

Study on Students' Engagement of Different Writing Levels in the Process of Peer Feedback of English Writing in the Junior High School

Xi Chen

School of Foreign Language, China West Normal University, Nanchong 637000, China

Abstract

Within peer feedback, the act of involving students uploading their first drafts of English essays as writers, offering written comments as feedback givers, back-evaluating the helpfulness of peer responses as feedback receivers, and revising previous work as suggested. Research investigating features and development trajectories of engagement from the perspective of feedback givers is still in its infancy. Based on the requirements of the peer feedback task and in the context of teaching English writing in junior schools, this paper uses the survey research method to investigate the learning engagement of Chinese junior high school students in peer feedback and its dynamic changes.

Keywords

Peer Feedback; Behavioral Engagement; Cognitive Engagement; Sentiment Analysis.

1. Introduction

Peer feedback is the act of students pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each other's essays as evaluators and providing suggestions for revision. Students are asked to provide feedback to their peers as evaluators after they have submitted their first drafts of their essays, and then to comment back on the validity of the comments they have received and revise their essays as the valuer. In this process, students review their peers' texts and give written feedback as feedback providers, and then review their peers' comments and revise their individual compositions as feedback receivers.

Peer feedback can facilitate student learning both in terms of providing and receiving (Gao Ying and Liu Hang Song, 2021). Compared to receiving feedback, providing feedback creates a learning environment for learning from strengths and learning from weaknesses (Schum et al., 2016), which prompts students to think critically, apply evaluation criteria, and reflect on their personal writing (Nicol et al., 2014), thereby improving readership and English writing skills (Gao, Ying et al., 2018).

Peer feedback places higher demands on students' cognitive processing, behavioral performance and emotional engagement, and the extent to which students actively participate and put effort into the learning process is known as learning engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), and learning engagement has positive predictive power on academic performance (Dao, 2021; Guo Jidong, 2018). Peer feedback learning engagement in China is just in its infancy, focusing mainly on students' engagement as feedback recipients in the text revision process (e.g., Fan & Xu, 2020; Han, Ye, and Yang, Lu-Xin, 2021). However, there is a dearth of research that analyses learning engagement from the perspective of students as feedback providers. Capturing the level of students' engagement in learning when providing feedback can help inform instructional interventions to improve the quality of feedback and achieve the instructional goals of promoting writing and learning through assessment.

In view of this, and in order to better understand the learning engagement of high school students in the process of peer feedback, this paper uses a survey research method to

investigate the learning engagement of high school students in China to peer feedback and its dynamics according to the requirements of the peer feedback task and the context of English writing teaching in China's junior high schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Peer Feedback

Peer feedback involves students uploading their first drafts of English essays as writers, offering written comments as feedback givers, back-evaluating the helpfulness of peer responses as feedback receivers, and revising previous work as suggested. Students have a dual role in providing peer feedback, as both the sender and the receiver of feedback.

2.2. Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is mainly influenced by learners' attitudes towards peer feedback, the role of the feedback, the language level of the feedback giver and the way it is organized. Whether peer feedback can be used effectively in the classroom often depends on learners' attitudes. Research has also found (Mendoca & Johnson, 1994) that following the use of peer feedback, some learners found the process of engaging in the feedback to be rewarding. Students have a dual role in conducting peer feedback activities, as both the sender and the receiver of feedback. There is debate about which role students play in peer feedback that benefits them, but to some extent based on conventional wisdom, most empirical research in this area has focused on the recipient of feedback, thus neglecting the other side of the feedback giving equation, and the question of which role benefits students most has been debated in this area of research. In response to the question of whether different levels of feedback givers can provide effective feedback, Mendonca & Johnson (1994) found that high level learners who used peer feedback were able to give suggestions for improving the content of their writing and to revise their writing based on their peers' suggestions. In contrast, Nelson & Murphy (1993) found in their study that low level second language learners were able to effectively engage in peer feedback activities and improve their revision strategies. Students who followed the free-choice grouping condition showed better learning outcomes and better peer feedback skills than those in the teacher-assigned grouping condition. Meanwhile, in peer feedback training, most studies have used a fixed-membership approach (Min, 2005), whereas Hu (2005) encouraged students to experiment with different partners for peer feedback in order to access different levels of help.

2.3. Student Engagement

Rumberger and Larson's (1998) model of learning engagement includes two components: academic engagement and social engagement. Academic input includes students' attitudes towards school and their ability to meet performance expectations. Social engagement includes behaviors such as class attendance, orderliness, and active participation in school activities. Shernoff (2013) defines learning engagement as a strong, immediate experience of concentration, interest and enjoyment. In this definition, learning engagement reflects a subjective experience that encompasses both emotional and cognitive elements.

2.4. Dimensional Classification of Student Engagement

Fredricks (2004) three-dimensional division of behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement is a commonly accepted dimensional division among scholars. Behavioural engagement refers to the amount of time and energy students devote to academic tasks, specifically, attending classes, paying attention, completing assigned tasks, asking questions, and participating in extracurricular activities. Emotional engagement refers to the positive emotional response, sense of belonging, identity, interest in learning, attitudes to learning and

values that students develop towards school. Cognitive engagement reflects the cognitive activity in the learning process, i.e. the level of mental engagement and effort that students put into learning, understanding and mastering knowledge and skills. Cognitive engagement can specifically include self-regulated learning and the use of cognitive strategies. Patchan & Schunn (2016: 25) built a theoretical model of ability effects on peer assessment (Figure 2.1) to “help organize and predict a complex set of interacting effects at multiple points along the writing and reviewing process.”

2.5. Student Engagement in Peer Feedback of Writing

Ellis (2010) used Fredricks micro-level tripartite conceptualism to examine micro-level L2 learners' engagement with corrective feedback (CF). In this study, behavioral engagement involved learners' absorption and correction of CF, cognitive engagement referred to how learners attended to the CF they received, and affective engagement involved learners' attitudinal responses to CF.

Meta-cognitive strategies as cognitive engagement is informed by a conceptual framework of student engagement with WCF and AWE feedback. In a previous study, Koltovskaia (2020) used a variety of instruments to examine how two L2 learners of English at an American university engaged with the auto-corrective feedback provided by Grammarly when revising their final drafts.

Mutwarasibo's (2014) case study, involving 34 second-year undergraduate students with an average age of 25 and a writing teacher in Rwanda, reveals that teacher-initiated EFL writing groups can help promote engagement in learning among university students. Based on qualitative data collected through open-ended group interviews after each of the 12 classroom-based groups completed the English composition, Mutwarasibo summarized student-reported affective gains (e.g. building confidence in speaking/arguing), cognitive gains (e.g. increasing EFL-specific knowledge), and behavioral gains (e.g. developing interpersonal social skills).

3. Design of Study

Fan and Xu (2020) explored how 21 university EFL learners engaged emotionally, behaviorally and cognitively with peer feedback on L2 writing. Engagement in peer feedback can be understood in two ways: the effort students put into providing feedback and the extent to which students apply peer feedback. In this national study, engagement focused mainly on how students engaged in using the peer feedback received in the former, while there was a gap in terms of student engagement in providing peer feedback. This study sought to bridge this gap by examining high school students' engagement in learning during peer feedback.

3.1. Research Questions

Specifically, the present study aimed at answering the following research questions:

- 1) How do junior high students engage in the process of peer feedback as feedback givers?
- 2) How do junior high students' engagement levels change in the three circles of peer feedback process as feedback givers?
- 3) How does student engagement influence students' feedback performance in the process of peer feedback activities?

3.2. Participants

A class of 76 students in the first year of junior high school in Nanchong was selected for this study, and participants received training prior to the formal peer feedback process. A total of 1217 inter-rater comments, 304 first drafts of essays, 1217 back-rater comments, 304 reflective journals, semi-structured interview corpus and peer feedback inputs were collected. The data analysis consisted of five parts: 1) slicing the inter-rater comments into 22,194

minimal clusters (consecutive comments on the same topic) to reveal students' substantive behavioral and cognitive input, as well as the quality and quantity of the comments; 2) textual sentiment analysis of the reflective journals to explore emotional engagement; 3) quantitative analysis of the Learning Engagement Scale to reveal how students perceive their self-learning engagement; 4) analysis of the first drafts of argumentative essays on four topics were evaluated to examine the development of English writing proficiency; 5) qualitative analysis of the interview corpus and back-assessment rubrics. In the study, all textual data were coded and counted by a number of professionally trained research assistants; quantitative data were processed using SPSS 20.0.

3.3. Process of Study

This design is developed within the junior English classroom and lasts for 8-12 weeks. The course aims to introduce the basic essentials of writing and adopts a process writing approach where students complete a 120-150 word essay through outlining and three drafts.

Based on students' performance in the first diagnostic writing session, teachers will assign peer feedback groups of three students each, paired with students of three writing levels: high school and low school. The peer feedback exercise is conducted in the third week. After explaining the form, value and considerations of peer feedback, the teacher demonstrates the peer feedback process in the classroom based on the Peer Assessment Scale for English Writing based on Classroom Assessment (Ma, 2022). Students swap summaries of passages completed in the previous lesson for peer feedback exercises. The formal peer feedback activity consisted of three rounds of approximately 40 minutes each for the first, second and third drafts, and the focus of the feedback varied. Before each round of peer feedback, the teacher creates and explains a peer feedback handout based on the lesson content. Students gave their drafts to two other peers in the group to review, and then revised their drafts after the lesson based on the peer feedback they had received and promptly measured their own learning engagement during the peer feedback based on the English Writing Peer Feedback Learning Engagement Scale (Xie Bing, 2022).

4. Findings and Discussion

In response to the first research question, the analytic framework concluded that, overall, students were able to invest sufficient behavioral and cognitive effort in the provision of feedback with positive affect and that the relationship between the three constructs of engagement was found to be consistent over time. There was a significant high positive correlation between behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement. However, affective engagement showed lower positive correlations with these two dimensions. The salient features and developmental trajectories of each engagement dimension were analyzed and discussed in depth.

For the second research question, students' responses to the self-report survey led the authors to conclude that students have positive perceptions of their engagement from the feedback giver's perspective. Six factors of self-reported engagement, such as online performance, interpersonal communication, feedback strategies, task management, reviewer confidence, and value recognition, were significantly associated with substantive engagement.

The final research question concerned the performance outcomes provided by the feedback and its relationship to student engagement. The study confirmed that the more behavioral and cognitive effort students invested, the more likely they were to produce longer, higher quality comments and to achieve greater EFL writing score gains at the end of the study. Specifically, the quantity and quality of peer comments maintained a consistent trend of growth over time. In addition, students' overall scores on their first drafts of the four writing assignments

increased significantly. All writing dimensions, except for the argumentative component, showed a significant upward trend. Student performance results had a significant moderate positive correlation with behavioral and cognitive engagement, but a significant low positive correlation with affective engagement. Notably, cognitive aspects of effort, such as identifying, addressing and suggesting, and the act of providing revision or criticism, had a greater impact on student learning outcomes.

This study also revealed that English language proficiency had no significant impact on students' substantive and self-reported participation. University EFL learners, regardless of level, are behaviorally, cognitively and emotionally capable of engaging in providing feedback if they are well trained. The three elements of engagement fluctuated over time, but showed an overall upward trend. This may send a reassuring message to those who still doubt the viability of peer review for students with varying levels of English proficiency.

4.1. Findings of the Study

In line with the research questions posed in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the findings of this study include three areas. One is the characteristics and developmental trajectory of English undergraduate students' participation in feedback peer essays; the second is students' perceptions of their participation in the self-report survey; and finally, the performance outcomes and their substantive relevance to students. Overall, the main research findings can be briefly summarize as follows.

For the first research question, the analytical framework concluded that, overall, students were able to invest sustained behavioral and cognitive effort in the provision of feedback with positive emotions and that the relationship between the three constructs of engagement was found to be consistent over time. There was a significantly high positive correlation between behavioral and cognitive engagement; however, affective engagement showed a low positive correlation with these two dimensions. The salient features and developmental trajectories of each engagement dimension were analyzed and discussed in depth.

To answer the second research question, this study constructed and validated a 29-item self-report scale that spanned the three dimensions of engagement. Exploratory factor analysis yielded a six-factor solution that included online performance, interpersonal communication, feedback strategies, task management, reviewer confidence and value recognition. The survey revealed that students had positive perceptions of their personal effort invested in providing feedback to their peers. Expected significant associations were also observed in these six factors. Students' self-reported responses were compared to their substantive engagement data and showed a moderate positive correlation, indicating that overall participants could correctly assess their engagement as feedback providers.

A final research question concerned the performance outcomes provided by the feedback and its relationship to students' substantive engagement. The study confirmed that the more behavioral and cognitive effort students invested, the more likely they were to produce longer, high-quality comments and to achieve greater EFL writing score gains at the end of the study. Specifically, the quantity and quality of peer comments maintained a consistent trend of growth over time. In addition, students' overall scores on their first drafts of the four writing assignments increased significantly. All writing dimensions, except for the argumentative component, showed a significant upward trend. Student performance results had a significant moderate positive correlation with behavioral and cognitive engagement, but a significant low positive correlation with affective engagement. Notably, cognitive efforts, including identifying, addressing and advising, as well as the act of providing revision-oriented criticism, contributed more to student learning outcomes.

4.2. Implications of Teaching

Based Chinese higher education institutions are grappling with the question of how to educate students to adapt to the rapidly changing world of the 21st century. The latest English Curriculum Standards for Senior Secondary Schools (Ministry of Education, 2017) states that the ultimate aim of foreign education is "to improve moral standards and cultivate talents". Providing peer feedback is an integral part of peer review, engaging student reviewers in thoughtful planning and monitoring of the emotional, behavioral and cognitive processes involved in successfully completing academic tasks such as grading and commenting on peer articles. A complete session of peer review activities begins with the student's independent writing, followed by the interaction of the student providing feedback and evaluating the feedback received as a counter-assessment, and the independent revision based on the peer review as a whole.

References

- [1] Ellis, R. (2010) A framework for investigating oral and written corrective feedback. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 32(2), 335-349.
- [2] Fan, Y. & J. Xu. Exploring student engagement with peer feedback on L2 writing [J]. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2020(4).
- [3] Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C. & A. H. Paris. School engagement: Potentials of the concept, state of the evidence [J]. *Review of Educational Research*. 2004.
- [4] Fredricks, J. A. (2013). Behavioral engagement in learning. In J. Hattie & E. M. Anderman (Eds.). *International guide to student achievement* (pp. 42-44). New York, NY: Routledge.
- [5] Mendonca, C. O., & Johnson, K. E. 1994. Peer review negotiations: Revision activities in ESL writing instruction [J]. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28(4): 745-769.
- [6] Mutwarasibo, F. 2014. Promoting university students' engagement in learning through instructor-initiated EFL writing goopns. *TESOL Journal*, 5(4):721-742.
- [7] Nelson, G. L., & Murphy, J. M. 1992. An L2 writing group: Task and social dimensions [J]. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 1(3): 171-193.
- [8] Patchan, M. M., & Schunn, C. D. 2016. Understanding the Effects of Receiving Peer Feedback for Text Revision: Relations Between Author and Reviewer Ability [J]. *Journal of Writing Research*, 8(2): 227-265.
- [9] Patchan, M. M., Schunn, C. D., & Correnti, R. J. 2016. The Nature of feedback: how peer feedback features affect students' implementation rate and quality of revisions [J]. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(8): 1098-1120.
- [10] Shernoff D. J. *Optimal learning environments to promote student engagement*[M]. New York, NY: Springer, 2013.
- [11] Yu, S., & Hu, G. (2017). Can higher-proficiency L2 learners benefit from working with lower-proficiency partners in peer feedback? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(2), 178-192.
- [12] Yu, S., & Lee, I. (2016a). Exploring Chinese students' strategy use in a cooperative peer feedback writing group. *System*, 58, 1-11.
- [13] Yu, S., & Lee, I. (2016b). Peer feedback in second language writing (2005-2014). *Language Teaching*, 49(4), 461-493.
- [14] Yu, S., Zhang, Y., Zheng, Y., Yuan, K., & Zhang, L. (2019). Understanding student engagement with peer feedback on master's theses: A Macau study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(1), 50-65.
- [15] Zheng, Y., Yu, S., & Tong, Z. (2022). Understanding the dynamic of student engagement in project-based collaborative writing: Insights from a longitudinal case study. *Language Teaching Research*.
- [16] Zheng, Y., & Yu, S. (2020). Understanding individual differences in lower-proficiency students' engagement with teacher written corrective feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*.

- [17] Zheng, Y., Yu, S., Wang, B., & Zhang, Y. (2020). Exploring student engagement with supervisor feedback on master's thesis: Insights from a case study. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(2), 186–197.
- [18] Zheng, Y., & Yu, S. (2018). Student engagement with teacher written corrective feedback in EFL writing: A case study of Chinese lower-proficiency students. *Assessing Writing*, 37, 13–24.
- [19] Zheng, Y., & Yu, S. (2020). What has been assessed in writing and how? Empirical evidence from *Assessing Writing (2000–2018)*. *Assessing Writing*, 42, 100–121.
- [20] Zhang, Z. V., & Hyland, K. (2018). Student engagement with teacher and automated feedback on L2 writing. *Assessing Writing*, 36, 90–102.