of being used (that is, the number of revisions it elicits), has the potential to effectuate deeper learning from writers because it may trigger more meaning-level changes in subsequent drafts, is not clear.

2.8.4.3. The importance of the understanding of written feedback

One key issue which has surfaced in the literature on feedback is the issue of understanding of feedback. There is some evidence that teacher feedback is often misunderstood by students (Gielen et al., 2010a; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Walker, 2009; Weaver, 2006; Zhao, 2010). On the other hand, peer feedback is often perceived as more easily
understood because peers are on the same page (Topping, 2003), they experience the same problems in writing and difficulty in dealing with the same revision problems and hence, may be more effective in arriving at solutions (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). Teacher feedback, on the contrary, has been said to be ambiguous, vague, general, unspecific or formulaic rather than text-specific (Cho & MacArthur, 2010, p. 329; Rollinson, 2005). Additionally, Cho and MacArthur highlighted the knowledge distance between experts/teachers and novices/students: experts may be disadvantaged with the ‘curse of expertise’, which renders them ineffective in explaining skills and knowledge to learners as they tend to refer to knowledge inaccessible to novices in their explanations (p. 329).

This ‘curse of expertise’, which results from the knowledge distance between experts and novices also highlighted in Cho et al. (2008), may explain why teacher feedback is not easily understood by students. The gap in understanding between experts and novices, in the area of knowledge in question, renders the expert less able to understand the problems encountered by novices and give advice that is comprehensible from the novice’s perspective. One particular study on teacher and peer feedback by Zhao (2010) elucidates this issue of understanding of feedback. The case study by Zhao with 18 Chinese university students found that teacher feedback triggered more revisions than peer feedback (74 percent of teacher feedback given versus 46 percent of peer feedback given). However, it was also reported that learners incorporated more teacher feedback that they did not understand than peer feedback (83% of peer feedback was used and understood while only 58% of teacher feedback was
used and understood). Student interviews also uncovered learners’ passive use of teacher feedback owing to the “assessment culture” that permeates their educational setting (that is, students tended to adopt teacher feedback in their revisions as the teacher is the final evaluator of their work). Hence, it seems that the issue here is: though students seem to incorporate more teacher feedback than peer feedback, it may not be done with adequate understanding. On the other hand, peer feedback, though not as frequently adopted in subsequent revisions, seems to be more easily understood by peers and has been shown in some studies to promote critical reflection on the part of the learners (Berg, 1999; Ching & Hsu, 2016; Ekahitanond, 2013; Grami, 2012; Novakovich, 2016; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui and Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006).

The importance of the understanding of feedback in determining the impact of the feedback on student revisions and subsequent learning is highlighted in one critical study by Nelson and Schunn (2009). This study is pivotal in the literature on the characteristics of feedback which impact its effectiveness, and in generating a theoretical model for assessing different types of feedback. It investigated the relationship between “various types of peer feedback, potential internal mediators, and the likelihood of implementing feedback” (p. 375). The important finding from this study is that understanding of feedback is the only significant mediator of implementation of feedback, meaning that understanding of the feedback given was the only significant determinant as to whether the feedback would be implemented. Two possible mediators – understanding feedback and agreement with feedback – were
investigated in the study. In the proposed model in the study, “Through understanding and agreement, the feedback features are expected to affect feedback implementation” (p. 383). Contrary to expectation, agreement was not found to be a significant mediator at all. It is reasonable to expect agreement to be an important mediator as agreement with some proposition is more likely to lead to action in agreement with it.

To confirm the robustness of this finding, it was found that “no feedback features were strongly associated with implementation on their own…” (p. 393). This means that the impact of these feedback features on implementation was only through their association with the key factor – understanding of feedback. Specifically, “Solutions, summarization, localization, and explanations were found to be features most relevant to feedback implementation as a result of their influence on understanding” (p. 394). This highlights the fact that evidence of use of feedback alone is not sufficient in understanding the impact of any kind of feedback on subsequent writing. Understanding of feedback is an important aspect to consider in investigations, especially since it has bearings on not only the implementation of the feedback but also on learning beyond the resultant revisions, that is, a longer term impact.

It does not bode well if feedback that is incorporated is not understood as this will mean that there is less likely to be long-term learning from the feedback. This is because learning involves successful internalization of concepts learnt Lantolf (2003). Internalisation entails more than imitation. According to Lantolf & Thorne (2006), Vygotsky’s view was that “if internalization were indeed to result in an exact copy of the external on the internal plane, the
process would be meaningless and there could be no mental development” (p. 155). The process, in Vygotsky’s view, has to be “transformative”. Hence, in the case of responding to feedback, the mere incorporation of feedback without understanding is not conducive to long-term learning. Teacher feedback, it seems, is less likely to be understood compared to peers’.

As mentioned earlier under the benefits of peer feedback, research has shown that peer feedback is valued because it tends to be more easily understood because fellow learners are on an equal footing (Topping, 2003). Also, it has also been shown to promote critical reflection and critical reading on the part of the student-writer and student-reviewer respectively (Berg, 1999; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui and Ng, 2000).

To sum up, it is noteworthy that teacher feedback has been shown to be less readily understood while more readily adopted (e.g., only 58% of teacher feedback was used and understood in Zhao’s 2010 study), while peer feedback, though not as readily adopted (e.g., 51% vs 87% of teacher feedback in Paulus’ study (1999), and 67% vs 90% of teacher feedback in Yang et al.’s study (2006)), is seen to be more readily understood (e.g., 83% of peer feedback was used and understood in Zhao’s 2010 study). These characteristics of teacher and peer feedback may be seen as opposites but possibly complementary.

2.8.5 Complementary roles of peer and teacher feedback

The differing characteristics of teacher and peer feedback regarding use and understanding point to the possibility of both types of feedback playing complementary roles
in the writing classroom. Early studies by Caulk (1994) and Villamil and Guerrero (1998) propose that teacher and peer feedback could play complementary roles. Caulk (1994) found that peers were able to give valid suggestions, that peer feedback were more specific than teacher feedback which tended to be more general and targeted at the whole piece of writing; that peers “acted like normal readers” (p. 185) while the teacher tended to have the evaluator’s role in mind. Most importantly, the researcher concluded that peer comments did not substitute teacher comments, suggesting that they could play different roles. Similarly, Villamil and Guerrero (1998) did not see peer and teacher feedback in opposing roles: “We do not see peer feedback and teacher feedback being in competition; rather, we see them as complementary forms of assistance in the writing classroom” (p. 508).

A more recent study by Ruegg (2015) which investigated the relative impact of peer and teacher feedback in terms of subsequent improvement found that students who received teacher feedback gained significantly more than the group which received peer feedback in the area of grammar scores, while there is no significant difference between these two groups in the other areas: organization, vocabulary, content and total scores. In addition, significantly more of teacher feedback was focussed on content and meaning-related issues. The recommendation was that students should receive both types of feedback, with both playing complementary roles: teacher feedback focusing grammar and content issues and peer feedback on organization and academic style.
Two other studies investigated the possibility of peer feedback replacing teacher feedback (Gielen et al., 2010a; Karengianes et al., 1980). Gielen et al. found that there was no significant difference in post-test scores between the group which received teacher feedback and the group which received peer feedback and concluded that “peer feedback can substitute teacher feedback without considerable loss of effectiveness in the long run” (p. 157). Karengianes found that peer feedback had a greater positive impact on the writing of low-achieving tenth grade high school students than teacher feedback and concluded that “peer editing appears to be at least as effective, if not more effective, than teacher editing” (p. 206).

It is noteworthy that these two studies mentioned above involved L1 learners. Leki (1990) has noted that studies in L1 contexts have found peer feedback to be overall more effective than teacher feedback. It seems that with L1 learners, there is a stronger possibility of peer feedback being equally if not more effective than teacher feedback owing to the medium of peer feedback used – the L1. On the other hand, most of the comparative studies on L2 learners so far (e.g., Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006), seem to be in favour of teacher feedback. One possible explanation for this difference is the use of L1 and its impact on understanding of feedback. Unlike studies of peer review with L1 learners, studies of peer review with L2 writers involve the use of L2 in giving feedback. The potential disadvantage of using L2 is illustrated in a study by Zhao (2010) where the use of L1 in peer interaction facilitated the understanding of peer feedback. This is to be expected as according to the
Vygotskian sociocultural theory of learning (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), language is a key mediator in language development. Since L2 learners are more proficient in their L1, it is reasonable that peer interaction in L1 is more accessible and yielded a more positive impact on improvement in subsequent writing as shown in the Zhao study.

Taken together, these findings regarding the issue of understanding of feedback show that, when the potential difficulty of limited ESL proficiency is removed, there is the possibility of peer feedback playing a greater role in learners learning to write from feedback given. Further, the tentative evidence of teacher feedback being used more often but less often understood, coupled with that of peer feedback being more readily understood, and especially if given in an L1, points to the possibility of peer and teacher feedback playing complementary roles.

Such a potential for complementarity was already mentioned by earlier researchers like Caulk (1994) and Villamil & Guerrero (1998) and later echoed by Tsui and Ng (2000) and Yang et al. (2006). Tsui and Ng (2000, p. 167) identified four roles that peer feedback could play, which teacher feedback might not be able to fill: 1) enhancing a sense of audience as peers act more like real readers than teachers who tend to play the role of evaluators; 2) raising awareness of learners’ own strengths and weaknesses as writers as peers point out errors which may be blind spots for writers or acknowledge what they have done well through praise; 3) encouraging collaborative learning as peer response allows for clarification and negotiation of meaning between writer and reviewer; 4) fostering a sense of ownership of text as they are less likely to incorporate peer suggestions without agreeing since peer feedback is
seen as less authoritative compared to teacher feedback. One of the benefits of peer feedback mentioned in Section 2.8.4.3 – promoting critical reflection (Ching & Hsu, 2016; Novakovich, 2016; Yang et al., 2006) – is another potential role that peer feedback can play.

Two important conclusions in the Yang et al.’s study (2006) are that “students value teacher feedback more highly than peer feedback but recognize the importance of peer feedback”; and that “peer feedback, though it had less impact than teacher feedback, does lead to improvements and appears to encourage student autonomy, so it can be seen as a useful adjunct to teacher feedback, even in cultures which are supposed to grant great authority to the teacher” (p. 193, emphasis mine). Hence, we can see how peer feedback can play a complementary role with teacher feedback.

The studies reviewed so far show that the question of the relative impact of teacher and peer feedback on subsequent revisions is by no means clearly answered. A possible explanation for this is the complexity of both phenomena – the processes of teacher and peer feedback. As Novakovich (2016) highlighted about peer feedback, “the effects of peer review are difficult to isolate from a number of moderating variables that could intervene…” (p. 19). The moderating variables may be considered contextual factors in which the peer feedback process is embedded. In the next section, I discuss some of these contextual factors.

2.8.6 The importance of contextual factors

A review of several studies highlight the influence of contextual factors which contribute to the difficulty in arriving at a definitive answer regarding the relative impact of teacher and
peer feedback. The following review considers these contextual factors: the use of L1 in peer review by L2 learners, pedagogical measures to increase engagement with feedback given on writing, the number of peers in peer review configuration, the manner, format and mode in which peer feedback is administered.

The use of L1 by second language learners in peer review as mentioned in the previous section, seems to be a factor worthy of consideration. Studies by Zhao (2010), Lam (2016), Yu and Hu (2017b) and Yu & Lee (2016) highlight the influence of L1 on the effectiveness of the peer review process. Zhao (2010) reported that the use of L1 facilitated the peer interaction and led to understanding of peer feedback for the 18 participants in the study while Yu and Hu (2017b) reported that the two case study participants valued the use of L1 in peer review: “Both Alan and Leo reported that Chinese was a better medium than English to facilitate their group work and could make the peer feedback activity more efficient” (p. 30). The study by Yu and Lee (2016) reported that the use of L1 was “an important facilitative factor” as it was used “to identify errors and problems in essays, maintain the dialogue, provide specific comments, request and confirm meanings, and sometime argue with the partners” (p. 489). The study by Lam (2016) investigated if the 28 participants would perceive peer review conducted in L1 to be more effective in conveying feedback: 53.6% of the interviewees said it would work better, while 46.4% said it would not. All three studies had Chinese participants. Hence, it seems the use of L1 in peer review for second language
learners could potentially be an advantage, making the feedback more valuable vis-à-vis teacher feedback.

The use of measures to increase engagement with feedback is another factor to be considered. A study by Gielen et al. (2010a) with 85 Belgian 12-13 year old students using their L1 in writing is a case in point. In the study, two measures to increase engagement with peer feedback were used: an “a priori question form and an “a posteriori reply form”. The a priori question form required them to write about what they would like the feedback to address while the a posteriori reply form required them to write a reply on the peer feedback given. Four groups were set up: three in the experimental conditions (two given the two measures stated above and one without) and one control group who were given teacher feedback only. Results showed that the groups given the extension of peer feedback treatment (a priori question form and a posteriori reply form) showed significant longer-term learning effects (as captured in a post-test measure at the end of the writing course), especially the group given the a priori question form. The question form and reply form are measures to encourage the writer to respond to the feedback given. What the findings show is that requiring the writer to inform the peer reviewer about questions he had about the writing before the feedback is given, and requiring him to reflect on the feedback given heighten engagement with the feedback and increases the chance of the feedback given being used. This is resonant with some similar findings on teacher feedback where there is recognition of the need to understand better the needs and situation of the student if teacher feedback is to be effective (Hyland,
1998, 2000). For example, Hyland (2000) concludes in her case study of two students, that there is a “need for teachers and students to communicate on a one to one basis, not just about texts and writing problems, but also about approaches to writing and learning and feedback strategies. Clear and full communication is an essential ingredient for effective feedback” (p. 50). This points to the need to consider contextual factors in studying the impact of feedback (whether from teacher or peer) on revisions. The use of measures to increase the likelihood of engagement with feedback such as the question form and reply form used in the Gielen et al. (2010a) study constitutes one of the contextual factors which impact the effectiveness of peer feedback.

In most comparative studies, the impact of teacher feedback and peer feedback could also be influenced by the number of peers in the peer review configuration. The studies by Cho and Schunn (2007) and Cho et al. (2008) show that multi-peer feedback (i.e., feedback given by more than one peer reviewer) has a stronger impact on subsequent improvement in writing quality than feedback from an expert or single peer. In both studies, participants were grouped into three conditions: a single-expert feedback condition (i.e., feedback given by a teacher only), single-peer feedback condition (i.e., feedback given by a peer only) and a multi-peer feedback condition (i.e., feedback given by six peers). Findings from the Cho and Schunn (2007) study show that the group which received the multi-peer feedback improved the most in writing quality; specifically, the difference between the single-expert feedback group and the multi-peer feedback group was statistically significant. Similarly, the results from Cho et
al. (2008) study show that the group which received multi-peer feedback showed significantly greater improvement in flow and logic (two out of three criteria used in evaluating drafts) compared with the group which received single-expert feedback. More significantly, participants rated expert and peer feedback as equally helpful when it was not known whether it came from the teacher or peers. What these studies highlight is that the number of peers in the peer feedback configuration and whether the source of the feedback (teacher or peer) could influence the potential effectiveness of the peer review process.

Other factors that could influence the relative impact of teacher and peer feedback are the manner in which the feedback was administered (collective or individual), the format (oral or written) and mode (face-to-face or computer-mediated) in which the feedback was given. The teacher feedback given to students in the Gielen et al. (2010a) study was collective (collective written feedback based on his assessment of a sample of drafts) while the peer feedback was given individually. In the Tsui and Ng’s (2000) and Yang et al. (2006) studies, where teacher feedback was shown to have greater impact, teacher feedback was given individually. If teacher feedback were given individually in Gielen et al.’s study, it could have made teacher feedback more effective. In Liu and Sadler’s (2003) study where both oral and written modes of feedback were used, it was found that the different format in which feedback was given influenced its effectiveness in the different modes employed – written feedback was found to be more effective (in terms of overall number of comments, the proportion of revision-oriented comments, and the overall number of revisions) in the asynchronous computer-
mediated mode, while oral feedback was more effective (in terms of overall number of comments and proportion of revision-oriented comments) in the synchronous face-to-face mode.

Finally, the mode in which feedback is given presents an important factor to consider in any investigation of the impact of teacher and peer feedback on student writing. The increasing use of Internet technology in education has led to new possibilities and greater complexity in the entire enterprise of giving and receiving feedback on writing. The use of computer technology in the process of peer and teacher feedback has brought about various permutations in the configuration of peer and teacher review. For example, the number of peer reviewers can be readily increased in a web-based platform, resulting in multi-peer and teacher feedback on a piece of writing. Synchronous or asynchronous feedback (that is, whether writers receive feedback as soon as they are given by reviewers or they receive feedback after some delay) is an added dimension in a web-based environment. Additionally, a web-based environment makes possible a sense of anonymity of reviewers, not heretofore available in traditional face-to-face or pen-and-paper peer review. In fact, the undeniable currency of computer-mediated peer review, including the use of web-based peer review platforms, especially in the context of higher education, merits further research. In the next section, these new possibilities (multi-peer together with teacher feedback, synchronous or asynchronous feedback and anonymity of peer reviewers) in giving and receiving feedback
will be discussed as I review studies on computer-mediated peer review that are related to my study.

2.8.7 Research on computer-mediated peer review

With the advent of computer technology, new possibilities for the writing classroom have opened up through the use of computer-mediated peer review. There are two major ways in which computer-mediated peer review can be carried out: through network technologies and through web-based systems designed specifically for peer review. Examples of the former are: blogs, wikis, Google Docs or the review function in Microsoft Word. Some examples of the latter cited in Leijen (2017) are: Peerceptiv (formerly called SWoRD, Cho & Schunn, 2004), My Reviewers (Moxley, 2012), Calibrated Peer Review (Russell, 2004); and Norton Textra Connect (used in the Ho & Savignon study, 2007). In the literature, there is a growing body of research on the use of SWoRD (Cho et al., 2006a; 2006b; Cho et al., 2008; Cho & Cho., 2011; Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Cho & Schunn, 2007; Nelson & Schunn, 2009; Ng, Tay & Cho, 2015) the web-based peer review system used in the current study. In this section, I review studies focusing on the differences between feedback in a traditional face-to-face environment, and online peer feedback; studies on the impact of training and the role of teachers in online feedback, studies on online peer feedback and studies which used SWoRD, the web-based peer review system employed in the present study.
2.8.7.1 Differences between traditional face-to-face environment and online environment in peer feedback

The influence of computer-mediated peer review on the process of giving and responding to feedback on writing has become an area of extensive research in the recent years as the introduction of a new tool in any instructional environment tends to modify the processes and outcomes of any pedagogical activity. The differences between peer feedback given in a traditional face-to-face environment versus that given in an online environment have been highlighted by various researchers (Tuzi, 2004; Lu & Law, 2012; Yang & Tsai, 2010). Tuzi (2004) offers a useful categorization of these differences. Some key ones are: e-feedback is more distant (in terms of location); more personally distant; written and not oral; time and place independent; there is a greater sense of anonymity and no pressure to respond on the spot (p. 219). Some others have highlighted the advantages of online feedback over traditional face-to-face or paper-and-pencil feedback (Lu & Law, 2012; p. 258; Yang & Tsai, 2010; p. 73). One of the advantages is the anonymous nature of online feedback which encourages students to participate more as they are free to express their opinions, being less constrained by the pressure of face-to-face interaction and hence are more ready to be honest in giving feedback (Yang & Tsai, 2010; also MacLeod, 1999, cited in Tuzi, 2004, p. 220). The anonymity afforded by the online platform also creates a more impersonal and objective environment (see Tuzi, 2004, p. 219: “more distant” and “more personally distant”, describing the difference between written feedback and e-feedback, suggesting a greater remove between
the reviewer and the writer in the latter form of feedback) which may result in a clearer focus on the feedback given rather than the source of the feedback, and an opportunity to appreciate the kind of feedback peers would give, in relation to teacher feedback. Other advantages mentioned are: it allows students to continuously reflect on and revise their work as the peer review process is not confined by space or time (Lu & Law, 2012); and it helps to solve “the problems of increased teacher workload and class size” (Yang & Tsai, 2010, p. 73). In other words, it addresses the issue of time constraint that teachers face in giving feedback on student writing as an online platform increases the amount of feedback that writers may receive on their writing, not being confined to teacher feedback alone. These advantages may not be solely the result of using an online platform, but it may be said that they are rendered more accessible through the use of an online platform.

The use of a web-based platform for feedback such that both peer and teacher feedback are made available together with anonymity of peer reviewers in the current study is an attempt to investigate the impact of the online environment on the process of giving and responding to feedback on writing for L2 writers.

2.8.7.2 Specific studies comparing traditional peer feedback with electronic feedback

Studies which have compared traditional peer feedback with e-feedback, that is “feedback in digital, written form and transmitted via the web” (Tuzi, 2004, p. 217) – for example, the studies of Hewett (2000), Ho and Savignon (2007), Liu and Sadler (2003) and Tuzi (2004) have mixed findings.
Tuzi (2004) found that e-feedback had a greater impact on revisions than traditional peer feedback in the form of oral feedback. E-feedback had helped L2 writers to focus on larger chunks of text involving ideas, introduction, conclusions or examples rather than more smaller elements such as grammar, and punctuation, and hence, might incline them towards making macro revisions. However, despite the greater effectiveness of e-feedback, students stated that they preferred oral feedback with peers and with tutors in face-to-face settings, perhaps owing to greater familiarity with the oral mode of interaction.

Hewett’s study (2000) which focused on the influence of face-to-face oral and computer-mediated talk on revisions found that computer-mediated talk focused more on the writing tasks and resulted in more direct use of peer feedback, while face-to-face oral talk dealt more with abstract, global idea development, suggesting that if the pedagogical goal of the peer review is to aid in idea generation and shaping the argument in writing, then computer-mediated talk may not be as helpful. However, if the pedagogical goal is to help students improve on the writing, then it appears that computer-mediated talk is more useful as it tends to be focussed on the writing task. Additionally, these two modes of oral talk also differ in their influence on revisions. Revisions arising from computer-mediated feedback incorporated more direct use of peer feedback while revisions arising from face-to-face talk comprised more instances of intertextual (i.e., not with direct reference to peer feedback or imitative of peer feedback) and ideas generated by the writers themselves. Based on these findings, Hewett recommended that a combination of these two modes of feedback though
computer-mediated peer feedback offers some pedagogical advantages such as the ease of referring to comments again after the activity.

Ho and Savignon (2007) examined the use of face-to-face peer review and computer-mediated peer review and found that the Chinese EFL participants preferred the former to the latter. Some reasons include the lack of oral discussion in computer-mediated peer review, which precludes the opportunity to clarify ideas and exchange opinions. However, the participants did find it stressful to give feedback in a face-to-face context. Many advocated a combination of both modes of feedback, suggesting the advantage of being able to give feedback at their own pace in computer-mediated peer review, and also the opportunity to clarify doubts in a face-to-face peer review.

Liu and Sadler (2003) found that the group which had e-feedback fared better than the non-technology-enhanced group in terms of number of comments, revisions and percentage of revision-oriented comments, hence suggesting a greater effectiveness (i.e., in terms of generating feedback from the reviewer) of e-feedback. However, even though participants in the technology-enhanced group preferred the electronic mode of feedback (MOO, an online chatroom) which they found more appealing than the traditional oral feedback, the MOO resulted in “more superficial than substantive comments” (p. 220) and hence, may not be considered that effective in actuality, despite the higher number of comments and revisions generated in this mode of feedback. Their conclusion was that “technology-enhanced peer review works more effectively in the asynchronic commenting mode (i.e., Word) than in the
synchronous commenting mode (i.e., MOO), while traditional peer review works more effectively in the synchronous mode (i.e. face-to-face interaction) than in the asynchronic commenting mode (i.e., paper and pen)” (p. 219). In this study, the complexity of comparing the electronic and traditional modes of peer review is presented in terms of the time dimension, that is, whether the feedback comes in a synchronous or asynchronous mode. What can be established is that the use of technology has a positive impact in generating greater participation from learners whether in terms of giving or using feedback. On an affective note, it was also found that they preferred using the technology-enhanced mode of feedback through MOO.

What these studies have highlighted is that there are various factors that can influence the complexity of undertaking a comparison between computer-mediated peer review and traditional face-to-face peer review, notably, the medium of the feedback (oral or written) and the time dimension (synchronous or asynchronous). Each mode of feedback (computer-mediated or face-to-face) is influenced by the specific medium used and also the sequencing of the feedback. Every permutation could offer different results (as shown in the Liu & Sadler study). The advantages of either mode of feedback have been highlighted in the abovementioned studies and the researchers of three of the studies (Hewett, 2000; Ho & Savignon, 2007; Liu & Sadler, 2003) have recommended a combination of both modes of feedback; specifically, computer-mediated first, followed by the traditional face-to-face mode for peer review.
2.8.7.3 Studies on impact of training on peer comments and the role of the teacher in online peer review

Like the traditional peer review, training is necessary with the use of computer-mediated peer review. Liou and Peng’s study (2009) compared peer feedback before and after training and found that peer feedback was more revision-oriented post-training. Participants were also more successful in revising their work even though less than 50% of peer feedback were adopted for revision. The researchers concluded that the teacher plays an important role in providing training if computer-mediated peer review is to be incorporated successfully into writing instruction. Another study by Jin and Zhu (2010), though not explicitly addressing the issue of training, concluded that the introduction of Internet technologies in peer review results in greater complexity of the peer review process as the participants’ computer-related skills become one of the factors at play. Hence, the researchers concluded that guidance provided by a teacher to help resolve technology-triggered problems would be important in ensuring a successful computer-mediated peer review activity.

The study by Kaufman & Schunn (2011) surfaced the reasons behind students’ negative perceptions of peer assessment for writing, the key one being the view that peers are not qualified to review and assess another peer’s work. This concern has earlier been identified in the literature as part of ‘the L2 factor' (Hu & Lam, 2010), and therefore supports the formulation of this concept. Another important finding is that student perceptions were most positive where both teacher and peer feedback were available. The researchers’ conclusion
was that “instructors might allay students’ concern about fairness or peer assessment by participating in the grading process” (p. 403). While this study concerned the use of peer ratings where the issue of fairness is pertinent, the conclusion may also be applied to the use of peer evaluation in general, including peer feedback in the form of peer comments. Hence, the complementary use of both teacher and peer feedback would seem to be a reasonable way to address the concerns embodied in ‘the L2 factor’.

The studies reviewed above highlight the role of the teacher in the use of online peer feedback. It is noteworthy that even with the use of computer technology, the role of the teacher may not be dispensed with. The research design of the current study includes both teacher and peer feedback in a web-based platform; making it possible to explore the influence or role of teacher feedback in online peer feedback.

2.8.7.4 Studies on online peer feedback and student learning

Three published studies (Jin and Zhu, 2010; Lu & Law, 2012; Yang & Tsai, 2010) dealt with larger issues than the type or nature of peer feedback to include the effects of both cognitive and affective feedback on students’ learning; and conversely, students’ conceptions of learning and approaches to learning and how they impact the learning in an online peer review activity; and how students’ motives in online peer review were mediated by the use of Instant Messaging technology.

Yang and Tsai’s (2010) study investigated how conceptions of learning and approaches to learning impacted students’ learning in online peer review. It was found that those who had
conceptions of learning emphasizing cohesive rather than fragmented learning (e.g., conceiving online peer review as a means to exchanging ideas as opposed to a procedure for submitting assignments) and those who had a deep rather than surface learning approach (e.g., approaching online peer review as a means to reflect on one’s work using peer feedback as opposed to approaching online peer review as a means to fulfill course requirements) made more progress in the online peer review activity in the early stages (i.e., difference in performance between the first and second rounds of peer review, given a total of three rounds in the study). It was also found that conceptions of learning had a greater influence on learning outcomes (in terms of scores assigned to assignments graded by two instructors) than approaches to learning. The contribution of the study is in illuminating the factors which affect students’ learning in peer assessment in an online environment.

Lu and Law’s (2012) study focused on the effects of cognitive and affective feedback on students’ learning in online peer review. While cognitive feedback which identified problems, and proffered solutions was positively related to performance of peer reviewers, affective feedback in the form of praise was positively related to performance of those who received the feedback. Additionally, peer grading, as opposed to peer feedback/comments had no significant influence on performance. A key finding of the study is that peer reviewers benefit more (in terms of scores given for the assignment) from the online peer review activity than those who receive feedback: the more problems identified and suggestions given by the reviewer, the higher the score of the reviewer. This potential of peer review to promote
learning (especially for the reviewer) is shown in two other studies (Hult & Lijeström, 2011; Liu et al., 2001) where the researchers concluded that online peer review had supported student learning. Hult and Lijeström (2011) found that a great amount of feedback was given even though no minimum required number of posts was stipulated and reinforcing (i.e., affirming) and suggestive comments formed the majority of the feedback given, suggesting that the online peer review activity had supported learning. Liu et al. (2001) found that 77 percent of peer reviewers exhibited all four kinds of metacognition (planning, monitoring, regulation and critical thinking) investigated in the study, suggesting that peer review promoted higher order thinking.

Jin and Zhu’s (2010) study is noteworthy as it focused on how the use of another technology – Instant Messaging – in a technology-enhanced peer review activity mediated students’ motives in participating in the activity. The contribution of this study which focused on two case studies is in the insight it has generated on the formation and development of student motives in engaging in online peer review. For example, one participant, Anton, began with the motive of improving her writing skills in the first computer-mediated peer response task but her motive shifted to one of having fun in the second task. The study has also illustrated how the introduction of technology (in this case, Instant Messaging) has mediated student learning in that participants could shift between different motives while carrying out the task of peer review, due to the affordance of the technology – the Instant Messaging chat. Capturing the shifts in motives of the participants was made possible with the theoretical lens
of Activity Theory which yielded fresh insights on students’ participation in the peer review activity from the perspective of their motives.

The last study reviewed illustrates the importance of the use of a new theoretical framework – the Activity Theory – in yielding new insights on peer review, and also the impact of a new tool (computer-mediated peer review) on this pedagogical activity. According to Jin and Zhu (2010), “the integration of technology into peer response tasks can add to the complexity of such tasks” (p. 297). This is because, with the use of a new tool, participants’ skills in the new tool are an added dimension to the peer review task. This is all the more so when teacher feedback is introduced into the picture of computer-mediated peer review. The use of a technology-enabled platform for peer review, together with teacher feedback, is the area that my study addresses and will be discussed in Section 2.9 The Research Gap.

2.8.7.5 Studies focusing on the use of SWoRD

The group of studies reviewed here involved the use of the web-based peer review platform, SWoRD, which was adopted in the current study. One key feature of SWoRD is the affordance of multiple peer reviewers who could be both deliberately or randomly assigned into pairs or groups. Some studies focused on comparisons between peer (including multiple peers) and expert/teacher feedback and their impact on revisions/writing quality (Cho et al., 2008; Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Cho & Schunn, 2007); others on the nature and impact of
One important study focused on the question of validity of reliability of peer assessment, in the form of peer ratings (Cho et al., 2006b). This is an important question to investigate as reservations about the ability of peers to give valid feedback have always been a concern for both teachers and students. The key finding of the study is that the aggregate ratings of four peers are as valid as teacher ratings, and highly reliable. Though the study did not consider the impact of peer feedback on student learning, the finding is nonetheless noteworthy as evidence that peer ratings, and in this case, multiple peer ratings are adequately valid and highly reliable gives support to the use of peer evaluation as an acceptable form of evaluation on student writing, apart from teacher evaluation. More importantly, the finding highlights the advantage of having multiple peer reviewers which increases the probability of the feedback being valid and reliable. Though this study focused specifically on peer ratings, other studies using peer feedback in terms of comments support this positive finding. Cho et al.’s study (2008) found that papers reviewed by multiple peers improved more in flow (i.e., readability, through effective organization) and insight (i.e., reflecting innovation or creativity) compared with papers reviewed by an expert or by a single peer. Cho & MacArthur’s study (2010) yielded positive findings regarding multiple peer reviewers: students receiving multiple peer feedback received more feedback of all types, made more complex repairs (i.e., revisions) and complex repairs were positively associated with
improvement in the quality of writing. In other words, multiple peers (six in this case, versus one teacher reviewer) produced better outcomes than a single expert. Cho & Schunn’s study (2007) found that those who received multiple peer feedback made the most improvement in quality of writing compared with those who received feedback from a single peer or a single expert. In a study that investigated the types and traits of peer feedback and how they influenced revisions (Leijen, 2017), it was found that recurring and alteration types of feedback were strong predictors of revision. In other words, if a piece of feedback recurred (that is, mentioned by more than one peer) or offered an alternative version, it was more likely to lead to revisions.

In sum, these studies highlight the advantage of having multiple reviewers which increases the probability of receiving valid and reliable feedback and appear to increase the likelihood of implementation and to have a greater impact on improvement of quality of writing. Having multiple reviewers is one of the affordances of the web-based peer review platform, SWoRD.

The next group of studies using SWoRD to be reviewed focuses on the nature of peer feedback and its impact in terms of learner perceptions and effect on implementation (Cho et al., 2006a; Leijen, 2017; Nelson & Schunn, 2009; Ng et al., 2015). Cho et al. (2006a) found that peers’ feedback tended to be shorter, and more mixed in type with directive and praise comments being the most frequent while teacher feedback was mostly directive and seldom summative. Directive and praise comments were found to be helpful by undergraduate peers. Ng et al. (2015) generated from the data in their study, four categories of peer comments and
the corresponding responses of writers to these comments. Students were more responsive to comments that were specific rather than generic, highlighting the positive effect of specific comments in peer review. In Leijen’s study (2017), it was found that recurring feedback and feedback that offered an alternative version tended to result in revisions. Nelson and Schunn’s (2009) study is pivotal in identifying the key characteristic of feedback which would influence its probability of being implemented. It was found that understanding was the only significant factor influencing implementation, that is, the feedback would be more likely to be implemented if the problem identified was understood by the writer. This highlights the importance of feedback being understood if it was to be adopted for subsequent revisions. It was also found that understanding of feedback was more likely when these features of feedback were present: location of the problem was identified, a solution was offered and the feedback included a summary statement of the peer reviewer’s evaluation. In sum, certain characteristics of peer feedback have been identified as helpful in these studies: directive, praise and specific comments; comments that recurred, offered an alternative version, and comments understood by the writers.

Another study focusing on the nature of peer feedback and its impact on performance is worth mentioning here though it did not involve the use of SWoRD as it highlights the type of comments that would impact the quality of subsequent revisions. Yu and Wu (2013), in their investigation of the effects of two types of peer feedback: quantitative ratings and descriptive comments, found that both significantly predicted the quality of work produced.
(in this case, the generation of questions) as a result. Descriptive comments refer to feedback which is elaborated in words and therefore have more detail as compared with numerical ratings. Specifically, descriptive comments as opposed to quantitative ratings had a greater predictive power over the difference in quality of work produced, that is, the difference in performance in generation of questions is better explained by differences in quality of descriptive comments received, than in differences in quantitative ratings received.

The current study which adopts the use of SWoRD leverages on its affordance of multiple reviewers and provision of peer and teacher feedback on the same piece of writing which would make possible an investigation of both the nature of peer feedback and the differences between peer and teacher feedback.

2.9 The Research Gap

In this section, I delineate the research gap based on the preceding review of literature, considering the matter from the perspectives of amount of research, methodology and theoretical framework.

2.9.1 Lack of comparative studies

A proper understanding of the place of peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom is not likely to be derived at without considering its role with reference to teacher feedback. It is reasonable to posit that any serious investigation of the role of feedback in writing instruction should consider both types of feedback. However, to date, comparative studies of both types
of feedback are far from adequate. To the best of my knowledge, there are only a handful of studies which may be considered truly comparative studies where both types of feedback were concurrently investigated (Gielen et al., 2010a; Loan, 2017; Ruegg 2015; Tsui and Ng 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010).

A fair number of studies considered the students’ preference of feedback (between peer and teacher feedback) but may not have included both types of feedback in the process of providing feedback or in the investigation of the actual impact of feedback on revisions in the study; hence, they may not be considered truly comparative studies. For example, Hu & Lam (2010) and Sengupta (1998) concluded that there is a preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback while Villamil & Guerrero (1998) assert that “peer revision should be seen as a complementary source of feedback in the ESL classroom” (p. 491), even though teacher feedback was not made available as one of the sources of feedback on student writing in the studies. In other words, these statements were made without a fair comparison between both types of feedback being made available in the studies. They are primarily statements in relation to findings arising from peer feedback surfaced in the studies.

To date, to the best of my knowledge, there are fewer than ten truly comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback – as shown in the preceding literature review (Section 2.8). They are truly comparative because they are more than attitudinal surveys, that is, going beyond questionnaire surveys (e.g., Jacobs et al., 1998; Liu & Chai, 2009; Ren & Hu, 2012;
Zhang, 1995, 1999), to look at actual student response to and use of either type of feedback when both are given in the writing classroom (e.g., Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006).

As the key issues in the use of peer feedback – the ‘L2 factor’ and the ‘cultural factor’ – encapsulate the concerns that writing teachers and learners alike have regarding the place of peer feedback vis-à-vis teacher feedback in the writing classroom, it is pertinent that these two factors be central in any comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback. The ‘L2 factor’ may be operationalized in terms of the proficiency levels of peer reviewer and writer, while the ‘cultural factor’ may be captured in the preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback, if any, among participants. As proficiency in a language encompasses various domains (reading, writing, speaking, listening), for the purpose of the current investigation on feedback in writing, it is appropriate to confine this consideration to writing proficiency only (details on how this was established in the study are shown in Section 4.5.3 The diagnostic test and diagnostic test descriptors). Hence, there is a need for comparative studies which focus on the writing proficiency levels of peer reviewers and writers and also their preference of source of feedback. With such foci, these two factors can be foregrounded in the investigation, which may thus lead to a fuller understanding of the use of both types of feedback in writing instruction.

Further, the increasing use of technologies in the writing classroom has meant that any investigation into the use of peer feedback must include the use of web-based technologies for peer feedback. To date, there are only a handful of studies which use web-based peer
review systems and also include both peer and teacher feedback in the investigation (e.g., Cho et al., 2006a, 2008; Cho & Schunn, 2007; Gielen et al, 2010a; Ruegg, 2015). More comparative studies on peer and teacher feedback using web-based technologies for peer review are necessary. This may lead to a better understanding of the impact of such technologies on the process of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing of an L2 learner.

2.9.2 Methodological issues with comparative studies

The key methodological issue with comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback is that of the manner in which both types of feedback are administered in the study. In some cases, one type of feedback was given on one draft and then another type of feedback was given on the revised draft of the same piece of writing. For example, in the Tsui and Ng (2000) study, peer feedback was given on the first draft and teacher feedback, on the second draft. In some others, one group was given one type of feedback and another group, another type. For example, in the Ruegg (2015) study, one group was given teacher feedback on preliminary drafts for one academic year while a second group was given peer feedback on preliminary drafts over the same period. In yet others, teacher feedback was given collectively, that is, to the class as a whole while peer feedback was individual (e.g., Gielen et al., 2010a). Such variations in the manner of administering feedback in these studies mean that they may not be considered truly comparative studies of teacher and peer feedback since students did not receive both types of feedback on the same piece of writing.
Another difference is the mode in which the feedback was given. Often peer feedback was given orally, while teacher feedback was in the written mode. In some cases, both types of feedback were in the written form (e.g., Hyland, 2000). In some other cases, there was also some degree of teacher intervention/direction in the peer feedback process (e.g., the teacher commenting on peer feedback in the Zhao (2010) study and the teacher dictating the focus of the peer feedback in the Hyland (2000) study).

A great deal of variation in this matter may have to do with the practical constraints of running a writing class or the constraint of working with writing teachers with certain views about either type of feedback (e.g., the teacher volunteer in the Zhao (2010) study who insisted that he gave comments on the peer feedback). Hence, these variations have arisen mainly due to the particularities of each of the research sites/writing classrooms to which the researcher had gained access, which the researcher cannot control. As illustrated above, the researcher may not be able to dictate that the teacher participant should not give comments on the peer feedback even though it may be beneficial to the research objective for the teacher to not comment on the peer feedback given.

For a fair comparison to be made between teacher and peer feedback, both types of feedback should be concurrently available to learners and the same mode of feedback – either oral and/or written – should be used. Also, there should not be any teacher intervention of the peer feedback process, in terms of teacher direction of the feedback focus or teacher commentary on the peer feedback given.
Another key concern is that of the contextual differences between studies, in particular, the subjects of study. In the studies on L2 students, subjects ranged from secondary school (e.g., Tsui & Ng, 2000) to tertiary students (e.g., Paulus, 1999; Ruegg, 2015) and from heterogeneous groups (e.g., international students in Connor & Ascenavage, 1994 and Jin & Zhu, 2010) to homogeneous groups such as Chinese university students (e.g., Zhao 2010; Yang et al., 2006). It seems that studies with similar subjects such as Tsui & Ng’s (2000) and Yang et al.’s (2006) (Chinese students), have yielded similar findings (e.g., preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback as shown in higher take-up rates of teacher suggestions over peer suggestions). Chinese students are a growing community of learners of L2 in English and “among the most significant group in terms of numbers in the present and potential international educational market” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p. 5). So far, there are, to date, to the best of my knowledge, only three truly comparative studies on peer and teacher feedback with Chinese students as subjects (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010). More recent studies on Chinese learners focused on peer feedback alone (Lam, 2016; Yu & Hu, 2017a; Yu & Lee, 2016). Hence, there is indeed a need for more research to be done so as to arrive at a better understanding of the place of teacher and peer feedback in the L2 writing classroom, particularly for this group of L2 learners. Having a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both types of feedback or how they might be used together in L2 writing instruction would be of great use to this growing group of L2 writers.
2.9.3. The importance of contextual factors and the case for the case study research design

There is an increasing recognition of the importance of the influence of contextual factors on language learning, and understanding what the L2 learner brings to his language learning (Breen, 2001). Contextual factors encompass both individual factors (e.g., learner factors such as past experience in peer feedback, commitment level to the course; or teacher factors such as teacher beliefs about learning and attitudes towards students), and societal factors such as sociopolitical issues that influence teacher status (Lee, 2008a), the number of classes teachers need to teach, or course entrance and exit requirements or even what may be termed “an assessment culture”, a heavy emphasis on examination grades (see, for example, Zhao’s 2010 study). All these factors define the larger context in which the process of giving and receiving feedback takes place. The inadequacy of studies on teacher or peer feedback, in considering contextual factors has already been mentioned in the literature, particularly for studies on teacher feedback (Section 2.3.1 on Teachers’ multiple roles and Section 2.3.2 on The importance of contextual factors). The need to consider contextual factors is all the more pertinent for comparative studies on both types of feedback. In this respect, research designs which are quasi-experimental or questionnaire-based are inadequate in capturing the contexts in which the phenomenon of giving and responding to feedback takes place. Qualitative research designs which are more open-ended would be better suited to capture the influence of contextual factors. The current study adopts the case study research design which is better suited to capture contextual factors.
A review of the literature shows that the case study is increasingly used as part of a larger research design (e.g., Hyland, 2000; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010) in comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback as there is the growing recognition that the case study, with its emphasis on thick description, and multiple sources of data (Yin, 2009, 2014), is well-suited for the need to capture the context in which the phenomenon to be studied is embedded.

Previous comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback tended to focus on discreet and disparate aspects of the feedback process – for example, differences between peer and teacher feedback, preference of feedback or use of feedback. In most cases, only one or two aspects were investigated in the study; for example, student attitudes (e.g., Jacobs et al., 1998; Liu & Chai, 2009; Ren & Hu, 2012; Tsui & Ng, 2000), the nature of comments (e.g., Nelson & Schunn, 2009; Patchan, 2011), and whether changes in drafts could be traced back to teacher or peer comments (e.g., Hu & Lam, 2010; Paulus, 1999; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006).

A holistic view of how an L2 learner responds to and use both teacher and peer feedback when both are made available would be a more helpful approach in understanding the whole issue of feedback in the teaching and learning of L2 writing. A holistic approach would also entail that the focus should not be just one or two and disparate aspects of feedback, but rather, the entire phenomenon of responding to and using feedback. In other words, the spotlight is now turned inwards, looking at the learner and how he reacts (e.g., what goes on in his mind, or what catches his attention, or what causes him to act in a positive way) when faced with
feedback on his writing. This need for this broader perspective and more in-depth study of
students’ response to feedback has been raised by researchers such as Min (2006) and Cho
and colleagues (2006a). Min suggested that more introspective methods of data collection
such as retrospective interviews be used to capture students’ own reflections on effect of peer
feedback on their revision decisions (p. 136); Cho and colleagues highlighted the need to
consider more closely how students revise their writing based on different sources of feedback
received (p. 286); and Cho and Schunn (2007) emphasize the need to understand how students
respond to peer feedback compared to teacher feedback and the kind of feedback peers
provide (p. 424).

The above citations highlight the need to delve into the why and the how of students’
response to feedback in investigations on feedback. This approach to the investigation is more
likely to yield a better understanding of the place of teacher and peer feedback in the L2
writing classroom. It is also in line with the growing recognition by researchers of the
importance of the individual learner and learner agency in understanding language learning
(Breen, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). This approach is in line with the call
by researchers to move “from short-term feedback treatments to richer naturalistic
investigations focusing on feedback within the whole context of learning and on the learner’s
role in interpreting and using feedback” (Hyland, 2010; p. 181).
This focus on the internal process of processing and responding to feedback, which is influenced by a host of individual and contextual factors, is more readily captured by the case study method, with its focus on thick description and multiple sources of data.

While there is an increasing use of the case study in recent studies on peer feedback (e.g., Yu & Hu, 2017b; Yu & Lee, 2015; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012), there is, to date, to the best of my knowledge, only one not so recent comparative study on peer and teacher feedback using the case study approach (Zhao, 2010). Additionally, existing studies tend to be more limited in scope (usually two or a handful of case studies). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, most existing comparative studies are not truly comparative where the manner (e.g., whether participants were given both types of feedback on the same piece of writing or one type of feedback for one draft, and another for another draft) and the mode (oral or written) of administration of peer and teacher feedback were not held constant for each type of feedback. There is a need for studies where both teacher and peer feedback are given on the same piece of writing and the same mode of feedback is used for both types of feedback so there can be a true comparison of these two types of feedback.

The current study which employed a multiple cases and multiple methods approach afforded by the multiple case study research method seeks to fill the gap. The present study incorporated multiple case studies such that important factors such as the writing proficiency levels of writer and peer reviewer and preference of feedback may be foregrounded, with the opportunity provided by more data through multiple cases. Specifically, the setting up of
multiple cases with different configurations of writing proficiency allowed for rich data comparisons. In addition, the adoption of a web-based platform for feedback made both teacher and peer feedback in the written mode available on the same piece of writing. More details about the multiple case study research design adopted in the current study are presented in Chapter Four.

### 2.9.4 The need for a holistic approach and the inadequacy of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory in understanding feedback

In the previous sections, I presented the gaps in research with regard to the approach, method or focus of the studies reviewed. In this section, I present the gap from the perspective of the theoretical framework used in previous and existing studies on peer and teacher feedback.

Among the four theoretical frameworks which support the use of peer feedback in writing, (Liu & Hansen, 2002), Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning (1978) has been the more frequently used one, as its key ideas such as scaffolding and zone of proximal development, lend support to the potential of peer learning from peer in the process of peer review/feedback. As Ohta (1995) has noted, “…even a less proficient learner can assist a more proficient learner…in learner-learner interactions the notions of novice and expert are ‘fluid conceptions’; the same learner can function as both expert and novice at different times in a conversation” (p. 109). Hence, this theoretical framework offers a basis for investigating the
possibility of peers learning from other peers regardless of their level of mastery in the skills in question.

While the Vygotskian theory is apt for explorations on peer feedback, it may be inadequate in studies seeking to understand the place of both teacher and peer feedback in the learning of writing. This is the case as the framework does not encompass the contextual factors which so often influence the process of giving and receiving feedback, which are even more complex when one considers both types of feedback together.

As already established in the previous section, there is a need for a holistic approach to investigations on peer and teacher feedback, which go beyond scrutiny of disparate aspects of the feedback process. However, just as there is a need for a new methodology, such as the case study method, there needs to be a new theoretical framework to support the use of such a methodology. With the growing recognition of the importance of not only contextual factors, but also the individual learner and learner agency in understanding the phenomenon of language learning (Breen, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001), a theoretical framework which allows the researcher to capture the complexity of the process of responding to and using feedback, whether from peer or teacher is in order. The Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999) offers such a possibility.

In the next chapter, I discuss how this is a more appropriate framework with its emphasis on the larger social-cultural-historical contexts of an action, which encompass considerations such as the learners’ beliefs about sociolinguistic rules of communication, their culture of
learning, learners’ goals, learners’ preferred form of feedback, learner history; and also learner agency, in the form of motivations and goals in educational contexts.

2.10 The research problem

In light of the above discussion, it is clear that more studies need to be conducted to address the following gaps in the literature: 1) a lack of comparative studies on teacher and peer feedback, especially on Chinese learners; 2) the necessity of investigating the impact of web-based technologies for peer feedback on the process of responding to and using feedback; 3) the need for a holistic approach which allows for a focus on the key issues of proficiency level and preference for teacher feedback; 4) a research methodology which allows for consideration of contextual factors and 5) a theoretical framework which supports such a methodology. Such a framework would complement the open-ended and multi-perspective approach afforded by a research methodology which captures contextual factors.

3 An investigation filling the above gaps in research would provide some answers to the L2 writing teacher as to how best to combine both types of feedback on writing in the L2 writing classroom. It would also throw more light on some questions of perennial concern to both

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3 The high degree of matches (reflected in the Turnitin report) between the text in this paragraph and the CELC Symposium 2013 conference proceedings, “A qualitative study of second language writers’ response to and use of teacher and peer feedback - a proposal”, may be explained by my participation in this conference in which I presented the proposal for the research project of the current study.
writing teachers and L2 writers: What factors affect student responses to feedback? Specifically, how does the proficiency level of writer and peer reviewer impact the process of giving, responding to and using feedback? How shall the apparent preference for teacher feedback (or affective disadvantage of peer feedback relative to teacher feedback) with L2 learners be accounted for in L2 writing instruction? Finally, finding the answers to the above questions with a particular group of L2 learners, such as Chinese learners who form a significantly large proportion of L2 learners in English, not just in their own country but also internationally, would yield considerable practical benefits for writing teachers involved in teaching this group of learners.

In the next two chapters, I elucidate the theoretical framework and methodology which have been chosen for the present study as they fill the gaps highlighted in this literature review.
Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I first describe earlier paradigms used in second language research; namely, the cognitive and Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of mind. Then, I describe the theoretical framework which serves as the foundation of this study – the Activity Theory. Finally, I explain the three key concepts from this theory which I used in the analysis of the data of the study.

3.1 The cognitive paradigm

Traditionally, writing is seen as a “non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning” (Zamel, 1983, p. 165). In this traditional product-focussed approach to writing, the teacher’s role is seen as one of intervening at the right point with teacher input so as to influence the final product. This cognitive framework is based on the information-processing model. The key question in this paradigm is: what input would stimulate the desired output/response? In this case, it may be rephrased as: what kind of teacher input would bring about improvement in students’ writing? By focusing only on the individual learner’s cognitive processes, this paradigm is clearly inadequate in capturing the social, historical and cultural contexts of writing. Within this framework, teacher input (in the form of teacher feedback) had been found to be lacking in various ways:
1. The input had been deemed incomprehensible perhaps because it had not been mediated, that is, from the Interactionist perspective, there was no room for negotiation between the recipient and the giver of feedback.1

2. The multiple roles that teachers play (e.g., audience, real reader, editor, evaluator, to name a few) render their intention unclear and result in students not knowing how to respond to teacher input (Muncie, 2000; Cho et al., 2006a).

3. The conflicting roles of ‘evaluator’ and ‘real reader’ make it often difficult for teacher feedback to achieve the goal of improving students’ writing or helping them to become successful writers (Muncie, 2000; Cho et al., 2006a).

Indeed, the complexity of giving feedback has been highlighted by researchers such as Goldstein (2006): “[feedback] is the unique constellation and interaction of variables – contextual, teacher and student” (Hyland and Hyland, 2006c, p. 203). This framework which focuses on the learner’s cognitive processes, may fail to capture the complexity of how the learner processes feedback which is given in the context of a host of variables – contextual, teacher and student.

1In contrast, “Peer response provides opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning among second language learners” (Zhu & Mitchell, 2012, p. 363). Additionally, Nelson and Schunn (2009) identified understanding as the only significant mediator of implementation of feedback.
As Prior (2006) has highlighted, the cognitive paradigm is “too narrow in its understanding of contexts and was eclipsed by studies that attended to social, historical, and political contexts of writing” (p. 54). The cognitive paradigm, in focusing on what external stimulus might trigger the “right” kind of response from the learner-writer so as to generate the desired writing, ignores factors beyond the cognitive, such as the relationship between teacher and student (an example of social context) or the institutional factors involved in the teacher’s act of giving feedback (an example of political context).

In the next section, I describe the paradigm which superseded the earlier cognitive paradigm as researchers recognized the importance of social contexts in understanding language learning.

3.2 Vygotsky’ sociocultural theory of the mind

In Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of the mind, one finds the theoretical support for peer feedback as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of writing. In this framework which does not restrict humans to simple stimulus-response reflexes, mediation is seen as the key for humans to control their behaviour from the external world, via means called “tools” and “signs” (Vygotsky, 1978). In the practice of peer feedback, which presupposes a process-oriented approach to teaching writing, one makes use of peer feedback as a mediating tool in improving one’s writing as peer feedback provides a sense of real audience, a sense of support in the community of novice writers, promotes critical reflection and most critically, provides the
scaffolding for constructing the ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, in this paradigm, the key question is: ‘How does peer feedback help construct the zone of proximal development?’ The potential of such scaffolding is highlighted by researchers such as Ohta (1995): “… even a less proficient learner can assist a more proficient learner…in learner-learner interactions the notions of novice and expert are ‘fluid conceptions’; the same learner can function as both expert and novice at different times in a conversation” (p. 109). Similarly, Yu and Hu (2017a) found in their study that more proficient learners could learn when they work with less proficient learners in peer review. Hence, in research on feedback, there has been a move away from a purely brain-based perspective of how a language learner learns to one in which the larger contexts of community including the classroom, are taken into consideration.

Many studies on peer feedback have used the sociocultural theory of the mind to investigate the process of giving and receiving peer feedback and how it might create the right conditions for learning to take place (e.g., de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996; 2006). Using this framework, these studies have managed to capture the dynamics of interpersonal relations which influence learning; for example, which peer review stances correlate with better course grades. This framework has allowed the researcher to capture the larger contexts of learning to write through peer review, such as the cultural dimensions of interaction in peer review.
groups, and the stances of peer reviewers which may be influenced by relationships between writer and reviewer. However, this framework may not be adequate for comparative studies on both teacher and peer feedback as key Vygotskian concepts such as mediation, scaffolding and zone of proximal development are not able to capture the complexity of responding to both types of feedback that an L2 learner is often given access to in writing classrooms today. As different contextual factors might be at play in how peer feedback is given and processed and how teacher feedback is received and acted upon, a theory which looks beyond interpersonal relations is necessary. The Activity Theory, which encompasses the connection between the individual and society (embodying social, cultural, historical influences), is more appropriate in any investigation into both types of feedback on writing.

3.3 Activity Theory

The Activity Theory (AT) is, in essence, an extension of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of the mind. In Vygotsky’s model of human activity (1978), the subject acts on the object through the mediation of artifacts - tools, and signs (see Figure 3.1 for the triadic model). By means of tools (physical/technical tools), man is able to control their behavior from the external world, and through the use of signs (psychological tools such as language, concepts and cultural entities), man is able to regulate their minds. Hence, Vygotsky’s key contribution is the concept of cultural mediation. In Lantolf and Thorne’s (2006) words, “this view of culture is not merely in the minds of individuals, but is seen to exist objectively in the world of human artifacts and in the social construction and transformation of the natural
environment” (p. 211). In this conception of cultural mediation, “objects ceased to be just raw material for the formation of logical operations in the subjects as they were for Piaget. Objects became cultural entities and the object-orientedness of action became the key to understanding human psyche” (Engeström, 2001, p. 134). In other words, to understand human action, one has to investigate the role of mediation played by artifacts outside of the human mind, such as language, in man’s aim to achieve the “object” in any action.

![Artefacts/Tools](image.png)

**Figure 3.1 Vygotsky’s triadic model**

As shown in Vygotsky’s triadic model, in the process of learning, the subject engages in mediated action through the mediating artifact to achieve the object, which is the goal of the subject’s activity. In reconceptualizing human activity in this way, Vygotsky had successfully
departed from the prevailing behaviourist paradigm of his day which had as its presupposition the stimulus-response connection as the explanatory principle underlying human activity.

Vygotsky’s concept of cultural mediation may be considered the starting point of the now established Activity Theory, or First Generation AT. Subsequent psychologists such as Aleksei Nikolaevich Leont’ev and Yrjö Engeström extended his groundbreaking work to develop what is now considered Second and Third Generation AT respectively.

As a development of Vygotsky’ sociocultural theory of the mind, Second and Third Generation Activity Theory expand on the concept of mediation, to include mediators other than Vygotsky’s original mediators of tools and signs. To fully understand human actions, it also posits that one must take into consideration not only the social-cultural-historical contexts of an action, but also learner agency in the form of motivations and goals in educational contexts. This development of the theory has spawned two theoretical approaches in AT, one developed by Leont’ev (1978, 1981) and the other by Engeström (1987, 1999). The former focuses on the centrality of motive and the connectedness between motive and behaviour as an explanatory principle underlying human activity while the latter focuses on understanding human activity in collective activity systems comprising six key components – subject, object, artifacts (tools and signs), rules, community and division of labour. Engeström’s approach to AT was selected as the theoretical framework for the present study. In the next section, I describe the key features of these two approaches.
3.3.1 Leontev’s conception of the Activity Theory

Leont’ev’s approach is encapsulated in the idea that the mediation of mind, which, in Vygotsky’s conception, happens primarily through cultural tools, is carried out through “sensuous human activity” (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, p. 214). While acknowledging the importance of cultural mediation, Leont’ev foregrounds the importance of activity as in “cooperative labour and social interaction” (Leont’ev, 1981, pp. 55-56). The difference between Vygotsky and Leont’ev is that the former emphasizes culture/semiosis as the key means of explanation of human development while the latter puts more emphasis on activity. According to Leont’ev, “Practical relations to the world and object activity” is more important than Vygotsky’s concern with “inter-individual communication”, which constitutes merely a particular type of activity in Leont’ev’s conception (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 214).

Working on this premise, Leont’ev expanded on the concept of activity to include a hierarchy of activity types which structures human activity into three levels (i.e., activity, action and operation). In this way, the analytical power of the theory is expanded as human activity can now be understood as “activity” (“Why does something take place?”), “action” (“What takes place?”) and “operation” (“How is it carried out?”) (Bødker, 1997, pp. 150, 151). The key idea here is that of motives that drive human actions. Elaborating on this concept, Lantolf and Thorne said, “the object is the focus of activity; the motive is the cultural-psychological-institutional impetus that guides human activity, toward a particular object”
To illustrate, I will cite the example given by Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 219) – the action of riding a bicycle could be a reflection of different activities such as recreation or work as in the case of a professional cyclist. In either case, the operations involve the movements of muscles to maintain balance on a bicycle. Operations, then, are the means by which an action is carried out. Though the action is the same, the motive behind it could be different (work or recreation) and hence, the activity is considered different even though the action and the operation are the same.

Illustrating the usefulness of this theoretical framework is a recent study on peer response stances by Zhu and Mitchell (2012) where students’ peer response stances were shown to be linked to the motivation behind each participant’s participation in peer response. Using Leont’ev’s concept of the hierarchy of activity, the researchers made a distinction between previous research which focused on the action level of peer response in examining student stances in peer response, and their study’s contribution in investigating the motive behind these stances, thus shifting the focus of analysis to the activity level. In so doing, they showed how the students’ motive influenced the resultant stance they students took in participating in peer feedback. This application of AT shows the potential of arriving at new perspectives on language learning with this theoretical lens.

More recently, Yu and Lee (2015) sought to understand EFL students’ participation in group peer feedback in L2 writing using the same theoretical lens offered by Leont’ev’s
conception of AT, focusing on the construct of motive. Once again, new perspectives were derived, showing how the differing motives of two students resulted in different trajectories in their experience of peer feedback. The study’s contribution was in showing how students’ motives were linked to the other elements in peer feedback such as stance in giving feedback, revisions resulting from peer feedback and group interaction in peer feedback.

These two studies demonstrated how differing motives of learners would result in different learning trajectories or outcomes, even though they may be involved in the same action of participating in peer feedback. Additionally, it is also apparent that learner agency, as shown in the differing motives of different learners, plays a key role in determining the path the learner takes.

Next, I describe the other strand of AT – Engeström’s approach, which is considered the most recent development in AT.

3.3.2 Engeström’s conception of the Activity Theory

Engeström’s (1987, 1999) approach envisages human action in the context of a collective activity system whereby three factors; namely, tools and signs (i.e., meditational means), the community and rules that govern its functioning, and division of labour/roles (e.g., social roles and identity), play key roles in understanding any human action. Identifying the processes and participants in the system, Engeström has come up with a schematization that
extends Vygotsky’s original triadic model of subject, meditational means and object. The additional mediators he introduced to Vygotsky’s model – the rules, community and division of labour components – provide new dimensions in terms of the social-cultural-historical aspects of mediation not present in the original theory. This allows for a conceptual framework that connects human activity with the larger contexts – social-cultural-historical structures, as reflected in the areas at the base of Engeström’s diagram (Figure 3.2, p. 120). This means that any activity, such as writing or responding to feedback on one’s writing, may be investigated, not as an activity in isolation, but in connection with all these other elements in the system. The difference between Leont’ev’s approach and Engeström’s is that the former focuses on the individual (with particular emphasis on the motives behind an individual’s action), while the latter foregrounds the system in which any human action is embedded and to be understood. As Lantolf and Thorne (2006) put it:

Within a collective activity system, the actions of individuals occur at the nexus of three factors: the tools and artifacts available (for example, languages, computers), the community and its understood rules (historical and institutional ones as well as those that arise from a local set of social-material conditions), and the division of labour in these community-settings (for example, identity and social role, expected interactional dynamics). (p. 222)
The core components of the system proposed by Engeström are: the subject, object, artefacts, community, rules and division of labour. The subject refers to the participant whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis. It could refer to individuals or groups. The object is the goal of the chosen activity for investigation; it can be “raw materials, conceptual understandings or even problem spaces” (Barab et al., 2002, p. 78).

![Activity system diagram](image)

**Figure 3.2 Activity system (based on Engeström, 1987, 1999)**

Towards which the activity is directed and “which is molded or transformed into outcomes with the help of physical and symbolic, external and internal tools” (Engeström, 1993, p. 67, italics in the original). The community refers to individuals or groups who share the same object and are operating under the same rules (as in norms or conventions); and division of labour (as in the...
established roles of the different members of the community). These divisions of labour “can run horizontally as tasks are spread across members of the community with equal status, and vertically as tasks are distributed up and down divisions of power” (Barab et al., 2002, p. 79).

Hence, the activity of receiving feedback on one’s writing, for example, could be understood more fully, when the researcher investigates not only the learner per se, but also the influence of the language used or platform such as a web-based platform (as representing the tool), the community of second language learners and teacher (as representing the community), and the role of expert-learner/ fellow-learner and teacher-expert (as representing division of labour) on the learner’s act of responding to and using feedback on his writing.

A key contribution of this expanded model is its ability to investigate “supra-individual phenomena” (Kaptelinin, 1996, p. 57), implying that individual actions are to be understood in the context of larger social-cultural-historical structures as reflected in the areas at the base of Engeström’s model – community, rules and division of labour (Figure 3.2). The act of responding to both teacher and peer feedback may be seen as embedded in a network of inter-relations between the L2 learner and various social-cultural-historical structures. For example, peer feedback is often studied in the context of the L2 learner and classroom culture (‘Community’), the understood rules of the community as in issues like politeness in peer-peer interaction (‘Rules’), while teacher feedback is often investigated in the context of the L2 learner and the differing status between teacher and student (‘Division of labour’). Hence,
Engeström’s model is highly appropriate in a comparative study of both peer and teacher feedback as it foregrounds the system in which the process of responding and acting on feedback is embedded; thus, it is better able to capture the complexity of the whole process, making more visible the influence of contextual factors such as the issue of politeness in peer interaction in giving feedback (‘Rules’) or peer reviewers of various proficiency levels (‘Community’).

There are several recent studies in the area of writing which have adopted the AT framework to understand peer revision (Jimenez-Jimenez and Zapata, 2006, in Lantolf and Thorne, 2006), teacher feedback (Lee, 2014b) writing strategies (Lei, 2008) and foreign language writing (Haneda, 2007). In all four studies, new perspectives of the issues at hand were made possible with Engeström’s expanded framework as is illustrated in the rest of this section.

Jimenez-Jimenez and Zapata (2006) derived a modified model based on Engeström’s, showing an existing peer review system as well as future innovations (through making changes in the system such as the possibility of face-to-face meetings apart from existing mediating artifacts such as the email, under the category of “mediating artifacts”).

Lee (2014b), investigating the conventional teacher feedback system in the EFL contexts in Hong Kong with the theoretical lens of third generation AT, surfaced the tensions and contradictions in the existing system. In line with the spirit of transformation characteristic of
AT, she reconceptualized the teacher feedback system, introducing a new object (Mediated Learning Experience) and corresponding innovations in all the other elements in the system. This reconceptualization is made possible with the expanded model of AT, with the additional mediators – community, rules and division of labour – which Engeström introduced to Vygotsky’s triadic model. These two studies show the potential of AT as a heuristic for generating pedagogic innovations.

Haneda (2007) came up with several models to better understand the different modes of engagement that foreign language writers might have in the same writing task. The contribution of the study lies in its interpretation of the various modes of engagement of EFL writers using Engeström’s AT framework, throwing light on relations between reader and writer and also the other components of the system (e.g., “Artifacts” such as linguistic resources and “Rules” such as genres), giving a richer understanding of how the different conceptions of what it means to be a writer in a foreign language influenced how each writer engaged in the same action of writing in a foreign language.

Lei (2008) reconceptualized writing strategies into four categories and captured writers’ agency and goals in strategy use. He defined writing strategies as “mediated actions which are consciously taken to facilitate writers’ practices in communities” (p. 220). In his study, he expanded on the four categories of mediators; namely, artifact (tools and signs in Vygotsky’s
theory), rules, community and division of labour to include the following sub-categories in the context of writing strategies (p. 223-229):

- **Artifact-mediated strategies** – tools (Internet and literary works); signs (L1-mediated and L2-mediated)
- **Rule-mediated strategies** – rhetoric-mediated strategies, evaluation criteria-mediated strategies and time-mediated strategies
- **Community-mediated strategies** – campus community-mediated strategies and society-mediated strategies
- **Role-mediated strategies** – author-mediated strategies and language learner-mediated strategies

The studies of Haneda and Lei show the potential of AT as a research framework. In a similar vein, an investigation into how an L2 learner responds to and uses teacher feedback and peer feedback may be informed with the perspective of AT, focusing on three key concepts: namely, mediated actions (including the interaction between different components of the system), learner agency, and contradictions in the system.

### 3.4 Mediation in Activity Theory

The central concept of cultural mediation in Vygotsky’s theory continues to be a focal point in later generations of AT. However, with Engeström’s expanded model, mediation
does not stop short at the subject’s level, but involves the various components in the system. According to Barab et al. (2002), to study any phenomenon meaningfully, one must go beyond focusing on any one component in the system without considering the interaction amongst the components within the system:

The components of activity systems are not static components existing in isolation from each other but are dynamic and continuously interact with other components through which they define the activity system as a whole. From an activity theory perspective, an examination of any phenomenon (e.g., learning in the classroom) must consider the dynamics among all these components. (p. 79)

Hence, with Engeström’s foregrounded system of any activity under investigation, researchers are now able to have “an analysis of a multitude of relations within an activity system” (Foot, 2014, p. 330, emphasis mine). This analysis could focus on any dyadic or triadic relations between all six components of the system, and also on the system as an entire unit. According to Foot (2014), the strength of this theoretical model lies in how it allows researchers to “move beyond whatever the most immediately apparent dyad of components is in a particular case (e.g., a doctor and a patient) and seek to identify how the other components are present and influencing the situation” (p. 332, emphasis mine).

Hence, a richer understanding of any activity can be arrived at as the focus of analysis is shifted from one focal point (the subject) to encompass the network of relations as reflected
in the interaction between the various components in the system. For example, apart from,
say, a tool mediating the subject, there could be a mediating influence of a tool on one of the
rules (e.g., a sociocultural convention in communication) or any other component in the
system.

Barab et al. (2002) shows us an example of how such an enriching perspective might be
possible in the context of the impact of technological tools such as the computer on human
activity:

With respect to the role of computers, for example, activity theorists are concerned with
how these tools mediate the relations between participant and object. Therefore, it is not
simply the human-computer (participant-tool) interaction that is fundamental to
understand, but the participant-object interactions as mediated by the computer that
become crucial (Kuutti, 1996). This perspective expands the unit of analysis from the mind
of the individual (as in traditional cognitive research) or from the human-computer
interaction (as in traditional human-computer interaction research) …, to the entire
activity. (Barab et al., 2002, p. 79, 80, emphasis mine)

In Barab et al.’s explanation, we see how one component – the participant – interacts not
just with the object, but more importantly, how the introduction of a tool – the computer –
mediates the participant-object relation. In Lei’s study (2008), in which he categorized into
four main categories the writing strategies he found among the Chinese EFL learners in his study, it was found that there was *interaction* between the strategies, which helped the writers to achieve their goals. Commenting on the finding from the AT perspective, he remarked that …every element (e.g. mediating artifacts) interacts with other elements in activity systems. Hence, strategic mediation of each mediator also interacts with that of other mediators. Through interactions between various types of strategies, Henry and Jenny could mediate their writing processes and realize their writing goals more efficiently and effectively. (p. 232)

In my study, I used the theoretical lens offered by this concept of mediation in AT, to examine how the use of a web-based peer review platform (a tool) mediates the other components in the system and also the subject-object relation. Yamagata-Lynch (2003) offers a fuller explication of this mediated action between the different components of the system:

Mediated action entails the subject, object and tool mutually instigating an interactive process of meaning making. The subject, object, and tool have a synergistic relationship, *in which each of them can mediate each other* and affect the entire activity… Therefore, mediated action is a transformation process not only for the subject but also for the tool and object. (pp. 101, 102, emphasis mine)
As the use of a web-based platform for peer review is a fairly recent innovation in the use peer feedback, it is important to investigate its impact on the entire activity system of the L2 learner responding to and using teacher and peer feedback on his writing. Specifically, it would be of interest to investigate how a new tool changes or transforms the action of responding to and using feedback through its influence on the rules, community and division of labour components in the system. For example, it would be of interest to researchers to know how the use of this new tool may affect the traditional division of labour between teacher experts and fellow/peer learners; how it may affect the rule of the cultural convention of politeness/issue of ‘face’ in face-to-face interaction in traditional Chinese culture; and how it may affect the ‘rule’ of the supremacy of the teacher/higher status of the teacher in educational settings. In other words, it would be of interest to know how this new tool may mediate the subject-rules, subject-community and subject-division of labour relations in the activity system of responding to and using teacher and peer feedback on writing of the L2 writer.

3.5 Learner agency in Activity Theory

What distinguishes sociocultural theory from the earlier behaviourist paradigms is the recognition that cognition is not the result of a deterministic exchange between external stimuli and internal responses within the human brain, but rather, entails a fundamentally social and cultural process. Central to this paradigm shift is the acknowledgement of learners as individuals and hence, the importance of the concomitant concept of learner agency.
Encompassed in the concept of learner agency are related concepts such as learner motives, history, orientation towards task such as perceived roles in peer interaction tasks, and individual differences including personality and habits. These explain why learners, when faced with the same task or engaged in the same action, may be involved in a different activity (as defined in AT) altogether. Haneda (2007) expressed it thus:

instead of acting alone, in a cultural vacuum, individuals within this theoretical perspective are seen as agents who engage in goal-oriented actions with cultural tools, both symbolic and material, as members of a particular sociocultural community. Further, since individuals’ actions are energized by their own underlying motives, even when they are seemingly engaged in the same action, they may, in fact, in carrying out a given task, be engaged in different activities/practices… (p. 304, emphasis mine)

The reason why these learners, who appear to be involved in the same action, are in fact on different trajectories has to do with the fact that they are individual agents. As such, they are endowed with the power to act according to their own volition, and not according to some deterministic logic between the stimuli in the learning environment and the learner’s brain. As Lantolf and Pavlenko put it, “As agents, learners actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning” (2001, p. 145). This conception of agency “is about more than performance, or doing; it is intimately linked to significance. That is, things and events do matter to people – their actions have meanings and interpretations. It is agency that
links motivation to action and defines a myriad of paths taken by learners” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 146). Hence, agency explains why learners can take different paths arising from their unique backgrounds and beings, even when faced with the same or similar circumstances.

AT is primarily about human agency which “helps to explain why and how people act as they do” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 238), including these different paths taken by learners. In other words, to understand better learner actions, we must look beyond the actions per se, to incorporate learner motivations and goals in any activity they are engaged in, so as to better understand the actions taken by the learner. In addition, these motivations and goals are linked to the learners’ sense of identity as learners of the target language, which influences the decisions they make in learning (i.e., agency).

In the context of responding to and acting on feedback on one’s writing, learner agency may offer a more productive lens from which to explore why one learner responds positively to feedback on his writing and acts on it while another ignores it altogether. Certain learners may choose ‘marginal participation in the target community’ (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001, p. 152) because of their particular histories. For example, a learner may choose not to adopt teachers’ feedback due to factors like time constraint, a negative teacher-student relationship, or a lack of value perceived in the proposed investment of time (see, for example, Goldstein, 2004). Conversely, another learner may not adopt peers’ suggestions given in feedback due
to the perception that the peer is not a competent guide to greater participation in the target community; the relationship between the peer and writer; or unproductive peer-writer interaction due to beliefs about what is polite or impolite to say about a peer’s work (see, for example, Nelson & Murphy, 1993). All these reasons for not adopting the feedback given may stem from the learners’ particular histories of engagement with the community of the target language, which, in turn, influence their motives or reasons in studying a second language. These reasons which are linked to a learner’s agency are important in influencing learning outcomes (Gillette, 1994). Hence, instead of investigating only the relationship between the nature of feedback and its outcome in terms of improvement in subsequent writing, it may be more productive to consider learner agency which is more likely to yield a more holistic perspective on the issue.

Agency, as it is construed in AT, is “a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with society at large” (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148). Just as learner agency may be influenced by the learner’s history (e.g., past language education or language ideologies or personal beliefs), it is equally susceptible to the current and anticipated activity that the learner is engaged in. Therefore, learner agency is not something that is static, but rather, is impacted by the current conditions that circumscribe the activity in question. In Lantolf and Thorne’s (2006) words, “within a given time and space, there are constraints and affordances that make certain actions
probable, others possible, and yet others impossible” (p. 238). For example, even though a learner may be inclined to take teacher feedback on his writing seriously owing to a positive history of engagement with the community of the target language, he may decide to ignore teacher feedback on some occasions should current factors like time constraint prove to be more pressing.

In the current study, I examined the L2 writer’s response to and use of teacher and peer feedback with the theoretical lens of AT, focusing on learner agency in the subject of analysis – the L2 writer, and investigating the connections between the act of responding to feedback and the other key components in the activity system. As Lantolf and Thorne (2006) put it, “Within a collective activity system, the actions of individuals occur at the nexus of three factors: the tools and artefacts available, the community and its understood rules…, and the division of labour in these community-settings” (p. 222).

The theoretical lens of AT allows the researcher to investigate connections within the activity system, in line with the increasing recognition that learners’ engagement with feedback, whether teacher or peer, is influenced by “a constellation of factors” (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2010, p. 184). Hence, an activity system like Engeström’s may be suited to capture this myriad of connections which may help throw light on how an L2 learner responds to and acts on feedback received on his writing.
3.6 Contradictions in Activity Theory

A central concept in Activity Theory is that of contradictions, variously interpreted as tension, conflict, difficulty, problems in the functioning of an activity system. Kuutti (1996) offers a clear definition:

Activity theory uses the term contradiction to indicate a misfit within elements [of an activity system], between them, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity. (p. 34)

These contradictions or tensions within or amongst the components of the system are far from being simply problems, drawbacks, or some obstruction in the functioning of the system. In fact, these internal contradictions offer opportunities for innovation and change and further development of the system; they are “the driving force of change” (Engeström, 2001, p. 133).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Lee (2014b), in investigating the conventional teacher feedback system in the EFL contexts in Hong Kong, surfaced the tensions and contradictions in the existing system. In doing so, she reconceptualized the teacher feedback system, introducing a new object (Mediated Learning Experience) and corresponding innovations in all the other elements in the system. This is an example of how contradictions serve as a springboard to future innovations in the system. As Foot (2014) puts it, contradictions are not points of deficiency in the activity system, but rather, opportunities for departures and new ideas, and are therefore “starting places” rather than end points (p. 337).
In another study, Hadjistassou (2016) used the concept of contradictions to investigate students’ online feedback exchanges on paper topics. This investigation illuminated the tensions experienced by these ESL learners as they sought to use feedback in their drafting process. Identifying the strategies students used to overcome these tensions to aid their learning highlights the potential of using understanding contradictions in an activity system and leveraging on them to generate productive learning activities.

In the context of responding and acting on feedback on one’s writing, the potential contradictions are issues which have been surfaced in the literature regarding both teacher and peer feedback. Some issues of concern for teacher feedback are: the danger of text appropriation (Rollinson, 2005; Zhao, 2010), the multiple roles that teacher plays in giving feedback (Muncie, 2000; Reid, 1994) and understanding of teacher feedback (Zhao, 2010). More recently, the institutional context in which teacher feedback is given has also been surfaced as an issue which has great influence on the practice of giving feedback on students’ work (Lee, 2008a; Lee, 2014b; Lee et al., 2017). Two key issues in peer feedback surfaced in the literature have been encapsulated in the terms, ‘the L2 factor’ and ‘the cultural factor’ (Hu & Lam, 2010, p. 374), the former pertaining to L2 learners’ relatively lower language proficiency (compared with L1 learners) and the latter, cultural concerns such as preference for teacher feedback among Chinese learners.

In my study, I examine the L2 writer’s response to and use of teacher and peer feedback with the theoretical lens afforded by the AT concept of contradictions as I observe if there are tensions within components and between components in the system. For example, there may be tension between the preference for teacher feedback (rules) and writer as author
(division of labour) wherein the issue of text appropriation may be seen; or between teacher as expert (division of labour) and time constraint (rules) wherein the effectiveness of teacher feedback may be investigated.

3.7 Complementarity between the Activity Theory framework and the multiple case study method

This theoretical framework which comprises mediators such as community, rules and division of labour apart from Vygotsky’s original mediators of tools and signs, ties in well with a qualitative methodology such as the case study; in particular, a “multiple instrumental case study” (Creswell, 2012) research design where two key factors, the L2 factor and the cultural factor (Hu & Lam, 2010) in the study of peer response could be investigated in relation to contextual factors which affect the effectiveness of teacher feedback. As highlighted by Goldstein (2004), feedback is affected by “a unique constellation and interaction of variables – contextual, teacher and student” (p, 203), and with studies by Storch and Wigglesworth (2010), Hyland (1998), and Conrad and Goldstein (1999) bearing testimony to the complexity of understanding the whole issue of what happens when an L2 writer processes and responds to feedback, a more multi-dimensional approach such as the case study, where the focus is on understanding the “why” and the “how” of a phenomenon, is well suited to capture the influence of various factors which affect what may or may not motivate an L2 writer to respond to and act on the feedback given.
Some examples of factors found in the above studies are: teacher’s own beliefs, teacher’s assumptions about students’ attitudes or motivation, or what students already know or the teacher-student relationship (Goldstein, 2006; Hyland, 1998), the tension within the teacher between being authoritative and authoritarian (e.g., Muncie, 2000); and from the student’s perspective, time constraints, the student’s beliefs, the lack of content knowledge, (Goldstein, 2006), the student’s understanding of his role in directing revision, in contrast with the teacher’s (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999). The data from Hyland’s study (1998) show that “the use of teacher written feedback varies due to individual differences in needs and student approaches to writing” (p. 255), including prior experiences that students bring to the classroom. Goldstein (2006) suggests that “we need to look at each student and his or her context individually if we are to give optimal feedback to all students” (p. 203). Hence, it seems that to get a good grasp of how an L2 learner deals with feedback, we need an instrument which allows us to go beyond external concerns such as the characteristics of the feedback or the outcomes of the feedback, to encompass the individual learner and the teacher, as well as what they bring into the feedback-vision process from the contexts they operate in.

I have shown in this chapter the earlier paradigms which precede that of the Activity Theory which serves as the foundation of the proposed study. I have also explained the key concept of learner agency, and the complementarity between this theoretical framework and
the research methodology adopted in the study – the multiple instrumental case study. In the
next chapter, I discuss the appropriateness of this research methodology for the study.
Chapter 4

Methodology

In the literature review chapter, I argued that a new theoretical framework is in order in any research that seeks to investigate teacher and peer feedback with a holistic perspective and also, that a research methodology which allows for a consideration of contextual factors is necessary. Hence, the gap points to the need for a research methodology which would complement the adoption of a new theoretical framework. In the previous chapter, I delineated such a framework – the Activity Theory. In this chapter, I explain the rationale behind and describe the methodology chosen for this present study – the case study research design. I explain how the case study is set up in this study, followed by a description of the research site, detailing components such as the participants, the course, the assignments, the timing of feedback. I then describe the data collection methods, the sources of data, the timeline in collecting data and also the features of the web-based peer review platform used in the study. Finally, I explain the procedures used in the analysis of data, detailing both the general inductive approach and the use of specific concepts from Activity Theory in the cross-case analyses, and the plan of triangulation of data. I end with describing the trustworthiness of the present study and the ethical considerations adhered to throughout the research process.
4.1. A case study research design

One important gap in the research has been the lack of a holistic approach in investigations into feedback, both teacher and peer feedback, so far. To address this issue of the need to go beyond discreet aspects of the phenomenon of feedback, to encompass a larger picture with the learner as an active agent in responding to feedback and also to consider contextual factors, a methodology which allows for multiple sources of data focusing on the L2 writer’s response to and use of feedback on writing is in order. In other words, a research design which makes it possible for the researcher to consider “feedback within the whole context of learning and on the learner’s role in interpreting and using feedback” (Hyland, 2010, p. 181), in contrast with earlier studies which focused on disparate aspects such as impact of feedback on subsequent revisions (e.g., Yang et al., 2006) or student attitudes towards peer and teacher feedback (e.g., Ren & Hu, 2012), using quasi-experimental or questionnaire-based methodologies which do not take into account contextual factors.

With the above considerations in mind, the case study methodology appears to be the most appropriate. According to Creswell,

“A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection” (Creswell, 2012, p. 465).

It is a qualitative research methodology which focuses on an individual being, object or entity and aims to maximize our understanding of it through collecting and organizing
various sources of data. In the present study, the object of study is the L2 writer’s response to and use of teacher and peer feedback on writing. The case unit is made up of four writers, bounded by different proficiency levels in writing.

The extensive data collection is drawn from multiple sources of data. According to Yin (2014), there are six types of data: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts. Using multiple sources of data allows the researcher to “corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 2003, p. 87), achieving “the development of converging lines of inquiry, a process of triangulation and corroboration” (Yin, 2009, pp. 115, 116). With the triangulation of data from various sources, some “objectivity” may be arrived at even when only one case is studied because the evidence is drawn from multiple sources of data, which makes it possible to have rich data and thick description. Such data triangulation “helps to strengthen the construct validity of [the] case study” (Yin, 2014, p. 121).

Apart from a consideration of contextual factors, the need for a more in-depth study of students’ response to feedback has also been raised by researchers such as Min (2006) and Cho and colleagues (Cho et al. 2006a; Cho & Schunn, 2007): “Future research can involve retrospective interviews with student writers to examine their own revisions and discuss the effects of peer review comments on their decision making” (Min, 2006, p. 136); “…it is important to look more deeply at how students revise their drafts in response to different sources of feedback…” (Cho et al., 2006a, p. 286).
The call for more in-depth studies emphasizes the need to delve into the *how* and *why* of students’ response to feedback in investigations on feedback. According to Yin (2014), case studies are the preferred method when “the main research questions are ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions” (p. 2). This is facilitated by one of the key methods employed in the case study methodology: the interview. In this present study, the key methodology used is the stimulated recall interview (Gass & MacKay, 2000). This method has made it possible for the researcher to garner more in-depth data on the learner’s process of responding to and using feedback, capturing the internal aspects of the phenomenon, rather than the external aspects such as take-up rates of teacher and peer feedback or students’ attitudes towards either type of feedback.

Another important reason that the case study methodology was chosen for the present study is the need for a research methodology that would complement the theoretical framework for the study. The third generation Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999), which expands on Vygotsky’s original mediators of tools and sign, to include additional mediators of community, rules and division of labour, ties in well with the case study methodology which allows for multiple sources of data to encompass contextual factors such as those captured in the additional mediators in third generation Activity Theory. Examples of such factors under the mediator in the activity system, “Rules”, are sociolinguistic rules of communication and time constraint in completing assignments which form part of the context of the process of responding to and using feedback on writing of an L2 writer. Data
reflecting such contextual factors may be captured more readily when more than one source of data is used. Hence, the case study methodology is well suited for garnering and investigating data to be analysed through the theoretical lens of Activity Theory.

4.2 Types of case studies

There are three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental and multiple or collective case study (Stake, 1995, 2005). The intrinsic case study involves the study of a particular case for the sake of understanding its unique/unitary character. For example, Asmussen and Creswell’s study, ‘Campus Response to a Student Gunman’ (cited in Creswell, 2007). The instrumental case study is intended to provide insight on an issue. For example, Leki’s 2007 study of undergraduates studying in a second language at American colleges. A multiple or collective case study is, in effect, an instrumental case study extended to a few cases for the purpose of illuminating a particular issue or phenomenon.

In the present study, the multiple case study was adopted as the aim of the research was to gain understanding on the issue of responding to and using written feedback on writing of an L2 writer which can be best understood by looking at more than one subject as it is the typical case that the researcher was interested in rather than any one unique case, and the typical may be more easily arrived at from a sampling of a few cases rather than a unitary case. The difference between a typical case and a unique case is that the former has characteristics unique to itself and is often studied for its own sake while the latter has
characteristics representative of a particular class/group and is often studied for its potential in surfacing these characteristics.

4.3 A multiple case study design

The “multiple instrumental case study” (Creswell, 2012) is one in which “multiple cases are described and compared to provide insight into an issue” (p. 465). The issue in the present study is the phenomenon of responding to and using feedback on writing of an L2 writer. As an instrumental case study, the multiple instrumental case study offers the possibility of “analytic generalizability” (Duff, 2008) to theoretical models more so than a single case study. The use of more than one case is a strong counterargument for critics of the case study method who point out the limitations of case studies in terms of the generalizability or rather the lack thereof of the findings of one idiosyncratic case/context. (An idiosyncratic case is one which is unique in itself and hence, has limited generalizability; for example, the case study of the language acquisition of Genie, a girl deprived of a normal childhood cited in Duff’s 2008 study). The intrinsically comparative nature of multiple case studies augments its instrumental value in throwing light on the phenomenon under investigation. Yin (2014) likens the strength of multiple cases to multiple experiments where

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4 The high degree of matches (reflected in the Turnitin report) between the text in this section and the CELC Symposium 2013 conference proceedings, “A qualitative study of second language writers’ response to and use of teacher and peer feedback - a proposal”, may be explained by my participation in this conference in which I presented the proposal for the research project of the current study.
there can be literal or theoretical replication. A literal replication is meant to predict similar results while theoretical replications are meant to predict contrasting but expected results based on initial hypotheses (p. 57). Yin’s view of multiple case studies as a replication rather than sampling design (p. 57) is adopted in this present study as having more than one case can allay the fears of the critical reader that the findings he reads about are peculiar to that particular context only. Also, the possibility of theoretical replication allows for the two key factors (the “L2 factor” and the “cultural factor”) in the study of feedback on L2 writing which have surfaced in the literature, to be foregrounded in the replication of the cases.

Combined with the strength of a thick description that a case study method offers (drawing from multiple sources of data), and set in the context of the phenomenon, case studies “have a high degree of completeness, depth of analysis and readability” and they are effective in generating “new hypotheses, models, and understandings about the nature of language learning or other processes” (Duff, 2008, p. 43). Case studies, because they focus on getting as much data as possible on the entity under investigation and the context in which it is embedded, have the potential of generating new insights and generalizations about the phenomenon in question.

4.4 The multiple case study set-up in the present study

As mentioned in Section 4.3, the two key factors (the ‘L2 factor’ and the ‘cultural factor’) in the study of feedback on L2 writing that have surfaced in the literature review may be
foregrounded in the investigation in the setting up of the cases in this case study. These factors may be “operationalized” using purposive sampling, and in this case, criterion sampling specifically, i.e., in the selection of cases. Hence, it was initially conceived that the multiple case study would be set up in the following way:

Focus on 2 key factors

(the ‘L2 factor’ and the ‘cultural factor’)

+  

Purposive sampling taking into consideration these 2 factors  

(criterion sampling)

Analytic generalizations

Figure 4.1 Rationale for adopting the “multiple instrumental case study” (Creswell, 2012)

The criterion sampling was meant to be based on the writing proficiency level of the writers (to reflect the ‘L2 factor’) and the preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback (to reflect the ‘cultural factor’). The preference for teacher feedback was chosen to reflect the ‘cultural factor’ though this is only one aspect of the factor. This is justified by its apparent importance in the literature (see pp. 53, 56). However, as only one participant in my study did not have a preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback, the research
design in terms of the setting up of the cases was modified, such that the cases were bounded by the writing proficiency level of the writers only, and hence, theoretical replication was based on this factor only. The preference for teacher feedback was not used in the selection of cases, but was nevertheless investigated through the overall strategy in gathering data.

Each case of four writers was bounded by the writing proficiency level of the writers. There are a total of three case set-ups. Each case set-up comprises four writers, of the same proficiency level in writing in two of the set-ups (Cases 1 and 2), and with mixed proficiency levels (two writers of the same proficiency level) in one of the set-ups (Case 3).

Three cases were set up as follows:

**Case 1**

A1 A2 A3 A4

**Case 2**

UI1 UI2 UI 3 UI 4

**Case 3**

UI 5 UI 6 I1 I2
Figure 4.2  Set-up of the cases in this multiple case study

There are a total of three case set-ups. Each case set-up comprises four writers, of the same proficiency level in writing in two of the set-ups (Cases 1 and 2), and with mixed proficiency levels (two writers of the same proficiency level and the other two of a different proficiency level) in one of the set-ups (Case 3). Each writer in each case was grouped with three peer reviewers of the same writing proficiency level. For Cases 1 and 2, all four writers were grouped with the same writers in the case who served as peer reviewers. In Case 3, all four writers were grouped with peer reviewers of a different writing proficiency level, but only two out of the three reviewers were also the writers in the same case. The third reviewer was a different person for each of the cases. This has to
do with the fact that there were only two writers of the same writing proficiency level in Case 3 while each writer was grouped with three peer reviewers. All writers receive teacher feedback apart from peer feedback, on the same piece of writing. The configuration of each of the cases may be illustrated as follows:

Case 1
*These reviewers came from the same class as the participants.

Figure 4.3 Configurations for peer review for the three case set-ups

The setting up of the cases bounded by the writing proficiency levels of the writer means that theoretical replication is possible across the cases, while the presence of four writers of the same proficiency level in Cases 1 and 2, and two writers of the same proficiency level in Case 3, means that literal replication is possible within each case. A literal replication is meant to predict similar results while theoretical replications are meant to predict contrasting but expected results based on initial hypotheses (Yin, 2014, p. 57). The supposition was that writers of different proficiency levels paired with peer reviewers of the same proficiency level would behave differently in terms of responding to and using teacher and peer feedback on writing. The findings for each case would therefore answer the first sub-question of the second research question, “Are there differences in the way L2 writers of different proficiency levels, respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing? If so, in what ways do they differ?”

4.5 Research Context

4.5.1 Research site

The research site was a postgraduate English language teacher training programme situated in an established teacher training institute in a comprehensive university in Singapore. In terms of the language environment, it was an ESL context, with the majority of the faculty having near-native to the equivalent of native proficiency in the English
language. The student population comprised ESL learners with varied levels of proficiency in the English language, the majority of whom having had at least 12 years of English instruction.

The programme was a twelve-month programme designed to equip ESL English language teachers with knowledge of pedagogy and research in teaching English to second and foreign language learners. The writing course that participants were enrolled in was one of various modules in the programme. The aim of the writing course was to introduce students to current theoretical models of writing underpinning recent research in the teaching of first language and second/foreign language writing and facilitate critical evaluation of writing research and instructional practices with the view to identify useful strategies in writing instruction. While teacher feedback was a regular activity in the course, peer feedback was administered for two out of the three assignments for the course.

4.5.2 Participants

4.5.2.1 Student participants

There were 12 participants, 11 female and one, male, aged 25 to 35 years, with years of learning the English language in the People’s Republic of China ranging from 10 to 22, with seven participants ranging from 13 to 18 years. They were English language teachers teaching English at the undergraduate level or the equivalent, in their home country, and came from various parts of the country. They were enrolled in the programme between 2014 and 2015.
The majority of the participants came from the inland provinces in China (Sichuan (6), Shanxi (1), Chong Qing (1), Hubei(1)). The remaining three were from Beijing, Hebei and Hainan. From the questionnaire administered at the beginning of the study, it was known that seven out of the twelve participants had previous experience of peer feedback in a writing class but none in the form of multiple drafts. All except one preferred teacher feedback to peer feedback. As English language teachers in their home country, they had experience giving face-to-face feedback on students’ writing but not online feedback including feedback through a web-based platform. Through both the briefing for participants and the information sheet issued together with the informed consent form for the study, participants were fully aware that in participating in the study, they were giving feedback in the capacity of peers to fellow classmates enrolled in the course.

A culturally homogeneous group was selected as research studies (Leki, 1990; Nelson and Carson, 2006) indicate that peer feedback with L2 learners may be more effective when carried out in culturally homogeneous groups. This is because learners from different cultural groups may be expected to have different expectations in peer interaction that may militate against the productive use of peer feedback.

It would have been advantageous if participants were undergraduate non-English majors rather than graduate students who were English teachers as this group would be more representative of the average learner of English in the People’s Republic of China. Unfortunately, there was no access to such a group. There are, however, some good reasons
for the choice of participants for the present study. This specific group of participants was chosen not only because there was the possibility of access being granted, but also because it was more likely that one could find a fair number of participants with intermediate or advanced levels of proficiency in English amongst them, as they were English language teachers from the PRC. Being English language teachers who are more likely to be exposed to and receptive of non-traditional pedagogical methods from the West such as peer feedback, they are suitable subjects for this investigation as participants need to be at least open to the use of peer feedback, if there is to be a fair comparison of both types of feedback on writing. Finally, as teachers are traditionally accorded with respect and authority in the Chinese classroom, they have the potential of influencing many learners under their charge. Hence, the findings of this study would be of relevance to this increasingly important group of learners of English who form the majority of the non-native learners of English in the world (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

4.5.2.2 Teacher participant

The teacher participant in the study who gave online feedback to the student participants was trained in the field of applied linguistics. She obtained her doctoral degree from a mid-west university in the United States, specializing in second language writing. Since assuming a faculty position in a university in Singapore, she had taught courses in academic writing and research on second language writing. At the point of the study, she had eight years of
teaching experience and her typical work load then involved teaching of three courses in a semester apart from managing research projects and administrative tasks. She had prior experience of giving feedback to students’ writing via email, but not on a web-based platform.

4.5.3 The diagnostic test and diagnostic test descriptors

The diagnostic test to determine the writing proficiency levels of the participants so that they could be assigned to three case set-ups bounded by proficiency level, was modeled after the Writing Test Two component of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Potential participants were instructed to write an essay of 250 to 350 words on a topic that is relevant to the context of their home country, so as to facilitate adequate ease in writing the essay on the spot and within 40 minutes. Two topics were given so it would be likely that participants would find one that was suitable. In addition, topics were “academic” in focus as the diagnostic test was done as a culminating activity at the end of the free workshop on “Academic writing” offered to all potential participants of the research project. Also, the assignments from which data for the study was collected required that the academic register be used.

The essays were then graded based on a scoring rubric that was designed specifically for this study. It was drawn up based on the IELTS Writing Band Descriptors for Task 2. The bands were modified to reflect the typical proficiency descriptors – Advanced, Upper
Intermediate, Intermediate, Elementary – and the descriptors for the bands adjusted accordingly. As a reference with which to decide on the corresponding band descriptors for the various typical proficiency descriptors, the document, “What’s my IELTS level?” on the website, www.myieltsleader.com was referred to in designing the grading rubric for this diagnostic test (see Appendix E for the diagnostic test descriptors). Two raters, the researcher and another English Language teacher familiar with teaching PRC learners, graded the essays using this grading rubric, assigning a proficiency level to each script. A total of 20 potential participants took the diagnostic test. Out of these 20, only 12 were selected for participation in the project. Out of the 20 scripts, the raters had agreement for 14, and discussed the remaining six scripts til 100% agreement was reached. Where there was initial disagreement, it was only a difference of one band. Out of these 20 participants, 12 were selected to participate in the research project. They were placed into three cases of four writers each, based on their proficiency level.

4.5.4 The assignments

The two writing assignments that participants worked on and from which data were collected were journal reflections based on topics on writing research covered in the course on research on the teaching of writing they were enrolled in as part of the English language teacher training programme they were admitted to. The course aimed to equip students with knowledge on the theoretical perspectives on writing research and instruction and also the practical strategies to adopt in teaching writing. According to the course document, students
were expected to write about issues on writing raised in the course readings and class discussions. The journal entries could include commentary, critique, analysis or personal experience and the word limit was 750 words. In short, they were to write in an academic register, using the Reflection genre. The two assignments were graded in a course where there were three written assignments and one oral presentation assignment. All four assignments were graded. The journal reflection assignment was chosen for data collection as it afforded two rounds of peer review to be carried out, so that the period of engagement could be sufficiently long (eight weeks in total).

4.5.5 The writing and reviewing cycle

The following writing and reviewing cycle, which spanned eight weeks, was adhered to for the two assignments from which data was collected:

1. Write first draft
2. Upload to SWoRD for peer review
3. Do peer review for 3 peers
4. Consider peer and teacher feedback
5. Write backevaluation (i.e., comment on feedback by peers and teacher)
Two writing-and-revision cycles spanning eight weeks (one for each assignment with each cycle lasting four weeks), from which data was gathered increased both the richness and trustworthiness of the data, as according to Dörnyei (2007), “case studies are often at least partially longitudinal in nature” (p. 152) because of the detailed information that the researcher seeks to gather about the case. Hence, the period of one semester of engagement in the present study satisfies to some extent this requirement (the entire period of data collection, including interviews and journal entries spanned 12 weeks).

4.5.6 The timing of both sources of feedback

As already mentioned in the literature review (see section 2.9.2 Methodological issues with comparative studies), the majority of studies on peer and teacher feedback have tended to have one type of feedback given and then followed by another but on different drafts; that is, both sources of feedback were given at different times. While there have been some findings which point to some preferred sequence in the provision of feedback, the evidence
is by no means conclusive. Hyland (2000), for example, is of the view that the “imposition of a teacher focus on the peer feedback had a negative effect in terms of the commitment shown by responders and in terms of the value placed on the response by the writers” (p. 15), implying that perhaps input from peers and teachers should perhaps be kept separate. Ferris (2001), in a brief review on studies done on the effects of peer feedback on student revisions, stated, as one of a few generalizations from these studies, that “students are more likely to consider the suggestions made by their peers in constructing revisions if teacher feedback is not given simultaneously” (p. 301). For this present study, both sources of feedback were made available at the same time, so that a fair comparison may be made. In other words, there would be a fair chance of knowing whether students do indeed have a clear preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback when given the choice to choose one over the other, or whether they judge the feedback on grounds of merit/usefulness to improving their writing, regardless of the source of the feedback. Though the web-based platform afforded anonymity of the peer reviewers, participants were aware of the source of the feedback from the teacher.

4.5.7 The choice of mode of feedback and configuration of peer feedback groups

The focus on written comments rather than oral feedback/response was an attempt to focus on the process of responding to, including decision-making in response to feedback rather than the social/oral interaction in the acts of giving and receiving feedback. The mode of written feedback also allows for a more considered response on the part of the reviewer and
also the benefit of a record of the comments given, from which the writer can decide whether
to act on – that is, the focus was on the use of the feedback given. The feedback was given
in the writers’ L2.

4.6 Data collection

In line with the case study research design, multiple sources of data were collected so as
to increase the richness of the data and for thick descriptions to be made possible.

Sources of data

The following sources of data were collected: 1) Stimulated Recall interviews (based on
feedback sheets by teachers and peers; first and revised drafts), 2) Reflection in focused
diary entries (with a focus on respondents’ response to the specific peer and teacher
feedback given on the two pieces of writing from which data were collected in this study),
3) Documents in the form of first and revised drafts and reviews showing feedback by
teacher and peers, 4) A semi-structured questionnaire at the beginning of the study and 5)
semi-structured interviews at the beginning and end of study.

1 A semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix A) was conducted at the beginning of
the semester with the entire class of students from which the potential subjects of the study
were taken, before peer and teacher feedback activities were carried out. This served a two-
fold purpose – to sieve out suitable subjects for the three case set-ups in the project, and to
arrive at a profile of the group from which the sample was taken, so as to set the investigation in context. Respondents who held negative views towards peer feedback would not to be selected as they would not be suitable subjects for the case study. One would expect from them, a skeptical attitude which would militate against any active engagement with peer feedback. This scenario would then render the comparison between peer and teacher feedback invalid. The results of the questionnaire showed that none of the respondents had negative views towards peer feedback and only one respondent did not prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback and hence, the initial plan to use both the writing proficiency level and the preference of

1 The high degree of matches (reflected in the Turnitin report) between the text in this paragraph and the CELC Symposium 2013 conference proceedings, “A qualitative study of second language writers’ response to and use of teacher and peer feedback - a proposal”, may be explained by my participation in this conference in which I presented the proposal for the research project of the current study.

feedback as bases on which the cases were to be bounded was not possible. Hence, the three cases set up for the study were bounded by the writing proficiency level of the writers only. All 12 respondents selected for the study had positive attitudes towards peer feedback.

1Semi-standardized interviews (Berg, 2004, p. 79) (see Appendices B1 and B2) were conducted with the 12 participants at the beginning (ranging from 15 to 25 minutes) and end of the study (ranging from 20 to 40 minutes) to investigate attitudes towards and past experience of peer and teacher feedback. These interviews were different from the
stimulated recall interviews which formed the key methodology used (more on this in the next paragraph); and served a different purpose. Interviewees were not questioned about specific decisions in their revision process, but rather more general questions exploring their experience of and attitude/opinions about the use and potential of both teacher and peer feedback in the learning of writing, the reason for their preference or lack of preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback, were posed. The interviews at the end of the study were meant to see if respondents had changed in their views after one semester’s experience of having both teacher and peer feedback on their writing.

1The high degree of matches (reflected in the Turnitin report) between the text in this paragraph and the CELC Symposium 2013 conference proceedings, “A qualitative study of second language writers’ response to and use of teacher and peer feedback - a proposal”, may be explained by my participation in this conference in which I presented the proposal for the research project of the current study.

1Stimulated recall/retrospective interviews (Gass & Mackay, 2000) (see Appendix C) formed the key methodology used in investigating in-depth the subjects’ response to and use of peer and teacher feedback. According to Gass and Mackay, the rationale for using stimulated recall stems from the assumption that some concrete reminder in the form of an object would facilitate the recollection of the mental processes involved in a particular event:

It is assumed that some tangible… reminder of an event will stimulate recall of the mental processes in operation during the event itself. In other words, the theoretical foundation
for stimulated recall relies on an information-processing approach whereby the use of and access to memory structures is enhanced, if not guaranteed, by a prompt that aids in the recall of information. (p. 17)

Hence, with the aid of physical cues or prompts, a learner may be able to recall the original situation in which an event took place, through the use of stimulated recall.

According to Ericsson (2002), “The least reactive method to assess participants’ memory of an experience is to instruct them to give a retrospective report” (p. 984). Echoing Ericsson, Dörnyei (2002) states that the stimulated recall method is “the least reactive of all the introspective techniques, because the targeted thought processes are not affected by the procedure in any way” (p. 149). Brown and Rodgers (2002) also highlight that “If the process is quite deliberate…, then these may be language use tasks which are deliberate enough and conscious enough for reporting the steps of mental processing to be realistic” (p. 73).

Learners’ response to and use of peer and teacher feedback may be considered one example of such language use tasks. As far as was possible, participants were interviewed within 48 hours after they had responded to the feedback given and made changes to their
first drafts. It had been reported that recalls prompted a short period after the event (48 hours in general), were 95% accurate (Bloom, 1954, cited in Gass & Mackey, 2000, p. 18).

There are three types of stimulated recall: consecutive, delayed, and non-recent (Gass & Mackey, 2000). The one chosen for this study was consecutive recall as it has the greatest potential in terms of reliability of data since respondents are called upon to recall whatever their thoughts were when doing the activity under investigation immediately after the event. Ericsson and Simon (1987, cited in Gass & Mackey, 2000) have argued that

retrospective reports on the immediately preceding cognitive activity can be accessed and specified without the experimenter having to provide specific information about what to retrieve…This form of retrospective verbal report should give us the closest approximation to the actual memory structures. (p. 50)

In other words, the argument is that retrospective reports are sufficiently reliable as a source of data on what has gone on in the subject’s mind, without the need for the researcher to provide prompts. However, in this study, interviewees were shown the initial and final written products (i.e., drafts one and two of assignments one and two) and the reviews showing peer and teacher feedback as stimuli, and asked about their responses to the feedback they received on the first drafts of their writing, including their reactions (acceptance/rejection), their decisions about whether to use the feedback in their second
drafts and the reasons behind those decisions and the changes they made (see Appendix C for interview questions).

For both types of interviews (semi-structured and stimulated recall), participants were given the option to express themselves in their first language, i.e., Mandarin, thus removing the potential negative effect of learner proficiency on the quality and quantity of the data collected. However, being English language teachers themselves, most of the participants chose to speak in English in the interviews. Typically, the interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

**Focused Diary Entries/Reflections** in which participants were asked to reflect on the experience of receiving peer and teacher feedback on their writing, commenting on how they felt and what they did, formed an added source of data on the internal process of responding to and deciding on whether and/or to act on feedback given on writing. These entries served as a supplementary source of data to provide information that might not have been captured in the stimulated recall interviews, given the potential drawbacks of the “subjectivity in the researcher’s recording and interpreting of the data” (Hall & Rist, 1999, p. 298). Other potential drawbacks such as the possibility of interviewees presenting themselves in a better light than in reality owing to the pressure of appearing acceptable to the other party in face-to-face interaction; and the chance that some respondents were more comfortable recording their thoughts in writing than verbalizing them in an interview, could also be mitigated with
this supplementary source of data. In addition, according Gass and Mackey (2007), diaries are helpful in generating perspectives other than the researchers’, as they can unearth information about the learning process hidden from the researcher:

Diaries can yield insights into the learning process that may be inaccessible from the researcher’s perspective alone. Even in studies that provide a structure for the diary writers to follow…, researchers are still able to access the phenomena under investigation from a viewpoint other than their own. (2007, p. 48)

Focused diary entries offer some form of triangulation of data with the data from the key source – the stimulated recall interviews.

The examination of drafts sought to find out the kind of feedback peers gave, the kind of feedback the teacher gave, the changes made from draft one to draft two in each writing-revision cycle, how the changes were made (i.e., which type of feedback motivated the change made), whether there was any improvement (e.g., improvement in overall quality of final draft) and which changes were facilitated by peer feedback and which changes were facilitated by teacher feedback. Each draft was examined for changes made and the instances of revisions made were marked out and labeled on both drafts one and drafts two (see the section 4.11.5, “The use of quantification”, for more details). The total number of revisions were counted, and interviewees were shown drafts with these revisions marked out, in the interviews as stimuli for the stimulated recall.
The following table shows the amount of data gathered for each of the five sources of data (Table 4.1). This illustrates the attempt of the researcher to arrive at a thick description of the phenomenon under investigation, as espoused in the case study research methodology.

**Table 4.1 Types and amount of data collected**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of data</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stimulated recall interview</td>
<td>19 hours 38 minutes 20 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-study questionnaire</td>
<td>12 questionnaires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview (beginning of study)</td>
<td>3 hours 6 minutes 3 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview (end of study)</td>
<td>6 hours 36 minutes 32 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused diary entries/Reflections</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First drafts (2 assignments)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second drafts (2 assignments)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer reviews (2 assignments)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher reviews (2 assignments)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.7 The affordances of the web-based peer review system, SWoRD**

SWoRD (now called Peerceptiv; see [http://www.peerceptiv.com/wordpress/](http://www.peerceptiv.com/wordpress/)) is an online peer review system developed by the University of Pittsburgh. This web-based peer review
system allows for multiple peer reviewers, including instructor/teacher reviewer. This means that a student-writer can obtain up to six peer reviews and one instructor review on one piece of writing, at the same time. There is also the option to ensure anonymity of peer reviewers, which was adopted for the present study. Finally, one affordance of this system, called “backevaluation” allows the writer to respond to feedback given, in the form of comments, which was also adopted in the present study. This affordance promoted writer engagement with the feedback as it elicited some written response to the feedback on the writer’s writing.

4.8 Time line for data collection

The data collection took place over the course of a semester spanning 12 weeks. The researcher obtained permission from the instructor of the course the participants were enrolled in, to approach them for recruitment into the study. To ensure that participants were adequately acquainted with the activity of peer feedback, a brief training session was conducted early in the semester, before the actual data collection commenced. A timeline of the data collection is shown below:

Table 4.2 Time line for data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 3    | • Met potential participants  
      |   • Conducted pre-study questionnaire  
<pre><code>  |   • Invited students to free workshop on academic writing (where diagnostic test for purpose of determining the writing proficiency) |
</code></pre>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>level of participants would be conducted)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 4 (in class) | • Conducted briefing on how to do peer feedback  
|   | • Issued instructions on how to upload writing drafts and give feedback on peers’ writing using SWoRD |
| 4 (outside of class) | • Conducted recruitment exercise through workshop on academic writing  
|   | • Conducted diagnostic test (for purpose of identifying writing proficiency level of participants) |
| 5 | • Briefing on participation in research project for participants  
|   | • Informed consent forms signed and collected  
|   | • Conducted semi-structured interviews  
|   | • Participants wrote Draft 1 of Assignment 1 |
| 6 | • Peer and teacher feedback given on Draft 1, using review function on SWoRD  
|   | • Participants read reviews at end of the week, and wrote backevaluations |
| 7 | • Participants wrote Draft 2 of Assignment 1  
|   | • Conducted Stimulated Recall interviews once Draft 2 was completed |
| 9 | • Participants wrote Draft 1, Assignment 2  
<p>|   | • Participants wrote Reflections on Assignment 1 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Peer and teacher feedback given on Draft 1 of Assignment 2, using review function on SWoRD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants read reviews at end of the week, and wrote backevaluations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/12</td>
<td>Participants wrote Draft 2 of Assignment 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conducted Stimulated Recall interviews once Draft 2 was completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Participants wrote reflections on Assignment 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13, 14</td>
<td>Conducted semi-structured interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.9 Training for peer review

In Week 4 of the course, participants were given brief instructions on how to give peer feedback. A brief explanation of what peer review is and its benefits was given, followed by instructions on how to give peer feedback and guidelines in the form of guided questions for giving feedback in the areas of content, organization and language (See Appendix D). Some examples of feedback given in these three areas were shown. The training was an attempt to ensure that participants would be adequately prepared to give feedback and thus would more likely take the exercise seriously, thus rendering the data more reliable.

### 4.10 Data Analysis

#### 4.10.1 The inductive approach to data analysis
In line with the spirit of qualitative research, the main approach adopted in the data analysis was inductive, iterative, data-driven and open-ended. Stimulated recall interviews were the key source of data from which within-case descriptions were made. Memos were written as the audiotapes were listened to repeatedly and appropriate parts transcribed. The end-of-study interviews and reflections were also referred to in writing the within-case descriptions. The pre-study interviews were referred to where appropriate. In Mackey and Gass’ (2005) words, the researcher examined “the data for emergent patterns or themes, by looking for anything pertinent to the research question or problem” (p. 241). The within-case descriptions were derived using this approach.

While in principle, the researcher looked out for emergent patterns in the data, it was not contradictory for her to have some preliminary ideas about what to expect. According to Duff (2008), “Although qualitative data analysis is typically inductive and data driven, the codes may also be anticipated before analyzing the data (a priori codes), given the topic of study, the research questions, and the issues likely to be encountered” (p. 160).

In the present study, the “a priori codes” can be said to be the two key factors identified in the literature – the “cultural factor” and the “L2 factor” – which were kept in mind as the researcher scoured the data for emergent patterns. Hence, any references to the peers’ proficiency and the participant’s preference for teacher feedback were readily taken note of. However, adopting an open approach, the researcher also kept in view interesting data that might not have been linked to the research questions or literature review. For example, in
some cases, the theme of the negative affective impact of peer feedback (that is, strong negative reactions to critical feedback received) emerged even though it was not anticipated prior to the data collection. This open approach was similarly adopted for the cross-case analyses.

Data from each writer in each case were analysed to establish emerging themes (see Appendix F) first in within-case analyses, before carrying out cross-case analyses between the three case set-ups.

Due to constraints in resources, only the researcher was involved in analyzing the data from the interviews. However, the audiotapes were listened to repeatedly while memos were written and appropriate parts transcribed. This process occurred recursively, in line with the spirit of qualitative research and ensuring that the data were processed several times. Hence, the researcher had established some level of intra-rater reliability.

4.10.2 The use of Grounded Theory in within-case and cross-case analyses

Grounded theory was used in the within-case and cross-case analyses – as a method of data analysis, rather than a research methodology. According to Charmaz (2000), grounded theory methods seek to arrive at possible tentative theoretical explanations of data before arriving at more definitive conclusions: “grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (p. 509).
It is for the reason of arriving at “analytic generalizations” (Duff, 2008, p. 49) – which may be said to be similar to “theoretical frameworks” – that this method was chosen. While it may not be possible to generate some theoretical model since only one factor (operationalized in the proficiency level of participants) was used to set up the cases, some generalizations on how an L2 learner responds to and uses both teacher and peer feedback on his/her writing may be generated from the data in this study.

There are two main strands in the school of grounded theory: systematic/objective grounded theory as espoused by researchers like Strauss and Corbin (1998); and constructive grounded theory as espoused by researchers like Charmaz (2006). The former is more formalized/formulaic, with prescribed steps for analyzing the data (as shown in the terms – open, axial and selective coding) while the latter is more open-ended, subjective and intuitive, as it believes in the interaction between the researcher and the researched in how the data is interpreted. In line with the more open-ended approach espoused in this study, the latter strand was adopted, as this approach is more open, less constricted and therefore, also more in line with the emphasis on contextual factors in this study, the need for which has been highlighted as a gap in the literature.

Using Charmaz’ more open approach, the primary data from the stimulated recall interviews were scoured for recurrent themes, from which the basic within-case descriptions were written, supplemented by data from the reflections and end-of-study and pre-study
interviews. The process was iterative, with a constant moving back and forth between the raw data and the memos written on the data, till it appeared there were no more emerging themes. Thus, the within-case analyses and descriptions were derived before proceeding to cross-case analyses, as recommended by case study researchers (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). As described by Creswell, the procedure in analyzing multiple cases should begin with detailed description of each case which forms the basis of comparisons across cases based on recurrent themes: “…a typical format is to first provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, called a within-case analysis, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis…” (p. 75).

Once the within-case descriptions were established, the case descriptions were scoured for emergent, recurrent themes across the cases to derive the cross-case analysis. However, the process was not as linear as is usually assumed as emerging themes across cases surfaced even as within-case descriptions were being arrived at. These themes (Appendix F) were captured in memos which were revisited as the cross-case analysis began. For example, even as within-case descriptions were being written, an emerging theme was that of preference for teacher feedback or the lack of it. For the stage of cross-case analysis, three key concepts from Activity Theory were also used.

4.10.3 The use of Activity Theory concepts in the cross-case analyses
The three key concepts from Activity Theory which informed the cross-case analyses were: mediation, agency and contradictions. The concept of mediation was the theoretical lens used in analyzing the data which would answer the first research question, “How does the use of a web-based peer review system affect the process of responding to and using feedback on writing for L2 learners?” The within-case descriptions were examined to see if there were instances where the tool – the web-based peer review system, SWoRD – mediated the following relations in the activity system of responding to and using feedback on writing: the subject-rules, subject-community and subject-division of labour relations.

The concept of agency was the theoretical lens through which data surfaced with regard to the first sub-question of the second research question, “Are there differences in the way L2 writers of different proficiency levels, respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing? If so, in what ways do they differ?” Agency was reflected in the decisions participants made in response to the same two sources of feedback they were given. Data were examined to determine if there were differences between the three case set-ups with writers of different proficiency levels as they were compared with regard to the level of independence in their revising behaviour, in the cross-case analysis. The level of independence in revising behaviour reflects agency or individuation in the writers’ response to and use of feedback on writing.
When this research project was conceived, the idea of independence in revising did not figure in my conception of how the data might answer the question of how second language writers respond to and use peer and teacher feedback on their writing. However, as I began analyzing the data, the theme of independence in revising emerged as I worked on the data from the case of Advanced Writers. This theme is in line with the concept of learner agency from Activity Theory. Subsequently, I continued in the same vein as I considered the data for the other cases with writers of different proficiency levels.

For the second sub-question of the second research question, “Is there indeed a preference for teacher feedback as reported in the literature among second language writers? If so, does this preference translate to a greater use and effectiveness of teacher feedback?”, the concept of contradictions from Activity Theory was the theoretical lens from which the data regarding the issue of preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback were interpreted. The concept of contradiction connotes ideas such as “misfit”, “misalignment” or “contrary to expectation”. With this theoretical lens, the data surfaced unexpected findings with regard to the impact of teacher feedback, given the confirmation of the preference for teacher feedback in this sample group.

4.10.4 Triangulation of data

While different types of triangulation have been identified by research methodologists (theoretical, methodological, investigator, data – e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), the most
common definition of triangulation is that it involves “the use of multiple, independent methods of obtaining data in a single investigation in order to arrive at the same research findings” (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 181). In this study, there was a deliberate plan to ensure the triangulation of data through supplementing the data from the key method of data collection with other sources – namely, data from the stimulated recall interviews were supplemented by data from the focused diary entries/reflections; and the drafts of writing and peer and teacher reviews showing the feedback given. It is possible that significant data regarding how the respondents responded to and used feedback on his/her writing might have been inadvertently missed in the stimulated recall interviews. Hence, analyzing data from these interviews together with data from the reflections, the researcher could arrive at a more complete picture of how the participants responded to and acted/did not act on the feedback given on his/her writing. Similarly, information regarding participants’ response to peer and teacher feedback garnered at the interviews was corroborated (or contradicted) by the actual changes made on the drafts. Quantitative analyses of the drafts and peer and teacher reviews helped to corroborate findings from the interviews and reflections. For example, in some cases, while the respondent declared a preference for teacher feedback, an examination of the revisions made in the drafts showed a heavier influence from peer feedback on the revisions made. Through such triangulation of data, the internal validity of this multiple case study was thus increased. This is an important way to assure the critic of the case study method that there is a reduced chance of the findings from the study being
idiosyncratic in nature. In Duff’s (2008) words, “both insider (emic) and outsider (researcher/analyst) perspectives of phenomena” (p. 143) were incorporated to arrive at “a triangulation of data”. In other words, the ‘emic’ perspective of the participant reflected in either interviews or questionnaire is triangulated with the ‘outsider’ perspective of the researcher; for example, through the examination of the drafts. Strengthening the internal validity of this case study meant that the possibility of analytic generalizability of the findings was enhanced.

4.10.5 The use of quantification

As mentioned in the previous section, triangulation of data included the use of quantification in part of the data analysis. It was applied in the counting of the number of revisions that had arisen from either source of feedback or a combination of sources, in the examination of drafts (see Appendix G for an example). Also, first and revised drafts were holistically evaluated with scores assigned so as to determine if revisions made led to an overall improvement in the quality of writing. “Quantification can play a role in both the generation of hypotheses and the verification of patterns that have been noticed” (Mackey and Gass, 2005, p. 182). It was, therefore, hoped that quantification used in the examination of the first and second drafts might yield some patterns regarding the relative influence of teacher and peer feedback and their impact on improvement in quality of writing. A comparison between the three cases with different proficiency levels, in these aspects, was made in the cross-case analysis.
4.10.6 The grading of drafts and the grading rubric

As mentioned in the previous section, some measures of quantification were carried out, such as the grading of drafts for each assignment, so as to determine if there had been an improvement in quality of writing after the writer had made revisions based on feedback received on his/her writing. This information in terms of improvement in scores was used together with the data from the interviews, peer and teacher reviews and reflections in the cross-case analyses, to generate comparisons between the three cases bounded by proficiency level.

The grading rubric for evaluating the drafts was designed specifically for this present study. It was adapted from the critical thinking scoring guide in Blattner and Frazier’s study (2002, p. 63) for the critical thinking component; and the band descriptors in the IELTS Writing Task 2 for the components on coherence/cohesion, grammatical accuracy and academic register components (see Appendix H). A critical thinking component was included as the writing assignment required a critical evaluation of sources read.

The grading of the drafts was carried out by the researcher and the same experienced language teacher familiar with PRC students, who was involved in the diagnostic exercise at the beginning of the study. Both hold Master’s degrees and have more than fifteen years of experience teaching English to second language learners, including PRC students. For the standardization exercise, both raters graded a set of five scripts from the same class of students that the participants came from, but were written by those not involved in the
study. The raters graded the five scripts independently. There was a 100% agreement between both raters in terms of the band (see Appendix G on band descriptors of the four bands in the grading scheme) awarded to all five scripts. However, in terms of the ranking of the scripts, they differed on the ranking for Scripts Number Two and Five (that is, one rater ranked Script Number Two as higher than Script Number Five, while the other rater ranked them the other way round). The two raters negotiated the score for one of the scripts such that both raters finally agreed on the same ranking order of the scripts.

Subsequently, the raters graded 24 drafts one and 24 drafts two for both of the assignments from which data were gathered. The average of the scores for each draft given by both raters was calculated, and the improvement in scores (if any) from draft one to draft two, was thus derived for all participants.

4.11 Trustworthiness

One key criticism that has been levelled at the case study research design is the risk of the data and conclusions of the study being “idiosyncratic” or having limited relevance and reliability since they may well have arisen from singular contexts or circumstances to be of any value to the field of knowledge in question, or to the public at large. Researchers supportive of the use of the case study such as Creswell (2007), Duff (2008) and Yin (2014), however, argue that case studies can exhibit a different kind of rigour which renders it a respectable and reliable research design. On the issue of generalizability, Duff proposed the concept of “analytic generalizability”:
Most case study researchers do not hold generalizability to populations as an achievement or desired goal…However, many do argue that analytic generalizability (i.e., generalizing to theory or models as opposed to populations) is both possible and desirable. (p. 176)

In the present study, the focus on two key factors in the research on peer review – the ‘L2 factor’ and the ‘cultural factor’ – has helped to enhance the potential relevance of the “analytic generalizations” (Duff, 2008) of the conclusions of the study. Also, in accordance to Duff’s advice, the use of multiple case studies augments the potential generalizability of the findings of the study. The choice of 12 writers set up in three cases bounded by their writing proficiency level, enhances the potential relevance of the findings regarding the response to and use and feedback on writing of L2 writers. Stake (2005) also advocates the use of multiple case studies, recognizing that they are instrumental in nature: “They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing about a still larger collection of cases” (p. 446).

Apart from the use of multiple case studies, the deliberate plan for triangulation of data through the collection and analysis of multiple sources of data (see section 4.11.4 Triangulation of data) adds to the rigour of the study. Also, as prescribed by Creswell (2007), a prolonged engagement with the case study participants over the 12 weeks in a semester, with four rounds of interviews, one writing workshop-cum-recruitment meeting, one brief training session on giving peer feedback, and one briefing for potential participants where
the research project was introduced and the pre-study questionnaire was conducted and one briefing for participants of the study after the selection process, helped to promote a stronger engagement on the part of the participants and a trusting relationship between the researcher and the participants.

Finally, care was taken to ensure a high degree of objectivity and reliability in the data collection process. First, in carrying out the stimulated recall interviews, the researcher planned the interviews such that they were conducted, as far as was practicable, given the participants’ schedules, within 48 hours. Where it was not possible (a minority), they were conducted well within a week after the revision of drafts. Second, participants were informed that they had the option to respond using their mother tongue, Mandarin, so as to increase the validity of the data in minimizing the effect of lack of proficiency in English. However, most of the participants chose to respond in English, with only one or two using Mandarin only at certain parts of the interviews. Participants were also assured of confidentiality; in particular, that their views with regard to peer and teacher feedback, would not be shared with the instructor of the course they were enrolled in.

With regard to the grading of the diagnostic test scripts and the first and second drafts of both assignments from which data were collected, care was taken to have more than one rater (two raters were used), and due standardization procedures in grading were carried out (see Sections 4.5.3 and 4.10.6).
4.12 Ethical considerations

Throughout the whole research process, the researcher paid attention to adhering to standard ethical guidelines (e.g., Creswell, 2007; pp. 230 – 232) in carrying out the research project.

At the stage of recruitment of participants, the researcher explained clearly the purpose of the project, assured confidentiality and anonymity, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendix I for the Informed Consent Form). They were assured that their participation was purely voluntary and no member of the class would be put at any disadvantage for not participating in the study. To administer the diagnostic test for the purpose of recruiting participants, the researcher arranged to conduct a workshop on academic writing to which the potential participants were invited. The test was carried out as part of the workshop, as an opportunity to practise the skills taught at the workshop. The researcher gave feedback on the writing for the benefit of the participants, whether or not they were selected for participation in the study.

At the start of each interview, the participants were reminded that whatever they said would be held confidential. Pseudonyms were given to the participants in the reporting of the data. All data collected in the study – interview recordings, manuscripts of drafts and focused diary entries, records of feedback on writing, questionnaires – were stored on external storage devices while processing and accessing of data was done on a password-
protected computer. All data collected were used for research purposes only. Only the researcher has access to the data.

In order not to disrupt the natural flow of the class, data collection in terms of the drafts of assignments was done according to the pre-determined schedule of the class. No extraneous requirement outside of the course requirements was imposed on the members of the class, including the participants.

As a gesture of reciprocity, the participants were each given a book voucher, and also editorial assistance for two pieces of writing after the completion of the data collection for the present study. Also, at the end of the study, they were invited to a celebration party to thank them for their cooperation and participation in the study. All 12 participants remained till the end of the study and all turned up for the party, a testament of the trust established between the researcher and the participants, which helped ensure, to some degree, the willing participation of the participants and the quality of the data gathered.

4.13 Summary

In this chapter, I explained my choice of the case study research design, and specifically, the decision to carry out a multiple instrumental case study. I described how the multiple case study was set up. I delineated the research context, giving details on the research site, the participants, the course they were enrolled in, and the assignments they
wrote from which data were collected. The sources of data collected, the data collection methods and approach in data analysis were systematically described. The chapter ended with an explanation of measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and the ethical guidelines adhered to throughout the research process.
Chapter 5

The mediating influence of SWoRD on the other components in the activity system

Overview

As detailed in the chapter on the theoretical framework, three key concepts from Activity Theory were used as theoretical lenses through which to examine the data garnered in the case studies: mediation, agency and contradictions. In this first chapter on the results, the theoretical lens used is the concept of mediation and I will be presenting data which address the following research question:

*RQ1 How does the use of a web-based peer review system affect the process of responding to and using feedback on writing for L2 learners? (Mediation)*

In the next two chapters, the other two concepts inform the analyses of the data which address the following research question with the attendant sub-questions:

*RQ2 How do second language learners respond to and use peer and teacher feedback on their writing?*

a) Are there differences in the way L2 writers of different proficiency levels, respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing? If so, in what ways do they differ? (Agency)
b) Is there indeed a preference for teacher feedback as reported in the literature among second language learners? If so, does this preference translate to a greater use and effectiveness of teacher feedback? (Contradictions)

For the first research question and the second sub-question of the second research question, I will be presenting the activity system of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing of an L2 writer with which the reader may understand the data discussed (See Figure 5.1, p. 186).

5.1 The activity system of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback of an L2 writer

In Figure 5.1, the activity system of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback of an L2 writer is presented, using the six components of the human activity system in Third-generation Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999). Using data from the present study, the constituents of each component are filled out. To illustrate, the subject in this activity system refers to the L2 writer engaged in the activity of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback to achieve the goal (object) of improving his/her writing from Draft One to Draft Two and eventually developing his/her ability to write in the target language. The outcome of this activity is the improvement of his/her writing from Draft One to Draft Two, and his/her development as an L2 writer. The ‘Tools’ refer to artifacts (both physical and cultural) used to achieve the subject’s goal. In this case, apart from
MEDIATING ARTEFACTS/TOOLS

SWoRD
- Written language
- Consulting other peers (oral)
- Resources outside of feedback
- Other peers’ papers
- Research articles
- Course modules (by teacher of this course or others)

SUBJECT
L2 writers

OBJECT

OUTCOME
- Development of students as L2 writers
- Improvement in quality of draft

RULES
- Sociolinguistic rules of communication (politeness/"face")
- Cultural value of high status of teachers/preference for teacher feedback
- Course requirements
- Assignment requirements
- Number of assignments
- Time constraint

COMMUNITY of reviewers
- Teacher expert
- Advanced proficiency reviewer
- U. Intermediate proficiency reviewer
- Intermediate proficiency reviewer

DIVISION OF LABOUR
- Teacher as expert
- Peers as fellow learners
- Peer as expert
- Writer as author

Figure 5.1 Activity system of an L2 writer responding to peer and teacher feedback
written language, research articles and other peers’ writing, the use of the web-based peer review system (SWoRD) is a key component worthy of serious investigation, as it is a relatively new tool in this activity of using peer and teacher feedback. The ‘Rules’ refer to norms, conventions or requirements governing the activity. In this case, the sociolinguistic rules of communication such as the Chinese cultural value of ‘face’ (Nelson & Carson, 2006; pp. 46-48) and the cultural value of high status accorded to teachers are prime examples of conventions governing this whole process of responding to and using feedback on writing. The ‘Community’ refers to individuals or groups who share the same goal. In this case, it refers to the 12 participants of the study who are categorized according to their proficiency level. Finally, the ‘Division of Labour’ refers to the roles of the different members of the community. The traditional role of the Teacher as Expert and the role of the Writer as Author are the commonly understood roles in the division of labour. The roles of Peer as Fellow Learner and Peer as Expert are the less than expected ones which have surfaced in the data. The established relationship between them is: the Teacher is expert and in a superior position vis-à-vis learners which include Writer as Author, Peer as Fellow Learner and Peer as Expert.
5.2 The concept of mediation in Activity Theory as applied to the activity system of responding to and using feedback on writing

A major contribution of first generation Activity Theory is Vygotsky’s concept of mediation (1978), which posits that all human activity is mediated by an artifact, even as the subject seeks to achieve a goal. In third generation AT, the concept of mediation is understood in the context of collective activity systems comprising six key components- subject, object, artifacts (tools and signs), rules, community and division of labour (Engeström, 1987, 1999). In the activity of receiving feedback on one’s writing, mediation may be investigated between the different components in the system. To illustrate, one may ask the following questions: how does the use of the written form of feedback (Tool), mediate the subject’s response to and use of feedback to improve his writing; or how does the time constraint that students face in completing assignments (Rule) mediate the subject’s response to and use of feedback?

In this chapter, I will focus on the mediating influence of the web-based peer review system (SWoRD) used in this study (Tool) on the activity systems of the 12 participants in responding to and using feedback to improve their writing. Specifically, I will be documenting from the data how this new tool, SWoRD, changes or transforms the action of responding to and using feedback through its influence on the rules, community and division of labour components in the system. For example, I will illustrate how the use of this new tool has affected the ‘Rule’ of the cultural convention of politeness/issue of ‘face’ in face-to-face interaction in traditional
Chinese culture; the ‘community’ of lower proficiency reviewers; the traditional division of labour between teacher as experts and peers as fellow learners; and the traditional division of labour between teacher as experts and peer as experts. In other words, I will delineate how this new tool has mediated the subject-rules, subject-community and subject-division of labour relations in the activity system of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback of the 12 L2 writers in the study.

5.3 The affordances of the web-based peer review system (SWoRD)

As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, the web-based peer review system, SWoRD (now called Peerceptiv), is a peer review system, which allows for multiple peer reviews to take place alongside teacher review. The key features of this system are: it is anonymous, it allows for simultaneous feedback from multiple peer reviewers and teacher reviewer, it provides room for the writer’s response to feedback given (in the format of a “backevaluation”). In presenting the data in the rest of the chapter, I will be considering how these affordances of the system have impacted the participants’ process of responding to and using feedback on their writing.

5.4 The mediating influence of SWoRD on ‘Rule’ (the issue of ‘face’)

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One of the key benefits of this system is that it eliminates the dynamics of the face-to-face interaction of peer feedback, which may be a hindrance in peer review for L2 learners (Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Villamil & Guerrero, 1998). In particular, Chinese learners are often concerned with the issue of ‘face’ which militates against honest expressing of one’s opinion, for fear of causing the other party embarrassment, something that is taboo in collectivist cultures such as the Chinese culture (Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 1998; 2006). For example, in a face-to-face peer review setting, Carson & Nelson (1996) reported that the following scenario was fairly common: The Chinese students hardly gave feedback and when they did, it was done with much caution so as not to engender any disharmony in the group through disagreement or criticism (p. 1).

This issue of ‘face’ is one key aspect of the ‘cultural factor’ identified by Hu and Lam (2010) as one of two major impediments in the use of peer review with L2 writers, the other being the ‘L2 factor’. Hence, by eliminating the potential of causing embarrassment to the writer in face-to-face interaction, SWoRD has the potential of uncovering the potential benefits of peer feedback for Chinese learners who may be generally reluctant to embrace this pedagogy. It is, therefore, of interest to investigate how the use of this platform for peer feedback (Tool) mediates one of the other components in the activity system – the cultural belief/value of ‘face’ (Rule).

The negative reactions to feedback received, which may potentially militate against a productive use of peer feedback given, are observed in writers from all three of the case set-
ups bounded by proficiency level in this study. This negative affective impact of negative peer feedback is shown in the following quotations from writers of varying proficiency levels:

*I felt very depressed* when I first looked the feedback because there were so many negative comments about my writing. (Upper Intermediate Writer 2 Reflection 1, emphasis mine)

When I read this [i.e. the reviews] for the first time, *I felt very very sad for the whole night* … it’s too sad for me to start to revise. (Intermediate Writer 1 Journal 1 Interview, emphasis mine).

At the very beginning when I read the feedbacks, actually I didn’t expect there will be so much, so many words, sentences and at the first sight, *I was a little bit disappointed with myself*… (Intermediate Writer 2 Journal 2 interview, emphasis mine)

I just leave it away for about 2 days after I read the reviews so that I can re-read it with new vision. You know, whenever you finish your own writing, just feel as if it is the best one in the world and you feel you are reluctant to make any changes to it and also after I read the peer review, *I just feel a little bit harsh at first sight* … I just calm down, I just step away from it and after 2 days, all those negative feelings just fade and then I can just read it more objectively. (Advanced Writer 4 Journal 2 Interview, emphasis mine)

As can be observed in the above quotations, regardless of the proficiency level of the writer, it is possible for these second language writers to be so emotionally affected by the negative
Comments on their writing to render the feedback ineffectual initially, at least. The issue of ‘face’ is highlighted here, through its absence rather than presence. In the non-face-to-face context of this web-based platform, the negative affective impact of negative peer feedback was clearly observed (as shown above). This negative affective feedback would not have surfaced if peer reviewers had been hesitant to express their critical comments on the peer’s writing honestly, out of a sense of the need to preserve ‘face’. However, in this study, the fact that such negative reactions had been elicited showed that the participants were not behaving according to the usual habit of Chinese learners who would be mindful to not cause the other party to lose ‘face’. The following quotation bears witness to this issue of ‘face’ in Chinese culture: “Before, back in China, I had rare opportunities to experience peer feedback. According to our traditional culture, we do not usually directly point out other people’s mistakes. We usually say something euphemistically” (Upper Intermediate Writer 2, Reflection 1).

When the above participant referred to Chinese students “usually say[ing] something euphemistically”, she was describing the characteristic Chinese behavior of avoiding honest but negative comments in social interaction which is in keeping with the Chinese cultural value of preserving harmony (and hence, the need to avoid causing embarrassment or offense to one’s listener).
The use of SWoRD has been observed to mediate this issue of ‘face’ in that honest, even highly critical comments had been made by peers on this anonymous platform. In fact, the extent of such critical comments was such that their negative affective impact was observed among writers of all three proficiency levels (that is, in all three case set-ups). This means that regardless of the proficiency level of the writer (and the reviewer), the web-based platform has mediated the issue of ‘face’ in the feedback received by these writers.

The following are some examples of the critical comments given by reviewers of various proficiency levels:

From my perspective, there are too many paragraphs in this journal, it may looks kind of chaotic. (Intermediate Writer 1, Journal 1 Review, Peer Reviewer 3, Upper Intermediate Level)

In the second paragraph, your main idea is about the importance of “genre approach”. So I think that the sentence like “For example, product-based approach and procedure-based approach to ESL/EFL writing instruction gained popularity respectively in 1970s-80s”, which is about development history of genre approach and seems irrelevant with its importance, may be deleted. (Upper Intermediate Writer 2, Journal 1 Review, Peer Reviewer 1, Upper Intermediate Level)
This journal gives a good summary of genre-based writing teaching. Literature are reviewed adequately. However, the reflection on scarce research on EFL context or China context is somewhat unfounded. More evidence is needed for author to claim so. Or a narrower claim might be better. (Advanced Writer 4 Journal 1 Review, Advanced Peer Reviewer 1)

The impersonal nature of the system (made possible by the anonymity of reviewers afforded by the system) has mitigated the fear of offending one’s peers with critical comments on their writing, which led to the emergence of such comments, the effect of which is captured in the quotations above. If these writers had merely been affected by the negative affective impact of such comments and not gained anything from them, then the mediating influence of SWoRD on the issue of ‘face’ in Chinese culture (Rule), would have been futile. While it may be true that honestly negative feedback from peers, though potentially insightful, may have too dampening an effect on the writer, to effect any positive change, an analysis of the data for these four cases (as shown in the above quotations) showed that good had come out of the negative experience of unpleasant, even “harsh” feedback from peers. I will present two cases for illustration.

*Case of Wei*
In the case of Wei (Intermediate Writer One) who appeared to be most affected by the negative feedback, it was observed that something positive had arisen from her experience of the negative feedback.

Reflecting on her response to the feedback given to her in Journal 2, she commented that she had changed her approach in addressing the feedback this time round:

I tried to figure out the problems, especially about the content and organisation and I think maybe it’s the one I want to change most and spend a lot of time to think and to read [my paper] myself. I don’t think my changes are all directly connected to any feedback, or maybe some of the feedback, *it makes me to think and to read again… to read more carefully and to read from the reader’s perspective.* (Journal 2 Interview)

She clarified that instead of seeking to address every single piece of feedback and make revisions according to the suggestions, this time round (that is, the second time in this study), she tried to focus on what she thought was important and needed revisions. When asked why she changed her approach, she said: “I can’t do something that meets everybody’ satisfaction” (Journal 2 Interview).

A sense of frustration may be detected in this line which is confirmed by her elaboration that this time round, though she felt she had come up with a good draft one, still there was a lot of negative feedback. Hence, she felt she could not be addressing every single piece of feedback. Ironically, this sense of discouragement had caused her to be more focused and think harder about which part of draft one she would like to change. The resultant impetus for
her to be more critical about her writing and the feedback received surely is a positive spin-off of the entire peer review activity. This effect of stimulating critical thinking has been observed in some other studies on second language writers (Yang et al., 2006). What is noteworthy here is that this is possible even with writers of relatively low proficiency level. The positive impact of these comments may be further supported by the improvement shown in her drafts: she had a percentage improvement of 6.5 from draft one to draft two (See Appendix J).

Case of Qiao

Qiao (Advanced Writer Four) could acknowledge the benefit of the peers’ feedback on her writing eventually despite the potentially dampening critical feedback on her writing. The relevant episode to illustrate this finding involves a revision regarding the conclusion of the second journal. Reflecting on how she responded to the feedback, she said:

I just leave it away for about 2 days after I read the reviews so that I can re-read it with new vision. You know, whenever you finish your own writing, just feel as if it is the best one in the world and you feel you are reluctant to make any changes to it and also after I read the peer review, I just feel a little bit harsh at first sight … I just calm down, I just step away from it and after 2 days, all those negative feelings just fade and then I can just read it more objectively, and then if I just reread my last conclusion and I see, ya, there is only one sentence, you cannot just expect the reader to know everything in one sentence. So I think I should just rework on it. (Journal 2 Interview, emphasis mine)
It is noteworthy that even for advanced writers who should be fairly confident as writers, the issue of the negative impact of harsh comments still exists. However, after a “cooling off period”, the writer was able to look at the negative feedback more objectively, and benefit from valid comments given (as reflected in the last few lines of the quotation). This cooling off period is made possible by the web-based format of the peer review activity and the anonymity of peer reviewer afforded by this tool. The impersonal and non-face-to-face context means that the writer could choose to “withdraw” from the activity without negative social consequences and then return to it after she had dealt with her negative reactions and when she could be in a better frame of mind to evaluate the value of the critical feedback given.

Commenting on her experience with peer review on this platform at the end of the study, the writer said:

...this peer review exercise I have realized the value of it and how much wealth and empowerment I can get from candid suggestions through interaction with my peers.

(Reflection 1)

I am pretty happy with the changes I have made. It is a valuable learning experience by offering me a second chance to judge my own writing from more objective views.

(Reflection 2).

But one thing of most importance is that firstly I should ignore those negative comments without any attitude and focus on the constructive suggestions. (Reflection 2).
The first quotation mentioned above underlines the value of a web-based platform in allowing peer reviewers to give feedback *freely* on their peers’ writing. The second quotation illustrates the reflective/critical stance on one’s writing that this peer review activity promotes and third quotation highlights the cooling off period which allows the writer to recuperate from the negative affective impact of negative feedback, that a web-based platform makes possible. To elaborate, the web-based platform which allows for easy access at any time, makes it possible for the writer to initially “reject” the feedback given, and then return readily to it, when the initial raw impact of critical comments has subsided. The positive impact of the feedback is supported by the improvement shown in her drafts: she had a percentage improvement of 9 from draft one to draft two (See Appendix J).

On a concluding note, it seems that another strength of the web-based peer review platform is the anonymity of reviewers that it affords. In the words of one of the participants:

> by utilizing this wonderful computer software, it aims to carry out peer review in an anonymous way. Hence, peers could feel comfortable when comment on somebody’s draft without knowing whose paper is. Moreover, the writers also have no idea who gives these responses. *We could express our opinions freely.* (Upper Intermediate Writer 5, Reflection 1, emphasis mine)

### 5.4.1 Discussion

The key findings discussed in this section are: 1) the negative affective impact of negative peer feedback on the participants is evidence that the web-based platform for feedback had
mediated the issue of ‘face’ in the peer review activity; 2) the positive impact of the negative peer feedback on participants was made possible through the non face-to-face and anonymous nature of the web-based platform for feedback.

The issue of ‘face’ and ‘the cultural factor’

The issue of ‘face’ may be considered one of those among “a complex of cultural and social differences” (Hu & Lam, 2010, p. 374) between L1 and L2 students which explain why peer feedback, which originated in an L1 context, may not be as effective in an L2 context. This issue may be considered characteristic of Chinese learners who belong to collectivist cultures where it is important to maintain interpersonal harmony and hence, it is often considered taboo to give critical comments freely (Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Nelson & Carlson, 1998; 2006), even with the intention of helping the other party improve. This issue of ‘face’ is one aspect of ‘the cultural factor’ which embodies a host of social and cultural differences between L1 and L2 learners which might militate against a productive use of peer feedback with L2 learners.

Issues arising from ‘the cultural factor’ may be amplified when peer review is carried out in a face-to-face context. The findings of Villamil and De Gurrero’s (1996) and Nelson and Carson’s (1998) studies illustrate this point. The former studied the face-to-face interactions of 27 pairs of Puerto Rican students engaged in peer review, while the latter investigated a mixed group of Chinese and Spanish-speaking students’ perceptions of interactions in peer response groups. While the former reported positive findings of successful collaboration
between the students, the latter found that “The Chinese speakers frequently refrained from speaking because of their reluctance to criticize their peers, and claim authority as readers” (p. 127).

On the other hand, the Spanish-speaking students in Nelson and Carson’s study focused on the task at hand, which was to help their peers improve their essays, and were not concerned about maintaining group harmony. This is in contrast to the Chinese students, the behaviour of whom was interpreted thus by the researchers:

We interpreted this need for consensus as part of the Chinese students’ perceived need for harmonious group relations. These Chinese students, then, appeared reluctant to speak because of not wanting to embarrass the writer and wanting to create and maintain harmonious group relations. (p. 45)

Villamil and Guerrero attributed the positive results in part to the Puerto Rican’s cultural value of cooperation and teamwork, while it was highlighted in the second study that Chinese learners had a different cultural value (the need to maintain social harmony) which made peer review less effective for them. Hence, it should be recognized that in face-to-face peer review, the cultural dimension of giving feedback cannot be ignored. What the findings of my study have uncovered is the potential of web-based peer review systems to circumvent this cultural impediment, such that the potential of peer feedback may be unlocked. This is illustrated in the discussion in the next three sub-sections.

*The negative affective impact of critical peer feedback*
While such web-based systems may be able to unleash critical comments which may be highly constructive to improving peers’ writing, the negative affective impact of critical feedback still exists, whether a face-to-face or online medium is used for peer review. This is illustrated in the quotations of the participants’ negative reactions to negative peer comments, as shown in Section 5.4. It is this issue that I will consider in discussing the next study.

In Nelson and Murphy’s 1992 study of four ESL learners engaged in peer review, it was recognized that the group dynamics in such writing groups could be more complex than recognized, and potentially problematic:

Results indicated that students in this group were successful in the task dimension … However, the social dimension of this group was less successful, as indicated by a preponderance of attacking, critical responses about students’ writing … and by the negative responses to these comments. (p. 187, emphasis mine)

The negative affective impact of critical feedback is an issue that needs to be addressed if peer feedback is to be a productive activity. Elaborating on the root cause of such a phenomenon, the writers remarked thus: “One’s writing is an intricate part of one’s self and an attack on writing often constitutes an attack on self. An unsupportive social climate, as illustrated by this study, can lead to defensiveness or withdrawal” (p. 189). Other studies have highlighted similar concerns with the impact of negative/critical feedback on the writer:
“Receiving feedback and discussing it face to face can be a challenging process which, without careful management, can turn into confrontations” (Mutch, 2003; p. 37).

The challenge of delivering negative feedback to peers which can potentially turn into a face-threatening situation is also highlighted in a study by Cartney (2010). The negative affective impact of critical peer feedback was shown in my study as illustrated above. However, because the peer review was not carried out in a face-to-face context, it was possible for “defensiveness or withdrawal” to be dealt with more effectively, as shown in “the cooling off period” practised by the participant, Qiao, mentioned above. Hence, the positive impact of the negative peer feedback on Qiao was made possible through the non face-to-face medium of the web-based platform. How writers deal with negative/critical feedback in a non-face-to-face context is worthy of further research.

*An alternative peer review system versus face-to-face peer review*

One important difference between a web-based peer review system and traditional face-to-face peer review is the interaction involved in the review process. As highlighted by Nelson and Carson (2006):

However well the students are trained and however well the peer review session is structured, though, a significant factor in the effectiveness of peer response is the contextual element of the interaction of the group itself and the quality of that interaction. (p. 43)
The web-based system for peer review used in this study is a written/non-face-to-face format where face-to-face interaction is removed. Apart from the anonymity afforded by the system which mediated the issue of ‘face’ for Chinese learners, the written format of peer review is also leveraged with the use of this platform. The fact that the participants who had suffered from the negative affective impact of critical peer feedback, could subsequently benefit from the critical yet insightful feedback had in part to do with the medium in which the feedback was given – the written format. It allowed the writers receiving the feedback time and space to process the feedback without being clouded emotionally by the complexity of the oral interaction in face-to-face peer review, making possible “cooling off” periods as illustrated by the participant Qiao.

The complexity of and potential problems with the interaction in peer response groups is shown in various studies (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Nelson & Murphy, 1992, 1993; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). The various stances adopted by learners were shown to impact the efficacy of the peer review (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger, 1992). The study by Min (2008) showed that a more collaborative stance after training in peer review led to better revision quality. These studies emphasize the complexity of oral interaction during peer review and how it might impact subsequent revisions. Another study by Min (2006) which tracked the impact of trained peer review on student revision focused on peer written feedback. It yielded very positive results regarding the impact of peer feedback on subsequent revisions. The researcher
commented thus on the format of the peer review activity: “…peer written feedback appears to be a more fruitful approach to grappling with the exact relationships between peer comments and revision strategies and writing outcomes than peer (oral) response groups” (p. 133).

This is supported by the finding in my study where the written format was leveraged and could possibly explain how the participants were able to benefit from the negative feedback despite the initial discomfort of receiving such feedback.

The affordance of anonymity of the web-based peer review system

The affordance of anonymity made available by the web-based platform for peer review has the potential to unlock the benefits of peer feedback by circumventing this cultural impediment of ‘face’ to productive peer review, through the anonymity afforded by a web-based platform for peer review such as the one used in this study. As shown in the data of the present study, the anonymous nature of peer feedback has mediated this impediment of ‘face’ (part of the cultural factor in the use of peer feedback) in removing the potential social discomfort that L2 writers might experience in the activity of peer review. This finding echoes those of other studies.

A recent study with Turkish learners investigating undergraduates’ perceptions of anonymous and open digital peer feedback shows evidence of the importance of anonymity afforded by web-based peer review systems. In the study with 60 learners in an EAP context, it was found that “EAP learners prefer both receiving and providing feedback anonymously
and anonymity seems more important when providing peer feedback” (Razi, 2016, p. 86). In addition, “… anonymity in peer review provided better quality feedback” (Razi, 2016, p. 86).

The interview data from the study revealed that these participants from a Turkish university share similar concerns with Chinese learners about offending one’s peers in giving honest but critical feedback. Here are some of the reasons given for preferring anonymous peer feedback:

“It is more objective, as we do not know who is giving the feedback.”

“In anonymous peer review, I think we hide our emotions along with our identities.”

“In the case of open peer review, I could not criticize effectively to avoid hurting my friend’s feelings.”

“No one criticizes his/her best friend’s paper truthfully.”

(Razi, 2016, p. 85)

This concern about ‘face’ in giving honest but critical feedback is not confined to Chinese learners (though the cultural value of ‘face’ is a well-known characteristic of Chinese), as shown in the findings of Razi’s study. It has also been mentioned in an L1 context, that this concern about not offending one’s peers may also be present among some L1 learners. According to Freedman (1987), pedagogical activities requiring students to critique peer writing often fail because critiquing peers’ work is contrary to the social norms among students of not criticizing other students in the presence of a teacher. McLeod (1999) noted that e-feedback allowed students to express their true thoughts and hence be more honest in responding.
More recent researchers have also highlighted the contribution of anonymity in promoting greater ease in giving feedback to peers, in particular, critical feedback. Ching and Hsu (2016) show the link between anonymity and ‘psychological safety’ and how creating psychological safety promotes greater ease in giving feedback: “Anonymity has been used to improve psychological safety in the peer feedback activities, aiming to create an environment that students feel more comfortable to offer critical and constructive feedback” (p.107). Yang and Tsai (2010) have also highlighted this advantage of anonymity in a web-based environment which allowed students “to freely express their ideas and thoughts about other students’ work without restrictions of time and location” (p. 73).

5.5 The mediating influence of SWoRD on ‘Community’ (issue of proficiency level of peer reviewer)

The ‘L2 factor’ (Hu & Lam, 2010, p. 374) encapsulates one key concern in the use of peer feedback with second language learners: the proficiency level of the peer reviewer and the writer. In particular, the questions of whether a writer of a lower proficiency level can be effective in giving feedback to another writer of a higher proficiency level (Hu & Lam, 2010; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Tsui & Ng, 2000) and whether second language writers who are in the process of mastering the language, are able to evaluate potentially invalid feedback (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Murphy, 1993) are of great interest to researchers.

The web-based peer review system used the study has made it possible for the writers to be incognizant of the proficiency level of the peer reviewers, who have been deliberately paired
up with the writers, through the affordance of the system. This has resulted in two cases of a higher proficiency level writer not identifying immediately the feedback from the teacher and instead, mistaking the feedback from one peer (Peer Three of a lower proficiency level) as coming from the teacher. Additionally, these two writers also benefitted greatly from the feedback of peer reviewers of lower proficiency. I will now focus on these two cases as they help to illuminate the above issues highlighted under the ‘L2 factor’.

**Case of Zenn**

Zenn (Upper Intermediate Writer Five) who had peer reviewers of a lower proficiency level, declared a preference for teacher feedback at the beginning of the study but an examination of the teacher and peer reviews and the drafts showed that peer feedback had greater influence than teacher feedback in the revisions made. Notably, she acknowledged the considerable influence of one particular peer reviewer who had a lower proficiency level: “I revised my paper mostly based on your commentary” (Journal 1 backevaluation, regarding Peer Reviewer 3).

Peers influenced a total of nine revisions, while teacher feedback influenced 4 revisions for both journals. Both teacher and peer feedback influenced one major revision in each of the journals. Before she knew the source of the feedback, she treated all feedback equally. Hence, one feedback by the teacher on the need to rewrite the topic sentence for a paragraph was ignored, as she felt that the main idea in the paragraph was clear enough:
from my understanding it’s quite clear, I didn’t figure it out that something confusing maybe for readers. When I was doing my peer review, I also found that my peers’ writings really lack the topic sentence at the beginning and it’s so hard for me to find the topic sentence.

(Journal 1 Interview)

However, after realizing that this piece of feedback came from the teacher, she went back to address it. Before this, she considered one piece of feedback from two peers (one of whom was the one who was identified as the most influential), as the one that triggered the most important revision for Journal 1.

In Journal 2, what the writer considered as the most important change arose from the feedback from peers, including the most influential peer reviewer, Peer Three. The suggestions were:

“I suggest that the conclusion should be strengthened to show your thesis again which will make reader know deeper about your own viewpoint” (Peer Reviewer 3, Journal 2 Review).

“And I think if the conclusion part can be stated not so generally but more clearly, that will help the readers to clarify your argument again in the end” (Peer Reviewer 1, Journal 2 Review).

The writer’s initial reaction was: “At first, I feel confused …”, as she did not think that a short journal requires a long conclusion. However, since two peers raised the same point, she
decided to take up the suggestion, and reworked the conclusion, giving a concrete example to back up her statement, rather than just mentioning two key points by way of summarizing, which was what she did in the original conclusion.

The revised version in response to the peers’ suggestions, does appear to be an improved one:

To draw a brief conclusion, regarding the possible application of peer feedback into EFL writing class, two points in terms of the cultural factor and the pre-training session are argued to be taken into careful consideration. (Conclusion, Journal 2 Draft 1)

In conclusion, based on what have discussed in this article, it is argued here that cultural differences are likely to be circumvented by online peer feedback application and thus learners who value collectivism tend to be more critical in reviewing. In addition, pre-training could be considered as a good way to guide students to become more constructive peer reviewers. (Conclusion, Journal 2 Draft 2)

The revised version is more specific in clarifying what the cultural factor mentioned in the original conclusion is and also, in stating rather than making a tentative point about the benefit of pre-training in peer review. It is a more concrete statement than the original conclusion.

In responding to the feedback by these two peers who indicated their desire for a stronger conclusion, with the key points more clearly expressed, the writer acknowledged the reader’s
expectation of what constitutes a good conclusion. This constitutes an instance of how peers have helped a writer derive a clearer sense of audience, understanding better what the audience/reader expected in the conclusion. As Zenn had acknowledged in the interview, she did not immediately agree with the peers’ opinion, as she did not think that it was necessary to have a ‘long conclusion’ to a short piece of writing, the journal entry. However, since more than one peer reviewer mentioned their lack of satisfaction with the conclusion, she became convinced as she grasped more clearly how the conclusion came across to the reader.

Overall, the peer reviewers of lower proficiency paired up with this writer of higher proficiency, were able to give feedback on a range of issues: ordering of information (e.g., combining of two paragraphs), cohesion (e.g., topic sentence, conclusion) and language points (e.g., grammar, phrasing). Most of the language points raised by one peer reviewer (Peer Two) were taken up by the writer.

In summary, I have shown in the above example, the unexpected positive impact of having peer reviewers of a lower proficiency level. I will show yet another example in the rest of this section, so as to illustrate how this web-based platform for peer review (Tool) is able to mediate one of the elements in the activity system – peer reviewers of lower proficiency level (Community). It will also illustrate how the introduction of this tool is able to mediate the ‘L2 factor’ in the use of peer feedback with second language learners.

Case of Nan
Nan (Upper Intermediate Writer Six) acknowledged that had she not known the source of the feedback (that is, whether from peers or teacher), she would have perhaps treated all the feedback equally: “I benefit from the peers’ responses and if the system didn’t tell us which responses are the teachers and which responses are from my classmates, I think I will revise the draft in a different way...” (Journal 1 Interview, emphasis mine)

Of one particular peer’s feedback (the same as the one highlighted by Upper Intermediate Writer Five - Peer Three), she remarked thus:

The longest feedback given by my peer is very critical and comprehensive. S/he points out the lack of cohesion in my draft and the inappropriateness of citing three definitions of genre without mentioning the relation between them are quiet (unedited) insightful. His/her opinion forces me to comb the logical dots of my draft and reflect on the goal of my writing.

(Reflection 1)

In fact, this piece of feedback on the lack of cohesion between the first section of her journal and the reflection section which formed the second half of the journal, was acknowledged as the most influential piece of feedback which led to four revisions in the second draft of Journal One. This piece of feedback triggered much thinking on her part as she deliberated on how to revise her first draft. She elaborated that this feedback dealt with the overall organization of the journal, while the teacher feedback addressing this same part of the text concerned simply the link between the citation used in the first paragraph and the rest of the paragraph.
One change arising from her response to this peer’s feedback on the issue of cohesion involved picking out only the main points in the citation used, instead of summarizing all the main points in the citation, so as to sharpen the focus of her journal, and thus showing the link between the first and second sections of the journal. Another noteworthy change resulting from this feedback comprised changing the phrasing in the conclusion, so as to link the conclusion back to the sources mentioned in the first section of the journal.

Reflecting on how she decided on the revision move, she said she was attempting to figure out the organization of the paper after reading this peer’s comment, and thought that she could just remove all other sources except the one which mentions the focus of her journal. To do this, the revision would require much work (“like rewriting another draft”, Journal 1 Interview) and she was not prepared to do that. More importantly, as the teacher did NOT recommend removing the sources (but instead, simply integrating the citations rather than removing them altogether), she did not decide on removing the sources though reflecting on the peer’s feedback did lead her train of thought in that direction. However, one most telling remark she made was: if the teacher had recommended removing those sources, she would have done so and undertaken to rewrite the whole draft. What this episode clearly reveals is the writer’s preference for teacher feedback (which she did declare at the beginning of the study) but what is more noteworthy is the fact that the feedback from a peer of lower proficiency had been shown to trigger such deep thinking on the organization of the paper, which did result in four revisions.
The question to ask here is: would this writer, who had a preference for teacher feedback, have taken this peer’s feedback seriously if she had known who the peer reviewer was, and the proficiency level of the peer? In fact, the writer acknowledged that it would be “confusing how to revise” if she did not know the source of the feedback:

I trust teacher more so if I know which revise [review] is from the teacher, it helps me to decide which part to rewrite [revise]. If I didn’t know whether this response is from teacher, it will torture me to decide whether I should rewrite it or not …especially if the two responses (i.e., from teacher and peer) are contradictory. I think if we know which one is from teacher, we will mainly focus on that part. (Journal 1 Interview)

Thus, the anonymity of the web-based system had allowed the potential of peer feedback, even feedback from a writer of lower proficiency level (whose feedback would most likely be ignored if the proficiency level of the writer were known), to be harnessed, as shown in this case. In other words, the concerns about the ability of second language learners (who are far from mastering the target language) to give productive feedback in peer review, is shown to be mediated by the use of this tool – a web-based peer review platform.

While the potential of peer feedback using a web-based system is illustrated in the above examples, one might still question the capacity of second language learners, to evaluate potentially invalid feedback. This study, however, has surfaced evidence to the contrary.
Upper Intermediate Writer Six showed the capacity to discern the validity of feedback given by peer reviewers of a lower proficiency level in several instances.

To illustrate, I will present a few examples. In the first Journal, she rejected three peer suggestions and gave reasons for doing so. Two peers commented on the title:

“I am not sure the title is clearly stated and grammatical correct” (Peer Reviewer 1, Journal 1 Review).


The writer explained in the backevaluation her reasons for NOT taking up these peer suggestions:

“As for the title, I think it is grammatical correct since we seldom use complete sentence as title” (Journal 1 Review).

The title of the journal is: “What genres to teach”

The third comment had to do with the choice of terms used:

In my opinion, genre itself is distinct from genre approach. In the journal, it seems a confusion of genre and genre approach. The author should put genre approach not genre into Chinese classroom. (Peer Reviewer 3, Journal 1 Review).
The writer responded thus in the backevaluation:

This review is very critical and specific. I am really touched by the length and sincerity of the review. As for the title and the distinction between genre and genre approach, I think the commenter didn't get my point. (Journal 1 Review).

An examination of the draft did confirm that the focus of the journal does merit the title and choice of terminology, “genres” rather than “genre approach”, and as shown in the writer’s reply above, the title is grammatically correct.

Journal 2 also showed more examples of the capability of the writer to reject invalid suggestions. The first concerns the use of connectors while the second, paragraph organization:

This journal is good at reviewing the ideas of the past. But I am a little lost in the ideas in the comparison. I think some more signal words and explanations to the citations can help me to follow the flow of your idea better. (Peer Reviewer 1, Journal 2 Review)

In the second part "The synthesis of the two approaches" and the 3rd "My personal reflection" both are mentioned about the combination of the two approach. I am not sure whether this is necessary to divide into two part. (Peer Reviewer 1, Journal 2 Review)

In response to these two points about the need for signal markers and the organization of her paragraphs, the writer remarked thus:
I checked the first part of the article and I think I have used sufficient signal words to make the passage coherent and reader-friendly. So I am not sure why the reader found it difficult to follow the flow of comparison. I think the reason why I divided the second and third part into two parts is that the second part is theoretical foundation or literature review on the process-genre approach while the third part is more practical and personal.

(Backevaluation, Journal 2 Review)

An examination of the first draft showed indeed the reasonable decision of the writer to maintain two paragraphs for the second and third parts of her journal, and she had given a very good reason for doing so, as shown in the above quotation. Additionally, a reading of the first part of the journal proved to be sufficiently reader-friendly to justify her decision not to take up the peer’s suggestion to include more signal markers.

In conclusion, this writer had shown that it is possible for a writer of a higher proficiency level to benefit from constructive feedback from a peer reviewer of a lower proficiency level, and also be able to reject invalid feedback from such peer reviewers. The use of a web-based platform for peer review has facilitated the unlocking of the positive potential of feedback from peer reviewers of a lower proficiency level who would normally be disregarded if not for the anonymity afforded by such a platform. Furthermore, the possibility of invalid peer feedback being mistakenly accepted as ‘accurate’ in such a platform is shown to be ‘innocuous’ in this case.
The other writer paired up with peer reviewers of a lower proficiency level, Upper Intermediate Writer Five, took up most of the peer suggestions and did not present any instance where she had taken up invalid peer suggestions in her revisions.

In summary, in the results of my study presented above, the web-based peer review platform has been shown to mediate peer reviewers of lower proficiency level, and mitigate the ‘L2 factor’ in the use of peer review with second language writers. Peer reviewers of lower proficiency level are part of the community of reviewers in the activity system of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback of an L2 writer (see Figure 5.1, p. 186). The other members of the ‘community’ are the teacher expert, the reviewers of Advanced, Upper Intermediate and Intermediate proficiency levels. The web-based peer review system has been shown to mediate the relation between subject and ‘community’ in that the usual relationship between the subject and the ‘community’ of lower proficiency writers has been reconfigured as the potential of feedback from reviewers of lower proficiency than the writer’s is unlocked. This is contrary to the expectation that feedback from such peer reviewers would be ignored as it has come from a source deemed less competent.

5.5.1 Discussion

The key findings discussed in this section are: 1) It is possible for writers paired up with peer reviewers of a lower proficiency to benefit from the feedback given, 2) writers paired up with peer reviewers of a lower proficiency are able to reject invalid feedback from such peers.
Overview of studies addressing the issue of writing proficiency

Whether a writer can benefit from a peer reviewer with a lower writing proficiency was revisited in some studies (Allen & Mills, 2016; Hu & Lam, 2010; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Strijbos et al., 2010; Yu & Hu 2017a; Yu & Lee, 2016). While some surface expected findings that corroborate with the concerns highlighted in the ‘L2 factor’ about the capability of writers of lower proficiency to contribute productively to peer review with higher proficiency writers, others uncover unexpected findings which point to the possibility of higher proficiency writers benefitting from peer reviewers of lower proficiency. One of the first group of studies, Lundstrom and Baker’s (2009), found that lower proficiency peer reviewers benefitted more from reviewing peer papers than reviewers of higher proficiency while Allen and Mills’ found that “low proficiency reviewers are less able to provide feedback on their high proficiency peer’s writing” (p. 508). On the other hand, Hu and Lam’s (2010) statistical analysis showed that proficiency level did not affect the participants’ behavior as peer reviewers and L2 writers responding to peer feedback. Their perception as to whether their peers’ proficiency level mattered to them did not affect the number of suggestions they gave or the number of peer suggestions taken up. In Strijbos et al.’s (2010) study, the group that received feedback from low proficiency level peers improved more than those who received feedback from high proficiency peers. Hence, it was concluded that feedback by a “low competent peer” is equally effective. Yu and Hu’s (2017a) study surfaced equally positive findings about the benefits that higher proficiency writers might gain from peer feedback from lower proficiency writers. For
example, the second drafts of these higher proficiency students improved after adopting feedback by lower proficiency peers and two out of the three case study participants reported that they found they benefitted from reviewing their peers’ papers. Yu and Lee’s (2016) study illustrated how low proficiency peers might be able to contribute to the peer review activity. They gave feedback on a range of writing issues such as content, organization and style and their feedback was considered useful by their group members. This may not be surprising if one understands that writing proficiency may not capture all that writing encompasses such as the ability to generate and organize ideas and reader-awareness, which peer reviewers of lower proficiency may possess. I shall now focus on Yu and Lee’s and Yu and Hu’s studies in discussing the findings presented in this section as they provide evidence of the positive contribution of low proficiency peer reviewers grouped with higher proficiency writers. Also, Yu and Hu’s (2017a) study has surfaced the conditions in which a high proficiency writer may benefit from feedback from a lower proficiency peer reviewer.

**The mediation of the L2 factor in a web-based peer review system**

The findings presented in this section, of two writers clearly benefitting from the feedback from a peer of lower proficiency level – are evidence that the ‘L2 factor’ may be mitigated under certain conditions. This is contrary to reservations long held regarding the tenability of having a writer of a higher proficiency, learn from a peer reviewer of a lower proficiency. In Yu and Hu’s (2017a) study, the favourable condition seems to have been the motives and goals for peer feedback of the students. Two cases in the study who benefitted from peer
feedback from lower proficiency peers viewed the whole activity as a learning-oriented one, while another case where the student did not report seeing peer feedback as beneficial and showed lower gains in improvement in text quality, had negative attitudes towards peer feedback as an activity. In addition, the two positive cases “focused on the quality of peer comments rather than the English proficiency of their peer reviewers” (p. 8, emphasis mine).

Contrary to expectation, these participants who had a positive motivation in participating in peer feedback and viewed it as an opportunity to learn, focussed on whether the comments given by peers were helpful or not, instead of being prejudiced by their knowledge of the source of the feedback – peers of a lower proficiency than theirs.

In my study, the condition appears to be the affordance of anonymity of the web-based peer review system, as this facilitated a focus on the quality of the comments by peers, rather than the proficiency level of the peer reviewer. As mentioned earlier, the two cases in my study initially mistook the peer’s comments as coming from the teacher as they were focussing on the comments. This phenomenon would not have been possible without the use of a web-based platform which provided anonymity of the peer reviewers. The findings of these two cases illustrate how this web-based platform for peer review (tool) is able to mediate one of the elements in the activity system – peer reviewers of lower proficiency level (Community). This tool has altered the usual relations between the L2 writer (Subject) and the peer reviewers of lower proficiency level (Community) in that the affordance of anonymity of this tool has resulted in the subject paying attention to the feedback from this member of the community
of reviewers, despite the traditional bias against feedback from such a source. These findings also constitute evidence of how the ‘L2 factor’ (i.e., reservations about the viability of peer review with L2 writers owing to a lack of proficiency in the target language compared with L1 writers) in the use of peer feedback with second language learners has been mitigated by the use of this tool.

Range of focus of feedback by low proficiency reviewers

The current study presented two cases of peer reviewers of lower proficiency contributing positively to peer review with writers of higher proficiency. They gave feedback on a range of issues (for example, ordering of information, cohesion and language points; specifically, 23.2 % on content, 15.9 % on organization and 60.7 % on language) and for one of the cases at least (Upper Intermediate Writer Five), peer feedback had a slightly greater influence on revisions compared with teacher feedback, which is rather unexpected given the teacher-centred culture that the participants came from.

These findings corroborate those of Yu and Lee’s (2016) where three students of lower English language proficiency were investigated with regards to how they might be contributing to group peer feedback. It was found that they “commented on different aspects of writing, and though they did not have a good command of English their comments
addressed language issues (ranging from 37.5% to 70.4%)” (p. 488). Additionally, they provided about 33% of the comments from the group of 12 students, of which 76.6% were incorporated by their peers, and 88.1% of these revisions were deemed an improvement on the original versions.

Indeed, as Yu and Lee (2016) concluded, “students’ low language proficiency need not be a debilitating factor” in peer review (p. 491). Put simply, the fact that some L2 writers may have a low proficiency level (Intermediate level in the case of the current study) does not preclude their capacity to contribute positively to peer review.

*The issue of the incidence of erroneous suggestions and adoption of erroneous suggestions*

The findings of the case of Nancy in my study, where the writer of higher proficiency consistently ignored the erroneous feedback given by a peer of lower proficiency, constitute evidence that, contrary to expectations, the reservations that pedagogues have about peer reviewers of low proficiency sabotaging the whole enterprise of peer feedback when working with writers of higher proficiency level, are less grounded in practice, than thought. The finding of the current study echoes the conclusion in Patchan’s (2011) study: “Overall, there were relatively few significant effects of feedback source (i.e., whether feedback came from a writer of high or low proficiency) – suggesting that peer review is pretty safe from a receiving feedback perspective” (p. 44). It was also found that for high proficiency writers, giving feedback on high quality texts (i.e., from high proficiency writers) was equally
beneficial to giving feedback on low quality texts (i.e., from low proficiency writers). In short, there appears to be no reported disadvantage to the high proficiency writer who is involved in peer review with a low proficiency writer.

A more recent study by Allen and Mills’ (2016) with students of high and low proficiency surfaced similar findings. Their study yielded evidence that peer feedback in mixed groups in terms of language proficiency is not an issue as their investigation of the incidence and impact of erroneous suggestions given by participants regardless of proficiency level, was low (a mere 4%) and just slightly less than half of these were incorporated. Additionally, it was found that proficiency level did not influence the likelihood of giving or incorporating such suggestions. This finding is consistent with an earlier finding of 7% of “false repairs” being incorporated (Villamil & Guerrero, 1998; “false repairs” refer to erroneous suggestions being taken up).

5.6 Mediating influence of SWoRD on ‘Division of Labour’ (peer as fellow-learner)

Peers have traditionally been seen as on a par with fellow learners, and not expected nor believed to be capable of playing a similar role as the teacher in the classroom, as fellow learners are on the same journey, and do not possess superior knowledge. This is especially so in a second language learning environment, where the teacher is seen as superior and offering learners a “bridge” to the knowledge of the target language and its rhetorical conventions. Hence, the term, the ‘L2 factor’ (Hu & Lam, 2010), which encapsulates the potential objections teachers and students alike may have to the idea that learners could learn from fellow learners, even as they themselves are in the process of mastering the target
language. The research design of the present study, leveraging on the affordances of the web-based peer review system, SWoRD, has put the focus on this issue of the ‘L2 factor’, by investigating the response to and use of feedback of writers of various proficiency levels, grouped with peer reviewers of varying proficiency levels without the knowledge of the writer. In this way, it may be observed if writers behave differently when given both teacher and peer feedback at the same time, and when responding to feedback from peer reviewers of a similar or different proficiency level.

To the best of my knowledge, there has not been any study to date (see Section 2.8) in which the research design is such that both teacher and peer feedback are made available at the same time and hence, a comparison of the impact of both types of feedback, on the second language writer’s response to and use of feedback might be judicially investigated. The present study, through the use of a web-based platform, makes it possible for both peer and teacher feedback to be available at the same time, making possible such an investigation. Specifically, each writer received feedback from three peers and the teacher at the same time, before s/he was required to write and submit a second draft of his writing. In addition, the grouping of writers with peer reviewers of a particular proficiency level could also be readily determined by this platform, without the knowledge of the writers. This research design has meant that the researcher could observe how the writer responded to both types of feedback in his/her effort to revise his/her writing, and also, whether the grouping of writer and peer reviewer according to proficiency level made any difference in terms of the impact of peer feedback on
their response to and use of feedback to improve their writing. In this section, I will illustrate how the web-based system has mediated the traditional division of labour between teacher-expert and fellow learner, in that this tool has facilitated the harnessing of peer feedback from fellow learners (a non-traditional division of labour) in helping writers to improve their writing/writing ability.

One of the benefits claimed of peer review in the L1 literature is the capacity of peer feedback to stimulate thinking from the writer (Bruffee, 1984). While there is some evidence that this benefit applies to second language learners as well (Braine, 2003; Ching & Hsu, 2016; Novakovich, 2016; Tang & Tithecott, 1999; Yang et al, 2006), substantial evidence is still lacking and specific examples of how peer feedback stimulates critical thinking are scarce. In this section, I will present data from three cases of differing proficiency levels, whereby the writer showed the positive impact of peer feedback in stimulating thinking about the writer’s writing, regardless of whether teacher or peer feedback had had a greater influence on the writer’s revisions.

**Case of Wei**

The first case is that of Wei (Intermediate Writer One) who had peer reviewers of a higher proficiency level. Despite the prevailing negative reaction to negative peer feedback that this writer experienced (discussed in Section 5.4), she nevertheless benefitted from attempting to address the feedback by a peer. The peer requested elaboration on the implications of the
approach in L2 writing she was advocating in her journal: “I wonder, if you can elaborate a bit more on ‘How to organize your course’ part, it would be more reflective the journal” (Journal 1 Review).

Reflecting on this revision decision, she said: “I think my peer was helping me to find a solution...the aim of this writing/this journal...the writing purpose of this journal” (Journal 1 Interview).

As she thought about the peer’s suggestion about elaborating on the implications of her idea, it dawned on her that she could combine all three approaches she had mentioned in her essay instead of her original idea of advocating the genre approach alone. Hence, one might say she and an “Eureka moment” whereby her thinking about her argument was changed as a result of responding to a peer’s comment.

The process of revision which resulted from addressing this peer’s comment clearly points to the potential of critical thinking as an important spin-off of the peer review activity.

Case of Xiao

The next case is that of Xiao (Upper Intermediate Writer One) who had three peer reviewers of the same proficiency level. She carried out a drastic overhaul in terms of organization, in the second half of Journal 1, in response to two peers’ feedback:
“The organization is clear. If you could arrange the last part of reflection more logically or orderly, it would be better” (Peer Reviewer 1, Journal 1 Review).

“As for the reflection part, I think it can be better organized by following a logical order…” (Peer Reviewer 3, Journal 1 Review).

The resultant changes comprised six deletions, additions of topic sentences, inclusion of six to eight connectors and the recombining of separate paragraphs or parts of paragraphs to form new paragraphs (This is an example of Multiple Revisions. Please see Chapter 6 for explanation).

Reflecting on her response to the feedback, she wrote:

I have been little aware of the exact definition of being well-organised... In what aspects can we call a passage is well-organised? Of course, all agree that such things must be involved as coherence, strong logic and soon, nevertheless, all of these just seem to be meaningless signs to me before. But now, after this feedback, I do get a clearer image of being well-organised, and I can link the image to the general definition together. (Reflection 1, emphasis mine)

It seems the peers’ feedback had the effect of bringing into focus the whole issue of what good organization entails, if only because the absence of it is being highlighted in the peers’ feedback:
“All the feedback pointed out it is poor organized, it is not connected firmly so I had to change something to make it more logical.” (Journal 1 Interview)

Though this revision was triggered by peer feedback, the writer said she figured out how to improve on the organization on her own, that is, the feedback did not offer specific directions as to how the revisions should be made. As she worked on re-organising the Reflection section, she said she had to define her own idea of what good organization is:

I just want to change, want to refine it in the terms of organization. And I just define the well organization by myself, I cannot get any specific direction from the comments. I just define what is so called well organized. After rereading the whole draft again, I begin to change it by myself according to my understanding of well organized, good organization.

(Journal 1 Interview)

Additionally, it is noteworthy that she got a “glimpse” of what good organization is from reading her peers’ drafts. The peer review activity contributed to her revising process as a writer as she learned from reviewing her peers’ work:

Most of my own understanding of good organization most probably is based on my review on others’ drafts and I have read three drafts from my classmates and I also notice some problems in organization, in terms of logic and so just combine these problems with my own draft I just define what the good organization is and I try to change my own draft in
this sense…I cannot explain what good organization means, just do it consciously. (Journal 1 Interview)

It can be observed here that the feedback had triggered a process of searching for answers with regard to what good organization entails. As she had elaborated, she sought to arrive at an idea of what good organization is, partially through observing peers’ drafts. Ironically, she did not learn from looking at good examples of organization, but rather from having to experience the impact of poor organization she encountered as a reader:

If someone tells me to revise my first draft in terms of organisation directly without any other drafts to show me to learn, probably I do not know how to change it, do not know the way how I can change it but after contrasting others’ drafts, I get a little impression, I get a little idea of the way. That’s the way I make the change in my draft. Learn from other draft. (Journal 1 Interview, emphasis mine)

It is important to note that this learning from other drafts was very much facilitated by the web-based platform which required that each writer’s drafts be uploaded onto the system, from which other peer reviewers could easily access the drafts for reviewing. It could be argued that reading other peers’ drafts could have taken place in a traditional face-to-face setting for peer review, but it cannot be denied that having drafts uploaded onto an online system would have facilitated easy access and retrieval for reference when the writer is in the process of revising his own writing.
While it may be seen that peer feedback had triggered critical thinking on the part of the writer in this case, one might still question as to whether the thinking and revisions had led to any improvement of the draft. An analysis of the drafts by two raters did show a slight improvement of 3% in the overall score. (Overall, this writer was more influenced by peer suggestions and teacher suggestions in the revisions she made). This is promising, given that one cannot quantify the learning impact of having been challenged to think more deeply about one’s writing. Such learning may not be captured in the mere improvement in scores.

Case of Lynn

The last example is of a writer of the highest proficiency level: Advanced Writer Three. She had three peer reviewers of the same proficiency level whose feedback she described as having a “scaffolding effect” on her revising process. By that, she meant the peers’ feedback had stimulated her thinking, which helped her to arrive at concrete decisions about what revisions to make, even as the teacher feedback she received gave her a general direction or served as “the driving force” of her revising efforts.

Of the effect of peer feedback, she remarked that it “actually reproduce the process because [the teacher] actually reached the conclusion …my peers scaffolded me through the thinking process…about all the problems maybe contribute to the final problem mentioned by [the teacher]…” (Journal 1 Interview, emphasis mine).
She acknowledged the “thought-provoking” (i.e., stimulating thinking) effect of the peers’ feedback in the form of questions: “With the questions raised by the peers, it causes me to think more deeply/broadly how to improve your draft…opens up the space” (emphasis mine) for the writer to think on her own about how to make the changes. “The peers’ specific comments gave me the ‘clue’ to deal with the problem highlighted [by the teacher].” (emphasis mine)

Hence, in this way – by opening up space or giving her a “clue” to deal with the problem, the peer feedback provided what the writer called the “scaffolding effect” of the feedback. In other words, the peer comments provided some “handles” for her as she sought to deal with the feedback given by the teacher and how to revise her writing in response to it. The following example in Journal 2 captures this salient impact of peer feedback as perceived by the writer:

The second draft of the second journal in which the writer on the topic, “Pedagogical implication of how to give effective corrective feedback”, presents a drastic overhaul which made it impossible to count and track the total number of revisions made. The key piece of feedback which triggered this revision move was the teacher’s feedback on the length of the journal entry: “It’s too lengthy. It’s equivalent to two journal entries. Please cut down the number of words” (Journal 2 Review).
This feedback may be considered the most influential as it drove the motivation of her entire revision effort for Journal One. Her prime consideration to begin with was – “how to shorten the essay” or “which part to cut?”

Looking at the peers’ comments, she garnered some ideas as to how to trim her essay. As Peer Reviewer 3 gave a clear suggestion about the organization of the literature review, she began working on revising this section. The peer’s advice was: “… I think if the literature review part were organized in a way explaining the advantages and disadvantages of methods one after another, it would be more reader-friendly” (Journal 2 Review).

This comment elicited a reworking of the literature review. This reworking of the literature review in turn led to an overhaul of the second part of the paper – the Reflection section, which deals with the proposed solutions the writer had come up with for the problem identified.

Reflecting on how the revisions made in the literature review led to a drastic overhaul of the organization of the reflection section, she explained that initially, she began with solutions in mind and tried to look for relevant articles to back up her solutions:

But as I worked on revising my literature review in response to peer feedback, I started thinking about my proposed solutions… I realized that because the typology in my literature review is not right, it’s affected my proposed solutions so I had to change my proposed solutions in the second part of the paper too. (Journal 2 Interview)
She explained that responding to the peer’s feedback at this juncture also brought about an entire change in her approach to her paper: from working with her solutions in mind first and then finding the right articles to support them, she had now reversed the order – starting with the revised typology of corrective feedback in the literature review and letting that drive the organisation of the second part – the solutions in the Reflections section. This is an instance of how a peer comment had triggered a thought process that drastically changed the content and organization of a great part of the paper. The writer acknowledged the peer’s influence in this revision move: “Your suggestion on the structure and content of my literature review part is very insightful, and I’ve changed it…” (Backevaluation, Journal 2 Review).

An examination of the drafts confirms that the literature review begins with a revised typology of corrective feedback. In the above revision moves, the “scaffolding effect” mentioned by the writer herself in Journal 1 interview is observed. The teacher feedback set the overriding focus of the revision effort while the peer feedback supplied specific suggestions the writer could consider in the process of working on the revisions. In the writer’s own words, “…teacher’s feedback is rather short and basically tells me what to do without pointing out how to while peer feedback is very helpful in pointing out many detailed problems” (Journal 2 Reflection).

On a concluding note, it is to be noted that such a drastic overhaul in both the literature review and the reflection sections are possible only when the writer exercises great
independence in revision (Please refer to Chapter 6 on Learner Agency for more on this topic of independence in revision.).

5.6.1 Discussion

The key finding discussed in this section is that writers of different proficiency levels showed the positive impact of peer feedback in stimulating thinking about the writer’s writing.

The influence of the web-based peer review system

What I have presented in the three cases above is evidence of the salubrious effect of peer feedback which stimulates critical thinking on the part of the writer, regardless of the proficiency level of the writer and possibly, of the peer reviewer as well. In the first case, a weaker writer was grouped with stronger peer reviewers while in the other two cases (Upper Intermediate and Advanced), the writers were grouped with peer reviewers of the same proficiency level. Certainly, I am not making the case that peer review inevitably leads to critical thinking on the part of the writer and hence, it promotes learning to write, in the short term at least. What I can safely say with the evidence shown here is that peer feedback in this web-based environment has been shown to be capable of stimulating critical thinking which leads to important revisions being made in the writer’s drafts.

This salubrious effect of peer feedback is seen across the proficiency levels and in the presence of teacher feedback being proffered at the same time. This constitutes veritable proof
of the “scaffolding” (Vygotsky, 1978) that peers can provide in learning or the “near-peer role models” effect that Murphey and Murakami (1998) described in their study. This evidence might not have been that easily garnered if not for the affordances of the web-based peer review platform which remove the potential bias that learners, especially those from teacher-centred cultures, might have about the efficacy of peer feedback from peers who are fellow learners on a par with them in their journey of mastering a second language. It is reasonable to surmise that they would not have been so ready to respond to and act on peer suggestions if not for the affordance of anonymity of peer reviewers, which precluded any bias on the writer’s part with regard to the peer reviewer’s proficiency level and by implication, his capability as a reviewer. Furthermore, this salubrious effect of peer feedback took place in spite of the synchronicity of teacher feedback afforded by the web-based platform. This finding is all the more noteworthy given the common finding in the literature of a preference for teacher feedback (Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006) and the likelihood of students following teacher advice rather than peer advice due to the lower status of peers, and regardless of the quality of the feedback given by peers (Strijbos et al., 2010). Hence, it can be said that the web-based platform (Tool) has mediated the traditional division of labour in the activity system of responding to and using feedback on writing of second language writers, in that the potential of feedback from fellow learners is unlocked, as the relationship between different constituents (teacher as expert versus peer as fellow learner) under the component of ‘Division of Labour’ is mediated with the introduction of a new ‘Tool’
(see Figure 5.1). In other words, the usual relationship between teacher as expert as reviewer, and peer as fellow learner under the component of ‘Division of Labour’ which would privilege the position of the teacher as reviewer over that of the peer reviewer who is a fellow learner, is modified with the introduction of the ‘Tool’, SWoRD. The peer as fellow learner is now seen as on a par with the teacher expert as reviewer, as feedback from peers who are fellow learners are seen as of comparable value.

*The potential of peer feedback to stimulate critical thinking*

This finding of the potential of peer feedback to stimulate critical thinking is not new. Several earlier studies have mentioned this as one of the potential benefits of peer review (Berg, 1999; Mittan, 1989; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000). However, in the findings presented above, we are shown examples of how peer feedback stimulated thinking in the response of the writers to the feedback given. Commenting on the incidence of self-initiated revisions in the participants of her study, Yang et al. (2006) noted a stronger tendency for self-initiated revisions among the group who received peer feedback compared with the group which received teacher feedback. The following possible explanations were proffered:

The more they doubted the feedback, the more likely it was that they would develop their own independent ideas they had for revision…In contrast, exposure to teacher feedback seemed to reduce self-correction, perhaps because students believed that the teacher had pointed out all their mistakes and there was no need for further correction … The over-
dependence on teacher feedback is likely to lower the students’ initiative and lead to fewer self-initiated corrections in the teacher feedback group. (p. 192)

What this quotation highlights is the possible reason behind the “stimulating” effect of peer feedback – the fact that there is room to challenge it, or simply not accept it wholesale. In the words of Cho et al. (2006a): “novices tend to just accept feedback when feedback givers have higher status, whereas they tend to challenge feedback from peers or less-knowledgeable people” (p. 285).

Another possible explanation for the stimulating effect of peer feedback could stem from the way peer feedback is presented – usually in a more tentative and less prescriptive/authoritative manner, which promotes room to explore, to arrive at one’s own solution to the problem. In the case of Lynn (Advanced Writer Three), the “thought-provoking” (i.e., stimulating thinking) effect of the peers’ feedback in the form of questions was acknowledged. She said that the questions led her to think more deeply about how she should be revising her writing. In the case of Wei (Intermediate Writer One), she was responding to the peer’s polite request for elaboration on an idea: “I wonder, if you can elaborate a bit more on…”. Apparently, these peer comments elicited much thinking which led to important revisions in the writer’s second drafts.

An examination of the reviews for these three writers does confirm that peer comments tended to be more polite and tentative in tone (as shown in the prevalence of tentative/hedging expressions such as “it seems”, “I think”, “I wonder”, “may be…”, “may make”, “If you…,
the article would be way better…”) and less prescriptive in tone than teacher comments which had a more frequent use of imperatives (e.g., “State your claim and support your summarize your supporting arguments”, “please make the link clear”), questions (e.g., “Do you have secondary sources (readings) to back up your claim?) and definite-sounding words (e.g., “You need secondary sources…”).

The flip side of the argument that peer feedback stimulates thinking because it is less prescriptive is that teacher feedback tends to be prescriptive and less likely to stimulate thinking. This is because a prescriptive tone tends to discourage students from challenging the feedback given. Coupled with the higher status usually accorded teacher feedback among L2 learners, the prescriptive teacher feedback may render students more passive and dependent as learners (Lee, 2008b). Hence, teacher feedback, being more often prescriptive and coming from a sender who is accorded a higher status than peers, may not be as effective, as peer feedback in stimulating critical thinking. Some evidence of this was shown in a study which compared “nonexpert” peer feedback and “expert” teacher feedback on a web-based system (Cho et al., 2008). It was found that drafts reviewed by multiple peers “undergo significant quality improvement in both flow and insight” (p. 86, “flow” meaning readability and “insight” meaning innovative ideas reflecting creativity), which the researchers attributed to the following hypothesis being supported: “…knowledge distance between experts and nonexperts may hinder knowledge refinement” (p. 86. “Knowledge refinement” here refers to improvement in the learner’s knowledge in the area in question). Cho et al. (2008) also found
evidence of the “stimulating” effect of peer feedback: “the effect was particularly strong on the insight criterion, suggesting that multiple peer reviews are likely to stimulate creative ideas” (p. 86, emphasis mine).

The concept of “knowledge distance” between experts and non-experts referred to in the first quotation above, may be interpreted from the perspective of the sociocultural theory of learning. According to this theory, learning takes place when the learner is functioning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is defined as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers or seniors” (Vygotsky, 1978). In the above example regarding the “knowledge distance” between experts and non-experts, it could be surmised that feedback from “nonexpert peer” brought about greater improvement compared with “expert” teacher feedback because the “knowledge distance” between peers is smaller. To put it another way, the feedback by “expert” teacher might not have been within the ZPD of the learners and hence, did not bring about as great an impact.

Conversely, from the perspective of sociocultural learning, advocates of peer review have cited joint scaffolding, whereby one learner helps another, as an explanation of how peer review works. Citing the work of de Guerrero and Villamil (2000), Lundstrom and Baker (2009) commented that they “demonstrate how at times the reviewer scaffolds the learning of
the writer while at other times the writer scaffolds the learning of the reviewer” (p. 31). In other words, with peers, it is likely that learning takes place through the activity of peer review as the input/feedback provided is more likely to be within the ZPD of the learner, as compared with that provided by the expert/teacher. The case of Xiao presented earlier (Upper Intermediate Writer One) illustrated how this mutual scaffolding between reviewer and writer, can take place. The peer feedback this writer received had clearly triggered a process of searching for answers with regards to what good organization entails. In her search, she found some answers in reviewing other peers’ drafts. Interestingly, it was in taking note of negative examples of organization (or the lack thereof) in paragraphs that she reviewed, that she gathered some sense of what good organization might be, which helped her in revising her own draft.

The findings presented in this section showed the capacity of peer feedback to stimulate critical thinking on the writer’s writing, possibly because 1) the less privileged position of peers (vis-à-vis teachers) encouraged writers to have greater room to find their own solutions to the problems highlighted, 2) the less prescriptive and tentative stance of peer feedback promotes room to explore, and 3) the feedback from peers is more likely to be within the learner’s ZPD. The mediating influence of SWoRD in unleashing the potential of feedback from fellow learners is unlocked, as the relationship between different constituents (teacher as expert versus peer as fellow learner) under the component of “Division of Labour” (see Figure 5.1, p. 186) is mediated with the introduction of this “Tool”. What merits further research is
the question of the extent to which a web-based peer feedback platform encourages/stimulates critical thinking compared with a non-web-based platform.

5.7 Mediating impact of SWoRD on ‘Division of Labour’ – Peer as Expert (L2 factor)

The division of labour in the activity of giving feedback has traditionally seen the superiority of teacher feedback as the sole means of feedback on students’ writing, as it is considered “expert”. Therefore, it is deemed reliable and capable of helping students to improve in their writing. Since the 1990s, peer feedback has surfaced as an alternative form of feedback (an additional constituent of “Division of Labour” in the activity system) but has mostly been accorded by practitioners (and possibly students as well), a subordinate role vis-à-vis teacher feedback, in contexts where it has been accepted as a viable form of feedback.

Commenting on the practice of peer feedback, Lantolf and Thorne remarked that

The appropriation and appreciation for students of what might be called ‘teacherly practices’ marks a distinct alteration in the usual division of labour of educational setting.

*Being put in the position of expert* may increase the sense of knowledge and authority for participants who typically inhabit the discursive and institutional confines of a ‘student’ subject position, the entailments of which are to receive and demonstrate knowledge but rarely to act as an authority or expert. (p. 257, emphasis mine)

Given the traditional expectation that the peer is rarely tasked to act as an expert, it is reasonable to expect doubts regarding a peer’s ability to function as an “expert” in giving feedback, as shown in the kind of feedback given, and the impact of the feedback on revisions.
It is also reasonable to question if a peer could even take the place of or play the role of a teacher (that is, “expert”) in the practice of peer feedback. Hence, using the concept of mediation afforded by the lens of AT, the influence of the web-based platform, SWoRD, in mediating the relationship between Peer as Expert and Teacher as Expert under Division of Labour will be discussed.

Four writers from two different case set-ups (two writers from the Upper Intermediate - Upper Intermediate group and two writers from the Intermediate - Upper Intermediate group), reported that they did not initially recognize the sender of the feedback given by the teacher. Such episodes transpired as these participants were not so familiar with the web-based platform for peer review initially and hence mistook a peer as the teacher because the “feedback was long and specific and credible” (Upper Intermediate Writer Six, Journal 1 Interview). What this admission of the mistaken source of the feedback from the participants highlights is the possibility that peer feedback could be as ‘good’ as teacher feedback, or at least ‘good’ enough for it to be mistaken for teacher feedback. However, for more substantial evidence for the emergence of Peer as Expert with the use of a web-based system, the case of an Advanced Writer rejecting teacher feedback in favour of peer feedback will be presented below.

Advanced Writer Two had three peer reviewers of the same proficiency level. She wrote about cultural differences being an element necessary for the process and genre approaches in EFL writing pedagogy. What she considered the most important change in Draft One resulted
from her response to two peers’ comments about the lack of mention of the topic – cultural differences – in the Introduction and Literature Review sections which form the essay’s first half:

“Maybe you need to point out the in-depth relationship between cultural awareness and different approaches” (Peer 2, Journal 1 Review).

Although argument that "instruction in this approach, which usually focuses on modeling the target L2 genre, seldom includes an explanation to the differences between the two rhetorical conventions embedded in their own cultures" has been made, it is not that convincing since many teachers indeed incorporate the stark differences of rhetorical differences and logic reasons hidden behind certain language or structure use. It is suggested to be more specific in offering the evidence of present-day practices' lack in culture awareness. (Peer 3, Journal 1 Review)

Responding to the peer feedback on the lack of mention of the topic of the essay, she reflected thus:

The main point I want to make is there are different genre approaches in different cultures but in the first draft I didn’t mention it until I go to the third part, the self-reflection but I thought I should have mentioned it in the introduction and the literature review part. Actually, I have thought about it but the word limit made me cancel that part. (Journal 1 Interview)
I had thought about this before …It was just because of the word limit, I decided to cut it out. But the peers’ comments made [realize] that this was actually important …So I decided to change some content in the second draft to keep my content more closely connected to my topic. (Reflection 1, emphasis mine)

The change in the content resulted in a new paragraph (Change 4) to replace the original one and a new paragraph (Change 6) later in the text. Though the writer was aware of the point raised by the peers while writing the first draft, she did acknowledge that it was the peers’ comments which made her realize the importance of introducing this point early in the text. This shows the impact of peer feedback on her revision behavior – the peers had provided a clearer sense of the reader’s expectations. She noted on her decision to delete some part of the content (Change 4) that: “Actually the teacher mentioned this is a good point but I think if I want to elaborate this point the words will exceed that [the word limit] so I decided I will cut this out maybe the next journal” (Journal 1 Interview).

Of her decision to cut this part out apart from the concern about word limit, she said: “it is something irrelevant something not closely to the point [about cultural differences]” (Journal 1 Interview).

Here, she showed independence in making personal judgment, and rejecting teacher suggestion for a good reason. This is noteworthy given her declared preference for teacher
feedback at the beginning of the study. She had decided to take up the peers’ suggestion at the expense of the advice given by the teacher. This is an example of a peer playing the role of a teacher in that a writer had decided to take up a peer’s suggestion instead of adhering to teacher advice, which is rather atypical in a teacher-centred culture to which the participants of this study belong.

Another important source of evidence that Peer as Expert is shown in the case of Advanced Writers grouped with peer reviewers of the same proficiency is the predominant influence of peer feedback over teacher feedback in the revisions of these writers. This finding was derived from tracking the number of revisions arising from teacher and peer feedback separately; from both sources giving rise to the same revision, and the number of major revisions arising from each type of feedback (See Appendix F for an example). Peer suggestions had influenced at least two major revisions in the drafts for Journal 1 and 2, and in one case, had triggered a drastic overhaul of the paper. In contrast, teacher feedback had triggered one major revision for two of the writers, and none for the other two.

As a group, the Advanced Writers made the greatest improvement in terms of improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two, given by two raters. On average, for both Journal 1 and 2, the improvement in scores was between 7 to 14% (See Appendix I). Furthermore, three out of the four writers had scores equal to or above the median score of eight, compared with only two out of four writers for the Upper Intermediate Writers - Peer Reviewer group, and one writer out of four writers of the Intermediate Writers - Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers
and Upper Intermediate Writers - Intermediate Peer Reviewers group. These figures augur well for the proposition that indeed, with this particular grouping of writers and peer reviewers based on language proficiency, the traditional division of labour which privileges teacher feedback, may be reconfigured, to the benefit of both teacher and students (See Section 7.7.5.2 for a discussion on the complementary roles of teacher and peer feedback).

These findings are unexpected as it is commonly believed that Chinese learners prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback (Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Liu & Chai, 2009; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Yu et al., 2016; Zhao, 2010) and are known to be skeptical of the efficacy of peer feedback (Yang et al., 2006). On the other hand, it is reasonable that peer reviewers of advanced proficiency would be sufficiently competent to give valid and even insightful feedback that can lead to important revisions. Hence, the findings suggest that the grouping of advanced proficiency writers with peer reviewers of the same proficiency level, may unlock the potential of peer review, such that peers may assume the role of Peer as Expert, comparable to the role of Teacher Expert, and thus reconfiguring the traditional division of labour which privileges the role of teacher feedback, to the benefit of both teachers and students (See Section 8.3 for a fuller discussion).

5.7.1 Discussion

Four key findings were presented in the previous section: 1) Several instances of writers mistaking peer feedback for teacher feedback, 2) one case of an Advanced Writer adopting peer feedback over teacher feedback, 3) Peer feedback had a predominant influence over the
revisions of Advanced Writers grouped with peer reviewers of the same proficiency, and 4) Advanced Writers made the most improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two. The next section is a discussion of these findings.

**The influence of the web-based peer review system**

One major factor in explaining the above findings which show that the grouping of Advanced writers with peer reviewers of the same proficiency has the potential to maximally unlock the benefits of peer review is the use of a web-based peer review system. Three affordances of such a system are discussed below.

First, such a system allows for an *impersonal* platform focusing on the quality of feedback given, without the “noise” coming from various cultural assumptions. In other words, these are underlying beliefs which distract the writer from the value of the feedback received for what it is. Examples of such distracting cultural assumptions are: the superiority of teacher feedback and the concomitant bias against peer feedback (i.e., the “cultural factor”). Another source of distraction is the uncertain interpersonal dynamics of face-to-face peer review which impacts the peer review activity. For example, Ho and Savignon, (2007) found in their study that one issue with face-to-face peer review is the reluctance of participants to criticize their peers face-to-face: “In short, the Chinese people’s attitude-harmony might hinder writers from progress” (p. 283; quotation from participant). Nelson and Carson (2006) highlighted that “the issue of group dynamics can complicate the task of providing feedback” (p. 54), especially considering the different communication styles that students from different cultures might
have. Hence, the impersonal nature of a web-based platform facilitates a recognition of the quality of peer feedback for what it is, without being clouded by presuppositions usually accentuated in face-to-face interaction.

Another affordance of the web-based system is that there can be more than one peer reviewer. The availability of multiple reviewers increases the probability of receiving valid and constructive feedback from peers (Cho et al., 2006b; Cho et al., 2008; Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Cho & Schunn, 2007). It has also been shown to encourage writers “to rethink their paper and revise more” (Tuzi, 2004; p. 230), if only because the same comment repeated by more than one peer has a greater persuasive power compared to the comment being made by only one peer. Furthermore, there is some evidence in the literature that feedback from peers could be as good as feedback from experts (e.g., teachers):

> Multiple peer judgements, especially when provided through computer-supported knowledge refinement systems, may be much less costly and just as good or perhaps even better than expert judgments, since peers are likely to think more like nonexpert users.

(Cho et al., 2008, p. 83, emphasis mine)

The finding of the Advanced Writers grouped with peer reviewers of the same proficiency making the most improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two for both journals taken together, is in agreement with the above quotation. This finding also supports earlier ones which showed that peer feedback can be as effective as teacher feedback (Cho & Schunn, 2007 for “single peer” vs “single expert”; Gielen et al., 2010a) if not more effective in its
The differences in characteristics and effect between peer and teacher feedback

impact in some cases (Karegianes et al., 1980; Cho & Schunn, 2007 for multiple reviewers). The study by Cho and MacArthur (2010) offers some insight as to why feedback from multiple reviewers could lead to better improvement in writing. Students receiving feedback from multiple reviewers received more feedback of all types, and made more complex revisions and complex revisions was positively associated with improvement in quality of writing. Peers also made more non-directive feedback and non-directive feedback was positively associated with complex revisions. This indicates a connection between the nature of the feedback given and the types of revisions which result and the subsequent impact on improvement in writing quality (This will be discussed in greater detail in the next section).

Third, the synchronous availability of both teacher and peer feedback has made it possible for the value of peer feedback to be recognized for what it is, vis-à-vis teacher feedback, as seen in the research design consideration in Cho & MacArthur (2010, p. 335). The introduction of this web-based platform (Tool) has facilitated a reconfiguration of the traditional division of labour, to elevate the role of the peer to Peer as Expert in addition to Peer as Fellow Learner in the activity system of responding to and using feedback on one’s writing of an L2 writer. It would merit further research whether the Peer as Expert would replace the role of Teacher Expert, under specific conditions.
Another possible explanation for the very positive impact of peer feedback vis-à-vis teacher feedback for the Advanced Writers could lie in the nature of feedback from these two sources. The intrinsic differences between teacher and peer feedback could possibly account for the differential impact of peer and teacher feedback.

There are several studies which have investigated the differences between teacher and peer feedback (Anson & Anson, 2017; Cho et al., 2006a; Cho et al., 2008; Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Karegianes et al., 1980; Ruegg, 2015) and others which investigated the characteristics of peer comments and the relationship between quality of peer feedback and improvement in performance (Gielen et al., 2010b; Strijbos, 2010).

Ruegg (2015) found that a greater proportion teacher feedback dealt with meaning-level issues and content but contrary to expectation, the group which received teacher feedback outperformed the one which received peer feedback, in terms of improvement in grammar scores. This is in contrast to earlier findings which found writers making more meaning-level revisions after receiving peer feedback (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Yang et al., 2006).

The studies by Cho et al., (Cho et al., 2006a, Cho et al., 2008; Cho & MacArthur, 2010) surfaced qualitative differences between peer and expert feedback. While experts tended to give less praise and predominantly directive comments (i.e., explicit suggestions of specific changes), peers tended to give more praise and a range of comments, with directive comments and praise being the most frequent. The finding on peers giving more praise is consistent with earlier findings (Tuzi, 2004). Undergraduates found directive and praise comments most
helpful (Cho et al., 2006a). Multiple peer feedback elicited more complex revisions, while expert feedback led to more simple revisions. It was also found that complex revisions had a positive relationship with improvement in quality of writing (Cho & MacArthur, 2010).

Stribjos et al. (2010) found in their study on the impact of peer feedback content and sender’s competence on the perceptions and efficiency of peer feedback, that elaborated specific feedback by a high competent peer was considered more adequate. It has been shown in the literature that elaborated and specific feedback is regarded positively by students (Arndt, 1993; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Straub, 1997). In Gielen et al.’s study (2010b), “justified comments” were found to have a positive effect on posttest performance. (“justified comments” may be taken to mean the provision of some explanation for the evaluation expressed in the feedback). In this quasi-experimental study, it was found that peer comments which included justification were more likely to improve posttest performance than the accuracy of comments, though this effect was diminished with students with better pretest scores.

Taken together, the research findings presented above indicate the advantage of feedback which is directive, specific and elaborated or explained, in eliciting revisions which are more likely to improve the quality of the revised drafts.

The Advanced Writers grouped with peer reviewers of the same proficiency in my study reported that teacher feedback tended to be general and directive/prescriptive in tone, while peer feedback tended to be more specific and less directive in tone. Some said that teacher
feedback offered the “macro-view”, gave the big picture but did not offer the solutions while peer feedback was more detailed, descriptive and would usually offer suggestions for revision.

The above findings from the interviews and reflections are corroborated with the findings from analyzing the reviewer comments. Looking at the comments in the reviews for this group of Advanced Writers, the following themes emerged:

Table 5.1 The differences between teacher and peer feedback as shown in reviewer comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Example of teacher comment</th>
<th>Example of peer comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teacher comments are brief and to the point while peer comments are more descriptive/ have more detail</td>
<td>“Can you strengthen your conclusion section?”; “Language - generally good and fluent.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teacher comments are often in the form of questions – to imply what the teacher wants the writer to do; while peers tend to pose questions meant to provoke thinking, and in illustrating the points made</td>
<td>“Is it possible to avoid long sentences?” “Any evidence to back up this claim?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>paper? Writing? Reading? Oral performance?</td>
</tr>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It is suggested that you clearly define the topic your paper covers. If the focus is on writing, what is the uniqueness of CMPR use in writing? How to implement CMPR? How to group students?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 3 | Teacher comments tend to be prescriptive – either in the form of closed questions or request expressed in the imperative while peers tend to be polite and hesitant-sounding | ‘Is it possible to avoid long sentences?’; ‘Instead of researches, say research studies’; ‘Please link your second paragraph to CMPR’ |
|   |   | ‘Maybe’, ‘seems’ ‘I am not sure’, ‘If …, the journal would offer more help to…’, ‘It is suggested to…’, ‘A suggestion is…’, ‘The reviewer think[s] it might be better…’ |

| 4 | Teacher comments show little praise, while peer comments often begin with some praise, before negative evaluation is expressed | ‘A very comprehensive and reflective essay which involves nearly all the things read. Good job! However,…’ |

| 5 | Almost all peer reviewers gave praise, some even quite extravagantly | ‘Obviously, the writer writes with a very clear goal in his/her mind. The topic is well selected. Culture awareness is a hotspot in EFL writing research and the writer has done a very good work to justify his/her claim…’ |
From the above analysis, it may be said that the strong impact of peer feedback on the revisions of this group of Advanced Writers could have been explained partly by the fact that the peer comments appear to be more specific/directive (offer suggestions or thought-provoking questions) and elaborated (details given) and “justified” (reason given for opinion). Peer suggestions are less directive in tone (i.e., less prescriptive) and included frequent praise. The aforementioned ways in which peer feedback differed from teacher feedback for this group of writers, could have contributed to the greater impact of peer feedback on their improvement in writing from Draft One to Draft Two.

In conclusion, the findings reported here confirm earlier findings reported by Cho et al. (2006a), that there was “no evidence that undergraduate students thought peer feedback was significantly less helpful than expert feedback” (p. 279); and those of Karegianes et al. (1980) that “peer editing (or peer feedback) appears to be at least as effective, if not more effective
than teacher editing (i.e., teacher feedback)” (p. 206). This differential impact between teacher and peer feedback has facilitated a reconfiguration of the traditional division of labour, to elevate the role of the peer to Peer as Expert vis-à-vis the role of teacher as Teacher Expert. In the traditional classroom, the teacher as reviewer is accorded a higher status vis-à-vis peer reviewers in the community of reviewers (see Figure 5.1). However, in the present study, with the use of a new ‘Tool’ (SWoRD), the findings suggest that there is potential in peers assuming the role as Peer as Expert as there is evidence that feedback from some peers (such as the peer reviewers of Advanced proficiency) could be comparable to feedback from teachers (Teacher as Expert), thus modifying the traditional division of labour between Teacher as Expert and Peer as Expert.

5.8 Summary

In this chapter on how the use of the web-based peer review system has transformed the activity of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing of an L2 writer, I have shown its mediating effect on the following components of the activity system (see Figure 5.1):

1) the ‘Rule’ of the cultural convention of politeness/issue of ‘face’ in face-to-face interaction in traditional Chinese culture

2) the ‘Community’ of lower proficiency reviewers
3) the traditional ‘Division of Labour’ between teacher as experts and peers as fellow learners

4) the traditional ‘Division of Labour’ between teacher as experts and peer as experts

The introduction of this new ‘Tool’, the web-based peer review system, has mitigated the impact of the Chinese cultural convention of ‘face’ (‘Rule’) which predisposes students towards restraining themselves from giving honest feedback on peers’ writing. The findings of honest though critical peer feedback which facilitated improvement in subsequent drafts is testament to this. The findings of writers benefitting from feedback from peer reviewers of a lower proficiency level show the impact of this web-based peer review system in unlocking the potential of feedback even from peers who are deemed less competent in the community of reviewers (‘Community’). Similarly, the use of the web-based peer review system has unleashed the potential of peers who are fellow learners, in harnessing the potential of their feedback which is more often than not, ignored or not given due consideration in the presence of feedback from Teacher as Expert, in the traditional ‘Division of Labour’. Finally, the findings of feedback by peers of Advanced proficiency level being comparable to feedback from Teacher as Expert with the use of this web-based peer review system highlights the power of such a tool in harnessing the great potential there is in peer feedback, such that peers can even assume the role of Peer as Expert vis-à-vis Teacher as Expert in the transformed ‘Division of Labour’. In other words, I have shown how this new ‘Tool’ has mediated the Subject-Rules, Subject-Community and Subject-Division of Labour relations.
Chapter 6

Learner Agency: level of independence in revising across the proficiency levels

In the last chapter, I addressed the first research question on the influence of the web-based peer review system, SWoRD, on the activity of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing of an L2 writer. The concept of mediation from third-generation Activity Theory (AT) was used in analysing the data. In this chapter, I will be using another key concept in AT – that of learner agency, in analyzing the data. I will be addressing the second research question on how second language learners respond to and use peer and teacher feedback on their writing, and specifically focusing on the first of two sub-questions (the second sub-question will be addressed in the next chapter):

a) Are there differences in the way L2 writers of different proficiency levels respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing? If so, in what ways do they differ?

Activity Theory is primarily about human agency which “helps to explain why and how people act as they do” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 238), including the different paths taken by learners. In particular, learners can show individuation in the way they respond to feedback on their writing, as reflected in the decisions they make. Thus, learner agency, in the context of this study, may be expressed in the different decisions learners make in responding to and using feedback on their writing.
I will look at how writers of different proficiencies in the three case set-ups exhibit different levels of independence in revising in the decisions they make in response to the same two sources of feedback they are given. In essence, they are involved in the same task of responding to teacher and peer feedback on their writing, but show different ways of responding with regard to the level of independence in revising. I will present my classification of four types of independence-reflecting revisions which have surfaced in the data.

6.1 Level of independence in revising

When this research project was conceived, the idea of independence in revising did not figure in my conception of how the data might answer the question of how second language learners respond to and use peer and teacher feedback on their writing. However, as I began analyzing the data, the theme of independence in revising emerged as I worked on the data from the group of Advanced Writers. As I observed how these writers responded to and acted on the feedback they received on their writing in revising, their recurrent actions of independent revising behaviour emerged as a theme in the coding. As I reflected on those different types of revision moves which showed independence in how the revisions were made, I derived the following definition of independence in revising behaviour:

“Independence in revising behaviour is defined as the capacity to take charge of the revising process such that the writer would even make revisions which are not in direct response to the feedback given.”
The concept of the level of independence in revising may be interpreted as an extension of the AT concept of learner agency, as the capacity to take charge of the revising process may be understood as a reflection of the capacity of the individual to make decisions, not as a mechanical response to some external stimuli, but based on his mental capacity to act according to the circumstances he faces, and also as a whole person with his particular history, personality, motives, etc. This is the case as humans are “agents who regulate their minds, rather than the other way round” (Lei, 2008, p. 219). Hence, individuation in the way the participants respond to feedback on their writing may be reflected in the different levels of independence in revising.

There are important implications should independence in revising behaviour be shown to be prevalent amongst writers of a particular proficiency grouped with peer reviewers of a particular proficiency, as the exhibition of independence in revising behaviour denotes a writer who has the capacity to learn from the revising process as he engages with feedback on his writing. This highlights the potential of feedback given on one’s writing to facilitate critical reflection, and by implication, learning about one’s writing and also improvement in writing ability.

As it is reasonable to postulate that critical thinking is likely to lead to long-term learning, instructional/learning conditions that promote critical thinking are therefore valuable to pedagogues. In the case of the use of feedback, if any particular type of feedback or configuration of the peer review activity is shown to promote to a greater extent, critical
thinking in the writer, then certainly its potential in the teaching of writing should be harnessed. In this respect, the potential of peer feedback, in stimulating critical thinking mentioned in the literature (Ching & Hsu, 2016; Novakovich, 2016; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006) and a possible optimal configuration of the peer review activity based on the writing proficiency of writers and peer reviewers, should be further investigated (refer to Section 6.6.1 and 6.6.4 for a discussion on this theme).

6.1.1 Revisions reflecting independence in revising behaviour

There are four types of revisions which may be said to reflect independence in revising behaviour. They are 1) “Snowball Effect” Revisions 2) Complex Revisions 3) Multiple Revisions 4) Rejections of teacher feedback. The explanations of what these terms mean are shown in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of revision</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Snowball Effect” Revisions</td>
<td>Revisions not done in direct response to a particular piece of feedback i.e., revisions done in response to one particular piece of feedback has triggered other revisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex Revision</td>
<td>A revision that is done in response to more than one source of feedback and the sources of feedback do not deal with the same topic/issue.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1 Classification of independence-reflecting revisions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiple Revisions</th>
<th>Multiple revisions arising from one source of feedback or feedback on the same issue (and the revisions are not simple ones such as replacement of a word or re-ordering of sentences).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rejection of teacher feedback</td>
<td>Either revision not made at all because writer does not agree with the feedback or revisions which are not in accordance to teacher suggestion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the “**Snowball Effect**” Revision, responding to a particular piece of feedback and making a revision to deal with the issue raised has led the writer to look holistically at the entire text to see where else changes might be necessary as a result of the initial revision made. This reflects deeper thinking on the part of the writer.

In the **Complex Revision**, in responding to more than one source of feedback, the writer comes up with one revision move that addresses the issue(s) raised by the different sources of feedback. This shows the ability of the writer to “synthesize” input from the feedback and recognize that the feedback from different sources deal with the same issue or could be addressed by the same solution.

In **Multiple Revisions**, in responding to a particular piece of feedback, the writer is able to come up with more than one revision move to address the feedback given. This reflects the ability to engage deeply with the feedback such that revisions made are beyond superficial/simplistic ones.
In rejecting teacher feedback by not acting on the suggestion given, or addressing the issue raised but not revising according to teacher advice, the writer shows independence in deciding what is appropriate for his own text. It signals a high degree of sense of ownership of one’s text, especially in a teacher-centred culture such as the Chinese learning culture. To illustrate further, here are examples of these four types of revisions.

6.1.2 Example of the “Snowball Effect” Revision

The “Snowball Effect” Revision may be conceptualized graphically in the following figure:

![Figure 6.1 “Snowball Effect” Revision](image)

An example of such a revision can be found in two drafts produced by Advanced Writer One (see Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3).

Revision: The writer wrote on the topic, “A Three-Dimension of Coherence”. In response to the teacher feedback, “You may want to re-write the topic sentence in your introduction (to summarize the gist of your entire paragraph”, the writer did a re-write (see Point 2 in Figure 6.3) but did not stop there. He made a further revision (see Point 5 in Figure 6.3). This change comprised a new paragraph which incorporates material expanded from the sentence at the
end of Paragraph 2 in the first draft which functioned as the original topic sentence (See part that was deleted in Figure 6.2). The new paragraph (Point 5 in Figure 6.3) is a summary of the main content of the journal, and serves as a transition to the rest of the journal.

**Commentary:** The revision decision made shows a “snowball effect” revision in that a revision made in response to a particular piece of feedback (Point 2) has generated yet another revision (Point 5) that is not done in direct response that piece of feedback. It also shows the writer’s awareness of the demands of the rhetorical structure of the paper in the change reflected in Point 5 was made with the purpose to provide a transition to the rest of the journal.
A 3-dimension model of coherence

Introduction

Perhaps every student has the experience of being pointed out the coherent problems in his/her writing. Coherence is emphasized by nearly every teacher teaching writing because it is an important element of good writing. However, what is coherence and how to achieve it has always been vague. Part of the reasons might be that the very concept of coherence is abstract and fuzzy, which makes it difficult to teach and learn.

Early attempts to define coherence put their emphasis on sentence connection and paragraph structure (Bain, 1890). Later on, focus shifted from sentence level to discourse level and “text” became central to the definition of coherence. In this view, coherence “can be considered in two different ways: as internal to the text and as internal to the readers.” (Lee, 2002, p. 137) Halliday and Hasan (1976) are among those who consider coherence as internal to the text. They defined coherence from the perspective of linguistic features, putting stress on the use of cohesive devices in connecting linguistic units. This has been criticized by researchers who hold that readers play an even more important role in constructing the coherence of the text. (For example, Feathers, 1981; Morgan & Sellmer, 1980).

In his 2002 paper, Leo Lee (2002) summarizes the development in definition of coherence and operationalizes it with five categories, namely macrostructure, information structure, propositional development, cohesive devices and metadiscourse markers. This short essay will propose a 3-dimension model of coherence which reflects the developmental trajectory of its definition and incorporates the five elements put forward by Leo Lee.

From 1-dimension to 3-dimension

Text as 1-dimension representation

Language, no matter in spoken or written form, is linear in nature. One syllable must

Figure 6.2 Excerpt showing Advanced Writer One “Snowball Effect” Revision (Draft One)
A 3-dimension model of coherence

Introduction

Coherence is emphasized by nearly every teacher teaching writing because it is an important element of good writing. However, what is coherence and how to achieve it has always been vague. Part of the reasons might be that the very concept of coherence is abstract and fuzzy, which make it difficult to teach and learn. [Definition of coherence has gone through several stages. Early attempts to define coherence put their emphasis on sentence connection and paragraph structure (Bain, 1890).] Later on, focus shifted from sentence level to discourse level and "text" became central to the definition of coherence. In this view, coherence "can be considered in two different ways: as internal to the text and as internal to the reader." (Lee, 2002, p. 137)

Halliday and Hassan (1976) are among those who consider coherence as internal to the text. They defined coherence from the perspective of linguistic features, putting stress on the use of cohesive devices in connecting linguistic units. This has been criticized by researchers who hold that readers play an even more important role in constructing the coherence of the text (For example, Feathers, 1981; Morgan & Seltser, 1989). Lee (2002), in her 2002 paper, summarizes the development in definition of coherence and operationalizes it with five categories, namely macrostructure, information structure, propositional development, cohesive devices and metadiscourse markers.

In this paper, I will propose an analogy which may help with the understanding of coherence. I call this analogy a 3-dimension model in that this model views a text as a 3-dimension structure which incorporates linguistic, discursive and social aspect of coherence. I hope by describing how this model get its final shape, I can simulate a developmental trajectory of coherence and by explaining how coherence works linguistically, discursively and socially I can encompass the five elements of coherence put forward by Icy Lee (Lee, 2002).

Figure 6.3 Excerpt showing Advanced Writer One “Snowball Effect” Revision (Draft Two)
6.1.3 Example of Complex Revisions

“Complex Revisions” may be conceptualized graphically in the following figure:

![Figure 6.4 Complex Revision]

Figure 6.4 Complex Revision

An example of such a revision can be found in two drafts produced by Advanced Writer Three (see Figure 6.5 and Figure 6.6).

**Revision:** The writer wrote on the topic, “The necessity and effectiveness of error correction”.

In response to the teacher feedback that the writer should “focus on two reasons (instead of four), and develop and elaborate on [her] ideas”, the writer kept all four reasons (first reason shown in Point 15 of Figure 6.5). However, she re-structured them into two sections (see Points 14 and 15 in Figure 6.6); she provided two answers in two sub-sections in the discussion section, to answer two questions raised in the introduction (not shown in the figures). She elaborated that she did not make this revision solely in response to the teacher feedback but also one particular peer’s questions which caused her to wonder if she had answered the
question she raised in the introduction. Hence, she decided to work on re-structuring her paper so that the questions raised are answered clearly in the discussion section.

**Commentary:** In summary, in this example of a revision which apparently looked like a response to teacher feedback initially, the writer was at the same time spurred on and given a clearer idea of how to go about revising this part from a peer’s feedback which triggered further thinking. This major revision shows the complexity of the writer’s response to feedback from different (i.e., both teacher and peer) sources in making one major revision decision.
feedback can hardly be transferred since the linguistic features are “integral parts of a complex system”, 3) students are easily demotivated by corrective feedback and simply avoid further use of complicated grammar and thus the claimed increase in accuracy in some researches is not convincing (Truscott, 2007, p. 258).

Although the problems of error correction argued by Truscott do exist to certain extent, it seems unreasonable to completely deny the role played by error correction. Statistical proof can be found in the experiment conducted by Van Beuningen et al. (2012). As revealed in the results, “comprehensive CF is effective in promoting both grammatical and non-grammatical accuracy during revision as well as in new pieces of writing, irrespective of learners’ educational level” and the “conterevidence against learners avoiding complex structures due to correction” is found (Van Beuningen et al., 2012, p. 36).

However, it is noteworthy that improvement in writing accuracy detected varies when different types of corrective feedback is given. In a longitudinal experiment conducted by Robb, Ross and Shortreed, 134 Japanese college freshmen were assigned into four groups, namely correction group, coded feedback group, uncoded feedback group and marginal feedback group, with the “degree of salience provided to the writer in the revision process” as the only variable (Robb et. al, 1986, p. 83). The results indicate that “highly detailed feedback on sentence-level mechanics” may not yield the expected improvement (Robb et. al., 1986, p. 91).

Discussion

The need for teachers’ error correction is driven by second language learners’ limited proficiency level and preferred over other types of revision (Ghani and Asgher, 2012). Its effectiveness may vary but total denial of it is unacceptable. What is undeniable however is that the often practiced direct comprehensive error correction, which is largely recognized by learners and laboriously implemented by teachers, is not reflected in obvious improvement in students’ writing accuracy. The possible reasons are analyzed as follows:

First, psychologically students may easily be intimidated by the overwhelming number of errors and thus be left demotivated. As Carson argued, “learners’ attitudes, became second point in draft 2

---

Figure 6.5  Excerpt showing Advanced Writer Three (Draft One) Complex Revision
(2006) and Anthony Bruton (2010), and the other with opponents represented by John Truscott (2007). It is believed by Truscott that the corrective feedback is problematic mainly in three aspects: 1) from the perspective of second language acquisition, error correction is against the “gradual and complex nature of interlanguage development”, 2) the effectiveness of corrective feedback can hardly be transferred since the linguistic features are the “integral parts of a complex system”, 3) students are easily demotivated by corrective feedback and avoid further use of complicated grammar, which makes the claimed increase in accuracy in some researches unconvincing (Truscott, 2007, p. 258).

Although the problems indicated by Truscott do exist to a certain extent, it seems unreasonable to completely deny the role played by error correction. Statistical proof can be found in many experiments (Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Van Beuningen et al., 2012). As revealed in the researches, “comprehensive corrective feedback is effective in promoting both grammatical and non-grammatical accuracy during revision as well as in new pieces of writing” (Van Beuningen et al., 2012, p. 36).

However, it is noteworthy that improvement in writing accuracy detected varies when different types of corrective feedback is given. In a longitudinal experiment conducted by Robb, Ross and Shortreed, 134 Japanese college freshmen were assigned into four groups, namely correction group, coded feedback group, un-coded feedback group and marginal feedback group, with the “degree of salience provided to the writer in the revision process” as the only variable (Robb et. al, 1986, p. 83). The results indicate that “highly detailed feedback on sentence-level mechanics” may not yield the expected improvement (Robb et. al., 1986, p. 91).

Discussion

1. The necessity of giving corrective feedback in EFL writing

The cognitive and psychological characteristics of EFL learners contribute to the necessity of error correction. Cognitively, EFL learners are of limited language proficiency and therefore are incapable of effectively identifying and correcting errors by themselves (Ferris, 2006). Furthermore, EFL learners expose to the target language for only a limited amount of time, which is in no way beneficial to language
acquisition as one can achieve apparent improvement in language learning after at least 10,000 hours exposure (Gladwell, 2009). Apart from that, driven by instrumental motivation (Sugita & Takeuchi, 2008), EFL learners are less likely to tackle their shortage in language exposure voluntarily. Consequently, the external help from teachers is in need. Psychologically, their lack of confidence drives them to appeal to authoritative figures for help and in turn results in their preference for teachers’ error correction over other types of revision (Ghani & Asgher, 2012). In a nutshell, it is necessary to provide EFL learners with corrective feedback due to their cognitive and psychological needs.

2. Possible reasons for the ineffectiveness of corrective feedback

Among different types of corrective feedback, “direct error correction” (Hendrickson, 1980, p. 218) is more frequently given by teachers in written form in an attempt to help students attain accuracy in writing (Ferris, 2006). What is undeniable however is that direct error correction may not be reflected in obvious improvement in students’ writing accuracy (Lalande, 1982; Hendrickson, 1980; Truscott, 2007). The possible reasons are analyzed as follows:

First, cognitively, too comprehensive error corrections will put students in a rather chaotic mental situation, where all errors are corrected consciously at the very moment, but fail to leave any trace in mind due to linguistic parts’ sparse and limited connection. Moreover, with all the ready-made error corrections on paper, some language learners may mechanically copy the right form without thinking the reason behind, which makes the time-consuming error corrections rather useless since this lack of internalization renders language learners “knowledge porters” rather than “knowledge processors”. Additionally, language acquisition is never an all-of-a-sudden matter. Any knowledge that can be acquired needs further consolidation. It is thus unreasonable to expect language learners to display obvious improvement within a short period of time and distinction between errors and mistakes made by language learners in the research needs to be further discriminated (Carson, 2001).

Second, psychologically, students may easily be intimidated by the overwhelming pressure of teachers’ error corrections. Besides, many language learners are unable to focus on their writing tasks when teachers are present. As a result, they are more likely to lose their self-confidence and become less autonomous in their learning process. Thus, it is essential to provide students with effective and efficient corrective feedback in order to help them improve their writing skills.

Figure 6.6 Excerpt showing Advanced Writer Three (Draft Two) Complex Revision
6.1.4 Example of Multiple Revisions

“Multiple Revisions” may be conceptualized graphically in the following figure:

![Figure 6.7 Multiple Revisions](image)

An example of such a revision can be found in two drafts produced by Advanced Writer Two (See Figure 6.8 and Figure 6.9).

**Revision:** The writer wrote on the topic, “Cultural differences- an element necessary for process approach and genre approach in EFL Writing Pedagogy”. In response to two peers’ feedback on the lack of mention of the topic – cultural differences – in the introduction and literature review sections of the journal, which form the first half of the journal, the write made what she considered the most important change in the journal. The writer deleted and subsequently replaced one entire paragraph (Points 4 in Figure 6.8 and Figure 6.9) and added a new paragraph (Point 6 in Figure 6.9) later in the journal. She deleted one paragraph (Point
4 in Figure 6.8, the paragraph that was replaced) even though the teacher said that a good point
was made there and asked for elaboration.

**Commentary:** The multiple revisions involved both deletion of an entire paragraph, followed
by a replacement with an entirely new paragraph and an addition of a new paragraph later in
the journal. These revisions arose from feedback on the same issue.
most widely accepted process model identifies the four stages in the
texting process, namely prewriting, drafting, revising and editing, and
maintains that these processes are nonlinear but recursive (Tribble, 1996).
Brainstorming, multi-drafting, peer review are common practices of this
approach.
In the 1980s, genre began to gain popularity in writing pedagogy.
The three traditions in genre studies --- English for specific purposes (ESP),
North American New Rhetoric studies, and Australian systemic
functional linguistics (Hyon, 1996) --- approach genre studies in writing
with different foci, different methods, different frameworks and different
scopes, but a core feature they share is the emphasis of purpose and social
context. An underlying assumption in genre approach is that the reason
that a group of texts share similar linguistic features is that they have
similar constraints of situations like purpose, audience etc. A model
widely used for genre instruction is named Teaching and Learning Cycle,
which consists of three stages: modeling of the target genre, joint
negotiation of text and independent construction of text. (Cope and
Kalantis, 1993)

A process genre approach (Badger and White, 2000) is a synthesis of
the two approaches described above. The reason for combing the two
approaches is that process approach has the weakness of assuming the
writing processes for texts varying in writing purposes and social texts
are all the same, and that the genre approach is criticized for ignoring the writing processes and assigning learners a passive role. Rigidly adopting either one approach is not as effective as flexibly synthesizing the two.

Self-Reflection: Culture Awareness—An Element Necessary for EFL Writing Pedagogy

Writing is an “activity embedded in a culture” (Connor, 1996:100). A difficulty for EFL writers is that they write to readers whose expectation on the writing is weaved by the L2 culture which they are not familiar with. However, neither the process approach nor the genre approach gives sufficient attention to this aspect.

In the process approach, “all students, regardless of their L1 backgrounds, are expected to have similar problems in generating meaning, revising, and learning about themselves” (Connor, 1996: 72). But the fact that EFL learners, especially those of lower proficiency, always turn to prior knowledge related to the writing task in their L1 culture to generate content indicates that problems arise when cultural distance between the two languages is far. For example, most Chinese students would have problems in writing a topic about whether private citizen should be allowed to legally own guns or not, because a ban on guns is noncontroversial in China. In this case, teachers should incorporate an analysis of the different attitudes towards guns between the two cultures in the prewriting activities to bridge the gap in the

Figure 6.8 Excerpt showing Advanced Writer Two Multiple Revisions (Draft One)
role while the teacher serves as a guide to facilitate the learner's work. The most widely accepted process model identifies the four stages in the writing process, namely prewriting, drafting, revising and editing, and maintains that these processes are nonlinear but recursive (Tribble, 1996). Brainstorming, multi-drafting, peer review are common practices of this approach.

In the 1980s, genre began to gain popularity in writing pedagogy. The three traditions in genre studies---English for specific purposes (ESP), North American New Rhetoric studies, and Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics (Hyon, 1996)---approach genre in writing with different foci, different methods, different frameworks and different scopes, but a core feature they share is the emphasis of purpose and social context. An underlying assumption in genre approach is that the reason that a group of texts share similar linguistic features is that they have similar constraints of situations like purpose, audience etc. A model widely used for genre instruction is named Teaching and Learning Cycle, which consists of three stages: modeling of the target genre, joint negotiation of text and independent construction of text. (Cope & Kalantis, 1993)

The differences between L1 and L2 writing have been noticed and discussed by many studies, especially in the field of contrastive rhetoric. Contrastive rhetoric is "an area of research in second language acquisition
that identifies problems in composition encountered by second language writers and, by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, attempts to explain them (Connor, 1996, p.5). It researches how a person's L1 culture, conventions and rhetoric structures influence his/her L2 writing through contrastive analysis, and its findings can help EFL teachers explain to their students not only how, but also why their L1 writing strategies sometimes fail to achieve the purposes in the L2 writing.

**Self-reflection: weave the findings of contrastive rhetoric into process approach and genre approach**

Writing is an “activity embedded in a culture” (Connor, 1996:100). A difficulty for EFL writers is that they write to readers whose expectation on the writing is shaped by the L2 culture and conventions which they are not familiar with. However, neither process approach nor genre approach gives sufficient attention to this aspect.

In the process approach, “all students, regardless of their L1 backgrounds, are expected to have similar problems in generating meaning, revising, and learning about themselves” (Connor, 1996: 72). But the fact that EFL learners, especially those of lower proficiency, always turn to prior knowledge related to the writing task in their L1 culture to generate content indicates that problems arise when cultural distance between the two languages is far. For example, most Chinese
students would have problems in writing a topic about whether citizens should be allowed to legally own guns or not, because a ban on guns is noncontroversial in China. In this case, teachers should incorporate an analysis of the different attitudes towards guns between the two cultures in the prewriting activities to bridge the gap in the content schemata.

The genre approach does have an emphasis on social factors such as purposes and audience, but instruction in this approach, which usually focuses on modeling the target L2 genre, seldom includes an explanation to the differences between the two rhetorical conventions embedded in their own cultures. As the genre knowledge —— structure, style and organization—— of the first language interferes with writing in the second language (Kaplan, 1966), it may be problematic for EFL writers to master the target genre when knowledge of the differences between the two writing conventions is absent. As a social member of a culture which holds the conception of self as interdependent, my own experiences in writing English argumentative essays—— which requires an independent view of self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) —— shows that it is hard to understand what makes one's argument convincing in English without comparing the different culture values underlying the rhetorical conventions.

As a result, teachers in the EFL settings should raise cultural awareness and equip themselves with the findings of contrastive rhetoric.
to solve the problems their students may encounter. And it is reasonable to go further to weave explicit instructions of cultural differences into process or genre approach, making these approaches more tailored to students from a certain culture, which, for example, means that the process approach or the genre approach adopted in teaching the same English writing task to German students and to Chinese students should be different, as German students and Chinese students may encounter different difficulties caused by the uniqueness of their own home cultures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, no matter which approach teachers adopt in EFL writing settings, awareness that cultural uniqueness determines the uniqueness in writing conventions is a necessity. As these cultural differences are hard to deal with and require effort to recognize and manage (Leki, 1991), the findings of contrastive rhetoric, which address these differences in a comprehensive way, should be weaved into ELF writing pedagogies of process approach, or genre approach.

Figure 6.9 Excerpt showing Advanced Writer Two Multiple Revisions (Draft Two)
6.1.5 Example of rejection of teacher feedback

Rejection of teacher feedback may be conceptualized graphically in the following figure:

```
Teacher feedback
  ↓
Ignored/Rejected  Issue raised addressed but not according to teacher advice
```

**Figure 6.10 Rejection of teacher feedback**

To illustrate further, here is an example of such a revision from Advanced Writer One.

The writer wrote on the topic, “Emergence of a genre and ants’ behaviour in seeking food”.

The teacher’s feedback on the organization of the paper was: “Interesting content. If I were you, I will combine sections 2 and 3. That is, talk about the first simple rule from ants, and immediately I will show its link to writing. And then, the second rule form {sic} ants…”.

**Revisions**: The writer did not take up the teacher’s specific suggestion. Instead, he introduced a new section, and retained the original arrangement of keeping the two sections separate, despite the teacher’s suggestion to combine these two sections because he had a reason for keeping them separate. In his own words: “I want to give my reader a fluent and consistent view of ant behaviour. I describe it in details and I don’t want to split it up simply because I want to compare these two things (i.e., the ants’ behaviour and the emergence of a new genre in writing)”. 
Commentary: Here is a writer who is able to make independent judgement about the pattern of organization which would suit his purposes well. He prefers the block organization rather than the point-by-point pattern of organization as suggested by the teacher. Despite his declaration of preference for teacher feedback at the beginning of the study, this writer shows much independence in his response to teacher feedback on his writing. He has a strong sense of sense of ownership of his writing and an independent attitude about how he would go about revising his writing.

6.2 An example of independence in revising as reflected in the complexity of revisions

(Advanced Writer Two)

The four characteristic independence-reflecting revisions are presented above. In this section, an example of a revision that may be categorized as both a “Snowball Effect” Revision and a Complex Revision is presented.

Advanced Writer Two wrote on the topic of cultural differences in EFL writing pedagogy. In response to peer feedback about the lack of mention of the topic – cultural differences – in the introduction and literature review sections of the essay, she deleted and subsequently replaced one entire paragraph (Change 4) and added a new paragraph (Change 6) later in the essay. Change 3 was a self-initiated revision that arose after making Changes 4 and 6. She recognized that after deleting one part and adding a new paragraph, she needed to adjust an earlier sentence – the topic sentence in the introduction. This revision is an example of the
“Snowball Effect” Revision, in that it arose as a result of an earlier revision, and was not made in direct response to the feedback that triggered the earlier revision. However, in making this revision, the writer incorporated another revision in response to three other comments, one regarding the need to mention the topic, and the other two regarding the use of citations. Hence, this is a rather complex revision which deals with feedback from various sources. Here are the original and the revised versions for illustration:

**Original version**

“However, as these approaches are originally borrowed from first language (L1) composition studies, it seems insufficient attention has been paid to the differences between L1 and L2 writing pedagogy, especially the cultural factors which underlie these differences.”

**Revised version**

“However, it seems neither of them has paid sufficient attention to the cultural differences between L1 and L2 pedagogy, since we cannot deny the fact that “linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the first language interfere with writing in the second language” (Connor, 1996, p. 5).”

This example shows the extent of the independence that writers such as this Advanced Writer can exercise in responding to feedback.
6.3 Comparison of independence in revising between Advanced Writers and Upper Intermediate and Intermediate Writers

The group of Advanced Writers paired with Advanced Writers as peer reviewers, presented the highest incidence of such independence-reflecting revisions in their drafts. Two out of the four writers exhibited all four characteristic revisions of independent revising behaviour as mentioned in the previous section. One out of the four exhibited three out of the four characteristic revisions; one out of the four writers exhibited one out of the four characteristic revisions; all four writers exhibited the “Snowball Effect” revision. A table showing the incidence of such revisions among the Advanced Writers is shown below:

Table 6.2 Incidence of independence-reflecting revisions in Advanced Writers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of revision</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snowball Effect</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection of teacher feedback</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.3 Incidence of independence-reflecting revisions in Upper Intermediate Writers with Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of revision</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snowball effect</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generally, the group of Intermediate writers paired with Upper Intermediate peer reviewers and vice versa presented a lesser degree of independence in their revising behavior, compared with the Advanced Writers, but two writers in this group may be seen as on a par with the group of Upper Intermediate Writers. None of them exhibited the “Snowball Effect” Revisions and two out of the four writers did not exhibit Multiple nor Complex Revisions. However, two other writers (Upper Intermediate Writer Five and Intermediate Writer Two) did reject teacher feedback (one instance each) while another two (Intermediate Writer Two and Upper Intermediate Writer Six) exhibited the Multiple (three instances) and Complex (two instances) Revisions. One writer (Intermediate Writer Two) presented a drastic overhaul for one of the assignments. She was the most outstanding among this group of writers as the one who was most independent in her revising behaviour, exhibiting two instances of Multiple Revisions and one instance of Complex Revisions. A table showing the incidence of such revisions among the Intermediate Writers is shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of revision</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snowball effect</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection of teacher feedback</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The different levels of independence in revising amongst these three case set-ups of writers show that indeed, writers of different proficiency, behave differently in the way they respond to feedback on their writing. The stronger writers tend to exercise more independence in responding to the feedback (such that they would even make revisions which are not in direct response to the feedback given) while the weaker writers (Upper Intermediate and Intermediate writers) tend not to exercise as much independence, as shown in the fewer incidences of independence-reflecting revisions overall.

Apart from differences in the level of independence in revising, writers of different proficiencies also differ in the comparative influence of peer and teacher feedback on their revisions. It is important to consider the comparative influence of peer and teacher feedback on the writer’s revisions as the configuration of the peer review activity in this study is such that the influence of both peer and teacher feedback, and that of the grouping of writers and peer reviewers according to proficiency is investigated. If any group with a particular pairing of writers and reviewers of a particular proficiency is shown to have the most positive outcomes, then it may be surmised that that particular configuration of peer review is pedagogically beneficial.

6.4 Comparative influence of Peer and Teacher feedback on revisions

Tracking the number of revisions, including major ones, arising from both sources of feedback for both assignments showed that for all the Advanced Writers, peer feedback had
greater influence than teacher feedback on their revisions (See Appendix F for an example).

Among the group of Upper Intermediate Writers grouped with peer reviewers of the same proficiency, one writer (Upper Intermediate Writer One) was more influenced by peer feedback while another (Upper Intermediate Writer Two) was equally influenced by teacher and peer feedback and two were more influenced by teacher feedback. Among the group of Intermediate Writers paired with Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers and Upper Intermediate writers paired with Intermediate Peer Reviewers, two were more influenced by peer feedback and the other two, more influenced by teacher feedback. Taken together, these findings show us that Advanced Writers were the most influenced by peer feedback. Upper Intermediate Writers were, as a group, slightly more influenced by teacher feedback; and Intermediate Writers grouped with Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers and Upper Intermediate Writers grouped with Intermediate Peer Reviewers, were equally influenced by teacher and peer feedback.

Apart from determining the comparative influence of both types of feedback in terms of the number of revisions arising from each type of feedback as shown in the student drafts, the level of improvement from Draft one to Draft two was also compared among these three groups of writers. The Advanced Writers made the greatest improvement in terms of improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two, given by two raters. On average, for both Journals 1 and 2, the improvement in scores was between 7 to 14% (see Table 6.5). Furthermore, three out of the four writers in this case set-up were above the median score for
improvement from Draft One to Draft Two (the median score is eight out of 100) compared with only two out of four writers for the Upper Intermediate Writers - Peer Reviewer group, and one writer out of four writers of the Intermediate Writers - Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers and Upper Intermediate Writer - Intermediate Peer Reviewer group (see Table 6.5).

Table 6.5 Improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer Group</th>
<th>Improvement in score (based on scores by 2 raters)</th>
<th>Percentage improvement</th>
<th>Above median score of 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer One</td>
<td>14 marks (out of a maximum score of 100)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer Two</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer Three</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer Four</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer One</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Two</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Three</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Four</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Five</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Six</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Writer One</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Writer Two</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Median Score = 8

Among the writers of the entire sample who were more influenced by peer feedback (seven out of a total of 12), the average score of improvement was 8.93 (out of 100), that for the group more influenced by teacher feedback (four writers) was 6.13 (out of 100), and that for the writer who was equally influenced by teacher and peer feedback, was 6 (out of 100). Taken together, the findings suggest that the group more influenced by peer feedback improved the most from Draft One to Draft Two.

Focusing on Advanced Writers, it may be inferred from the results that they benefitted the most from the peer review in terms of the incidence of independence-reflecting revisions and the level of improvement made. They were more influenced by peer feedback than teacher feedback. Since those more influenced by peer feedback showed the greatest improvement in scores, it may suggest that peer feedback had been responsible to a great extent for the positive results for these writers. As they were grouped with peer reviewers of the same proficiency, the findings may suggest that this writer-reviewer configuration (Advanced Writer with Peer Reviewer of Advanced proficiency) for peer review in terms of proficiency appears to be optimal.

However, a caveat is in order here. Though the Advanced Writers showed the highest incidence of independence-reflecting revisions, not all of these revisions stemmed from peer feedback alone. Approximately half of them did. This means that teacher feedback had a
comparable influence in generating independence-reflecting revisions. There is clearly a role for teacher feedback and the pertinent question is to understand how teacher and peer feedback can play complementary roles (see Section 7.7.5.2 for a fuller discussion).

Another caveat is that the results presented here are not generalisable to other contexts as no statistical analysis was done, owing to the small sample size. However, what may be concluded is that this particular configuration of peer review for the Advanced Writers yielded the most positive outcomes. Whether this finding will hold in other contexts and with larger sample sizes requires further research.

6.5 The influence of individual characteristics on the level of independence in revising

Apart from considering how L2 writers of different proficiencies differ in their response to and use of teacher and peer feedback on their writing in terms of the level of independence in revising, learner agency may also be shown in how individual characteristics of writers have influenced the level of independence in revising. Three cases illustrating the influence of individual characteristics on the level of independence in revising are discussed as follows. These three cases are selected for discussion as they appear to buck (Intermediate Writer Two and Upper Intermediate Writer Two) or accentuate (Advanced Writer One) the general pattern observed between the three groups of writers-reviewers of different proficiencies in terms of level of independence in revising, as presented in Section 6.3. They are also noteworthy because they showed the highest level of improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two.

Case of Ray
Ray, Intermediate Writer Two, was the only participant who did not prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback right from the beginning of the study (as indicated in the pre-study questionnaire and interview). Amongst the writers of the Intermediate - Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers group, she stood out as the one with the most number of independence-reflecting revisions (two Multiple Revisions, one Complex Revision and one instance of rejecting teacher feedback). This is an unexpected finding, especially since two other writers in this group exhibited none of these independence-reflecting revisions (except for one instance of rejecting teacher feedback). Most of these revisions stemmed from peer feedback. Another unexpected finding is that she showed the highest improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two in her group and was ranked number three, together with another Upper Intermediate Writer among the 12 participants. Being a writer of the lowest proficiency in the sample group, this is indeed unexpected and merits some attention.

In the pre-study interview, she explained that she had received little teacher feedback on her writing as a student. She believed that students should be active in their learning, instead of passively relying on the teacher’s input. At the end-of-study interview, she elaborated on her guidelines for deciding on whether to act on feedback she received: “whether they [i.e., the reviewers] understand my meaning or not”, and since she felt that “in most cases, [her] peers understood [her] a lot”, this could explain why peer feedback had a larger impact on her revisions. This is noteworthy, given that she had no prior experience of peer review. Hence, it is likely that these two factors – her openness to peer feedback resulting from the lack of
teacher feedback on her writing and her belief that students should play an active part in learning; and her experience that her peers understood her a great deal – have contributed to the unexpectedly positive results of the peer review activity on her level of independence in writing and the subsequent improvement in writing.

Case of Sue

Sue, Upper Intermediate Writer Two, stood out in her group of Upper Intermediate Writers and Peer Reviewers as she did not exhibit any of the independence-reflecting revisions (except for one instance of rejecting teacher feedback) and yet made the most improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two. However, she exhibited a fairly high number of self-initiated revisions (17 out of a total of 27 revisions), one of which dealt with content, and another with organization. The rest involved minor revisions regarding language such as word choice or deletions. She also rejected two peer suggestions.

Her self-declared habit of self-correction/self-editing is a likely factor in explaining this unexpected finding of the greatest improvement made despite the lack of independence-reflecting revisions. In reflecting on the self-initiated revisions she made, she mentioned her usual practice of looking through her drafts after she has completed her writing: “When you write something you need to revise it again and again and again if you have enough time or energy. So I have time so the final version of the journal so I have time and I need to reread and do some correction if it is necessary” (Journal 2 Interview).
This habit which resulted in the fairly high number of self-initiated revisions might have contributed to the improvement in the quality of the draft. Another possible factor is the focus of her revisions. There were four revisions that dealt with issues of cohesion, two of which constituted major revisions. It is commonly believed that revisions involving global issues such as cohesion (instead of local issues such as the mechanics of writing), are more likely to have an impact on the quality of the revised draft. For example, Paulus (1999) found a “moderate positive correlation…between the percentage of macrostructure changes made to the essays and the amount of overall improvement” (p. 282).

One of these revisions arose from teacher feedback, two from peer feedback and one from self-initiative. This self-initiated revision move (Journal 1 Change 14) comprises a series of revisions with the aim of having all information presented revolve around the main idea of the paragraph – the necessity of applying the genre-based approach. In other words, her aim in making these changes was to make this part of the paragraph more cohesive.

Change 14 (text in italics) shows a fairly drastic re-organisation which resulted in an improved version:

*Original version:*

“In other words, I was totally unconscious about theories of writing instruction before, whereas I am conscious about them now and have a clear thought about the importance of theoretical foundation for writing instruction. Moreover, I have gained an insight into
different approaches to ESL/EFL writing instruction such as product-based, process-based and genre-base approach. I clearly realized that my former ESL/EFL writing instruction was out of date because it was only restricted to writing product, never considering the writing process and the genre.” (Journal 1 Draft 1)

Revised version:

“In retrospect, I was totally unconscious about theories of writing instruction. In my writing instruction, I had just given students writing models of College English Test Band 4, analyzed models, asked them to write independently and given them feedback, as a consequence of which students’ writing ability didn’t get improved very much and students lost their interest in writing and didn’t invest much efforts in writing. I clearly realized that my former writing instruction was out of date because it was only restricted to writing product, never considering the writing process and the genre. Nevertheless, I am conscious about writing instruction theories now and have a clear thought about importance of theoretical foundation for writing instruction. Genre-based approach to writing instruction is a case in point.” (Journal 1 Draft 2)

Reflecting on the decision to make this revision, she acknowledged that she became more conscious about doing self-correction after addressing the earlier feedback given, including that from a particular peer on the issue of cohesion. Acknowledging that this revision was a “spin-off” from responding to the feedback she had received on her writing, she elaborated
that she usually did self-corrections which were mainly linguistic changes, but this time round, she dealt with more than linguistic changes – specifically, issues of cohesion. She commented that she became more conscious of making self-corrections, “because it’s a complete composition, you should consider from all aspects...” (Journal 1 Interview). Therefore, she had to look at her writing again to consider if she needed to make any other changes after addressing all the feedback on her writing. This habit of self-correction reflects to some degree her sense of ownership over her writing. Hence, this characteristic of doing self-corrections which became more accentuated after the experience of receiving feedback, could be an important factor contributing to the great improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two.

**Case of Charlie**

Charlie, Advanced Writer One, exhibited three out of the four characteristic independence-reflecting revisions: Snowball Effect Revision (three instances), Multiple Revisions (one instance) and Rejection of teacher feedback (two instances). He also rejected a peer suggestion and made seven self-initiated revisions. He is the second most independent writer, together with Advanced Writer Two in this group of Advanced Writers and Advanced Peer Reviewers. However, in terms of improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two, he showed the greatest improvement of all the 12 participants of the study. This writer came across as fairly resistant to feedback on his writing for Journal 1, as reflected in the following quotations:

“…your writing is like your own baby…and people usually think their own babies are the best one”
“…it’s very difficult to change your own article”

“…it’s very difficult for me to jump out of the box and look at the article like someone else”

“I’m not the kind of person to be easily influenced”

(Journal 1 Interview)

The last quotation highlights his self-acknowledged obstinate personality which could explain to some extent the high incidence of independence-reflecting revisions in his revised drafts, in that it would seem in line with this personality to not adhere closely to the suggestions given. While teacher feedback was slightly more influential than peer feedback in generating these revisions, peer feedback had a greater influence overall, considering especially the fact that included in the revisions arising from teacher feedback, half also involved self-initiated revisions not directly linked to teacher feedback. This greater influence of peer feedback over teacher feedback on his revisions is unexpected, given that he had no prior experience of peer feedback and his apparent preference for teacher feedback at the beginning of the study:

My only consideration would be whether the comments are convincing and informative enough. I do prefer to be reviewed by a teacher to by a fellow student because a teacher usually knows more in writing and is more likely to give instructive feedback. However, I also understand this is not always the case. It is just that the probability is higher.

(Reflection 1)
Upon closer examination of the above quotation, one might deduce that his was a stance inclined towards the neutral with regards to the preference for feedback as his opening line shows his focus on the quality of comments rather than the source of the comments. This tentative openness to peer feedback reflected evolved into a positive attitude towards feedback on his writing in Journal 2: “This time, I made much more change to my first draft than I did last time” (Reflection 2).

The circumstance that precipitated this change was his perception of the reason behind the peer feedback he received. For the first journal, he felt that the peers’ feedback arose partially from the fact that they did not have the same background knowledge as he had about the idea of “emergentism” (the topic of this journal which he had garnered from the field of engineering as he has a Bachelor’s degree in road and bridge engineering). For the second journal, however, he could not attribute the negative feedback from his peers to a similar gap in background knowledge: “…for the first journal, I attribute reviewers’ confusion to their lack of background knowledge …As for Journal 2, since all the knowledge is within the sphere of applied linguistics…, I think the problem must lie with me if they still find it hard to comprehend” (Reflection 2). In other words, he expected his peers to have sufficient knowledge about his chosen topic since it is within the field of applied linguistics, the discipline of the course he and his peers were enrolled in. He acknowledged that if the peer reviewers had difficulty understanding his model of coherence (the topic of his second journal) which is a topic within the field he believed his peers were familiar with, the “fault”, he
surmised, must lay with him. Hence, the most major revision he made for this draft is in response to this feedback that his writing caused difficulty in comprehension: “This three-dimension model is hard to understand … If all of them thought so, it is a problem”; “But this time I find that it is my problem I didn’t make it clear. So I make changes… Most of the changes I made are responding to their comments” (Journal 2 Interview).

What he considered as the most important revision he made in the second journal came in the form of the inclusion of three figures (Changes 10, 11, 13) to illustrate visually the model of coherence he had proposed in the second journal.

What this episode of revision shows is this writer’s openness to peer feedback when the “evidence” in terms of reader’s response is reasonable. Hence, he was persuaded despite his obstinate personality. It also shows how this writer has gained a greater sense of audience awareness through the feedback received.

In sum, this writer’s obstinate personality coupled with his stance leaning towards a “neutral” one with regard to preference of feedback, with the emphasis placed on the quality of the feedback received, could have contributed to the great benefit he garnered through this activity of peer review which resulted in the highest improvement in the quality of writing amongst the participants.

6.6 Discussion
The Activity Theory concept of agency is reflected in the decisions that writers make in responding to and using feedback on writing, as learners can show individuation in the way they respond to feedback on their writing. In this chapter, it has been shown that writers of different writing proficiency levels in the three case set-ups have exhibited different levels of independence in revising in the decisions they make in response to feedback on their writing. The key findings in this chapter are: 1) there are four characteristic types of independence-reflecting revisions, 2) Advanced Writers were more influenced by peer feedback than teacher feedback in their revisions, 3) Advanced Writers exhibited the highest incidence of independence-reflecting revisions, and 4) there is not much differentiation between the group of Upper Intermediate Writers with Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers; and the group of Intermediate Writers with Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewer and Upper Intermediate Writers with Intermediate Peer Reviewers, in terms of the level of independence in revising behaviour.

6.6.1 The tentative link between independence in revision and critical thinking

The four characteristic types of independence-reflecting revisions (the “Snowball Effect”, Complex, Multiple Revisions and Rejection of Teacher Feedback) share the common feature of a departure from the feedback given in the revision that is made. In other words, an independence-reflecting revision involves the writer’s decision to respond in such a way that is not in direct response to the feedback given. It takes some deeper engagement with the feedback given and critical thinking on the part of the writer to be able to come up with such
a revision. To deviate from given advice requires some thinking out of the box, and hence, making these independence-reflecting revisions indicates some critical thinking on the part of the writer. For example, in making a complex revision, the writer comes up with one revision move that addresses the issue(s) raised by different sources of feedback. This shows the capacity to “synthesize” and recognize that different sources of feedback are dealing with the same issue or may be addressed with the same solution. Synthesis may be likened to critical thinking and is one of the higher-order thinking levels according to Bloom’s taxonomy (1956). In making a “Snowball Effect” Revision, the writer comes up with more than one revision move as the initial revision triggers yet another or other revisions in other parts of the text. This reflects deeper thinking on the part of the writer than that which would accompany a single revision move. According to York-Barr et al., “high-order critical thinking happens after one has an opportunity to ponder or more deeply reflect on his or her own individual thoughts, insights, questions” (cited in Ekahitanond, 2013, p. 260).

While not conclusive, the findings of the presence of such revisions suggest a possible link between independence in revising and critical thinking on the part of the writer in responding in this way to the feedback received on writing. At the very least, it may be surmised that the feedback which led to these revisions stimulated thinking on the part of the writer (Novakovich, 2016; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006).

6.6.2 The comparative influence of peer and teacher feedback on Advanced Writers
All four Advanced Writers were more strongly influenced by peer feedback than teacher feedback in their revisions, compared to writers in the other two case set-ups where teacher feedback had a more comparable influence vis-à-vis peer feedback. A most probable reason lies in the writing proficiency of the Advanced Writers who have a relatively stronger grasp of the target language compared with writers in the other two groups. They are, therefore, in a stronger position to question peer feedback. Unlike teacher feedback, peer feedback is seen as “on a par” with their status as fellow learners and hence, the writers do not feel obliged to take up the suggestions given (Hu & Lam, 2010; Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006). In Yang et al.’s study, it was reported that peer feedback had a greater influence on the revisions than teacher feedback precisely because the lack of trust in peer feedback prompted writers to engage more with the feedback in arriving at solutions and hence, the greater incidence of successful revisions arising from peer feedback. It seems that the equal status between writer and peer reviewer frees the writer to question and engage with the feedback, thus eliciting deeper thinking, perhaps even critical thinking, and hence, the greater likelihood of arriving at successful revisions.

The Advanced Writers in the current study also presented the greatest improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two for the two assignments taken together. As those more influenced by peer feedback in the study showed the greatest improvement in scores, it may suggest that peer feedback had a great part to play in the improvement in scores for this group of writers since they were more influenced by peer feedback in their revisions. Hence, the
fact that as Advanced Writers, they had a stronger grasp of the language to be confident in questioning peer feedback, could have accounted for the highest improvement in writing quality amongst the participants presented by this group of writers.

6.6.3 Independence in revising in Advanced Writers

The Advanced Writers showed the highest incidence of revisions reflecting independence in revising behaviour and were the most influenced by peer feedback compared with the writers from the other two groups. Four possible reasons are proposed for this finding.

First, independence in revising behaviour indicates some measure of critical thinking on the part of the writer which leads to revisions which are not in direct response to the feedback given. The fact that Advanced Writers have a higher writing proficiency than the writers of the other two case set-ups may account for their greater inclination to deviate from the advice in the feedback given, resulting in a higher incidence of independence-reflecting revisions. It is reasonable to surmise that with a stronger grasp of the language, writers would be more confident in not adhering strictly to the advice from feedback, since a better knowledge of the language allows greater room for considering various options in the use of the language.

Second, the above proposition is given support in the finding that the Advanced Writers presented the majority of the unexpected occurrences of rejection of teacher feedback (four out of a total of seven instances for the 12 participants). This bears testimony to the suggested
capacity of the Advanced Writers to deviate from feedback given, and in this case, teacher advice. Such occurrences of rejection of teacher feedback are unexpected as the participants come from a teacher-centred culture where teacher advice often goes unchallenged (Hu, 2005; Ren & Hu, 2012; Sengupta, 1998; Zhao, 2010). A possible explanation is the influence of the web-based system which has created a more impersonal platform of interaction in an online environment (see Section 5.7.1 for details). Such an environment facilitates acting contrary to expected norms which govern face-to-face interaction. An impersonal platform allows the writer to ignore or at least, not be reminded of the usual considerations such as the need to show deference to figures of authority such as the teacher. Somehow, with the help of technology, “out of sight is out of mind”.

Third, the fact that peer feedback is seen as “on a par” with their status as fellow learners may predispose the writers towards questioning it and thereby, engaging more deeply with the feedback and perhaps leading to more successful revisions. The fact that Advanced Writers were more influenced by peer feedback could have accounted for, to some extent, the higher incidence of independence-reflecting revisions for this case set-up of writers, compared with the writers of the other two case set-ups who were comparatively less influenced by peer feedback. It has been observed that such revisions did result from peer feedback to a certain extent (about 50%). Coupled with the data from the interviews which showed the Advanced Writers finding peer feedback more specific and less directive in tone compared with teacher
feedback which tended to be general and directive (possibly explaining why peer feedback had a greater influence on revisions than teacher feedback; see Section 5.7.1 and Table 5.1 for details), it may be surmised that peer feedback is also as effective as teacher feedback in stimulating thinking and eliciting independence-reflecting revisions. This finding is further supported when the comparative influence of peer and teacher feedback on such revisions for Upper Intermediate and Intermediate Writers is taken into account, as peer feedback accounted for slightly more than 50% of the independence-reflecting revisions for these writers.

At this juncture, a caveat is in order. It is acknowledged that it is not possible to establish that it was the nature of peer feedback per se, and not other factors such as the writing proficiency level or the critical thinking capacity of Advanced Writers, which could have also accounted for the higher incidence of independence-reflecting revisions among these writers. However, since it is not within the scope of this study to investigate the critical thinking capacity of the writers, this question remains unanswered. It is possible that the higher writing proficiency level of these writers could have also accounted for the finding as better knowledge of academic writing genre and its conventions and generally, a stronger grasp of the language could have given these writers greater confidence in deviating from the feedback given (point already mentioned in Section 6.6.2). However, given the findings presented regarding the comparative influence of peer and teacher feedback, the extent of independence-reflecting revisions arising from peer feedback and these writers’ opinions regarding teacher
and peer feedback, it is not unreasonable to propose that peer feedback is at least, one important factor explaining the higher incidence of independence-reflecting revisions among these writers.

This finding of the positive effect of peer feedback is consistent with some earlier findings in the literature. Tsui and Ng (2000) reported that participants found that peer review helped raise awareness of one’s own writing problems through receiving and giving feedback. As two of the participants put it, they “saw the teacher as the authority and would incorporate the teacher’s comments no matter whether they agreed with the comments or not” (p. 164). However, with regard to peer comments, they said they were valued for helping them “in terms of spotting and raising awareness of the weaknesses in their own writing” (p. 164). Raising awareness may be seen as stimulating thinking on the part of the writer to some extent, if they were not aware of the problem highlighted, to begin with. Yang et al. (2006) found a stronger tendency for participants to make a revision not arising from teacher nor peer feedback in the group which received peer feedback compared with the group which received only teacher feedback. As the researchers put it, “The more they doubted the feedback, the more likely it was that they would develop their own independent ideas they had for revision” (p. 192). This suggests that peer feedback seems to have the effect of stimulating questioning/thinking on the part of the writer, if only because the source of the feedback is deemed less than authoritative.
More recent studies involving the use of ICT such as blogs and discussion boards in peer review have surfaced some positive findings regarding this effect (Ching & Hsu, 2016; Grami, 2012; Novakovich, 2016). Grami (2012) found that “critical thinking and ability to judge the feedback received from peers” (p. 46) were skills his seven ESL writers had developed in his study on online collaborative writing with the use of blogs and feedback checklists. Novakovich’s study (2016) found that blog-mediated peer feedback tended to produce a higher number of critical comments and critical comments were correlated positively with improved scores in quality of writing. To elaborate further, “the findings indicate that blogging technology encouraged a higher level of critical thinking in terms of feedback, and perhaps a correspondingly deeper revision of the work as a whole” (p. 25). This implies that the peer feedback given in an online environment led to a higher incidence of critical comments and since the critical comments were positively correlated with improved scores in writing, it may be surmised that the feedback led to some thinking on the part of the writer which resulted in “deeper revision”, which in turn led to better improvement in scores. However, as the evidence of this effect of stimulating thinking is sparse so far, the findings of the current study constitute additional evidence of this effect of peer feedback and also, an enriched understanding of how critical thinking on the part of the writer might be translated into the revisions made (as shown in the classification of four independence-reflecting revisions detailed in Section 6.1.1).
Fourth, it seems that the grouping of Advanced Writers with reviewers of the same proficiency has facilitated the relatively higher incidence of the independence-reflecting revisions for these writers. Apart from the positive findings in terms of the higher incidence of independence-reflecting revisions and level of improvement compared with the other writers, there was also a shift in the stance of these writers regarding their preference for teacher feedback by the end of the study. Although all did declare a preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback at the beginning of the study, only one (Advanced Writer Three) amongst this group of four writers still had a clear preference for teacher feedback by the end of the study. All the other three had moderated stances by the end of the study: two would choose teacher feedback if forced to choose between teacher and peer feedback and one (Advanced Writer Four) did not prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback. This suggests that the Advanced Writers grouped with the peer reviewers of the same proficiency level had such a positive experience of peer feedback that their initial stance with regards to preference of feedback between teacher and peer feedback had changed by the end of the study, to become more positive vis-à-vis peer feedback.

Hence, it is reasonable to deduce that, given the findings about the stimulating effect of peer feedback and the positive change in the writers’ attitude towards peer feedback, such a configuration of writer and peer reviewer based on proficiency seems to promote critical
thinking for the writer. This conclusion leads us to the issue of an optimal configuration of peer review based on proficiency.

6.6.4 An optimal configuration of peer review based on proficiency

Implicit in the ‘L2 factor’ is the issue of language proficiency of writers and reviewers and how this factor might impact the peer feedback process. In second language writing contexts, L2 proficiency clearly affects the peers’ ability to give feedback and the writer’s ability to evaluate and use feedback. Despite its centrality in the enterprise of peer feedback, it is one of the most under-researched factors (Allen & Katayama, 2016). More recently, some studies have addressed this factor either by focusing on whether and how learners of a particular language proficiency could benefit from peer review with learners of a different language proficiency (Yu & Hu, 2017a; Yu & Lee, 2016), or whether the language proficiency of writers and reviewers would influence the quantity and type of feedback given and utilized (Allen & Katayama, 2016; Allen & Mills, 2016; Patchan, 2011). In my study, three case set-ups of four writers each, with matched and mixed proficiencies, were investigated. The purpose was to investigate if certain configurations of peer review based on proficiency would yield optimal results.

In this study, the Advanced Writer - Advanced Reviewer configuration presented the best outcomes, both in terms of the level of independence in revising shown, and improvement in
quality of writing. The other two configurations in the study (Upper Intermediate Writer - Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewer, and Intermediate Writer - Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewer and Upper Intermediate Writer - Intermediate Peer Reviewer), did not differ much in terms of the level of independence in revising and improvement in scores.

The idea of an optimal configuration of peer review is predicated on the premise that writers of different proficiencies do behave differently, including their revising behaviour. If this is the case, then it is reasonable to surmise that there could be optimal configurations of writer and peer reviewer(s), based on proficiency as certain configurations might facilitate the optimal use of peer feedback. It has been shown in the study that writers of different proficiencies do exhibit different levels of independence in revising. Advanced Writers with Advanced Peer Reviewers exhibited the highest level of independence, posting a total of 22 such revisions, followed by the group of Upper Intermediate Writers with Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers, with a total of eight; and the group of Intermediate Writers with Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers and Upper Intermediate Writers with Intermediate Peer Reviewers, a total of seven.

In the present study, the Advanced Writer - Advanced Reviewer configuration presented the best outcomes, both in terms of the level of independence in revising shown, and improvement in quality of writing. In Section 6.6.3, it was shown that such a configuration of writer and peer reviewer seems to promote critical thinking for the writer, which may be
due to the strong language ability and confidence of these writers and the stimulating effect of peer feedback. This finding of an optimal configuration of Advanced Writer and Peer Reviewer is consistent with earlier findings (Leeser, 2004; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Patchan, 2011). Leeser found that while low proficiency learners benefitted from working with high proficiency learners, it worked best when high proficiency learners were paired with another of the same proficiency. Leeser’s study focused on oral peer feedback rather than written peer feedback. However, it constituted some evidence that high proficiency learners benefitted from the peer feedback from peers of the same proficiency. In Mendonca and Johnson’s study, Advanced ESL learners involved in peer review were found to generate the highest number of negotiations (in which learners talk, discuss their or others’ language use), compared with studies with learners of lower proficiency (Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Suzuki, 2008). In Patchan’s study, the findings suggest that writers would benefit more from feedback from peers of similar proficiency even as there was overall no significant difference between feedback from high proficiency peers and low proficiency peers in terms of its impact on the improvement in drafts. The specific finding of high proficiency writers receiving more peer feedback on content from high proficiency peers and being more likely to adopt feedback on content from high proficiency peers is in line with the findings of the current study. Hence, the finding of the current study contributes additional evidence to the limited research so far on optimal configurations for peer review. Further, while the finding is not unexpected, what the study has contributed is an enriched understanding of how this configuration may promote
critical thinking which is translated into successful revisions, especially independence-
reflecting revisions, and improved quality of writing.

The other two configurations in the study (Upper Intermediate Writer - Upper
Intermediate Peer Reviewer, and Intermediate Writer - Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewer and
Upper Intermediate Writer - Intermediate Peer Reviewer), did not differ much in terms of the
level of independence in revising and improvement in scores. Both groups had comparable
frequency of independence-reflecting revisions and level of improvement in quality of writing.
However, looking into individual cases, there are some variations in the distribution of these
two indicators: among the Upper Intermediate Writers and Peer Reviewers, there is a more
even distribution of independence-reflecting revisions, while among the Intermediate - Upper
Intermediate group, the distribution is concentrated on only two of the four writers, one of
whom is the outstanding case discussed in Section 6.5 on the influence of individual
characteristics (Intermediate Writer Two).

With these two configurations, there is a comparable influence on revisions between
teacher and peer feedback, which suggests that peer feedback in this setting is appreciated by
these writers and therefore a worthwhile activity. In addition, they both presented fairly
positive outcomes (an average gain of 7.25 percent in terms of improvement in scores; see
Appendix J); with the Upper Intermediate group having two writers above the median score
for the level of improvement in writing quality, and the Intermediate - Upper Intermediate
group, one writer. This indicates that peer review in these configurations has yielded some positive outcomes.

The literature has not surfaced much evidence of which configuration – matched or mixed proficiencies – work better. According to Ren and Hu (2012), mixed groups “can ensure that all students will contribute to and benefit from this activity” (p. 11). While Yu and Lee’s study (2016) provides evidence that low proficiency students are able to contribute positively to the peer review process, it has not established that peer review groups of mixed proficiencies work better. Likewise, Yu and Hu’s study (2016) found that higher proficiency students could gain from peer feedback from lower proficiency peers in terms of range of comments received, the positive impact of the feedback on revisions, and the learning derived from reviewing peers’ writing (even though one out of the three high proficiency students did not think that the peer review activity with lower proficiency peers was useful). However, the study did not establish that peer review groups of mixed proficiencies are preferable to those with matched proficiencies. On the other hand, Allen and Mill’s study (2016) suggests that mixed ability groups, especially if the difference in proficiency is relatively high, should be avoided as lower proficiency students tend to give less feedback compared with high proficiency reviewers. While the higher proficiency students can still give a fair amount of feedback, it does not mean that this configuration is not optimal for both groups of students. However, Allen and Mills (2016) did give a caveat:
Though we suggest that matched proficiency pairs may be optimal for achieving similar quantities of suggestions from all students, and thus similar levels of engagement with the task, we are not suggesting that peer feedback has no mutual benefits when proficiencies are different. (p. 510)

The lack of differentiation between Cases 2 and 3 (see Figure 4.3), one with matched proficiency (Upper Intermediate) and one with mixed proficiency (Intermediate and Upper Intermediate), in the study indicates that there is no clear conclusion as to whether matched proficiency groups or mixed proficiency groups work better for Upper Intermediate and Intermediate writers. However, a closer look at the outstanding case of Intermediate Writer Two, shows that lower proficiency writers can benefit greatly from peer review with higher proficiency writers. This is in contrast to the finding in Allen and Mills’ study (2016) that lower proficiency writers incorporated fewer meaning-related suggestions, meaning that they did not benefit much from the feedback by higher proficiency peers, in terms of improving their drafts. The finding of the case of Intermediate Writer Two in the current study shows that a mixed proficiency configuration may work to the benefit of the lower proficiency writer. Another writer in this group of mixed proficiency who exhibited some instances of independence-reflecting revisions, and had the second highest score for improvement in writing in the group, is an Upper Intermediate Writer. This means that in this mixed proficiency configuration, both the lower proficiency writer and the higher proficiency writer
seem to have benefitted from the peer review. Hence, whether matched proficiency or mixed proficiency configurations work better merits further research. However, what can be established here is that both configurations have yielded some positive outcomes.

The issue of individuation in response to feedback presented in Section 6.5 highlights the influence of writers’ individual characteristics on the peer review process and the fact that not all factors such as individual differences in personality or past experience can be accounted for. For example, the case of Intermediate Writer Two showed an unexpectedly high incidence of independence-reflecting revisions and the greatest improvement in scores in the group, even though one would expect Intermediate writers not to exhibit much independence in revision nor be able to make such considerable improvement, given their weaker grasp of the language. Studies have shown that weaker writers tend to incorporate fewer meaning-related feedback in their revisions (Allen & Mills, 2016) and also make fewer meaning-related revisions (Berg, 1999; Paulus, 1999). This may explain why they are less likely to make considerable improvement in their revisions. The individual characteristic of unusual openness to peer feedback of this writer (it is more likely for learners from a teacher-centred culture to prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback) explains the unusually positive impact of peer feedback on this writer. The next example is that of Upper Intermediate Writer Two. The influence of the habit of self-correction was seen in this writer who managed a considerable level of improvement in writing quality even though she did not exhibit any independence-
reflecting revisions. The example of Advanced Writer One (see Section 6.5) highlights the influence of an obstinate personality in accentuating the general trend of very positive outcomes for Advanced Writers. What these cases illustrate is that it may not always be productive to investigate the issue of whether mixed proficiency or matched proficiency configurations work better, as the influence of individual differences may make it difficult for firm conclusions to be arrived at.

6.6.5 Summary

In this chapter, it has been shown that there are differences in how L2 writers of different proficiencies, respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing, in terms of the level of independence in revising. The concept of independence in revising was defined, explained and illustrated with a classification of four types of independence-reflecting revisions. The differences between three case set-ups of Advanced Writers and Peer Reviewers, Upper Intermediate Writers and Peer Reviewers, and Intermediate Writers - Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers and Upper Intermediate Writers - Intermediate Peer Reviewers, are shown in the level of independence in revising, the comparative influence for teacher and peer feedback and the improvement in quality of writing. While the Advanced Writers - Peer Reviewers group stood out from the other two, there was not much differentiation between the other two groups. Implications in terms of an optimal configuration of peer review based on language proficiency were discussed.
Chapter 7

Contradictions in the activity system of responding to and using feedback on writing of an L2 writer

In the last chapter, I addressed the first research sub-question of the second research question on differences between L2 writers of different proficiency levels, in the way they respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing. The concept of learner agency from third-generation Activity Theory was used in analysing the data. In this chapter, I will be using another key concept in Activity Theory – that of contradictions, in analyzing the data. I will be addressing the second sub-question of the second research question of the study: b) Is there indeed a preference for teacher feedback as reported in the literature among second language writers? If so, does this preference translate to a greater use and effectiveness of teacher feedback?

The notion of contradictions may be understood variously as problems, conflicts or tensions within or amongst the components of the activity system in Activity Theory. In the context of the above research question, this notion may understood as a discrepancy between preference for teacher feedback and its efficacy, if any.

7.1 Preference for Teacher Feedback amongst L2 writers
One of the key issues with the use of peer review with L2 writers has been the oft-mentioned and relatively well-documented preference for teacher feedback among L2 writers (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Hu & Lam, 2010; Jacobs et al., 1998; Lam, 2016; Liu & Chai, 2009; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Ren & Hu, 2012; Sengupta, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Yu et al., 2016; Zhang, 1995, 1999; Zhao, 2010). This preference for teacher feedback is one central aspect of “the cultural factor” which includes other potential cultural impediments to the use of peer review with L2 learners, such as differences in rhetorical expectations (Leki, 1990) and sociolinguistic rules of communication (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 1998; 2006). The abovementioned research question seeks to ascertain if the oft-cited preference for teacher feedback is once again confirmed in this study, and if so, whether this preference actually translates into greater effectiveness of teacher feedback on the writers’ revisions. This may be of great interest to researchers as learners’ preference for a particular type of input should be translated into greater effectiveness for such input to be privileged in the design of instructional activities.

7.2 Clear preference for teacher feedback amongst participants

In the next section, I will be presenting data showing the clear preference for teacher feedback at the beginning of the study, the moderated stances of some of the participants regarding preference for teacher feedback by the end of the study, and the apparent contradictions between this declared preference for teacher feedback (or acknowledgment of
teacher as “Teacher Expert”) and two sub-components in the activity system – perceived time constraint (‘Rules’) and “Writer as Author” (‘Division of Labour’).

In the pre-study questionnaire, 11 out of the total of 12 participants declared a preference for teacher feedback. This was expected as preference for teacher feedback of Chinese learners is commonly reported in the literature (Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016; Liu & Chai, 2009; Nelson & Carson, 2006; Ren & Hu, 2012; Sengupta, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Yu et al., 2016; Zhao, 2010).

However, by the end of the study, there was a shift to a moderated stance towards peer feedback among some of the participants, across the proficiency levels. Amongst the Advanced Writers, all but one had a moderated stance towards peer feedback. One (Qiao, Advanced Writer Four) did not prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback by the end of the study. For the rest of the participants (Upper Intermediate and Intermediate Writers), five had moderated stances towards peer feedback. This means half of the participants had moderated stances towards peer feedback by the end of the study.

Below are some excerpts from the interviews at the end of the study to illustrate the shift in stances.

June (Upper Intermediate Writer Three) explained how she would decide on whether to act on the feedback on her writing, whether coming from the teacher or peers: “When I read the feedback, I will just think about it. If it is good, it is right, it makes sense, I will just change
it. If it is not correct or my idea is good, based on this, I will not change my essay” (June, Upper Intermediate Writer Three).

Qiao (Advanced Writer Four), who had some prior experience of peer feedback and had declared a preference for teacher feedback at the beginning of the study, reported thus about peer feedback at the end of the study: “Quite to the point, maybe more help than teacher feedback, to some extent because they are more in detailed about the language issue, or more about the structure, whether I should end a more strong conclusion or not” (Qiao, Advanced Writer Four).

Yin (Upper Intermediate Writer Four) who had no prior experience of peer feedback, began with a clear preference for teacher feedback at the beginning of the study. However, her attitude towards peer feedback had changed for the better by the end of study and she could see the possible role that peer feedback could play: “But sometimes [the teacher] may just focus the major issues in our writing and such grammatical feedback from peer, thus, becomes valuable” (Reflection 2).

It is pertinent to note that for this writer, two changes made in response to peer feedback (out of six) in Journal 1 and all changes arising from peer feedback in Journal 2 (three altogether), had to do with language issues. By the end of the study, while maintaining a preference for teacher feedback, the writer had also begun to see the value of peer feedback because of her positive experience and suggested that a combination of teacher and peer
feedback would be more helpful, in response to the question as to which feedback she found more helpful in revising her writing. She further explained that the suggestion arose from the acknowledgement that teachers are always busy and have many papers to read within a short time as indicated in Journal 2 Interview.

Apart from being positive about peer feedback and maintaining a preference for teacher feedback, she also admitted that her opinion of teacher feedback had changed slightly in the course of the study, from one of blind acceptance to a more discriminatory stance: “Does it make sense?” (on her criterion for deciding whether to act on feedback, whether from teacher or peers) (End-of-study interview).

Of those who still had a clear preference for teacher feedback at the end of the study, three (Upper Intermediate Writers One, Five, Six) acknowledged the value of peer feedback and advocated complementary roles for peer and teacher feedback.

Zenn (Upper Intermediate Writer Five) reported thus when asked if she still preferred teacher feedback at the end of the study: “I prefer the combination of these two”; “Only teacher comments is not enough for the student to revise their whole article but if you receive peer feedback, you can receive many aspects, many perspectives of comments” (End-of-study Interview).

Xiao (Upper Intermediate Writer One) still clearly preferred teacher feedback at the end of the study but would advocate that teacher and peer feedback play complementary roles: “In
my opinion, teacher feedback can be viewed as overall guideline, while peer feedback can serve as specific terms the writers can refer to in a certain error” (End-of-study interview).

Amongst those who had still had a preference for teacher feedback at the end of the study, acknowledgement that the teacher is the one who accords the scores in evaluation of student papers, was the clear reason given by three of the writers (Upper Intermediate Writers Five, Six and Intermediate Writer One). This reason may be interpreted as a reflection of what may be termed as “an assessment culture” (Lam, 2016; Zhao, 2010), which is prevalent in a teacher-centred culture.

7.3 The impact of teacher feedback on revisions and level of improvement

Analysis of the data showed that of the twelve participants in the study, four writers (Upper Intermediate Writers Three, Four, Six; and Intermediate Writer One) were more influenced by teacher feedback in their revisions compared with seven (Advanced Writers One, Two, Three and Four; Upper Intermediate Writers One and Five and Intermediate Writer Two) who were more influenced by peer feedback and one who was equally influenced by teacher and peer feedback (Upper Intermediate Writer Two). Those who were more influenced by teacher feedback had an average improvement score (from Draft One to Draft Two) of 6.13 marks (out of a maximum of 100 marks) compared with 8.93 (for those more influenced by peer feedback) and six marks (for the one equally influenced by teacher and peer feedback). Though statistical analysis could not be administered owing to the small
sample size, these figures showing the improvement in scores form Draft One to Draft Two seem to indicate that the preference for teacher feedback declared by the majority of the participants at the beginning of the study had not translated into superior effectiveness vis-à-vis peer feedback in terms of impact on revisions and improvement in quality in subsequent drafts. An analysis of the interview data (see next section for examples) revealed the apparent contradiction between the preference for teacher feedback and the perceived time constraint faced by teachers in giving feedback to students.

7.4 Contradictions in the activity system of responding to and using feedback on writing of an L2 writer

The preference for teacher feedback may be reflected in the term, “Teacher Expert” under the component, ‘Division of Labour’, in the Activity System of responding to and using feedback (See Figure 5.1). The reason is that, if the teacher is considered an expert compared with peers, then it is reasonable to expect a preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback. Looking at the data, there appears to be contradictions between “Teacher Expert” (‘Division of Labour’) and time constraint (‘Rules’). Time constraint is understood as the limited time that teachers have in giving feedback, and the limited time that students have in giving and using feedback. There appears to be contradictions between “Teacher Expert” and time constraint as the clear preference for teacher feedback declared at the beginning of the study (for all but one of the participants) did not translate into its greater impact on revisions and the level of improvement resulting from the feedback (those who were more influenced
by peer feedback had an average score of improvement of 8.93 (out of 100), that for the group more influenced by teacher feedback was 6.13, and that for the writer who was equally influenced by teacher and peer feedback, was 6). Analysis of the data revealed that perceived time constraint as a strong possible reason for this “misfit” or discrepancy between the status accorded to “Teacher Expert” and the actual impact of teacher feedback on revisions.

Second, there appears to be contradictions between “Writer as Author” (‘Division of Labour’) and preference for teacher feedback (‘Rules’) (See Figure 5.1). “Writer as Author” may be reflected in the decisions writers make in responding to feedback, in particular, decisions which are contrary to advice given in the feedback as this reflects a sense of text ownership. According to Rollinson (2005), “The writer receiving comments from peers retains the right to reject comments, and is thus more able to maintain the possession of her own texts” (p. 25). Hence, by implication, the ability to reject advice in the feedback is seen as an expression of ownership of one’s text. Analysis of the data revealed a surprisingly fair amount of rejection of teacher feedback in this sample group from a teacher-centred culture. Hence, this may be seen as an instance of contradictions between preference for teacher feedback (‘Rules’) and “Writer as Author” (‘Division of Labour’). The reasons which surfaced for not acting according to teacher feedback may be grouped into three categories: sense of text ownership, lack of writing proficiency in addressing teacher feedback, and lack of understanding of teacher feedback. These reasons may be understood as reflections of the “Writer as Author” as they stem from the writer himself. There appears to be contradictions
between the preference for teacher feedback and these reasons for not taking up or not addressing teacher feedback exactly according to teacher advice. This is because one would expect the preference for teacher feedback to yield positive outcomes with regard to use and impact of teacher feedback.

7.5 The contradiction between Teacher as Expert (Division of Labour) and Perceived Time Constraint (Rules)

In this section, I will suggest a possible reason behind the unexpected finding of the less than superior impact of teacher feedback (compared with peer feedback), on the revisions and improvement in quality of writing of the L2 writers in the study, based on the findings of the study.

One of the recurrent themes in the interview data is that of time constraint, for the teacher and peer reviewers in giving feedback, and the writers in working on revisions based on feedback. In answering the research question in this chapter, however, I focus on time constraint faced by the teacher in giving feedback only. It is useful at this juncture to highlight some background information regarding the context of the study. The class from which the participants came had a total of 20 members. Hence, the teacher would review 20 drafts each time, while peer reviewers had three drafts each for each writing cycle (there were two writing cycles including peer review in this study). The time given for papers to be reviewed was one week. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that the teacher did face some measure of time constraint, given that she had 20 drafts, each of about 1000 or more words, to review within
a week, apart from the research projects, administrative duties, and workload for other classes she was teaching.

When asked about the differences between teacher and peer feedback they experienced, one recurrent theme which surfaced in the interviews was that teacher feedback tended to be brief while peer feedback was detailed. A common explanation proffered by the participants themselves was the presumed busy schedule of the teacher. Here are some excerpts from the interviews to illustrate this point:

“She is time constrained… not so much time to look so closely to student papers.”

(Qiao, Advanced Writer Four, Journal 1 Interview)

“Teachers’ workload is heavy. She cannot point out everything but peers feedback (since we have three reviewers) point out more problems.” (Nan, Upper Intermediate Writer Six, End-of-study interview)

“[The teacher] pointed out the same things in both of my journals…maybe one reason is that she has so many drafts to look at…”(Charlie, Advanced Writer One, End-of-study interview)

“Teachers usually go through the article very quickly but peers they will carefully look at your paper and they are the real audience or real readers and when they give comments they will think it very clearly…” (Zenn, Upper Intermediate Writer Five, End-of-study interview)
When asked about whether she preferred teacher feedback to peer feedback at the end of the study, Intermediate Writer Two clarified that it did not matter to her whether the feedback came from the teacher or peers:

“It doesn’t matter to me whether this feedback is from my teacher or from my peers…”

“Not so. For me, according to my experience, I like both. So suppose there is only peer feedback, I might wonder what my teacher will say about my paper and suppose there is only my teacher feedback, then I’m worried if my teacher is too busy.”

When asked to explain why she would be “worried”, she elaborated thus:

The biggest reason is my peer feedback are more detailed in this case, according to my experience. [The teacher] only grasp the general direction …I understand she is very busy. My peers they read more detail, they gave me more specific suggestions or comments or criticism. (Ray, Intermediate Writer Two, End-of-study interview, emphasis mine)

When asked about whether it mattered to her whether feedback came from the teacher or the peers when she was deciding to act on feedback Wei (Intermediate Writer One) reported that she would pay attention to teacher feedback first but if the feedback from the teacher was not sufficient, she would turn to the peers’ feedback which often pointed out her errors:

“I will consider the teacher feedback first… but the feedback the teacher makes is not enough…sometimes just point out the main problem of the writing…”
“Maybe some sentences are not so clear to them [the peers] but the teachers they don’t have time to point out that mistake… that is the peers’ help.”

(Wei, Intermediate Writer One, End-of-study interview)

In sum, the data seem to point to the time constraint that the teacher faced in giving feedback as one important reason for teacher feedback not having the expected greater impact on writers’ revisions and improvement in writing quality vis-à-vis peer feedback, despite the preference for teacher feedback of the majority of the writers.

7.6 The contradiction between Writer as Author (‘Division of Labour’) and Preference for Teacher Feedback (‘Rules’)

As mentioned earlier, three main reasons for not taking up teacher feedback were reported in the data: sense of text ownership, lack of proficiency in addressing teacher feedback and lack of understanding of teacher feedback. A sense of text ownership may be captured when the writer rejects teacher feedback because he has a good reason for not taking it up; for example, s/he does not agree with the teacher’s evaluation, s/he feels s/he has a better “solution” to the issue at hand or he thinks the teacher has misunderstood his/her intention, just to name a few possible reasons. The lack of proficiency in addressing teacher feedback is indicated when the writer reports that s/he finds it difficult to make the change suggested by the teacher or is not sure how to do it. Alternatively, s/he may feel rather dissatisfied with the
change made, not knowing if it meets the requirement of the teacher, possibly because s/he
did not have sufficient mastery of the language to execute a successful or satisfactory revision.
The lack of understanding of teacher feedback is indicated when the writer says he does not
know what the teacher comment requires him to do or what the issue mentioned is about.

In the coding of the data, rejection of teacher feedback was categorized into 1) instances
of not taking up teacher feedback 2) instances where teacher feedback was taken up but not
addressed exactly according to teacher advice. Table 7.1 shows the incidence of rejection of
teacher feedback amongst the participants:

**Table 7.1 Incidence of rejection of teacher feedback**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Teacher feedback not taken up</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Teacher feedback not addressed exactly according to teacher advice</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer One</td>
<td>1 (Journal 1 Teacher Feedback 2)</td>
<td>Did not agree with teacher feedback</td>
<td>1 (Journal 2 Teacher Feedback 3)</td>
<td>Self-initiative – found another idea useful and included it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer Two</td>
<td>1 (Journal 1 Teacher Feedback 2)</td>
<td>Did not agree with teacher feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer Three</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (Journal 1 Teacher Feedback 3)</td>
<td>Had ideas from elsewhere regarding revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (Journal 2 Teacher Feedback 1; Journal 2 Teacher Feedback 3)</td>
<td><strong>First instance</strong> – Had ideas from elsewhere regarding revision <strong>Second instance</strong> – Did not understand what was required by teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Five</td>
<td>1 (Journal 2 Teacher Feedback 2)</td>
<td>Did not agree with teacher feedback</td>
<td>1 (Journal 1 Teacher Feedback 3)</td>
<td>Had difficulty in addressing teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Writer One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (Journal 1 Teacher Feedback 3)</td>
<td>Had difficulty in addressing teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Writer Two</td>
<td>1 (Journal 2 Teacher Feedback 3)</td>
<td>Did not agree with teacher feedback</td>
<td>1 (Journal 2 Teacher Feedback 2)</td>
<td>Had difficulty in addressing teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>---------------------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from rejecting teacher feedback owing to the difficulty in addressing it, the contradiction between the preference for teacher feedback and its effectiveness in practice is also reflected in the participants’ lack of satisfaction or sense of uncertainty regarding the success of revisions arising from teacher feedback. I will present examples to illustrate all three categories of reasons for the rejection of teacher feedback in the next three sub-sections.

### 7.6.1 Three examples of rejection of teacher feedback owing to text ownership

These examples of teacher feedback being rejected are rare examples hardly documented in the literature of the use of peer review with Asian learners, especially Chinese learners who come from a teacher-centred culture where the teacher is revered as the source of knowledge and rarely to be contradicted in the classroom (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Hu & Lam, 2010; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Ren & Hu, 2012; Sengupta, 1998). It is noteworthy that these instances were not confined to the strongest writers, the Advanced Writers, but were present across the proficiency levels. Two cases involving Advanced Writers were presented in the preceding chapters on the mediating influence of SWoRD (see Section 5.7) and learner agency as shown in level of independence in revising (see Section 6.1.5).

**Case of Lynne**
In reflecting on the most important revision in Journal 1, Lynn (Advanced Writer Three) reported making a revision that was in response to teacher feedback (Teacher Feedback 3) but was not done exactly according to teacher advice. It was also partially in response to peer feedback (Peer 2 Feedback 2 and 3).

The teacher pointed out that “reasons two and three are not fully developed” in the discussion section and suggested that the writer “focus on two reasons (instead of four reasons), and develop and elaborate on [her] ideas” (Journal 1 Review).

The resulting changes involved collapsing the four reasons into two – hence, the inclusion of two sub-headings in the revised discussion section. Though it appeared that the writer was taking up the teacher’s suggestion (to cut out two points out of four), in effect she retained all four points but re-organised them into two main sections. Reflecting on the change she made, she recounted that she felt she should provide two answers in the two sub-sections in the discussion section, to answer two questions raised in the introduction. She added that the idea of having two answers in a later section, to correspond with two questions raised in the introduction section, occurred while she was reading other peers’ drafts.

In this revision move, a rather high level of independence is exhibited as the writer did not make changes exactly according to the teacher’s suggestion and gained ideas about how to revise in response to that particular feedback, from elsewhere (in this case, from reading other peers’ drafts and not from the feedback of the reviewers) in making the revision. It also
reflects a strong sense of text ownership on the writer’s part, as decisions were made according to the writer’s conception of what constitutes an improvement in the text quality, rather than the teacher’s suggestion.

**Case of Sue**

Sue (Upper Intermediate Writer Two) declared a preference for teacher feedback at the beginning of the study and maintained this preference by the end of the study. She was equally influenced by peer and teacher feedback in her revisions, but had two instances of rejection of teacher feedback. The reason behind the first instance was a sense of text ownership.

The first instance involved the most important change in Journal 2 (Change 2) in which she wrote about the limitations of the genre-based approach to EFL writing instruction. The teacher’s advice was: “Don’t end a paragraph with a quote. Use citation more purposefully to develop an argument” (Journal 2 Teacher Review). Though the resultant revision was triggered by teacher feedback, Sue did not adopt the teacher suggestion of developing the argument, using the citation which was placed at the end of the Introduction in Draft One. Instead, she decided to move the citation in question to the beginning of the next section (the Literature Review section): “Because it’s more like literature review… In my opinion, it fits better too, belonging to literature review” (Journal 2 Interview).

Commenting on the change which appeared on the surface to be acting according to teacher (since the paragraph did not end with a citation in Draft Two as suggested by the
teachers), she said: “I checked other people’s published papers. I do see those scholars… examples at the end of paragraphs, they use other people’s citation” (Journal 2 Interview).

In short, the fact that the revised paragraph did not end with a citation (which was the teacher suggestion) was not the result of agreement with the teacher suggestion. Rather, she had made a decision about how to address this piece of teacher feedback after consulting external sources outside the feedback received (in this case, journal articles she had read). She elaborated that she moved the citation to the beginning of the literature review because she had observed such an organisation of information in the research papers she had read. She considered the citation she used (Hyland’s) to be important and therefore should be placed at the beginning of the revised paragraph: “Hyland is very famous and important scholar in this field and his comments should be considered as literature review” (Journal 2 Interview).

Hence, the revised paragraph was not the result of her adopting the teacher suggestion that she should use something to support her main idea and not end a paragraph with a citation, though it appeared to be so. Here, we see a sound reason being proffered for not acting exactly according to teacher advice, though the issue raised was addressed. Once again, it reflects the writer’s independence as a writer, making decisions she deemed fit, for the improvement in text quality. Hers is not a blind preference for teacher feedback.

*Case of Zenn*
In Journal 2, in which Zenn (Upper Intermediate Writer Five) wrote on the topic of peer feedback in L2 writing, there was an instance where Zenn did not act according to teacher suggestion to elaborate on a particular point, but instead changed a connector (“However”) to “Consequently”. She explained that she did not think she had anything else to elaborate on as she had already said what she wanted to say. She figured out that possibly, the teacher had misunderstood her intention, thinking she was opening a new line of thought with the connector, “However”. This episode reflects the capacity of the writer to reject teacher advice that was presumably based on a misunderstanding of the writer’s intention. This highlights the importance of “Writer as Author” even for writers of less than superlative proficiency as there exists a real possibility of teacher misunderstanding writer intention for various reasons. In this case, it seems to have arisen from the writer’s own mistake in using the wrong connector, which led to a misunderstanding of writer intention on the teacher’s part:

Original version:

With the purpose to keep favorable relationship with classmates and one common goal achievement, Chinese peers tend to be unwilling to provide constructive responses or critical agreements which in their opinions may cause writer’s further painful correction or hurtful feelings (Nelson & Carson, 2006). However, it is argued here, the writer could not revise the draft successfully without construct advice from peers.

Revised version:
With the purpose to keep favorable relationship with classmates and one common goal achievement, Chinese peers tend to be unwilling to provide constructive responses or critical agreements which in their opinions may cause writer’s further painful correction or hurtful feelings (Nelson & Carson, 2006). Consequently, without peers’ constructive comments, the authors are not likely to revise the drafts effectively.

Despite the writer’s declared preference for teacher feedback at the beginning of the study, she exercised her “authorship” appropriately at this juncture.

7.6.2 Two examples of rejection of teacher feedback owing to lack of writing proficiency in addressing feedback

Case of Ray

In Journal Two, Ray (Intermediate Writer Two) wrote on the topic – crossing the boundaries of genres: from school to workplace. She admitted facing difficulty when attempting to address teacher feedback on not ending a paragraph with a citation but using the citation more purposefully to develop her argument: “That is also kind of difficult for me, actually” (Journal 2 Interview).

In response, she did not really act according to the teacher advice, but simply re-arranged the sentences by not putting the citation at the end of the paragraph. Initially, she regarded the citation she used as a kind of summary of that part of the text.
Original version:

“Parks also states similarly, “studies which focus more specifically on how new employees make the transition from school to workplace genres have emerged only sporadically” (2001, p. 405). Thus, based on the strengths of genre as a “social response to process” (Ken Hyland, 2003) which highly values social purpose, audience, or what is traditionally known as “community”, we need to realize the necessity of expanding the notion of community insofar as a dynamic, instead of a stable one, “because genres exist before their users, genres shape their users and reshape them” (Parks, 2001, p. 405).”

Revised version:

“Similarly, Parks states “studies which focus more specifically on how new employees make the transition from school to workplace genres have emerged only sporadically” and believes that “genres exist before their users, genres shape their users and reshape them” (2001, p. 405). Thus, based on the strengths of genre as a “social response to process” (Hyland, 2003) which highly values social purpose, audience, or community, we need to expand the notion of community to a dynamic one.”

It can be observed that though teacher feedback may be appropriate for a particular part of the text, the lack of writing proficiency on the writer’s part might mean that the feedback
may not be utilised profitably. It should be noted that this writer is one of two writers of the lowest proficiency in this sample group – Intermediate.

**Case of Zenn**

Zenn (Upper Intermediate Writer Five) wrote on the topic of teacher feedback in L2 writing in Journal One. One piece of teacher feedback which she found difficult to address was about the need for her to link the first section of her paper to the overall argument. It was difficult for the writer to address this piece of teacher advice as it dealt with the relatively challenging issue of the overall cohesion of the paper. She commented thus on her attempt to make this revision in response to the feedback: “I tried to make the change but it’s a bit little hard for me…”; “I tried to but it’s hard for me” (Journal 1 Interview). From the interview data, it was clear that she understood the teacher’s suggestion but was not able to address it.

The result was that she did not make any change to address this issue in the end. Once again, though the teacher feedback was good advice, it proved to be too challenging for the writer, for it to result in any positive effect.

**7.6.3 Two examples of rejection of teacher feedback owing to lack of understanding of feedback**

**Case of Sue**

In Journal 2, Sue (Upper Intermediate Writer Two) wrote on the topic of the limitations of genre-based approach to EFL writing instruction. The difficulty she encountered in
addressing the teacher feedback involved her lack of knowledge of how to address the issue raised in the feedback. The piece of feedback in question is: “For your conclusion, just state your main point and your main supporting arguments” (Journal 2 Review). Her response was: “I think I did [i.e., do what was suggested by the teacher]… So I don’t know how to change it” (Journal 2 interview). Hence, she thought it could have been her language that caused the problem: “Or maybe my expression is not clear but I don’t know how to rewrite it” (Journal 2 Interview). Hence, it appears that this is a case of the writer not understanding what is required by teacher feedback and hence, was unable to make any revisions. This interpretation is corroborated by her reflection on this incidence of not making any revisions in response to the teacher’s feedback:

   And for one of teacher feedback, that is, rewrite the conclusion, I don’t know how to make a change because I do think I write the conclusion according to teacher’s suggestion, namely, restate one’s main idea and support it with evidence in the part of conclusion. Therefore, I don’t know how to make a change. (Reflection 2)

   In other words, the writer felt she had already done what the teacher suggested in the original draft and hence, could not understand what the teacher meant by her comment.

   *Case of Wei*

   The following quotation captures the general sense of difficulty that Wei (Intermediate Writer One) had in addressing the feedback given on her writing: “I understand but it’s hard
for me to make any improvement” (Journal 1 Interview). This difficulty includes her response
to teacher feedback given on one of the most important changes in Journal One. The teacher
feedback was:

“How do your second paragraph …and your third paragraph relate to your overall
argument?… Can you please make the link clear to the reader?” (Journal 1 Review)

“Introductory paragraph… Do you have secondary sources (readings) to back up your claim?”
(Journal 1 Review)

Change One – the insertion of a source to illustrate the approaches mentioned at the
beginning of the paragraph – was made in response to the second piece of teacher feedback
mentioned above. She was rather uncertain about how to address the feedback but simply
added a source that the teacher had earlier provided the class. As for the first piece of feedback
about the “link”, the writer had this to say:

I understand but it’s hard for me to make any improvement like “link” how can you say
“link”? … I’m not sure whether I should the things I argue in this first part or in my
argument in the rest part or is it one sentence is like a link…or a paragraph? I’m not sure
about that. (Journal 1 Interview)

As shown in the above quotation, her difficulty in addressing this feedback stemmed from
her lack of understanding of what is meant by the “link” (“…is it a sentence or a paragraph?”).
Additionally, there was also a clash in conceptual understanding of what entails a good
introduction. She explained that her idea of the introduction is that she should list the three approaches she wanted to discuss in the journal; hence, the first paragraph should be a summary of what she had read about the three approaches (which is what paragraphs 2 and 3 in Draft One are meant to do) and felt that “the link” suggested by the teacher, should come later in the article. Though her idea of what should be done in the introduction is not in agreement with the teacher’s advice, she still attempted to address the issue, which resulted in three important changes – Changes One, Two and Eight. A clear deference for teacher feedback is shown here as she sought to make changes according to the teacher’s advice despite her initial disagreement and also lack of understanding of what was prescribed. It is also noteworthy that when asked whether she felt she was successful in addressing this feedback, her comment was: “Not so good but I tried” (Journal 1 interview).

In conclusion, this writer’s difficulty in addressing the teacher feedback stemmed from her lack of understanding of what the teacher meant by “the link” between the second and third paragraphs of her text and her overall argument, and resulted in a less than satisfactory revision (i.e., “Not so good but I tried.”).

7.6.4 Three examples of lack of satisfaction/sense of uncertainty regarding the success of revisions arising from teacher feedback
Five participants across proficiency levels reported a lack of satisfaction or sense of uncertainty regarding the success of revisions arising from teacher feedback (Advanced Writers Two and Four, Upper Intermediate Writer Six, Intermediate Writers One and Two). Two writers (Advanced Writer Two and Intermediate Writer One) reported having a sense of satisfaction with revisions arising from peer feedback, in contrast to their lack of satisfaction with revisions arising from teacher feedback.

Case of Ray

In response to the teacher suggestion to elaborate on a problematic term, “contradictory input” in her Journal 2 on the topic, “Crossing the boundary of genres: from school to workplace”, Ray (Intermediate Writer Two) recounted thus: “I think I need to explain in several sentences” (if she really did according to teacher advice). However, she did not do so (i.e., talk about what the doctors are required to do in university and in the hospital because she felt this might be redundant since she would be talking about it later in her description of her medical students’ experience in the later part of her paper). Hence, she just included some citations rather than explaining the point (i.e., why “contrasting input”) in detail. Reflecting on this revision, she said: “I don’t think I fully elaborated because of the fear I mentioned just now” (i.e., the “fear” of committing an error of redundancy) (Journal 2 Interview); “…but I’m not quite sure whether this [i.e., the change she had made] is enough or not” (Journal 2 Interview).
**Case of Nancy**

Nancy (Upper Intermediate Writer Six) Nancy, wrote about the synthesis of process and genre approaches in Journal Two. She reflected on her satisfaction regarding a revision made in response to the teacher’s request elaboration of a statement she made:

“From a writer’s perspective, it is very difficult to realize the lack of elaboration since I can only predict or guess the reader’s reaction.” (Journal 1 Backevaluation)

“…although I did add a definition and some backup information and elaboration, I am not sure whether the revision is successful.” (Reflection 2)

“But I am not sure which statements need backup and when should I elaborate the opinion. I think it is a kind of feeling which should be cultivated through long-time training, and one or two reviews are not adequate to solve this problem.” (Reflection 2)

The difficulty she encountered here regarding the revision highlights the teacher’s input on the expectations of the discourse community of the target language; for example, the need for support in the form of citations in this particular case. Such input is a potential area of contribution of teacher feedback to the learners’ process of improving on his/her writing. Ironically, this is where the writer, Nancy, finds difficulty in addressing the feedback successfully.

**Case of Minh**
In Journal 2, Minh (Advanced Writer Two) wrote about computer-mediated peer response in Chinese EFL writing classrooms. The two major changes in this journal resulted from teacher feedback. A major change (Change 1) was in response to teacher feedback (Teacher feedback 3) on the need to link the second paragraph to the key topic – computer-mediated peer response.

She was not satisfied with the resulting revision as she felt constrained by the word limit imposed and so could not say much to address the issue raised by the teacher. For example, adding another paragraph to make the link clearer would result in the paper going beyond the word limit: “I’m not so happy because I really need something longer to explain this ... but I don’t know how to achieve a balance between the length and the effectiveness in explaining” (Journal 2 Interview).

The next most important set of changes (Changes 5 and 6) was also made in response to teacher feedback (Teacher Feedback 3). The teacher asked for evidence to back up a claim made. In response, she included two citations to back up the claim. About this revision, she had this to say:

If I have to find the evidence to back it up, it’s a paragraph or something but still the length confines that so I decided to make a citation here that shows the paper is about this … I don’t want to make it too long …Actually, I don’t know how to change it … I take the length of the essay into consideration. (Journal 2 Interview)
In the above two instances where she acted on teacher feedback, there was a feeling of frustration as she was either not able to deal adequately with the issue raised or unsure about how exactly to make a good revision – in both cases, the constraint of the word limit for the assignment was the key factor which led to such frustration.

However, looking at some of her other comments about these two major changes made in response to teacher feedback, one could see that time constraint was another factor at play: “I can make shorter but clearer, I reduce the ideas … two theories, maybe I can just mention one of them … this would be too huge project for me, I don’t have the time for such a big change” (Journal 2 Interview). Her frustration could be captured in the following line: “It’s like if I fixed this problem of my journal, I will suffer from another. So I just revised a little” (Reflection 2).

Yet another factor which surfaced towards the end of the interview for Journal 2 is the workload that the writer, like others in her class, had: “I try to revise according to the teacher’s feedback but I have trouble, this problem, so I think I can maybe cut out some information but that takes time, you know I have a lot of assignments” (Journal 2 Interview).

On reflecting on how she had responded to teacher feedback in Journal 2, she expressed her frustration of not being able to adequately deal with the teacher feedback due to the issue of adhering to the word limit of the assignment: “This time round, the teacher’s feedback is more difficult for me to revise… I think the suggestions are very good but I don’t know how to make a balance between the length and the requirements here…” (Journal 2 Interview).
In summary, while the writer saw value in the teacher feedback, factors such as the constraints of word limit, time and the pressure of the number of assignments were at play in the revising process and resulted in less than satisfactory treatment of the suggestions given.

7.7 Discussion

The Activity Theory concept of contradictions refers to tensions or “misfits” between different components of any activity system under investigation (see Figure 5.1). This concept of contradiction was used in analysing the data in the study to address the question of preference for teacher feedback among L2 writers and whether this preference, if established, translated to greater use and effectiveness of teacher feedback. In this chapter, I have shown two key contradictions: 1) that between preference for teacher feedback (reflected in the term, “Teacher Expert” under the component, ‘Division of Labour’) and perceived time constraint (‘Rules’), 2) that between “Writer as Author” (under the component, ‘Division of Labour’) and preference for teacher feedback (‘Rules’). The key findings in this chapter are: 1) teacher feedback has a less than superior impact on the revisions and improvement in quality of writing of the L2 writers in the study, vis-à-vis peer feedback. One key reason proposed is the perceived time constraint that the teacher faced in giving feedback, 2) a considerable number of instances of rejection of teacher feedback (11 for a sample size of 12 participants) was reported, for the following reasons: sense of text ownership, and lack of understanding of teacher feedback and lack of writing proficiency in addressing teacher feedback, and 3) a lack
of satisfaction or sense of uncertainty regarding the success of revisions arising from teacher feedback was reported in participants across the proficiency levels.

7.7.1 Time as an under-researched variable

Time as a variable in investigations in writing research, including the use of feedback in teaching writing, is arguably, an under-researched area: “A greater variety of in-depth investigations is necessary in writing strategy research, and special attention needs to be given to those barely researched variables such as time, as suggested by Roca de Larios et al. (2008)” (Lei, 2008, p. 230).

The research by Roca de Larios et al. (2001, 2006, 2008) constitutes a small body of research with specific attention on time as a factor in influencing the writing processes. While these studies focussed on the use or allocation of time and also temporal issues such as sequence and duration and how they impact the writing process, the issue of time as surfaced in the data of the current study entails the limitations imposed by time constraint on the activities of both giving and using feedback. Notably, contradictions surfaced between the privileged status given to teacher feedback (teachers play the role of “Teacher Expert” under ‘Division of Labou’) and the less than superior effect that it had on revisions and improvement in writing quality, vis-à-vis peer feedback. This finding is unexpected given the common perception and relatively substantial evidence of preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback in the literature. It is reasonable to expect greater effectiveness of teacher feedback on revisions and improvement in quality of writing since student perceptions and preference
for any type of input or instructional activity should positively impact its potential effectiveness and influence on outcomes. That this is not the case with regard to teacher feedback in this study, underscores a structural issue on which little attention has been given hitherto.

Time constraint as a factor which influences the effectiveness of teacher feedback has been mentioned in the literature but hardly investigated:

Among reasons for the decrease in adolescents’ writing skills…may be too little practice …and too little feedback when students do write. The time demands that the reading and editing of numerous student themes require are probably one reason teachers often refrain from assigning many themes to students. (Kariegianes et al., 1980, p. 203)

in practice, instructor feedback, particularly written feedback, is often ineffective, especially when instructors are overwhelmed by the demanding nature of writing assignments. (Cho & MacArthur, 2010, p. 329).

Though time constraint is not mentioned in the last quotation, what is implied in the text is the sheer number of assignments instructors are expected to give feedback on and by implication, the limited time in which to complete the task. The figure representing the activity system of responding to and using feedback on writing of an L2 writer from the Activity Theory perspective (see Figure 5.1) brings to the foreground the structural problem inherent in teacher feedback highlighted in the above quotations: the giving of feedback by teachers does not take place in a vacuum, but in the larger context of time demands that both
students and teachers face (see sub-components under ‘Rules’ in Figure 5.1). The data from
the interviews and reflections surface the perceptions of the participants who repeatedly
mentioned the supposed busyness of the teacher as a most likely explanation for the brief and
limited feedback, compared with peer feedback that they received. This points to the reality
of time constraint on the activity of giving feedback for the teacher. The experience of the
participants of the study seem to echo that of a participant in the Yu & Lee study (2016):

I think students may be more responsible than teachers. Our teachers usually don’t have
enough time to comment on our essays. We students have a lot of time to read and review
the texts. And peer feedback provides an opportunity for us to compare our writing and
ideas with others (Su, interview). (p. 491)

The potential of peer feedback to address the apparent contradiction between the
preference for teacher feedback and the time constraint that teachers face is highlighted by
Su. As some researchers have pointed out, time is what students tend to have more of,
compared with teachers. There are more peer reviewers available than there are teachers to
give feedback on students’ writing; and in most cases, students have far fewer drafts to review,
compared with teachers. In other words, time is on the students’ side. According to Gielen et
al. (2010a), peer feedback has two important advantages over teacher feedback, which involve
the time factor. The first advantage is detailed as follows: “peer feedback is quicker. As
teacher often has a considerable delay after submission of an assignment or test, feedback
sometimes is not available until after the curriculum has passed to another topic” (p. 145).
Elaborating on this issue of time delay, Gielen et al. cited Gibbs et al. who highlighted the advantage of peer feedback over teacher feedback in this respect: “imperfect feedback from a fellow student provided almost immediately may have much more impact than more perfect feedback from a tutor four weeks later” (p. 145).

While the participants of the current study had the benefit of synchronous feedback from peers and teacher afforded by the web-based peer review platform, the feedback from the teacher was not quite ‘perfect’ if only because the teacher had to work under time constraint. The second advantage of peer feedback regarding the amount of feedback also involves the time factor:

peer feedback can be part of an increase in the frequency or amount of feedback. Gibbs and Simpson emphasized that only giving feedback at the end of the learning process is not enough to support learning effectively and may provoke frustration in the learner. Several ‘intermediate’ peer assessment sessions on draft versions of for an instance an essay or report could answer to this need of regular feedback if teachers are not able or willing to increase its frequency themselves. (Gielen et al., 2010a, p. 145)

The point raised in the above quotation is that frequency and timing of feedback are important to student learning. Faced with time constraint, teachers are often unable to give sufficient and adequately timely feedback on students’ writing. This is particularly true in contexts where large class sizes are a norm, such as many Asian classrooms, and especially those in China, where the participants come from.
The less than superior impact of teacher feedback vis-à-vis peer feedback in the current study highlights how peer feedback could address the need for more frequent and substantial feedback on students’ writing which may not be possible for teachers to fulfil, given the institutional constraints they work under, key of which is that of time constraint. This potential is supported by the finding that participants found peer feedback to have been more detailed and specific on the whole, compared with teacher feedback (see Table 5.1). This is consistent with earlier findings such as Caulk’s (1994) who reported that teacher comments were rather general while student comments were more specific. Caulk’s study had, as its participants, 25 L2 writers in a metropolitan university in Germany, with proficiency levels ranging from Intermediate to Advanced, and enrolled in a 12-week long writing course (similar to the participants of the study).

7.7.2 Teacher feedback and the danger of text appropriation

The danger of text appropriation refers to instances where teacher feedback has led to the writer giving up on his original intention for the sake of fulfilling the teacher’s advice regarding revision. This constitutes a violation of “Writer as Author”, as it means that the author no longer acts as one, but simply relinquishes his right to a higher authority – the teacher. The instances of rejection of teacher feedback resulting from the writer exercising his sense of text ownership presented earlier bring to light some facets of the expression of text ownership.
In the case of Lynne, the writer did not make changes exactly according to the teacher’s suggestion and gained ideas from elsewhere (i.e., not from the reviewers) in making the revision. In the case of Sue, the writer made a revision which appeared to be in accordance with teacher feedback but was, in effect, the result of her consulting external sources such as reading published papers. In the case of Zenn, the writer rejected teacher advice out of the recognition that the teacher could have misunderstood her intention for a particular part of the text. In all these examples, the capacity of the learner to make decisions in response to teacher feedback which deviate from the advice given, shows the agency of the learner and are therefore positive findings from the perspective of learner independence. In learner independence lies the potential of long-term learning.

Unlike previous findings where students incorporated teacher advice without understanding (Zhao, 2010) or agreeing with it (Tsui & Ng, 2000, p. 163), the findings of the current study point to a healthy capacity of the writers in the study to make decisions they deem fit for the improvement of their texts even at the expense of “defying” authority. This contradiction, then, between preference for teacher feedback (‘Rules’) and “Writer as Author” (‘Division of Labour’) is a positive tension in the activity system. The danger of text appropriation highlighted by researchers (Hyland, 2000, Rollinson, 2005; Zhao, 2010) may indeed be present, but the increasing use of peer review can expose learners more to the potential in their peers and themselves to give and evaluate feedback, rendering them more confidence as writers to take greater ownership of their texts (Tsui & Ng, 2000, Yang et al.,
2006) and hence, minimise the risk of text appropriation by teachers. In sum, this potential contradiction in the activity system is a healthy manifestation of learner agency, which could be further harnessed with the use of peer review.

7.7.3 Lack of understanding of teacher feedback and writers’ Zone of Proximal Development

The two cases presented earlier where the writers did not address teacher feedback exactly according to teacher advice stemmed from a lack of understanding of what exactly the advice entailed. This disparity between expert and novice in terms of domain-specific knowledge is an important reason why advice from experts such as teachers may not always be effective. In Allen and Mills’ study (2016), it was reported that “One potential reason why suggestions were not incorporated more often is that some of these were outside the range of the writer’s ZPD” (p. 509). Though Allen and Mills’ study focussed on peer feedback, this reason can apply to teacher feedback as well. The cases presented in the current study point to such situations where the learner is not able to grasp the essence of the feedback as it is not within the current state of knowledge of the learner. In those two cases presented earlier, the feedback dealt with issues of cohesion: “the link” and the conclusion. These pertain to rhetorical issues which may be considered domain-specific knowledge which L2 learners are not so familiar with.
Cho and MacArthur (2010) highlighted the potential drawbacks of feedback from experts. Experts (such as teachers) tend to refer to knowledge that novices like students do not have access to; they also fail to appreciate the difficulty level of the tasks novices face:

In fact, experts may be ineffective in explicating skills and knowledge to novices…

Experts use knowledge that novice students cannot refer to even when the experts know the knowledge is unavailable to the novices. Also, experts tend to underestimate the difficulty level of tasks of novices. (p. 329)

The above quotation illustrates what it is meant by knowledge that is outside the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of the learner. Hence, for the teacher feedback on “the link” and the conclusion (in the cases presented earlier) to be effective, the learners needed to have shared the same knowledge of rhetorical conventions. However, this is precisely an area where one would expect a gap in knowledge between L2 learners and teachers who are the bridge to the discourse community of their target language, which they seek to be part of.

A study with 18 Chinese university students by Zhao (2010) found that teacher feedback triggered more revisions than peer feedback (74% of teacher feedback given versus 46% of peer feedback given). However, it was reported that learners incorporated more teacher feedback that they did not understand than peer feedback (83% of peer feedback was used and understood while only 58% of teacher feedback was used and understood). The findings in this study illustrate the danger of learners, especially Chinese learners, passively accepting and adopting teacher feedback owing to the preference for teacher feedback or the
“assessment culture” (“in which the teacher is the ultimate judger of students’ writing quality”, Zhao, 2010, p. 12) which permeates the Chinese educational setting.

It is noteworthy that unlike this potential drawback of teacher feedback being less readily understood as it often lies beyond the ZPD of the learner, peer feedback has been said to be helpful precisely because it is more likely to be within the ZPD of the learner. In fact, this is in line with the central tenet of the concept of “scaffolding” in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978) which is one of the key theoretical frameworks which support the practice of peer review. Hence, where teacher feedback may present a drawback, peer feedback may be able to plug the gap (see Section 7.7.5.2 for a fuller discussion).

7.7.4 Difficulty in addressing teacher feedback and level of satisfaction of revisions arising from teacher feedback

The two cases of writers not being able to address teacher feedback owing to a lack in proficiency highlight the “misfit” between appropriate/accurate teacher feedback and the inability of learners to adequately deal with it, thus rendering the feedback ineffective. The first case described earlier (Intermediate Writer Two) involved the proper use of citation in writing: developing an argument rather than as an ending in a paragraph. The writer simply re-arranged the sentences in the paragraph rather than seriously using the citation to develop her argument. This is an elementary and unsatisfactory attempt for a revision which would require higher-order skills in argumentation which the writer lacks.
The second case (the case of Zenn) entailed issues of cohesion – the advice to link the first section of her paper to the overall argument - also requiring higher-order skills in argumentation and organisation which are beyond the level of the writer’s writing proficiency. The writer did not make any change to address this issue in the end. Hence, though the teacher feedback was relevant and useful, it was not utilised as the participants had difficulty with revising problems to do with argumentation.

These findings are in line with earlier findings on students’ difficulty with revisions dealing with logic and argumentation (Ferris, 2001) and explanation (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999). Ironically, such rhetorical issues are precisely the area where L2 learners appreciate input from teachers (Leki, 2006). The L2 graduate learners in Leki’s study sought input on how native speakers would express the same ideas that they had expressed, suggesting that they appreciate teacher input on rhetorical structure and organisation. A lack in writing proficiency makes it difficult for learners to address effectively teacher feedback dealing with rhetorical issues which require higher-order skills such as argumentation and techniques for creating cohesion.

The difficulty in addressing teacher feedback is also reflected in a comparatively lower level of satisfaction or sense of uncertainty regarding the success of revisions arising from teacher feedback. Several participants across the proficiency levels did report this lack of satisfaction regarding their revisions arising from teacher feedback. This finding is similar to
an earlier finding by Yang et al. (2006) where it was reported that “teacher-initiated revisions are less successful than peer-initiated revisions” (p. 193). A possible reason proffered is that there was more room for negotiation of meaning with peer feedback, which helps to increase successful communication of meaning or ideas and hence a higher probability of arriving at successful revisions. However, while this finding highlights the benefit of interaction or negotiation afforded by peer review which could explain why peer feedback led to more successful revisions, the findings in my study point to the issue of proficiency level as another possible explanation for the lower success (in terms of level of satisfaction) of teacher feedback from the writers’ perspective.

The third case (the case of Minh, Section 7.6.4, illustrating the frustration of the writer in dealing with teacher feedback) uncovered some other factors apart from a lack of writing proficiency in explaining the difficulty in addressing teacher feedback: the constraints of word limit, time and the pressure of the number of assignments the participants were faced with, were shown to be at play in the revising process and resulted in less than satisfactory treatment of the suggestions given.

In conclusion, the difficulty in addressing teacher feedback is linked to the lack of writing proficiency of the writer in most cases though other factors such as perceived time constraint, constraint of the word limit and the pressure of the number of assignments may also be contributing factors to the difficulty in addressing teacher feedback and also the lower level of satisfaction with revisions arising from teacher feedback.
7.7.5 Potential innovations to resolve contradictions

The potential drawbacks of teacher feedback uncovered by the contradictions in the activity system, between the preference for teacher feedback (‘Rules’) and “Writer as Author” (‘Division of Labour’); and the “Teacher as Expert” (‘Division of Labour’) and Perceived Time Constraint (‘Rules’) propel the system to arrive at some resolution of these contradictions. According to Engeström, these internal contradictions offer opportunities for innovation and change and further development of the system; they are “the driving force of change” (2001, p. 133). These contradictions lead us to the question of how the potential of peer feedback could be harnessed to address these contradictions regarding teacher feedback. There is some evidence in the data that peer feedback is capable of filling the gap where teacher feedback presents drawbacks, suggesting that peer and teacher feedback could play complementary roles in the providing of feedback on students’ writing.

7.7.5.1 Multiple peer reviews on a web-based peer review platform

To resolve the contradiction in the system presented in the issue of perceived time constraint faced by teachers, the complementary use of peer feedback as an additional source of feedback on students’ writing is clearly a viable option. However, to address the common concern that feedback from peers may not be as reliable as feedback from a teacher who has greater expertise and experience, the use of a web-based peer review such as SWoRD seems to offer a possible solution.
First, SWoRD offers the affordance of multiple reviewers. Data presented in Chapter Five point to the possibility of multiple peers providing feedback that is likely to be valid and constructive (Cho et al., 2006b; Cho et al., 2008; Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Cho & Schunn, 2007) and even comparable to teacher feedback (Cho et al., 2006a; Cho & Schunn, 2007; Gielen et al., 2010a; Karegianes et al., 1980). The web-based peer review system allows for synchronous feedback by multiple reviewers, which means the amount of feedback on a student draft can be increased, which should help increase the reliability of peer feedback. Hence, with the use of a web-based system, the potential of peer feedback may indeed be harnessed as feedback from multiple peer reviewers is more likely to be sufficiently reliable to be considered as an additional source of feedback on student writing apart from the much-esteemed but limited teacher feedback owing to time constraint.

Second, the use of peer review also allows for more timely feedback on students’ writing, thus addressing the issue of time constraint faced by teachers (Gielen et al., 2010a). This is because peers can afford, on the whole, more time to review papers since they have fewer papers to review compared to teachers. This is supported by the data in the study which shows that a common perception of the participants is that teacher feedback tended to be brief owing to the teacher’s busy schedule while peer feedback tended to be more detailed and specific, perhaps because peers had fewer papers to review (in this study, peer reviewers had three papers to review while the teacher had twenty). Peer feedback could be more timely because unlike teachers who take a much longer time to return papers to students because of the
number of papers to review/grade, peers can give feedback on writing more readily and at a

time “while it still matters and in time for application and asking for further assistance” (Gibbs
& Simpson, 2004). Ching and Hsu (2016) concur with this view of the advantage of peer
feedback: “Pragmatically, learners receive frequent and greater volume of feedback in a
timely manner than the feedback that the instructor could provide alone” (p. 106).

In conclusion, the use of a web-based peer review system promotes the use of peer review
as an additional source of feedback that could address the issue of time constraint which many
teachers face, especially those in contexts where huge class sizes are a norm, such as those in
China. The need for timeliness of feedback which is also substantial enough, can be met with
the use of peer review and especially so, with the use of a web-based system as its affordances
include multiple reviewers and synchronicity of review. This means that the amount and
frequency of feedback on students’ writing may be increased without increasing the burden
on teachers. As timeliness of feedback is one important criterion for feedback to be helpful
for learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004), and in fostering a greater awareness of audience
(Rollinson, 2005; p. 25), this proposed innovation, is a worthwhile one for consideration.

7.7.5.2 Complementary roles for teacher and peer feedback

The contradictions between “Writer as Author” and preference for teacher feedback
which are presented in the issues of text appropriation/text ownership; lack of understanding
of teacher feedback and lack of writing proficiency to address teacher feedback, may be resolved with the judicial use of peer feedback as an additional yet necessary source of feedback (that is, complementary and not supplementary).

Peer feedback as a complementary and not supplementary source of feedback means that unlike the conventional thinking that teacher feedback is the best and should be used at all times, peer feedback should be seen as a comparable though different type of feedback which should be used together with teacher feedback. Complementarity between peer and teacher feedback may be presented in two scenarios: peer feedback to be given before teacher feedback, and both teacher and peer feedback made concurrently available.

**Learner agency and the concurrent use of peer and teacher feedback**

The danger of text appropriation may be minimized when learners gain confidence in their ability to give and evaluate feedback on writing. The examples of rejection of teacher feedback reported earlier underscores the capacity of learners to “defend” their own conception of how they think their text should be written in situations where teacher feedback seems to clash with their own ideas. This capacity is an important one for learners to develop if teacher feedback is to be used to their benefit. Hence, increasing their exposure to peer review as a pedagogical activity would promote the development of such a capacity. As has been mentioned in the literature, peer feedback is able to foster a greater sense of text ownership (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Rollinson, 2005) and encourage student autonomy (Yang et al.,
These characteristics of peer feedback should be harnessed so the potential benefit of teacher feedback could be maximized, with the risk of text appropriation being reduced. The contribution of the current study is in surfacing the capacity of L2 learners to reject teacher feedback out of their sense of text ownership, even learners from a traditionally teacher-centred culture to which the participants belong.

In this respect, the concurrent use of teacher and peer feedback (for example, through a web-based peer review system such as SWoRD) may be helpful in fostering confidence in learners as peer reviewers and writers are given the opportunity to view teacher feedback alongside peer feedback on the same texts. The possibility of encountering good peer feedback alongside teacher feedback on the same texts is increased with peer review configurations such as Advanced Writers-Advanced Peer Reviewers, as shown in the data in the study (this configuration yielded the most positive outcomes). Such exposures will help learners gain confidence in peer review, both as reviewers and writers receiving peer feedback on one’s writing. In this light, the potential contradiction in the activity system between “Writer as Author” and preference for teacher feedback is a welcome tension in the system, as it is a healthy manifestation of learner agency, which should be encouraged if learners are to become independent learners. It has been acknowledged that it is important that learners learn to be independent of their teachers in the long run (Boud, 2000; Sadler, 1998), and it has also been observed that peer feedback has the potential to promote a greater sense of self-control in
learning (Nichol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), towards achieving this end of producing independent learners.

**Gap in knowledge between experts and learners and the advantage of peer feedback**

The contradictions presented in the lack of understanding of teacher feedback and lack of writing proficiency in addressing effectively teacher feedback may be understood as stemming from the gap in knowledge between experts/teachers and learners. In contrast, peer feedback has been said to be more likely to be “on the same page” as peers share the same problems and language: “student writers may understand peer comments more easily than expert comments because peers share problems, languages and knowledge” (Cho & MacArthur, 2010, p. 329).

Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that peer feedback is more likely to be understood and more easily addressed. The data in the current study support this conclusion as hardly any instance of participants having difficulty dealing with peer feedback was reported, in contrast with the instances of difficulty in addressing teacher feedback.

The difficulty in addressing teacher feedback often stems from the gap in knowledge in the area of rhetoric. This is shown in the data of the current study. The examples showing the participants’ lack of understanding or difficulty in addressing teacher feedback often involve rhetorical issues such as cohesion, use of topic sentences, using citations to develop one’s
argument, and genre expectations. It is noteworthy that it is precisely in this area that teacher input would be appreciated as teachers are the learner’s bridge to the knowledge of the target language and its rhetorical conventions. There is also evidence in the data which show several cases where writers took teacher feedback seriously despite initially not agreeing with it, simply because the feedback dealt with rhetorical issues for which the writers acknowledged their lack of knowledge and hence appreciated the input by the expert – the teacher (e.g., Advanced Writer One, Upper Intermediate Writer Four, Intermediate Writer One).

It is of interest to researchers to know how peer feedback may be used judicially such that it can help learners to access the knowledge on the target language and its rhetorical conventions, which teachers can provide. This is an important question to answer as writers seem to understand peer feedback better than teacher feedback (given that peer feedback is more likely to be within the ZPD of the learner), and writers tend to have difficulty dealing with teacher feedback regarding rhetorical issues; and yet this is the area where teacher input would be appreciated.

A possible solution for closing this gap in knowledge is the sequencing of peer and teacher feedback in the writing/reviewing cycle. While this proposal is not new (several participants in Yang et al., 2006’s study reported preferring to receive peer feedback before teacher feedback. See p. 192), the findings of this study highlight the differing focus of peer and teacher feedback and the strengths of both types of feedback which should be harnessed
through the sequencing of peer and teacher feedback: peer feedback coming before teacher feedback.

*Leveraging the advantage of peer feedback: the sequencing of peer feedback before teacher feedback*

The data in the study showed that peer feedback on language was often appreciated (Intermediate Writer One, Intermediate Writer Two, Upper Intermediate Writer Four, Upper Intermediate Writer Six, Advanced Writer Four) in light of the perceived time constraint that the teacher faced and hence the lack of detailed attention to this aspect of the text in giving feedback. Peers were also shown to be capable of giving feedback on global issues such as organisation. In fact, the stimulating effect of peer feedback in terms of catalysing writers’ thinking regarding organisational structure (e.g., Intermediate Writer One, Upper Intermediate Writer One, Advanced Writer Three; see Chapter 5 for details) is one salient finding of the current study.

These foci of peer feedback render it more suitable to be received by writers first before teacher feedback which has been shown to be more appreciated for its input on rhetorical issues such as use of topic sentences, use of citations in argumentation, and genre expectations. This is to facilitate room for the writer to exercise judgement in response to the peer feedback given at the preliminary stage, which deals with organisational and language
issues. It is also important that writers are not stalled by difficulty in dealing with teacher feedback at the preliminary stage.

This sequence will also encourage a greater sense of text ownership, before teacher input in areas where it is most appreciated is given. This arrangement seems appropriate for configurations of peer review where the likelihood of peer feedback being almost as good as teacher feedback is not high or where there is a higher probability of learners encountering difficulty in dealing with teacher feedback. Data from the study showed that learners of writing proficiency other than the Advanced level reported lack of understanding of teacher feedback and difficulty in addressing teacher feedback. Hence, this suggested sequence may be especially suitable for configurations for peer review which do not involve learners of Advanced proficiency level.

*Plugging the gap in knowledge: two approaches*

While this suggested sequence may be helpful in promoting a greater use of peer feedback and also a greater sense of text ownership, it does not solve the problem of the learners’ difficulty in understanding and dealing with teacher feedback on rhetorical issues. It is of interest to explore what can be done to help learners access the expert knowledge which teachers can provide in this area. Two possible solutions are in order.
First, the proposed sequence of peer feedback followed by teacher feedback could culminate in a conferencing session with the teacher where there could be room for negotiation of the input given or clarification and explanation of teacher feedback given. As has been mentioned in the literature, feedback on more complex issues such as ideas and arguments is better communicated in conferences where there is room for interaction and hence, negotiation and clearer communication of meaning (Van Steendam et al., 2010). Yang et al.’s (2006) study also suggested that revisions arising from peer feedback had better outcomes than those arising from teacher feedback possibly because of “negotiation of meaning during the peer interaction...” (p. 193). However, this option, though ideal, is time-consuming and hence, may not be viable in some contexts, especially those where student numbers are large (which is the case in many Asian classrooms, including those from China).

A second option is to leverage the potential of peer feedback to bridge the gap in knowledge between expert and learner. This is possible as there is evidence in the literature of peer feedback offering a reasonably good alternative such that it might even replace the role of teacher feedback. Three studies (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Gielen et al, 2010a; Ruegg, 2015) offer some insights on this matter.

Studies showing the possibility of “Peer as Expert” (peer feedback replacing teacher feedback)
Ruegg’s comparative study on peer and teacher feedback found that the group which received teacher feedback gained more in improvement in grammar scores than the peer feedback group and a greater proportion of teacher feedback concerned meaning-level issues and content. It was suggested that teacher and peer feedback could play complementary roles in this way: teacher feedback to focus on feedback on grammar and content and peer feedback to focus on organisation and academic style. The findings of the current study, however, do not confirm these findings. In the current study, it was found that peer feedback was more specific and detailed and focused much on language and included issues of organisation which did stimulate thinking, leading to some major revisions. On the other hand, teacher feedback tended to be brief and general and where it dealt with rhetorical issues, presented difficulty to students. One possible reason why the results are different could be the fact that in Ruegg’s study, teacher and peer feedback were given to different groups of participants (i.e., some received teacher feedback only while others received peer feedback only). In contrast, in the current study, participants were given both teacher and peer feedback concurrently. In addition, the participants in Ruegg’s study were from “the low ability stream” while the participants in the current study were of a range of writing proficiencies and were enrolled in a discipline-specific writing class. This could have explained the greater focus on grammar of the teacher in Ruegg’s study (students were of low proficiency) and the difficulty with teacher feedback on rhetorical issues that the participants in the current study had (rhetorical issues are more salient in discipline-specific writing). The finding in the present study of peer
feedback being more detailed, specific and with much focus on language could also be accounted for by the background of the participants of the study: they were English language teachers and hence, would be more inclined to give feedback on language. The overall finding of the current study (i.e., that teacher feedback tended to be brief, general and more prescriptive while peer feedback tended to be more specific, detailed and less prescriptive) echo those of an earlier one Caulk (1994) which found teacher feedback to be general while student feedback was more specific.

Gielen et al.’s study (2010a) investigated specifically if peer feedback can be a substitute for teacher feedback. The unexpected finding was that there was no significant difference in students’ improvement in writing between the group which received only peer feedback and the group which received only teacher feedback. The suggestion is that “peer feedback can substitute teacher feedback without considerable loss of effectiveness in the long run” (p. 157). It was also found that “extensions of peer feedback” such as requiring students to state beforehand what questions and doubts they had for which they would like to receive feedback could increase the efficacy of peer feedback. The findings of the current study regarding how the Advanced Writers in the study could assume the role of “Peer as Expert” and thus modifying the traditional division of labour which privileges teacher feedback (“Teacher Expert”) (see Section 5.7), add to this small body of evidence pointing to the possibility of peer feedback assuming a complementary role at worst, and a substitutionary role at best, in
the enterprise of giving feedback on students’ writing. The next study (Cho & MacArthur, 2010) offers a possible explanation as to how this might be possible.

Cho & MacArthur’s (2010) study comparing peer and teacher feedback and their impact on student revisions found that the group that received multiple peer feedback (compared with the groups with single-peer feedback and single-expert feedback) received more feedback of all types, made more complex repairs. As complex repairs were found to be positively associated with improvement in quality of writing, this group showed the most positive outcomes. The researchers suggested that the fact that peer feedback is more easily understood and more readily used may explain these findings, adding that “Peer reviews included non-directive comments…which in turn led to more complex revisions…” (pp. 334-335).

To sum up, peer feedback might be more effective because it is more easily understood by peers, more manageable for students to deal with, and being less prescriptive (“non-directive comments”), tend to lead to greater improvement in writing quality. Hence, the findings of the current study (the students’ lack of understanding of and difficulty in addressing teacher feedback) seem to confirm the findings cited here – that teacher feedback is less easily understood and more difficult to manage.

Hence, to leverage the advantages of peer feedback, training should be given to students, especially writers of higher writing proficiency such that they may assume the role of “Peer
as Expert” and eventually be “trained so that their feedback becomes as effective as teacher feedback in the end” (Gielen et al., 2010a, p. 144). In this way, the knowledge on the target language and its rhetorical conventions which teachers possess, might be unlocked through the trained feedback of more competent peers. In this respect, further research is needed to delineate what kind of training and in what ways specifically (e.g., what peer review configurations or specific sequence of peer and teacher feedback in the writing/reviewing cycle) might achieve this goal.

### 7.7.6 Summary

In summary, in this chapter, I have presented the data which illustrate the contradictions in the activity system between “Teacher Expert” (‘Division of Labour’) and perceived time constraint (‘Rules’); and “Writer as Author” (‘Division of Labour’) and preference for teacher feedback (‘Rules’). The first contradiction shows how perceived time constraint is an important factor explaining why teacher feedback is not as effective as anticipated. The second contradiction delineates three important reasons why learners might reject teacher feedback: sense of text ownership, lack of understanding of and lack of writing proficiency to
deal with teacher feedback. Two innovations are proposed to deal with these two contradictions 1) the use of a web-based peer review system to facilitate multiple peer reviews of a quality that is good enough to compensate for limited teacher feedback owing to perceived time constraint 2) the complementary use of peer and teacher feedback in two scenarios: a) concurrent use of peer and teacher feedback in a web-based peer review platform b) written peer feedback followed by written teacher feedback and culminating in conferencing with the teacher and/or leveraging the advantages of peer feedback to plug the gap in knowledge between expert/teacher and learners, through the training of peer reviewers.
Chapter 8

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study was motivated by the increasing use of peer view in L2 contexts and the relatively well-documented preference for teacher feedback among L2 learners; in particular learners, from teacher-centred cultures such as the Chinese learning culture. In addition, the emergence of web-based peer review systems in the use of peer review in writing classrooms also calls for an investigation into its impact on this instructional practice. It is also timely that research should be carried out to determine the place of peer feedback in the writing classroom where teacher feedback has often had a monopoly in terms of influence on student revisions of drafts. It would contribute to a better understanding of how both types of feedback could be used judiciously for the best outcomes and to the benefit of both learners and writing instructors. Arguably, feedback plays a central role in the learning and teaching of writing and the use of these two dominant modes of feedback in the L2 writing classroom in the last three decades should be better understood and their pedagogical significance put in perspective. To this end, this study was guided specifically by the following research questions:

1. How does the use of a web-based peer review system affect the process of responding to and using feedback on writing for L2 learners? (Mediation)

2. How do second language learners respond to and use peer and teacher feedback on their writing?
a. Are there differences in the way L2 writers of different proficiency levels, respond to and use teacher and peer feedback on their writing? If so, in what ways do they differ? (Agency)

b. Is there indeed a preference for teacher feedback as reported in the literature among second language learners? If so, does this preference translate to a greater use and effectiveness of teacher feedback? (Contradictions)

A “multiple instrumental case study” (Creswell, 2012) research design was adopted, where two key factors, the L2 factor and the cultural factor (Hu & Lam, 2010) in the study of peer response could be investigated in relation to contextual factors which affect the effectiveness of teacher feedback. The L2 factor was operationalized in the differing language proficiency levels of the participants in the three case set-ups while the cultural factor was operationalized in the preference of feedback of the participants (i.e., whether there is a preference for teacher feedback). Engeström’s (2001) Activity Theory framework was adopted in analyzing the data; specifically, three key concepts were used in analyzing data for each of the research questions as shown above: mediation, agency and contradictions.

The findings of study were presented in the preceding three chapters. In Chapter Five, I presented the findings on the mediating influence of the web-based peer review system, SWoRD, used in the study. It was found that the use of this platform had a mediating effect on some of the components of the activity system. In Chapter Six, I explained the concept of learner agency and showed how the participants differed in the extent of agency as shown in their revision decisions and resultant revisions. In Chapter Seven, I presented the
contradictions in the system between “Teacher as Expert” (‘Division of Labour’) and Time Constraint (‘Rules’) and between the preference for teacher feedback (‘Rules’) and “Writer as Author” (‘Division of Labour’). In this chapter, I summarise the key findings of the preceding three chapters, and present the conclusions arising from these findings before I delineate the limitations and directions for future research; and highlight the contributions of this study.

8.1 Summary of the main findings

8.1.1 The mediating influence of SWoRD on the activity system of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing

The findings of the study demonstrated how the use of a web-based peer review system such as SWoRD has transformed the activity of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing of an L2 writer. Specifically, I have shown its mediating effect on the following components of the activity system:

1) the ‘Rule’ of the cultural convention of politeness/issue of ‘face’ in face-to-face interaction in traditional Chinese culture;

2) the ‘Community’ of lower proficiency reviewers;

3) the traditional ‘Division of Labour’ between teacher as experts and peers as fellow learners;

4) the traditional ‘Division of Labour’ between teacher as experts and peer as experts
The use of SWoRD has enabled the participants to circumvent the usual cultural impediment presented by the Chinese cultural concept of “face” and give honest and constructive feedback to one’s peers in the activity of peer review. The impersonal and anonymous nature of the web-based platform has resulted in the participants going beyond the usual reluctance of Chinese learners to give honest and critical feedback on peers’ writing, such that the critical feedback elicited strong negative affective impact on the writers. Despite the potentially negative impact of such critical comments, the salutary effect of the peers’ honest and critical feedback was seen in the positive impact on the writer’s approach to revising and revisions.

The mediating influence of SWoRD on the ‘Community’ of lower proficiency writers was shown in the positive impact of feedback from a lower proficiency peer on the revision of two higher proficiency peers. The mediating influence of this platform has unlocked the potential of peer feedback in that feedback from lower proficiency peers, which would normally be disregarded since it came from a source deemed less competent, has been shown to have a positive impact through the anonymity afforded by the platform.

The mediating influence of SWoRD on the traditional ‘Division of Labour’ between teacher as experts and peers as fellow learners is shown in the impact of peer feedback in stimulating thinking which impacted significantly the revision efforts of the participants. The use of SWoRD has meant facilitated the unleashing of the potential of feedback from fellow
learners as the relationship between teacher as expert versus peer as fellow learner is mediated such that peer as fellow learner is being given a greater premium than before: peer feedback could be valued for what it is in spite of the concurrent availability of teacher feedback.

The mediating influence of SWoRD on the traditional ‘Division of Labour’ between teacher as experts and peer as experts is shown in the case of Advanced Writers grouped with peer reviewers of the same proficiency. There was evidence of peer feedback from this case being as good as teacher feedback and being mistaken as such; and this group offered the most positive outcomes, pointing to the potential of peers assuming the role of Peer as Expert, comparable to the role of Teacher Expert, thus reconfiguring the traditional ‘Division of Labour’ which privileges the role of teacher feedback.

8.1.2 Learner agency in the response to and use of peer and teacher feedback in L2 learners

Learner agency, in the context of this study, may be expressed in the different decisions learners make in responding to and using feedback on their writing. These decisions may be reflected in independence in revising behaviour, which is defined as the capacity to take charge of the revising process such that the writer would even make revisions which are not in direct response to the feedback given.

Data from the study had surfaced four types of independence-reflecting revisions: “Snowball Effect” Revisions, Complex Revisions, Multiple Revisions and rejections of
teacher feedback. The case set-up of Advanced Writers with Advanced Peer Reviewers showed the highest incidence of independence-reflecting revisions and presented the most positive outcomes in terms of improvement in quality of writing from Draft One to Draft Two. There were no marked differences in terms of incidence of independence-reflecting revisions and improvement in quality of writing, between the other two case set-ups: Upper Intermediate Writers and Peer Reviewers; and Intermediate Writers-Upper Intermediate Peer Reviewers and Upper Intermediate Writers-Intermediate Peer Reviewers. Based on these findings, it appears that the configuration of Advanced Writer with Advanced Peer Reviewer is an optimal one.

8.1.3 Contradictions in the activity system of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing of L2 learners

Two key contradictions in the activity system were surfaced in the study: that between “Teacher Expert” (‘Division of Labour’) and perceived time constraint (‘Rules’) and that between “Writer as Author” (‘Division of Labour’) and preference for teacher feedback (‘Rules’). The first contradiction presented itself in the issue of perceived time constraint that the teacher faced in giving feedback on students’ writing. The second contradiction was presented in the rejection of teacher feedback for the following reasons: sense of text ownership, lack of understanding of teacher feedback and lack of writing proficiency to address teacher feedback. Two potential innovations to resolve contradictions were proposed:
the use of a web-based peer review platform which provides multiple peer reviews to address
the issue of time constraint, and the implementation of complementary roles for teacher and
peer feedback in providing feedback on students’ writing. The latter may be presented in two
scenarios: peer feedback to be given before teacher feedback, and both teacher and peer
feedback made concurrently available.

8.2 Contributions of the study

The following sections detail the contributions of the current study in terms of theory,
research, methodology and pedagogy. The key theoretical contribution is the
conceptualization of the activity system of responding to and using teacher and peer feedback
on writing of an L2 writer based on the data in the study, using the theoretical lens of Activity
Theory. The key research contribution is the conceptualization of a new taxonomy for
studying revisions informed by the Activity Theory concept of learner agency. The key
methodological contribution of the study is the research design of a “multiple instrumental
case study” (Creswell, 2012) which foregrounds the two key factors in a comparative study
of peer and teacher feedback: the ‘L2 factor’ and the ‘cultural factor’ (Hu & Lam, 2010),
which allows for a fair comparison of both types of feedback to be made so that judicial
decisions may be made regarding the use of both types of feedback in the L2 writing
classroom. Finally, the key pedagogical implication is the advantage of the use of web-based
peer review systems such as SWoRD in the implementation of both teacher and peer feedback.
for L2 writers, especially those coming from cultures which are influenced by the issue of ‘face’.

8.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

Comparative studies on peer and teacher feedback have investigated disparate aspects such as differences between teacher and peer feedback (Anson & Anson, 2017; Caulk, 1994; Cho et al., 2006a, 2008; Gielen et al., 2010a), preference of feedback (e.g., Liu & Chai, 2009; Hu & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2016), use of feedback (e.g., Gielen et al., 2010a; Tsui & Ng, 2000), effectiveness of feedback on subsequent revisions (e.g., Hu & Lam, 2010; Paulus, 1999; Yang et al., 2006), the impact of different types of peer feedback on subsequent performance (e.g., Ruegg, 2015). Few have adopted the Activity Theory framework to generate a more holistic picture of how an L2 learner responds to and uses teacher and peer feedback on writing with the use of a web-based peer review system. Some have used Leont’ev’s (1978, 1981) concept of motive to investigate how learner’s motivations impact their stances in taking part in peer feedback (e.g., Yu & Lee, 2015; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012) while others have generated an activity system to better understand the activity of either peer feedback (Jimenez-Jimenez & Zapata, in Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) or teacher feedback (Lee, 2014b) but to date, there has not been a study that has used the Activity Theory framework to generate a fuller and more holistic picture on the activity of responding to and using both teacher and peer feedback on writing for the L2 learner. The current study has filled an important gap by
generating such an activity system based on the data garnered in the study (see Figure 8.1).

The various components of the activity system were substantiated, rendering the contextual factors having a bearing on the activity of responding to and using feedback of an L2 learner more visible. For example, under ‘Rules’, one key factor, that of perceived time constraint, amongst others such as number of assignments the participants had to cope with, the word limit within which participants had to work, and the issue of “face” in Chinese culture were uncovered. The issue of “face” also surfaced prominently in the online interaction between writers and reviewers in the sense that it was circumvented rather than operative as it normally would be, in face-to-face peer review.

Drawing on this figure, the concept of mediation was used to better understand how a web-based peer review system (‘Tool’) transformed the process of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing, through mediating some of the components.
SWoRD
Written language
Consulting other peers (oral)
Resources outside of feedback
Other peers’ papers
Research articles
Course modules (by teacher of this course or others)

TOOLS
Develop student’s ability to write
Improve writing from draft 1 to draft 2 using teacher and peer feedback

SUBJECT
L2 writers

OBJECT
Development of students as L2 writers
Improvement in quality of draft

OUTCOME

RULES
Sociolinguistic rules of communication (politeness/”face”)
Cultural value of high status of teachers/preference for teacher feedback
Course requirements
Assignment requirements
Number of assignments
Time constraint

COMMUNITY of reviewers
Teacher expert
Advanced proficiency reviewer
U. Intermediate proficiency reviewer
Intermediate proficiency reviewer

DIVISION OF LABOUR
Teacher as expert
Peers as fellow learners
Peer as expert
Writer as author
of the activity system, such as ‘Community’ (low proficiency peer reviewers), ‘Rules’ (the concept of ‘face’ in Chinese culture), ‘Division of Labour’ (“Teacher Expert”, “Peer as Fellow Learner”, “Peer as Expert”). The contribution of this study is in adding to the scant research on the impact of new technological tools (e.g., web-based peer review systems such as SWoRD) on learning such as the use of feedback in learning to write. It has provided evidence that “Peer as Fellow Learner” and “Peer as Expert” in the giving of feedback is not only possible but capable of yielding positive outcomes vis-à-vis “Teacher Expert” in the
traditional ‘Division of Labour’ in the activity system of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback on writing. It has also documented the successful circumvention of a potential cultural impediment to the use of peer review with Chinese learners – the issue of ‘face’.

Also drawing on this figure, contradictions were surfaced which led to both a richer understanding of the process of responding to both teacher and peer feedback for an L2 learner, and also possible innovations to address the tensions in the activity system. This activity system has facilitated a fuller and more holistic understanding of the enterprise of giving, receiving and acting on feedback for the L2 learner such that new and more efficient ways of responding to and using feedback could be generated. Specifically, the traditional division of labour between “Teacher Expert” and “Peer as Fellow Learner” and that between “Teacher Expert” and “Peer as Expert” were shown to offer new possibilities if the issues surfaced regarding teacher feedback were to be addressed. Borrowing from Lee’s (2014b) comments on her own conception of the conventional feedback system of in EFL writing classrooms and possible innovations, the same may be said of the activity system proposed in this study:

In the new feedback activity system, the teacher and student roles have to be recast, so that students become active agents in charge of their own learning…Changing the teacher
and student roles in feedback essentially shifts the division of labour and affords new opportunities for developing new perspectives on writing and student learning. (p. 208)

How the shifts in the division of labour have led to new possibilities are detailed in the previous chapter which outlined how complementarity between teacher and peer feedback could be implemented in the writing classroom for the benefit of both teachers and students (see Section 7.7.5.2).

8.2.2 Research Contributions

Research on peer feedback has surfaced the potential of peer feedback to stimulate thinking (Berg, 1999; Braine, 2003; Ching & Hsu, 2016; Mittan, 1989; Novakovich, 2016; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006). This has been claimed as one of the benefits of peer feedback which teacher feedback might not be well positioned to proffer, given the more authoritative status traditionally accorded to teachers, which predisposes a reluctance on students’ part to question teacher feedback. While this potential of peer feedback has been highlighted by researchers and also reported in some studies (e.g. Yang et al., 2006, p. 192), the contribution of the current study lies in documenting specific examples of how peer feedback stimulated thinking in the response of the writers to the feedback given (see Section 5.6). Such examples which spanned the proficiency levels, serve as important evidence of such a potential of peer feedback which merits further research. While some analysis of the differences between peer and teacher feedback was proffered in this study (see
Table 5.1), more in-depth investigations of the nature of peer feedback in terms of focus and form as contrasted with teacher feedback could yield more insights on the reasons behind the stimulating effect of peer feedback.

Another research contribution of the study is in the conceptualization of a new taxonomy for revisions using the AT concept of learner agency. Specifically, I developed a new taxonomy for classifying revisions based on the independence reflected in the revision decisions made (independence may be seen as a reflection of learner agency). Earlier taxonomies tended to focus on the external textual changes made (e.g., Faigley and Witte’s 1981 taxonomy; Sommers, 1980) and whether the changes led to improvement (e.g., Min, 2006). While the former is foundational in pioneering a framework for studying the range of textual revisions that can be made, and the latter extended it by including the dimension of improvement in quality of text, neither considered the learner as an active agent in making decisions about whether/how to respond to feedback. The two earlier taxonomies took a more two-dimensional or mechanical view of the process of revising, focusing on the product of the process (i.e., the revisions as shown in the text), while the taxonomy generated in the current study is premised on the concept of learner agency which assumes that learners are active agents in responding to feedback and make decisions which may not correspond with the advice given in the feedback. This taxonomy is made possible with the use of qualitative data-gathering methods such as the stimulated recall interview, which allow the researcher to delve into the “how” and why” behind the revision(s) made, and also link the changes in the
drafts with the feedback source. Hence, a much richer picture could be derived as to how and why the writer responded to a particular piece of feedback in a particular way.

To illustrate, Advanced Writer One decided not to take up a piece of teacher advice concerning the organization of Journal One. On the surface, the revisions did not reflect the teacher advice to combine two sections and hence, could be interpreted in any of the following ways: the writer ignored the feedback, missed the feedback given, or did not know how the advice could be carried out. However, the use of the stimulated recall interview which allowed the researcher to direct the interviewee to specific pieces of feedback given and the relevant parts of the text where revisions were made or could have taken place, has uncovered the following reason which indicates a sense of text ownership on the part of the writer: “I want to give my reader a fluent and consistent view of ant behaviour. I describe it in details and I don’t want to split it up simply because I want to compare these two things” (Journal 1 Interview).

In this episode, it can be seen that the writer prefers the block organization rather than the point-by-point organization suggested by the teacher. It demonstrates an instance of independence in his response to teacher feedback, as he was able to make an independent judgment about the pattern of organization he believes would work better for his text. Without surfacing this reason behind his decision to take up the teacher’s suggestion, it would not have
been possible to identify the independence he had exhibited in responding to the feedback given. Such findings attest to the concept of learner agency in Activity Theory.

I have illustrated above how the stimulated recall interview allowed the researcher to capture why the writer responded to a particular piece of feedback in a particular way. I now illustrate how the stimulated recall interview also allowed the researcher to capture how the writer responded to feedback received. In the “Snowball Effect” Revisions, Multiple Revisions, and Complex Revisions in the taxonomy used in this study, the different ways in which the writers responded to the feedback were captured in the stimulated recall interview as they were asked to comment on the revisions made in relation to the feedback they received. Hence, for example, Advanced Writer Two explained that the most important change in Journal 1 was in response to two peers’ feedback on the lack of mention of the topic in the introduction and literature review of the paper. This key change resulted in three revision moves: a deletion, a substitution and an addition. Hence, this is an example of Multiple Revisions. These revision moves indicate some measure of independence on the writer’s part as the response to the feedback elicited more than one simple revision move, which implies deeper engagement with the feedback than might have resulted from one revision move. Once again, such responses would not have been captured without the benefit of the stimulated recall interview used in conjunction with drafts and records of reviews showing feedback received – various sources of data used in the case study methodology adopted for this study.
The case study methodology has indeed been instrumental in generating such rich data which, as I have shown above, have led to the emergence of a new taxonomy of revisions reflecting independence and by implication, learner agency, in the writers. The findings of the study, including this new taxonomy, are indeed positive outcomes of this investigation which is in response to earlier calls for more in-depth study of students’ response to feedback:

“Future research can involve retrospective interviews with student writers to examine their own revisions and discuss the effects of peer review comments on their decision making” (Min, 2006, p. 136).

“…it is important to look more deeply at how students revise their drafts in response to different sources of feedback…” (Cho et al., 2006a, p. 286).

“From the theoretical point of view, … it seems necessary to understand what types of feedback student peers provide and how student writers respond to peer feedback…compared to those of expert feedback” (Cho & Schunn, 2007, p. 424).

In conclusion, one important contribution of this study is the evidence pointing to the presence of learner agency in writers as they respond to feedback on writing and more significantly, the new taxonomy of independence-reflecting revisions which serves as an additional tool in studying student revisions in writing, contributing to the repertoire of revision taxonomies developed over the years. Unlike the taxonomies mentioned earlier, this taxonomy does not seek to be comprehensive in scope but rather, aims to capture the
dimension of independence in revising behaviour, which might hold the key to understanding how students’ independence in responding to and using feedback in revision might lead to long-term learning. This is because the critical thinking/engagement that is implicit in independence in revising behaviour is related to independence in learning, and long-term learning is not likely to take place without independence in learning.

8.2.3 Methodological Contributions

To date, there are few comparative studies on both teacher and peer feedback and to the best of my knowledge, none which has used the theoretical framework of third generation Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999). Furthermore, few have focused on the two key factors (the ‘L2 factor’ and the ‘cultural factor’; Hu & Lam, 2010) together, in the study of feedback on L2 writing that have surfaced in the literature.

The methodological contribution of the current study is the use of a “multiple instrumental case study” (Creswell, 2012) which foregrounds these two key factors in the setting up of the three cases of four writers each. It was originally conceived such that both factors would be captured through operationalizing the ‘L2 factor’ in the writing proficiency level of the writer, and the ‘cultural factor’ in the preference for teacher feedback. Criterion sampling in the selection of cases based on the writing proficiency level and preference for
teacher feedback of the writers would ensure that there could be theoretical replication (Yin, 2014) in which these factors are foregrounded. Theoretical replications are meant to predict contrasting but expected results; in this case, the effects of writing proficiency level and preference for teacher feedback on the response to and use of teacher and peer feedback. The supposition was that writers of different writing proficiency levels paired with peer reviewers of the same proficiency level would differ in the way they respond to and use teacher and peer feedback and writers with a preference for teacher feedback would differ from those who do not, in the way they respond to and use teacher and peer feedback. However, as only one participant in the study did not have a preference for teacher feedback, the three cases were bounded by writing proficiency level only, and hence, theoretical replication based on the writing proficiency level only was possible. Nevertheless, this multiple case design did generate important insights on the effect of writing proficiency level on the L2 writer’s response to and use of feedback. Though preference for teacher feedback was not used in the selection of cases, its effect was nevertheless captured in the data gathering, and especially with literal replication within each case (four writers of the same writing proficiency level in two of the cases, and two writers of the same writing proficiency level in one case), sufficient data was generated which added towards deriving some conclusions about the different case set-ups bound by writing proficiency level.
The use of third-generation Activity Theory has been critical in generating a broader perspective on the contextual factors impinging on the process of responding to and using peer and teacher feedback for the L2 writer. Coupled with qualitative methods of data collection such as the stimulated recall interview, an activity system of the process was generated based on the data of the study. Similar to Lee’s (2014b) activity system of teacher feedback on L2 writing, this schema throws new light on the phenomenon and contributes to a fuller understanding of it.

8.2.4 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the study point to three pedagogical implications, two of which involve the use of a web-based peer review system. This is not surprising as new tools with new affordances often open up new possibilities.

One important cultural impediment to the use of peer feedback with learners from Chinese culture is the issue of ‘face’ which discourages honest communication, especially of negative messages, for the sake of not causing embarrassment or offense to the other party (the ‘cultural factor’, Hu & Lam, 2010). This means that it is not likely that Chinese learners would offer honest, critical yet constructive feedback for fear of offending their peers, which defeats the whole purpose of conducting peer feedback. The use of a web-based peer review platform such as SWoRD in the current study has shown that this obstacle presented by ‘face’
may be circumvented with the anonymity of reviewers afforded by such a platform. Hence, it is recommended that for peer review to be a productive activity with Chinese learners, a web-based peer review system should be adopted as far as possible. Another advantage of using such a system is that the use of the written mode of feedback also allows L2 learners who may be handicapped in using spoken language to give feedback, to have more time and space to communicate their ideas clearly in the written mode. Additionally, writers also have the freedom to refer back to the feedback as and when necessary. This is helpful to L2 learners who may not be competent enough to deliver and process feedback on the spot, as in the oral mode.

One important limitation that teachers face in giving feedback is highlighted in one of two contradictions which surfaced in the activity system: time constraint. This limitation has been mentioned in the literature (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; p. 329; Gielen et al., 2010a; Kariegnanes, 1980) but not documented in any study, to the best of my knowledge. The recurrent theme of the time constraint faced by teachers surfaced in the interview and reflection data. Though the theme was an interpretation from the participants’ perspective of the reason behind the difference in amount of feedback between peer and teacher, and also proffered as a justification for recommending complementary roles for teacher and peer feedback, it should not be discounted as some kind of evidence of such a constraint.
To address this limitation, the use of a web-based peer review system would increase the amount and also timeliness of feedback to learners. This is because of the affordance of multiple reviewers of the web-based system. Timeliness is also made possible as peers, compared with teachers, have fewer drafts to review and hence, would be able to give feedback within a shorter time frame. Hence, the use of a web-based peer review system would help meet the needs of learners for frequency and timeliness of feedback which are important to learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

The second contradiction in the activity system – that between “Writer as Author” and the preference for teacher feedback – was presented in terms of the students’ rejection of teacher feedback for the following reasons: sense of text ownership, lack of understanding of teacher feedback and lack of proficiency to address teacher feedback. Such a contradiction may be resolved with the judicial use of peer feedback as an additional yet necessary source of feedback (that is, complementary and not supplementary). As mentioned earlier (Section 7.7.5.2), complementarity between peer and teacher feedback may be presented in two scenarios: peer feedback to be given before teacher feedback, and both teacher and peer feedback made concurrently available. The latter might be used if the goal was to increase learners’ confidence in their ability to give and evaluate feedback on writing and learners of a relatively high proficiency (e.g., Advanced proficiency) were involved. This is readily available through the use of a web-based peer review platform (Cho et al., 2006b; Cho et al.,
2008; Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Cho & Schunn, 2007). The former arrangement seeks to leverage on the advantages of peer feedback being more readily understood and easier to address, to harness the potential in peer feedback before learners are given teacher feedback. To enhance the effectiveness of peer feedback and help learners access the knowledge that teachers possess, training that would enable more competent peers to help bridge this gap in knowledge between learners and experts such as teachers would be beneficial.

8.3 Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations of the study which should be borne in mind in the interpretation of the findings.

First, the limited number of 12 case study participants did preclude the use of statistical measures to derive more robust findings with regard to measures such as the improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two. It precluded a more in-depth analysis of the differences between the three case set-ups in this aspect. If statistically significant differences could be established between the three case set-ups, more definitive conclusions could have been made on the effect of proficiency level in the configurations of peer review groups. In particular, the positive findings regarding the Advanced Writer/Peer Reviewer case set-up may not be generalisable to other contexts as no statistical analysis was done owing to the small sample
size. Whether this finding will hold in other contexts and with larger sample sizes is certainly worthy of further research.

Second, while there were matched proficiency groups for Advanced and Upper Intermediate proficiency levels, there were none for Intermediate proficiency level. Future research could investigate writers and peer reviewers of matched Intermediate proficiency level as well, so comparisons could be made between the matched proficiency groups for all three proficiency levels. Also, there was only one mixed proficiency case set-up (between Intermediate and Upper Intermediate proficiency levels). Including another between Upper Intermediate and Advanced proficiency levels would provide a broader perspective on the issue of whether matched or mixed proficiency groups are more effective. In sum, future studies could have as a minimum of five case set-ups showing the full range of permutations for matched and mixed proficiency level groups (Advanced-Advanced, Upper Intermediate-Upper Intermediate, Intermediate-Intermediate, Advanced-Upper Intermediate, Intermediate-Upper Intermediate). It should also be noted that low proficiency writers (i.e., Elementary proficiency level) have rarely been investigated. This is another area worthy of research.

Third, while one key finding of how SWoRD mediated the traditional division of labour between teacher as experts and peers as fellow learners such that peer feedback could stimulate critical thinking on the writer’s writing and hence unlock the potential of peer feedback to impact positively student revisions, it could not be established definitively that a
web-based platform was solely responsible for the salubrious effects of peer feedback as there was no comparison made with non-web-based peer review. What merits further research is the question of the extent to which a web-based platform encourages/stimulates critical thinking, compared with a non-web-based platform.

Fourth, while the introduction of this web-based platform (‘Tool’) has facilitated a reconfiguration of the traditional ‘Division of Labour’, to elevate the role of the peer, to Peer as Expert in addition to Peer as Fellow Learner in the activity system of responding to and using feedback on one’s writing of an L2 writer, it would merit further research whether Peer as Expert would replace the role of Teacher Expert, under specific conditions (Karegianes, 1980; Gielen et al., 2010a). Specifically, there is a need for further research to delineate what kind of training would be helpful in nurturing the more competent peers such that they will be able to give feedback that is comparable to teacher feedback and hence, assume the role of “Peer as Expert”. However, it should be acknowledged that the positive effect of peer feedback through this platform which has led to the proposition that the role of the peer might be elevated to that of “Peer as Expert”, could also have been accounted for, to some extent, by the background of the participants as English language teachers who are expected to be more inclined and competent to give feedback. Participants without this background such as non-English major undergraduates, for example, might have yielded less positive findings.

Fifth, the mediating influence of SWoRD in circumventing the issue of “face” in the peer review process and thus unlocking the potential of honest and potentially constructive
feedback from peers has highlighted the negative affective impact of critical feedback. While the findings of the study were positive in that good had come out of the initially negative experience of negative peer feedback, it would merit further research to investigate how writers deal with negative/critical feedback in a non-face-to-face context such as a web-based environment. This could yield insights on how learners could overcome negative reactions to critical feedback which might be an obstacle for their benefitting from the constructive peer feedback given. However, a caveat is in order: given the background of the participants as English language teachers, it could be possible that they would have given honest and constructive feedback even without the impersonal web-based platform for feedback. Nonetheless, the findings of the study constitute some evidence that such platforms are able to circumvent the obstacle of ‘face’ in the peer review process.

Finally, the absence of another rater owing to constraints in resources and hence, the lack of inter-rater reliability in the analysis of the data of the interviews, could have rendered the findings of this study less than robust, in particular, with regard to their generalizability to other contexts. However, the presence of intra-rater reliability in the recursive nature of the researcher’s approach in analyzing the data has proffered some measure of confidence in the findings of this study.
Appendix A

Semi-structured questionnaire

Study: A Qualitative Study of Second Language Writers’ Response to and Use of Teacher and Peer Feedback

Name: ____________________________________________

1. How long have you been learning English? (number of years)

2. Have you experienced peer feedback in a writing class before? Yes/No

3. If ‘yes’, do you prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback? Yes/No

4. If you do prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback, please give your reasons.
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________

5. If you do not prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback, please give your reasons.
  ____________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________
  ____________________________________________________________________

6. Have you taken an international proficiency test of your English? (e.g., TOEFL or IELTS) Yes/No
7. If ‘yes’, which test?
8. If ‘yes’, when did you take it? (please state the year)
9. What is your most recent score?

10. Do you see any benefits in peer feedback? If so, what are they?
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________

11. Do you see any problems with peer feedback? If so, what are they?
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________

Thank you very much!
Appendix B1

Questions for Semi-structured interview at beginning of study

1. Have you experienced peer feedback before? If yes, could you please describe your experience?

2. What are your views about teacher feedback?

3. You said in the questionnaire that you prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback, could you please explain why?

4. You said in the questionnaire that you do NOT prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback, could you please explain why?

5. What are your views about the learning of writing?

6. How would you describe your main motivation in learning English?

7. What value do you see in this course you are enrolled in? How would you rate the potential usefulness of this course on a scale of 1 – 10? (1 – not useful at all, 10 – extremely useful)

*Questions number 6 and 7 – written responses on form
Appendix B2

Questions of semi-standardized interviews at the end of study after peer feedback activities

1. Did you enjoy giving peer feedback on your friend’s writing?
2. If yes, what did you like about it?
3. How did you find the feedback you received from your peers?
4. Have you found the feedback you received from your peers helpful?
5. If yes, how was it helpful?
6. How did you find the teacher feedback on your writing?
7. Usually, what helps you to decide whether to act on the feedback given on your writing?
8. Do you prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback now? Why?
Appendix C

Questions for stimulated recall interviews

1. What is the most major change you made in the second draft? Why did you make that change? What do you understand of the feedback?

2. I see a change made here in your second draft. Could you please tell me how this change came about? (for changes made in response to feedback given on writing)

3. Could you please tell me how you reacted to this comment here? (for no changes made in response to feedback given on writing)

4. You made a change here which does not seem to be related to the feedback given. Could you please comment on the change made here?

5. Do you think that your second draft is better than the first? What do you think explains the difference?

6. You made a change here where feedback was given. What do you understand of the feedback?

7. Have you made any change where you did not understand the feedback given? Could you please describe how you made the change?

8. How did you find your peer’s feedback on your writing?

9. How did you find your teacher’s feedback on your writing?

10. Which source of feedback did you use most in revising for your second draft?
Appendix D

Guidelines for peer review

Please give constructive comments on your peer’s journal in the following three areas:

Content
Here are some questions to guide you:
How insightful do you find the ideas/argument in your peer’s journal?
Is the argument convincing? If ‘yes’, say how; if ‘no’, suggest improvements.
Is the evidence given appropriate/convincing/adequate?
How can your peer improve on his argument/ideas?

Organization
Is there a clear flow of ideas?
Is the paragraphing effective?
Is the introduction effective?
Is there a clear conclusion?
How can your peer improve in the organization of his journal?

Language
Is the essay in good, fluent accurate English? Are there errors you have spotted?
How can your peer improve in terms of use of words, sentence structure, etc?
Be specific, state which line/paragraph you are referring to when spotting errors or suggesting the use of another word.

Be constructive ☺ Be specific ☺
Appendix E

Diagnostic Test Band Descriptors (based on IELTS Writing Task 2 Band Descriptors and “What’s my IELTS level?” [www.myieltsteacher.com for matching of Band descriptors with typical proficiency descriptors])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Band</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Use of vocabulary</th>
<th>Grammatical Accuracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>• A clear position throughout</td>
<td>• Ranges from effective to adequate at the lower end of the band</td>
<td>• Ranges from very wide to adequate at the lower end of the band.</td>
<td>• A wide range of structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A well-developed answer, well-supported by evidence</td>
<td>• There is a clear progression of ideas</td>
<td>• Fluent and flexible use of vocabulary to convey precise meanings</td>
<td>• A variety of complex structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• There may be instances of over-generalisations or supporting ideas may not be sufficiently focussed, at the lower end of the band</td>
<td>• With use of a range of cohesive devices</td>
<td>• May have occasional errors in terms of word choice/spelling/word form</td>
<td>• Most sentences are error-free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• A clear topic sentence in most paragraphs</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Errors are rare and minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate</td>
<td>• Adequately responds to</td>
<td>• Paragraphing is used but may not always be logical</td>
<td>• Ranges from an adequate to limited</td>
<td>• At the lower end of band, may have a few errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prompt though some parts may be better addressed than others</td>
<td>• A relevant position throughout though the conclusion may be unclear or repetitive</td>
<td>• Main ideas are relevant but some may not be adequately developed</td>
<td>• At lower end of band, to prompt is partial and • A position is expressed but development not always clear and conclusion may be lacking</td>
<td>range of vocabulary, which is, nevertheless, adequate for the task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Relevant Details</td>
<td>Relevant Details</td>
<td>Relevant Details</td>
<td>Relevant Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>• Responds to prompt in a limited way or answer is tangential</td>
<td>• Has little to no control of organisational devices such as paragraphing and connectors</td>
<td>• Uses basic vocabulary</td>
<td>• A very limited range of structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Position is unclear or does not express a position</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Vocabulary may be inaccurate or inappropriate</td>
<td>• Complex structure rarely used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Few ideas, mostly undeveloped</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Errors do affect meaning of message</td>
<td>• Many errors which affect communication of meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>• Hardly responds to prompt or does not address the prompt at all</td>
<td>• Has little to no control of organisational devices such as paragraphing and connectors</td>
<td>• At the lower end of the band, uses a very limited range of words</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No position is expressed</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Errors in spelling and/or word formation severely affect meaning of message</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• At the lower end of the band, answer is completely unrelated to the prompt</td>
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<tr>
<td>• May be a totally memorised response</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix F

### Recurrent themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Illustrative example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preference for teacher feedback</td>
<td>“If I have the time, I will follow the teacher’s feedback. For the peers, it is a little bit tricky. I will see if I have enough time to revise. If I have time to revise only one piece of feedback, I think I will choose the teacher’s Why? Just because the teacher is going to give the score.” (Upper Intermediate Writer 4, End-of-study interview)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I trust teacher more so if I know which revise [review] is from teacher, it helps me to decide which to revise” (Upper Intermediate Writer 6 Journal 1 Interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and peer feedback playing</td>
<td>“I think that both teacher feedback and peer feedback are meaningful for students to improve their writing. However, teacher feedback cannot be replaced by peer feedback. They should be complementary.” (Upper Intermediate Writer 3, Reflection 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complementary roles</td>
<td>“Generally speaking, both the students’ feedback and the teacher’s feedback is useful and to some extent complementary to each other since the teacher maybe did not have enough time to do the editing which coincidentally becomes the focus of the peers’ review…On the deeper level, the teacher helped me to [enriched] my content” (Upper Intermediate Writer 5, Reflection 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence in revising behaviour</td>
<td>Defined as “the capacity to take charge of the revising process such that the writer would even make revisions which are not in direct response to the feedback given.” See Table 6.1 in chapter 6 for classification of independence-reflecting revisions found in the participants’ revisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affective impact of peer feedback</td>
<td>“I felt very depressed when I first looked the feedback because there were so many negative comments about my writing.” (Upper Intermediate Writer 2 Reflection 1) “When I read this [i.e. the reviews] for the first time, I felt very very sad for the whole night … it’s too sad for me to start to revise.” (Intermediate Writer 1 Journal 1 Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived time constraint</td>
<td>“She is time constrained… not so much time to look so closely to student papers.” (Advanced Writer 4, Journal 1 Interview) “Teachers’ workload is heavy. She cannot point out everything but peers feedback (since we have three reviewers) point out more problems.” (Upper Intermediate Writer 6, End-of-study interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in addressing teacher feedback</td>
<td>“I tried to make the change but it’s a bit little hard for me…”; “I tried to but it’s hard for me” (Upper Intermediate Writer 5, Journal 1 Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“That is also kind of difficult for me, actually” (Intermediate Writer 2, Journal 2 Interview).

| Comparative influence of peer and teacher feedback on revisions | See example in Appendix G |
| Improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two | See Appendix J for examples |
Appendix G

Comparative influence of peer and teacher suggestions on revisions (Advanced Writer One)

**Advanced Writer One**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of feedback</th>
<th>Peer feedback</th>
<th>Teacher feedback</th>
<th>Teacher and peer feedback</th>
<th>Self-initiated</th>
<th>Unaccounted for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>J1</td>
<td>J2</td>
<td>total</td>
<td>J1</td>
<td>J2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11/26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major changes</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5/26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rejection of feedback</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of revisions = 12 (Journal 1) + 14 (Journal 2) = 26

Journal 1 (J1) = peer suggestions more influential than teacher suggestions

Journal 2 (J2) = peer suggestions more influential than teacher suggestions

Overall = peer suggestions more influential than teacher suggestions
# Appendix H: Grading Rubric for Journal Assignment

|                         | Critical response to reading 40%                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
| **Excellent**           | Consistently does all or almost all of the following:                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 86 – 100                | • Accurately interprets theories and/or research evidence.                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | • Identifies salient arguments pro and con.                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                         | • Thoughtfully evaluates alternative points of view.                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                         | • Draws justified conclusions based on clearly explained reasons.                                                                                                                                                         |
|                         | • Accurately and appropriately uses and/or cites source material.                                                                                                                                                         |
| **Advanced**           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| (Language Proficiency) |                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| **Good**               | Does most or many of the following:                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 70 – 85                | • Accurately interprets theories and/or research evidence.                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | • Identifies relevant arguments pro and con.                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                         | • Offers evaluations of alternative points of view.                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                         | • Draws justified conclusions based on some evidence.                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                         | • Accurately and appropriately uses and/or cites source material.                                                                                                                                                          |
| **Acceptable**         | Does most or many of the following:                                                                                                                                                                                            |

|                         | Coherence and cohesion 30%                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
|                         | • Ranges from effective to adequate at the lower end of the band                                                                                                                                                             |
|                         | • There is a clear progression of ideas                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                         | • With use of a range of cohesive devices                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                         | A clear topic sentence in most paragraphs                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                         | i.e. Presents ideas in a clear and coherent manner                                                                                                                                                                         |

|                         | Grammatical accuracy and academic style 30%                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
|                         | • A wide range of structures                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                         | • A variety of complex structures                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                         | • Most sentences are error-free                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                         | • Errors are rare and minor                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | i.e., Uses fluent and grammatically sound language.                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                         | In academic style most of the time                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                         | At the lower end of band, may have a few errors                                                                                                                                                                               |

|                         | **Excellent**                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                         | • Paragraphing is used but may not always be logical                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                         | • There is overall progression of ideas but use of cohesive devices may sometimes be inadequate or inaccurate                                                                                                                                 |
|                         | i.e. Presents ideas in an adequately clear and coherent manner                                                                                                                                                                |

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| 55 – 69 | Intermediate (Language Proficiency) | • Misinterprets theories and/or research evidence. • Fails to identify salient arguments pro and con. • Superficially evaluates alternative points of view. • Draws unjustified conclusions based on little evidence. • Inaccurately and inappropriately uses and/or cites source material. | paragraphing and connectors At lower end of band, paragraphing may be inadequate or there may be overall lack of overall progression of ideas i.e. Attempts but is often less than successful in presenting ideas in a coherent and clear manner. | • Attempts to use complex structures • But tend to be inaccurate • Errors may be frequent and cause some difficulty for the reader Attempts an academic style but lapses range from moderately frequent to fairly frequent At lower end • A very limited range of structures • Complex structures rarely used |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fair | 0 – 54 | Consistently does all or most of the following: • Offers biased interpretations of theories and/or research evidence. • Fails to identify or dismiss relevant arguments pro and con. • Ignores alternative points of view. • Draws irrelevant or unjustified conclusions. • Inaccurately and inappropriately uses and/or cites source material. | Has little to no control of organizational devices such as paragraphing and connectors i.e., Fails to present ideas in a coherent and clear manner. | Cannot use correct sentence structures except in memorized phrases Many errors which affect communication of meaning Not in academic style at all |

**Grading rubrics** for the Journal Assignments examined in the research project, adapted from Blattner and Frazier, 2002, p.63, (for critical thinking component) and the IELTS Writing Task 2 Band Descriptors (for the coherence/cohesion, grammatical accuracy and academic register components).
Appendix I (1) (for participants of the questionnaire)

Name of student researcher: Lam Tsui Eu Sandra

Title of research project: A Qualitative Study of Second Language Writers’ Response to and Use of Teacher and Peer Feedback

I, ___________________________ (participant’s name), have been given and read the Participant Information Sheet describing the nature of the project, including procedures and what will happen to the collected data.

**I hereby consent / do not consent** to my participation in the above research.

I understand the purpose and process of the research project and my involvement in it.

I also understand that

- I will not receive payment for my participation. However, I will be invited to a free workshop on academic writing.
- participation in this project will not lead to any form of discomfort or personal harm.
- I can at any time withdraw my consent for my participation without penalty, prejudice, negative consequences, repercussion, or disadvantage and demand that my personal data/information be permanently deleted from the researcher’s records;
- the researcher will use the data and my personal information solely for this study;
- while information gained during the study may be shared within the course for which it was gathered, I will not be personally identified and my personal data/information will remain confidential;
- the ethical aspects of the project have been approved by the ethics committee of NIE.

If I have any questions about the research at any point in time, I will contact
Sandra Lam Tsui Eu, stelam@ntu.edu.sg; or
Dr Cheung Yin Ling, yinling.cheung@nie.edu.sg; or
The NTU Institutional Review Board, irb@ntu.edu.sg

**Name of participant: ___________________________**

**Signature:** ___________________________ **Date:** ___________________________

**Researcher's confirmation statement**

I have witnessed the participant signing this form.

**Researcher’s signature:** ___________________________ **Date:** ___________________________

*Please circle whichever applies*
Appendix I (2) (for participants of case study)

Name of student researcher: Lam Tsui Eu Sandra

Title of research project: A Qualitative Study of Second Language Writers’ Response to and Use of Teacher and Peer Feedback

I, ________________________________ (participant’s name), have been given and read the Participant Information Sheet describing the nature of the project, including procedures and what will happen to the collected data.

I hereby consent / do not consent* to my participation in the above research.

I understand the purpose and process of the research project and my involvement in it.

I also understand that

- I understand that apart from a free workshop on academic writing, I will also be given a $50 book voucher and be entitled to editing service for 2 pieces of writing in the subsequent semester, after successful completion of my participation in the study.
- participation in this project will not lead to any form of discomfort or personal harm.
- I can at any time withdraw my consent for my participation without penalty, prejudice, negative consequences, repercussion, or disadvantage and demand that my personal data/information be permanently deleted from the researcher’s records;
- the researcher will use the data and my personal information solely for this study;
- while information gained during the study may be shared within the course for which it was gathered, I will not be personally identified and my personal data/information will remain confidential;
- I will be audio taped during the study;
- the audio taping will be stored in a laptop that is password protected and is accessible only to the researcher;
- the original recording will be permanently deleted upon the student researcher’s completion of the course;
- the ethical aspects of the project have been approved by the ethics committee of NIE.
If I have any questions about the research at any point in time, I will contact

Sandra Lam Tsui Eu, stelam@ntu.edu.sg; or
Dr Cheung Yin Ling, yinling.cheung@nie.edu.sg; or
The NTU Institutional Review Board, irb@ntu.edu.sg

Name of participant: .................................................................

Signature: ................................................................. Date: .........................

Researcher’s confirmation statement

I have witnessed the participant signing this form.

Researcher’s signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________

*Please circle whichever applies
## Appendix J

### Improvement in scores from Draft One to Draft Two (Advanced Writers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer Level</th>
<th>Writer Name</th>
<th>Improvement in score (based on scores by 2 raters)</th>
<th>Percentage improvement</th>
<th>Above median score of 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer One</td>
<td>14 marks out of a maximum score of 100</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer Two</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer Three</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Writer Four</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer One</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Two</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Three</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Four</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Five</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Intermediate Writer Six</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Writer One</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Writer Two</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Median Score = 8
Appendix K

Research Support Office

3. Consent forms are important documents therefore they should be stored in the strictest arrangement. Loss of consent form would result in disciplinary action.

4. No deviation from, or changes of, the protocol should be initiated without prior written NTU IRB approval of an appropriate amendment.

5. The Principal Investigator should report promptly to NTU IRB regarding:
   a. Deviation from, or changes to the protocol.
   b. Changes increasing the risk to the subjects and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the trial.
   c. All serious adverse events (SAEs) which are both serious and unexpected.
   d. New information that may affect adversely the safety of the subjects of the conduct of the trial.
   e. Completion of the study.

6. Continuing Review Request/Notice of Study completion form should be submitted to NTU IRB for the following:
   a. Annual review: Status of the study should be reported to the NTU IRB at least annually using the Continuing Review Request/Notice of Study completion form.
   b. Study completion or termination: Continuing Review Request/Notice of Study completion form is to be submitted within 4 to 6 weeks of study completion or termination.

Professor Lee Sing Kong,
Chair, NTU Institutional Review Board
encl.

cc Director, National Institute of Education
Members, NTU Institutional Review Board


F. (Eds.), *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues* (pp. 23-41). New York: Cambridge University Press.


