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Peer review and Chinese EFL/ESL student writers

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Peer review, as a potentially beneficial pedagogical practice, has been gaining popularity in university writing classes for EFL/ESL students. A recent survey on the writing feedback preferences of undergraduate EFL learners at a major university in China, however, reveals a potential problem with the adoption of this pedagogical practice in EFL/ESL writing classrooms, namely the possible existence of an affective disadvantage of peer feedback for Chinese students and other learners from similar cultural backgrounds. Prompted by survey data and drawing on existing research, this article looks into this issue by analysing its underlying factors and suggesting productive ways to address these factors in the classroom.

Introduction

Peer review has been claimed by many researchers to have the potential to be an effective pedagogical activity in writing instruction. It can provide learners with the opportunity to improve their writing with the help of feedback from peers (Berg, 1999; Hu & Lam, 2010; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1998), develop their writing competence (de Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Hu, 2005; Mangelsdorf, 1992; O'Brien, 2004; Rollinson, 2005; Stanley, 1992), and facilitate their longitudinal development in various ways (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003; Hyland, 2000; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006). The use of peer review, however, is not always without problems (Ferris, 2003; Hu, 2005; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Paulus, 1999; Sengupta, 1998). Researchers and practitioners are still exploring ways to maximise the benefits and avoid the problems it might bring to learners (see Hu, 2005; Hu & Lam, 2010; Hyland, 2006; Min, 2005; Stanley, 1992). With a growing body of empirical research reporting numerous pedagogical

benefits of peer review (e.g., Berg, 1999; Hu & Lam, 2010; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000), more and more university writing instructors have started to adopt this pedagogical activity in their instruction for EFL/ESL students. In addition to benefiting students in the aforementioned ways, peer review is also expected to be a useful strategy for coping with students' common complaint about 'lack of feedback' from their instructors, which results, in part, from the latter's heavy workload and big class sizes. While writing instructors often have high expectations for peer feedback and although some success stories with peer review are quite encouraging, a recent survey on the writing feedback preferences of undergraduate EFL learners at a major university in China reveals a potential problem with the adoption of this pedagogical practice in writing classrooms, namely the possible existence of an affective disadvantage of peer feedback for Chinese students and other learners from similar cultural backgrounds. In this article, we will first summarise the results of the survey briefly and then address the problem identified in the survey by examining its underlying factors and exploring productive ways to deal with these factors in university EFL/ESL writing classes.

Affective disadvantages of peer feedback

In order to find out students' attitudes towards various sources of feedback for their English writing, we recently administered a written survey to 116 junior English majors at a major university in China. At the time of the survey, these students were taking an advanced writing course and were encouraged to revise their writing with the help of peer feedback in addition to teacher feedback. However, they had not received any training on peer review except for a brief explanation about what they were expected to do. In the survey, the students were asked to indicate whether they preferred to have teacher feedback only, peer feedback only, both teacher and peer feedback, or no feedback at all on their writing. They were also asked to give reasons for their choice.

The analysis of the data revealed that whereas more than a third of the participants in the survey preferred to have teacher feedback only, no one preferred to have peer feedback alone. Furthermore, although 60.3% of the students preferred to have both teacher and peer feedback, qualitative analysis indicated that a great majority of them described teachers as experienced experts and teacher feedback as being authoritative and effective, whereas they found peer feedback useful only in addressing surface language corrections or offering an alternative perspective. Notably, 16 students reported that only teacher feedback would be taken on board when teacher and peer feedback conflicted with each other. Such perceptions of the different values of these two feedback sources show

students' strong preference for teacher feedback. That no one preferred to have peer feedback only also suggests students' reservations about the effectiveness of peer feedback. Thus, the pattern of feedback preferences reported by the students is indicative of a more positive attitude toward teacher feedback. In other words, while both teacher and peer feedback were seen as desirable sources of information in the English writing class, teacher feedback clearly enjoyed greater popularity and authority.

Such an affective disadvantage of peer feedback could produce negative effects on students' learning because 'students' perceptions about and attitude toward instruction are crucial determinants in their performance as writers' (Zamel, 1987, p. 699). This issue has given a number of researchers cause for concern. For example, both Hyland and Hyland (2006) and Nelson and Murphy (1993) warn that the affective disadvantage of peer feedback might keep students from incorporating peer feedback into revisions of their work. Just as students' willingness to participate in a pedagogical activity can contribute to successful instruction (Zhang, 1995), so their unwillingness can be detrimental to the instructional process. If students' less-than-favourable attitudes toward peer feedback remain unaddressed, the effectiveness of this pedagogical practice is likely to be limited. Therefore, the issue of Chinese students' strong preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback must be grappled with if peer review is to be used productively with Chinese EFL/ESL learners. Drawing on existing research we examine, in the following section, factors that contribute to Chinese students' preference for teacher feedback at the expense of peer feedback.

Causes of students' unfavourable attitudes toward peer feedback

That students prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback is not a new problem reported in the literature on peer feedback in ESL/EFL contexts (see Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007; Zhang, 1995). A number of possible causes for such a preference have been identified by researchers. Considering the purpose of this article, only the causes that might be relevant to Chinese EFL/ESL students will be discussed here. These causes mainly fall into three categories: limitations of students as reviewers and writers, cultural influences, and inappropriate implementation of peer review as a pedagogical activity.

Limitations of students as reviewers and writers

One perceived limitation of students as reviewers and writers is their limited knowledge of the target language and its rhetorical conventions (Hu, 2005; Hu & Lam, 2010; Nelson & Carson, 1998). This limitation may cause a number

of problems that can exert negative influences on Chinese students' attitudes towards peer feedback. For example, students may have problems in giving constructive feedback when reviewing peers' writing (Hu, 2005; Hu & Lam, 2010; Sengupta, 1998) and in identifying valid feedback from peers when revising their own work (Hu, 2005; Stanley, 1992; Tsui & Ng, 2000). Worse still, students' perceptions of peers' competence in the target language as limited can lead to a mistrust of opinions from peer reviewers. Such mistrust tends to be perpetuated in contexts where, as described by some researchers (e.g., Hyland, 2000; Nelson & Carson, 1998), teachers' authority is traditionally respected, as is the case with many Confucian heritage societies. Students' reservations about the utility of peer feedback, often in contrast to their strong faith in teacher authority and expertise, have been reported in a number of studies, especially those that involve Chinese students (e.g., Hu & Lam, 2010; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Sengupta, 1998). It was also manifest in the students' explanations for their choice of feedback collected in our recent survey.

Another perceived limitation of peer review as a source of feedback is some students' limited ability to critique another student's writing. As suggested in the research literature, many students do not know what to look for in peers' drafts or fail to give usable comments (Ferris, 2003). They tend to focus on micro-level error correction rather than macro-level textual or content issues in a peer review task (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Carson, 1998). Such concerns with micro-level issues are reflective of a limited understanding of what constitutes good writing. Even when students attend to global issues, they tend to give general and vague comments rather than specific and revision-oriented ones (Leki, 1990; Liu & Sadler, 2003). Indeed, surface-error focus and vagueness of feedback were recognised by many participants in our survey as two factors contributing to the unhelpfulness of peer feedback (see also Mangelsdorf, 1992; Nelson & Carson, 1998).

In addition, a lack of productive collaborative skills can cause problems in Chinese students' interaction with each other as writers and reviewers. There has been considerable empirical evidence to suggest that certain student behaviours and attitudes discourage peer collaboration. For example, Lockhart and Ng (1995), in their study on the interaction of 27 dyads of Chinese students in a peer feedback task, found that most of the students took either an authoritative or an interpretive stance which 'views peer response as transmission of knowledge and opinion' (p. 633). This is consistent with the finding reported by Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger (1992). These restrictive stances operate 'in an evaluative mode' (Lockhart & Ng, 1995, p. 646), and therefore '[ignore] the dynamic aspect of writing' (p. 646) and 'defeat the intended purposes of peer review' (Hu, 2005, p. 326). Students

may also experience strong emotional involvement in peer feedback interaction (Amores, 1997). The social dynamics of a peer feedback group can sometimes be really problematic when reviewers become over-critical (Nelson & Murphy, 1992) or disrespectful (Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996), and writers over-defensive (Amores, 1997) or intimidated (Nelson & Carson 1998; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996). Certain interactional strategies that students use to achieve better social dynamics may also inhibit productive collaboration. For example, the Chinese students in Carson and Nelson's (1996) study tried to be indirect and soften their criticism, only to cause confusion on the part of the writer. All these problematic behaviors and attitudes, which work against productive collaboration, can hinder the effectiveness of peer review as a pedagogical practice and even generate 'a sense of discomfort and uneasiness among the participants' (Liu & Sadler, 2003, p. 194) to negatively affect students' attitudes toward peer feedback.

Cultural influences

Cultural influences on the effectiveness of peer review as a pedagogical activity and peer feedback as a source of information for writing improvement have attracted much attention from researchers (Carson & Nelson, 1994; Hu & Lam, 2010). Some suggest that students who hold certain cultural beliefs and values antithetical to the pedagogical principles underlying peer review might find it difficult to participate in and benefit from this pedagogical activity (Carson & Nelson, 1994; Hu, 2002; Hyland, 2000). For example, Nelson and Carson (1998) contend that a collectivist belief in group cohesion and harmony in China explains Chinese students' reluctance to criticise peers' drafts or explicitly disagree with others in their interaction. Such culturally embedded reluctance to act as critics works against the primary purpose of peer review (i.e., to help students improve their writing) by depriving students of critical but constructive feedback from peers. Another cultural factor contributing to EFL/ESL students' preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback is the prevalent perception of the teacher as the knower and authority in 'teacher-centered' cultures like the Chinese culture (Hu, 2005; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Sengupta, 1998). Although the aforementioned cultural influences seem to be especially relevant to Chinese EFL/ESL learners, Hu and Lam (2010) found little cultural impact on most of the Chinese students in their study, a result consistent with the findings of Yang et al (2006). As pointed out by the authors of both studies, the lack of a negative cultural impact might have been a function of the appropriate pedagogical implementation of peer review. This is good news for writing instructors who are interested in using peer review with their Chinese EFL/ESL learners.

Inappropriate implementation of peer review

In addition to the student-internal factors discussed above, inappropriate pedagogical implementation of peer review can also negatively affect students' attitudes toward it. In some cases, students may feel uncomfortable in performing certain peer review activities implemented inadequately. For example, they may feel rushed if time allotted for peer feedback is insufficient (Ferris, 2003; Mangelsdorf, 1992). Students of lower proficiency in the target language may feel inhibited from contributing to the task in groups of mixed proficiency levels if oral communication is required (Hu & Lam, 2010; Zhu, 2001). In other cases, students may lose interest in peer review if its effectiveness is not demonstrated. For example, Hyland (2000) found that the use of feedback sheets had a negative effect on students' attitudes toward peer feedback. However, in another study, Berg (1999) found that students greatly benefited from it. This has important implications. Firstly, the ineffectiveness of a certain procedure or technique might be attributed to the specific teaching and learning context to which it is applied. While it helps some students in certain contexts, it may work against others in different contexts. Secondly, its ineffectiveness might also be attributed to students' inappropriate use of it due to a lack of training. This is another well-recognised cause of unsuccessful peer review (see Hu & Lam, 2010; Rollinson, 2005), which can lead to students' negative views about peer feedback. This factor may also have played an important role in the feedback preferences of the participants in our survey because none of them had received any training in peer review.

Strategies for making peer review a productive pedagogical activity

Student training and careful implementation of peer review have been recommended in the literature as an effective means of overcoming the problems associated with the classroom use of peer review and of improving its pedagogical effectiveness (Hu, 2005). Since there is a recognised need to tailor peer review to specific learning contexts (Ferris, 2003; Mangelsdorf, 1992), we give special attention to research conducted on Chinese EFL/ESL learners when we draw on the research literature to identify effective training and implementation strategies.

Effective student training

Awareness-raising is a commonly used strategy in studies that report positive training effects (e.g., Berg, 1999; Hu, 2005). Several options are available to raise students' awareness of peer review as a beneficial pedagogical activity. For example, cognisant of students' need for initial persuasion about the value of peer feedback (Rollinson, 2005), many researchers (e.g., Berg, 1999; Ferris, 2003; Hu,

2005) either explain or conduct discussion about the benefits of peer feedback, usually supplemented with examples of how accomplished writers make use of peer feedback. Besides promoting peer review as a valuable pedagogical activity, students can also be guided to discuss potential problems of peer feedback and possible solutions (Ferris, 2003; Hu, 2005). Other awareness-raising activities include making students appreciate the purpose of peer review (Mangelsdorf, 1992) and demonstrating the value of peer feedback with actual examples (Stanley, 1992). Such awareness-raising can help students develop an appropriate attitude toward peer feedback (Berg 1999; Paulus, 1999) and is believed to be particularly necessary for students from Asian cultures with cultural norms antithetical to those underlying writing group interaction (Carson & Nelson, 1996). It should be helpful in reducing those cultural influences that might work against Chinese EFL/ESL learners when they engage in offering and considering peer feedback.

An important objective of student training is to teach students to make 'productive response and revision' (Rollinson, 2005, p. 27). Demonstration and modelling are widely used techniques to achieve this objective, albeit with variations in specific implementations. For example, while Berg (1999) used his drafts of a conference proposal reviewed by his colleagues to demonstrate appropriate peer feedback and effective revision, Hu (2005) asked his students to examine previous students' drafts in progress and discuss both the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of peer comments and revision made in response. Modelling is often conducted by the instructor thinking aloud while making comments on a piece of writing (Hu, 2005; Min, 2006). Such modelling allows students to see the instructor's considerations when critiquing a piece of writing as well as how to offer constructive feedback. If feedback sheets are to be provided in peer feedback sessions, the appropriate use of this tool should be demonstrated (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Min, 2005). One way of doing this is through instructor modelling of how to use the feedback sheets effectively, as Hu (2005), Min (2006), and Yang et al. (2006) did in their studies. Such demonstration and modelling can be followed by practice activities in which students respond to sample drafts collaboratively (e.g., Berg, 1999; Hu, 2005; Rollinson, 2005) to consolidate what they have learned. All these activities have been found to work well to help students make productive responses and revisions.

Another important aspect of peer review training is to help students engage in productive interaction by developing their communicative strategies and teaching them appropriate language for effective feedback (Berg, 1999; Rollinson, 2005; Stanley, 1992). In this regard, research suggests that explicit instruction is an effective and often-used method. In Hu (2005), for example, Chinese ESL students

in Singapore were taught appropriate interactional strategies through instructional activities that engaged them in identifying problems in examples of inappropriate language use, reflecting on various reader stances towards a piece of writing, and discussing appropriate response behaviours. Other instructional activities include using worksheets completed by the instructor to demonstrate how to be polite, clear and specific in feedback (Mangelsdorf, 1992) and discussing characteristics and benefits of effective collaboration based on transcripts of collaborative peer review (Lockhart & Ng, 1995). Stanley's (1992) method involves more active participation from students by asking them to role play in pairs and then discuss each pair's successful and unsuccessful communications to explore effective communication strategies. These are all tested ways to help students develop the collaborative skills necessary for successful peer interaction and feedback. They may be combined to achieve even better effects.

In addition, some researchers (e.g., Mangelsdorf, 1992; Min, 2006), aware of the limitations of pre-training, have emphasised the necessity of ongoing support to help students transform declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. Such support can be provided through teacher-student conferencing (Mangelsdorf, 1992; Min, 2006), in which teacher assistance can be tailored to individual needs. While it has been found to be highly beneficial, support of this nature is rather time-consuming and may not be practical in some classrooms. In comparison, the follow-up activities that Hu (2005) used with his Chinese students are less demanding on instructional time. The activities include responding to students' written comments and highlighting good ones, drawing students' attention to rejected valid suggestions and accepted invalid suggestions, modelling appropriate responses by responding to students' drafts, and conducting peer feedback sessions to discuss students' problems and provide affective support. Such activities can be carried out regularly and are more practical for teachers with limited instructional time.

Strategies for implementing peer review

The literature on peer review suggests that several issues need careful consideration in the implementation of the pedagogical activity to ensure its beneficial effects. These issues mainly concern peer response modes (Hu, 2005; Min, 2005), group configuration (Connor & Asenavage, 1994), feedback structure (Ferris, 2003; Min, 2006), and peer feedback assessment (Ferris, 2003; Min, 2006).

Firstly, decisions about response modes need to be made carefully in the light of student characteristics. Many researchers (e.g., Hu, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006) include both oral and written response in their peer feedback tasks

so that students can benefit from both modes. Specifically, written response allows students, especially ESL/EFL students who have not attained advanced proficiency in the target language, more time to compose helpful feedback and provides a permanent record for student writers to revisit in revision and for instructors to monitor the effectiveness of peer feedback (see Ferris, 2003; Min, 2005). The oral response modes, on the other hand, can reduce misunderstanding between peers (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006) and facilitate the acquisition of effective communicative strategies and writing skills by involving students in social interaction (Hu, 2005). Furthermore, the order of the response modes is also important. Although Hu (2005) found that the order of written and then oral response could result in problematic written comments caused by misunderstanding of writers' intentions, this order might make the task easier for EFL/ESL students by allowing them more time out of class to compose their written comments, and misunderstanding can be cleared during the oral phase of the peer review task. Furthermore, the formulation of written comments can also prepare students for the oral response and therefore save in-class interaction time (Ferris, 2003), which is a practical concern of many practitioners with a crowded curriculum to cover.

Secondly, group configuration issues centre on group size and composition. Typical group sizes found in empirical studies of peer review are two to four people. Although multi-member groups may provide more perspectives (Ferris, 2003) and opportunity for collaborative feedback which can build up peer reviewers' confidence (Mangelsdorf, 1992), pair work increases the opportunity for intensive discussion (Mittan, 1989; Paulus, 1999) and may make participants more comfortable (Nelson & Murphy, 1992). Therefore, Hu (2005) suggests that the dyadic format be used at the beginning stage to familiarise students with peer review as a pedagogical activity and shift to multi-member group work when they are ready. With regard to group composition, some researchers believe that fixed groups with students of mixed proficiency levels can ensure that all students will contribute to and benefit from this activity, possibly in different ways (Ferris, 2003; Mittan, 1989). Others encourage students to work with different peers, for shifting group membership allows students to benefit from a variety of strategic assistance (Hu, 2005) and 'may discourage the development of negative roles in one group' (Nelson & Murphy, 1992, p. 189). There is reason to believe that shifting membership, besides the benefits mentioned above, might also create a sense of fairness by allowing students to collaborate with peers at different levels of writing competence.

Thirdly, providing feedback structure by using peer feedback sheets or guiding

questions is a common practice in successful implementation (Hu, 2005; Min, 2006). These implementation strategies can help students focus on important issues at proper points (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Rollinson, 2005) and foster a sense of priority in revision (Arndt, 1993). The questions used to guide students should be arranged in such a way that macro-level issues will be attended to before micro-level issues (Arndt, 1993; Hu, 2005). It should be noted that feedback sheets, unless used strategically, might restrict reviewers to only those issues raised in the sheets rather than encourage them to attend to the needs of a specific text and the writer (Lockhart & Ng, 1995). It is also likely for some students to treat feedback sheets merely as series of questions to answer (Min, 2005). To use feedback sheets effectively, instructors need to provide guidance on how to use them as aids rather than chores to finish off (Berg, 1999; Min, 2005). Students should be given more autonomy once they master the technique of responding (Lockhart & Ng, 1995).

Finally, assessing peer feedback is another useful strategy reported in the literature that can contribute to the success of peer review (Ferris, 2003; Min, 2006). It can be used to motivate students (Min, 2006; Mittan, 1989), hold them accountable for their comments (Ferris, 2003; Min, 2006), communicate the instructor's high commitment to peer feedback (Mitten, 1989), and provide information that will allow the instructor to make necessary adjustments to peer feedback implementation (Ferris, 2003). It can be easily done by grading students' written comments. However, it is more helpful if the grade is accompanied by qualitative feedback on the specificity and helpfulness of students' suggestions, as described by Mitten (1989).

CONCLUSION

Peer review, as a potentially beneficial pedagogical practice, is gaining popularity among university EFL/ESL writing instructors. However, there are indications that many Chinese students may have unfavourable attitudes toward it. The extensive literature on peer review suggests that a variety of factors can lead to such unfavourable attitudes. These include the limitations of students as reviewers and writers, cultural influences, and inappropriate pedagogical implementation. Encouragingly, existing research indicates that most of these problems can be overcome by effective student training and careful implementation of peer review tasks. Useful training and implementation strategies and activities have been discussed in this paper and, hopefully, will help practitioners maximise the effectiveness and benefits of peer review as a pedagogical practice. These

valuable strategies and activities notwithstanding, instructors will need to come up with individual responses appropriate to their students and teaching contexts in their effort to take advantage of peer review in their classroom. For example, they would need to work out the most effective training activities and best group configuration in relation to the needs and characteristics of their own students. In a similar vein, it would be important for them to determine, through close monitoring, whether changing or fixed group membership works best for their students. Above all, they must aim to achieve a judicious balance between the uses of different sources of feedback in their writing instruction so that their students are best supported in their learning journey.

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