

Using Learners' Diaries to Investigate the Influence of Students' English Language Proficiency on Peer Assessment

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Abstract

Peer assessment has been used increasingly in English writing instruction in the past two decades. This has given rise to research on peer assessment in developing English learners' writing proficiency. However, few studies have exclusively examined student variables in relation to peer assessment and, in particular, how students' English language proficiency affects the use of peer assessment in English-medium writing classrooms. The case study research described in this article examined, through the employment of students' learning diaries, how Chinese university English-learners' language proficiency affected the use of peer assessment. Ten second-year English majors at a university in Southern China were asked to keep diaries of their experiences of being involved in peer assessment over sixteen weeks. The diary data showed that the students viewed their English language proficiency as a salient variable influencing the focus, the type, the appropriateness, and the impact of peer feedback on learners' redrafts.

Theoretical Background

It has long been a tradition for the agency of writing assessment to be with writing tutors rather than student writers themselves. Over the past twenty years, increasing attention has been paid to the role of students in developing their English writing ability through inviting students to assess their peers' writing assignments (Ferris 2003b and Hyland and Hyland 2006). Investigations of peer assessment with EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign/Second Language) learners have suggested that peer assessment facilitates developing student writing quality.

With regard to student variables for peer assessment, students' English language proficiency was suggested as the most influential factor for peer assessment through one-off surveys and classroom discussions (Cheng and Warren 2005, McGroarty and Zhu 1997, Nelson and Murphy 1993, Sengupta 1998, Storch 2001, and Yang, Badger and Yu 2006). Mangelsdorf (1992) observed during class discussions about peer assessment that 77% of her 40 ESL college freshmen viewed their English ability to be insufficient to critique their peers' texts. Cheng and Warren (2005) ascertained through interviews with Hong Kong undergraduate engineering students that half of the 27 student interviewees thought themselves to be unqualified for the peer assessment task because of their poor level of English language proficiency. A similar finding was reported in Storch (2005): the eighteen ESL college students (mostly from Asia) expressed their reservations about collaborative writing in their interviews, largely because they did not feel confident in their own English language proficiency.

However, it is insufficient to use one-off survey or classroom discussions to examine learners' perceptions of the influence of their English language proficiency on peer assessment, because learners' performance in peer assessment has been suggested to differ from writing task to writing task and from peer to peer (Ferris 2001, Ferris 2003a, Mendonca and Johnson 1994, and Min 2005). Data collected via one-off survey and classroom discussion was based on learners' recall of their peer assessment experiences and could thus be inaccurate. A data collection method such as a diary

study, providing the progression of learners' reflection on peer assessment experiences in different writing tasks, and with different peer collaborators, is needed.

The current study collected learners' peer assessment diary data across six writing tasks, over 16 weeks and with different peer collaborators. The following research question was examined: How did student English language proficiency affect Chinese university students' experiences of peer assessment from the learners' perspective?

Current Study

The current study adopted a case study methodology to capture Chinese university EFL-learners' perspectives about student English language proficiency and the use of peer assessment for EFL writing. Peer assessment was introduced to an English writing class consisting of 18 second-year English majors. Ten of them were asked to keep diaries to record their experiences of peer assessment for over 16 weeks.

Research Setting

The students involved in this study were second-year English majors. They had known each other for over a year, therefore no specific strategies were adopted to develop peer-to-peer relationships. According to the writing tutor, the students were at an intermediate level of English ability based on their performance in the writing course; however, he also observed different levels of English language ability among individual learners. This enabled the researcher to investigate the influence of students' English language proficiency on peer assessment by allocating the ten diarists to three language groups on the basis of the final marks they obtained in their writing class (i.e. 70% based on their assignments and 30% on their final term-paper):

1. High level group: four diarists, with a final mark above or equal to 90;
2. Mid-level group: three diarists, with a final mark between 80 and 90;
3. Low level group: three diarists, with a final mark below 80.

Peer assessment was carried out in class by randomly organising students in pairs to review and comment on each other's paper. The students were asked to write their names on their peers' work to ensure that every student participated in peer assessment. This made it possible for the researcher to identify writers' and reviewers' English language proficiency.

Students in this study had almost no previous experience of providing peer feedback on English writing. This made training in providing peer feedback necessary for the effective use of peer assessment in writing instruction. However, the instructor in this study was determined to follow a method that he called 'shark therapy', allowing students themselves to find out how to provide effective peer feedback. Students with no previous peer feedback experiences and no training in providing peer feedback might compound the impact of students' English language proficiency on students' experiences of peer feedback. Such an influence was borne in mind when the data was analysed but further discussions of that influence were beyond this paper.

Data Collection and Analysis

A diary is defined as 'a first person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular and candid entries in a personal journal and then analysed for recurring patterns or salient events' (Bailey 1996: 215). Although a review of the existing studies from 1992 to 2007 shows that no diary study has been conducted so far in the research into peer assessment, the advantages of diaries over traditional research methods such as questionnaires, interviews and

observations have been widely discussed in the research into second language learning and teaching. Corti (1993), for instance, identified three benefits of diaries over interviews:

1. Provided more reliable data for events which are difficult to recall accurately;
2. Overcame problems of collecting sensitive data by personal interviews;
3. Supplemented interview data, thereby creating more rich and comprehensive information on participants' behaviours.

Allwright and Bailey (1991: 4), comparing diary and classroom observation and questionnaire data, highlighted that:

A learner's diary may reveal aspects of the classroom experience that observation could never have captured, and that no one would have thought of including as questions on a questionnaire.

In the current study, the advantages of a diary study were revealed in at least three ways. First, diary studies were more flexible than interviews in terms of both time and locations. The diary approach enabled students to jot down their feelings about peer and teacher assessment, whenever and wherever they wanted, after each writing class. Second, as a result of flexibility, the diary data were more continuous and thus more complete than the interview data: learners' diaries recorded participants' experiences of peer and teacher assessment in every class. By contrast, the interview data were collected only twice and the learners were highly likely to forget events or feelings happening during the intervening months between the two interviews. Finally, negative personal feelings towards peer and teacher assessment, and partners and the tutor, might be too sensitive to be expressed in face-to-face interviews, but it might be easier for learners to record them in their diaries without a third person present.

The diary data consisted of learners' diary entries, the researcher's report on learners' diary entries, and learners' responses to the researcher's report on their diaries. The learners were also asked about their concerns about providing personal diary data. They were promised anonymity. Both dates and names were changed. Learners' diaries were collected each week. Forty-three diary entries, along with responses to diary reports, were collected.

The 43 diary entries were archived, coded and analysed with NVivo2 (see Richards 1999). A grounded approach was adopted when coding was carried out: let the data itself suggest coding categories. Four categories emerged from the data, consisting of: the focus of feedback (i.e. grammar, wording, mechanics, sentence structure, organisation, content and style); the type of feedback (i.e. feedback with/without revision solutions); the appropriateness of feedback; and the use of peer feedback in students' subsequent drafts.

Findings

The analysis of learners' diary data showed that students' English language proficiency was perceived as a salient factor influencing the use of peer assessment. In the 43 diary entries, 14 discussed its influence on the focus of peer feedback; 14 discussed its influence on appropriateness; 12 recorded its influence on the type; and 13 discussed its influence on the use of peer feedback in revised drafts. Furthermore, except for three entries, all other comments were overwhelmingly negative, expressing the constraints of students' English language proficiency on the efficacy of peer assessment in EFL writing instruction.

Language proficiency and focus of feedback

Students' sentiments about their limited language proficiency narrowing the focus of peer feedback recurred in their diaries, from both a writer's and a reviewer's perspective. Dan, a student in the mid-level group, commented on feedback received from and provided for a peer in the low group:

The peer's criticism is *very general, not very detailed* about the format, rhythm, or specific words. *I could not evaluate their work in detail as well.* I think this might be because of *our limited knowledge* on writing an English poem because it requires a higher English level (Dan/D/2803/P4).¹

In her response to the diary report, she clarified 'general' as follows: "General feedback", I refer to feedback on the content in contrast to the format, the rhythm and the wording in my poem' (Dan/R/2803/P4). We can thus see from Dan's assertion that she felt that she and her peers were not competent to provide feedback on aspects other than content. A similar concern was expressed by Jin, a student in the high-level group:

Especially when we commented on a poem, we often pay more attention to the *general ideas* which the author tried to convey than the *specific language use*. After all, *our ability is very limited* (Jin/D/2803/P9).

She explained her meaning of 'ability' in her response to the diary report: 'Ability, I mainly refer to *how to use English* but the *knowledge of writing an English poem* is another ability I refer to as well' (Jin/R/3003/P2). From Jin's diary and her response to the researcher's diary report, she considered that her own and her peer's English abilities made them unable to provide feedback focused on different aspects.

Dan's and Jin's diaries, along with their responses to diary reports, have indicated that a genre like poetry, which is usually believed to require a high level of English knowledge, compounded the influence of students' English language proficiency on providing feedback with different foci. The influence of language proficiency and the focus of peer feedback can be further generalised to other genres including fiction and research papers. For example, Dong, a student in the mid-level group, addressed the narrow focus of his feedback provided on his peer's fiction:

I think *my English is not quite well* and I can't provide useful comments on language, word or structure when we are doing PA [peer assessment]. I mainly *concern on the plot or idea* of the story (Dong/D/2504/P11).

This claim reveals that Dong did not believe his English language proficiency was sufficiently high enough to provide feedback on the language use in his peer's story. From a writer's perspective, Jian complained about feedback on his research paper from a student in the high-level group: 'Since it was difficult for her to understand my paper, I got *few suggestions* besides the two *micro-level feedback* from her' (Jian/R/1105/P3). A look at Jian's research paper showed the two feedback points in his six-page-long research paper: one on grammar (singular and plural form) and the other on organisation (the location of two sentences in one paragraph). His peer, a student in the high-level group, explained why she could not provide more feedback points on Jian's research paper in her diary:

The *unfamiliar words* used in the paper and the *long and complex sentence structures* made me hard to understand the paper. Thus, I couldn't give suggestions to my partner in a macro view such as content and organisation. I paid more attention to micro point. I need to improve my English ability (Jin/D/0905/P11).

Jin's explanation showed her limited language knowledge resulted in her difficulty in providing feedback on different aspects of her peer's writing.

We could see from the foregoing that no matter which language group the learners belonged to, they unanimously claimed that their limited English ability was the reason for their difficulty in providing feedback with a broad focus. Further, the learners discussed most frequently the restriction of their limited English ability on the provision of feedback on language use (i.e. grammar, wording, sentence structure, organisation and style). It is possible that genres might compound the influence of students' language proficiency on the focus of peer feedback, since the learners claimed that they could only provide feedback on content for arguments, poems and fictions, but for research papers they could only comment on language use.

¹ All emphases in quotations are the author's.

Language proficiency and type of feedback

It was reiterated in learners' diaries that they felt incapable of providing suggestions for improving the language point they addressed in the feedback they provided on peers' writing.

Xiao, a student in the mid-level group, felt upset about her inadequate English knowledge when suggesting how her peers could revise their writing: 'My English is *not very well*, as well as my writing skills, so I *cannot correct* what I think is wrong' (Xiao/D/0606/P3). Hua, another mid-level student who worked with students across the three groups during the research period, claimed that students' limited language proficiency made it difficult for them to provide revision solutions for improving peers' writing quality: 'Students have *their limitation in language knowledge* and sometime it is *hard to provide the way to solve the problems* we found' (Hua/D/3005/P13). Aligning with Xiao and Hua, Li, a student in the high-level group, expressed her concern about providing revision strategies:

Sometimes I felt that one word or one sentence was not quite suitable in the context, but I *couldn't find the way* to improve it. My language ability *limits* me (Li/D/0206/P7).

By way of contrast, in her 9th May diary entry, Li discussed how valuable peer feedback was in improving the organisation of her writing:

Partners who worked with me before could just pick out places where are wrong or inappropriate, but *could not find places where might be improved*. However, this time, my partner not only pointed out micro things, but also viewed the essay, even every paragraph as a whole and made *some macro advices*. For example, he noticed the sentence order and picked out a sentence that turned up suddenly in one paragraph. *After discussion*, we both agreed to put that sentence at the end of the paragraph as a conclusion (Li/D/0905/P10).

In addition to the wide focus of feedback ('micro things' and 'macro advices'), Li seemed to be happy about the negotiation between herself and her peer about the organisation in her writing. A close look at her peers' English language proficiency revealed that her collaborator on 9th May gained the highest final mark among all her collaborators. In this sense, higher language proficiency might facilitate learners providing revision suggestions, explaining the reasons behind their feedback and negotiating with peers about how to revise addressed areas.

We can see from the learners' diary entries above that, similar to the focus of peer feedback, the influence of learners' language abilities on the type of peer feedback also seems to be across the three language groups. However, higher English ability could possibly facilitate the provision of revision strategies in learners' diary data.

Language proficiency and appropriateness of feedback

The influence of language proficiency on the appropriateness of peer feedback appeared to be another essential theme in learners' dairies (i.e., 14 entries). Students' mistrust of the appropriateness of peer feedback, provided and received, was overwhelming in the diary data.

Shu, working with a student in the low-level group, complained about the inappropriateness of peer feedback for her work: 'Sometimes her comment is *not related* to my work. I think whether we can do peer assessment better *depends on one's English proficiency*' (Shu/D/1005/P3). A similar concern was expressed by Yan, working with student in the mid-level group:

They [referring to peer feedback points] are some corrections or comments which do *not match my original ideas*. The *most important* factor that influences peer assessment is our *English proficiency*. (Yan/D/0206/P5).

Likewise, Zhong, working with a student in the mid-level group, was also upset about the irrelevance of feedback provided on his writing: 'They are *not always able to put forward advice to the point*. I think whether we can do peer assessment better *depends on one's language proficiency*' (Zhong/D/1104/P5)

Similar cases also occurred for the students in the high-level group. For example, Shu, a student who obtained the second highest mark in the writing class, expressed her concerns about providing

feedback for her peers' writing: 'I'm *not professional in English* so I don't think I can provide good comments for my peers [...] I might provide wrong ones sometime' (Shu/D/1204/P4). Shu's diary data suggest her suspicion of her own English capacity for providing valid peer feedback, even though her final mark for her writing course was above 90.

Similar to the influence of students' language proficiency on the focus and type of peer feedback, the influence of learners' language proficiency on the appropriateness of peer feedback occurred across language groups.

Language proficiency and use of feedback

As described above, 13 diary entries discussed how student language proficiency influenced students' decisions on using peer feedback in revised drafts. However, the thirteen entries were made by three students and thus might not be viewed as a representative remark by the ten diarists. Surprisingly, two of the three students were in the high level group and one in the mid-level group.

Jian, a student in the high level group, commented on his hesitation in using feedback provided by peers who had a lower level of English ability than him: 'It is a little difficult for me to accept my peers' judgments on my work, especially when I don't think my partner's English ability is above mine' (Jian/D/1104/P8).

On the other hand, as a reviewer, he also gave up on persuading his peers to use his feedback because of his lack of confidence in his English language proficiency:

Anyway, I am not an expert. I am *not qualified* to judge on other's poem and give good advices, so I didn't insist on my opinion and didn't argue with him, either (Jian/D/1803/P28).

Although Jian obtained the third highest final mark in the participating writing class, he seemed to lack confidence in his own competence to provide 'good' feedback. This reduced the amount of feedback comments that were given in his peers' redrafts. Since the two students belonged to the high- and mid- levels of language ability groups, we may consider that students with a higher level of language proficiency might be more critical of peer feedback when using peer feedback in their redrafts.

Summary and Discussion

In this study, learners' diaries were utilised to explore university-level Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of the role of students' English language proficiency in the use of peer assessment in EFL writing classrooms. The 43 learners' diary entries kept by 10 students demonstrated that the students perceived the students' English ability influenced the focus, the type, the appropriateness, and the use of peer feedback on learners' redrafts.

It is not surprising that EFL learners are worried about their English knowledge when providing peer feedback and using peer feedback in their revisions. For second language learners, language proficiency is, or is considered to be, a hurdle for students' behaviours in pair or group work (Cheng and Warren 2005, Nelson and Murphy 1993, McGroarty and Zhu 1997, Sengupta, 1998, Storch 2001, and Yang, Badger and Yu 2006), even though peer assessment is used in order to improve students' English language proficiency through providing them with the chance to practise their English knowledge. This raises a question about how to increase learners' confidence in participating in peer assessment. One possible way to increase learners' confidence is to provide students with training in how to provide quality peer feedback, as suggested in studies on training in peer assessment, which showed that training led to students' improved peer assessment performance and, consequently, improved writing performance (Berg 1999, Hansen and Liu 2005, Hu 2005, Min 2005 and Stanley 1992). This finding has been corroborated in this study. As pointed out above, students in this study were not provided with instructions in providing peer feedback, which seemed to compound the effects of students' language proficiency on the efficacy of peer feedback. Another possible way to increase learners' confidence in participating in peer assessment suggested by the writing tutor in this study is to increase communication between teachers and students. In this respect, Ferris (2003b: 168–189) described five steps to increase communication between students and teachers when peer assessment was used in writing classrooms for the first time.

The results of the present study should be interpreted with caution in the light of its methodological limitations. This study was conducted in a high-ranking university and the participating students in this study were at the intermediate level of English ability. A lower level of student language proficiency, or a more varied level of participating student, might generate different findings regarding the influence of students' English language proficiency on peer assessment. In addition, this study was conducted in the Chinese education context, where teacher assessment was predominant in writing instruction. This makes the findings in this study more applicable to students from education contexts similar to the Chinese one. The current study, however, is believed to contribute to the use of, and research on, peer assessment. It has provided illuminating insights into university-level EFL students' viewpoints about the influence of students' language proficiency on peer assessment in writing tasks, and with peer collaborators. It has also offered implications for the use of learners' diaries to explore learners' learning experiences of innovative pedagogy, such as peer assessment.

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