

*Are High-Proficiency Learners Effective Feedback Providers? A Case Study on  
Online Peer Feedback in L2 Writing*

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**Abstract**

The advancement of technology provides language learners ample opportunity to engage in meaningful communication in the target language without physical and temporal constraints. Previous research on peer feedback in second language (L2) learning revealed a common belief held by practitioners was that providing feedback on written language production related to the learners' abilities in the target language (Yu & Hu, 2016), implying that more capable learners gave more effective feedback compared to less capable learners. However, this is not always the case. Based on empirical studies in language education (e.g., Min, 2005), the purpose of this case study was to help us understand whether feedback training influenced the quality of peer feedback in Chinese as a second language (CSL) writing. Two trained and two untrained high-proficiency CSL learners from Vietnam studying Mandarin Chinese in a university were recruited to participate in this study. The data included participants' compositions, stimulated-recall interviews, and peer feedback. The results of this study suggested that trained learners were more likely than untrained learners to identify a range of problematic issues in writing (e.g., incoherent composition and incorrect grammatical/lexical features) and to perceive collaborative learning more positively, which provided pedagogical implications.

Keywords: peer feedback, Peergrade, Chinese as a second language (CSL), collaborative learning

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## Introduction

In past decades, peers giving feedback on each other's work in face-to-face or computer-mediated communication environments has proven useful for enhancing second language (L2) learners' learning experiences and developing learners' critical thinking (Emerson, 2013; Kim, 2015; Novakovich, 2016). During the process of reviewing others' writing, learners employ a number of tactics (e.g., clarifying the intended meaning or making suggestions on problematic issues) to help the feedback receivers revise their work.

Providing accurate or appropriate feedback seems to relate to the learners' abilities in using the target language. As suggested by Liu and Sadler (2003), learners' linguistic resources may be a concerning factor that affects the reliability and specificity of the feedback to improve the quality of the written work. However, the language abilities of L2 learners were not the only factor considered in this present study; this case study focused on learners' explicitly stating how to solve issues arising in L2 writing and making suggestions that their peers may incorporate when revising.

Feedback training plays an important role not only in fostering learners' strategic processes and achievement in the language but also in increasing their confidence in the language (Min, 2005, 2006; Rahimi, 2013; Tsui & Ng, 2000). To review written essays strategically involves an array of global and local processes. A global review requires students to pay attention to the structure and intended meaning of the writing. Learners giving feedback should be able to identify any portion of the writing irrelevant to the main topic. A local review relates to grammar (e.g., subject and verb agreement and verb tenses), word choice (e.g., formal or informal diction), and mechanics (e.g., full stops and commas). Min (2005) suggests the learner be taught to explain the writer's intentions, identify problematic areas, and make specific suggestions for revising the problematic areas.

Some studies not directly related to the effects of training on peer feedback have provided a better understanding of the relationship between types of peer feedback and other factors. Ho's (2015) study examined the effects of peer feedback on students' revisions in face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. Relevant results of that study revealed that feedback training had an impact on types of comments as the participants gave more specific comments (e.g., "a topic sentence is missing in the writing") than unspecific comments (e.g., "use appropriate transitions for your ideas") in the two environments. The majority of the comments was globally oriented. The study also showed that peer feedback implemented in technological resources benefitted students' learning in many ways, helping students facilitate independent learning and enabling them to explore knowledge through using the target language in meaningful situations.

Comparative studies, like Ho's (2015) research, examining the differences in peer feedback in the two learning environments contribute to an understanding of how technology can benefit students' learning from providing feedback. DiGiovanni and Nagaswami (2001) reported their results that online comments were more likely than face-to-face comments to help the participants focus their attention on the required tasks, to help the teachers monitor how the students provided feedback to

their peers, and to support ubiquitous learning that allowed the students to learn the content anytime and anywhere. In addition, using online resources, according to Ho and Savignon (2007), had an impact on learners' affective feelings (e.g., reducing stress when giving feedback online), whereby the learners could express their ideas without worrying about causing embarrassment for their peers. In their study, Li and Li (2018) obtained the results that the Turnitin tool improved not only the quality of the writing but also the feedback strategy. Because of the tool, the participants paid attention to the content of a composition instead of the details of vocabulary and grammar. Although the aforementioned studies did not investigate whether peer feedback skills had something to do with the learners' abilities in the target language, they all placed emphasis on training learners in peer reviewing to enable them to provide effective or valid comments (e.g., Li & Li, 2018). Built upon these studies, this case study analyzed the trained and untrained feedback provided by high-proficiency CSL learners; in other words, this study investigated to what extent trained feedback can be differentiated from untrained feedback in relation to specific and to global (e.g., the ideas of a composition) and local (e.g., vocabulary and grammar) comments.

## **Methodology**

### **Context and Participants**

Four junior-year undergraduate students were randomly chosen from a scheduled class taught by the researcher. They are originally from Vietnam with a mean age of 22.5 years, recruited from a Chinese department in a private university. They had studied Mandarin Chinese for more than three years in Taiwan where Mandarin is an official language. There were two male (Bao and Li) and two female (Mimi and Yuan) students whose proficiency levels in the target language were between level 4 and level 5, between advanced and fluent, in the Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language (TOCFL). Both trained learners, Li and Mimi, received six hours of face-to-face feedback training, whereas the untrained learners, Bao and Yuan, did not receive any feedback training. The students had never participated in online or face-to-face feedback projects or activities.

### **Instrumentation**

The instruments used in this study were the participants' compositions, stimulated-recall interviews, and peer feedback. Three composition tasks contained pictures; each set required the participants to compose 300 words in Chinese by describing what they saw in a picture. To make sense of a given picture, they had to contextualize the picture using appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and other language skills.

A paper-based stimulated-recall interview was adopted to determine the participants' perspectives on giving or receiving feedback. More specifically, this instrument was used to clarify whether the participants understood comments given by their peers and whether the feedback conveyed the intended meaning to their peers. Examples of the questions asked during the interviews included: "Do you understand the comments given by your group members?" "What comments do you give to your peers? Why?" "Can you clarify the comment on this?"

The last instrument was peer feedback provided by the participants. The participants made comments on their peers' compositions; the comments were kept in Peergrade, an online tool, and analyzed.

### Online Tool

Peergrade, developed by a group of researchers (Wind et al., 2017), was employed in this study to collect data. In the teacher/researcher interface, learning tasks that included images and texts were made available to students through their mobile phones, laptops, or desktops. In addition, submission dates for drafting assignments and making peer review comments were set up. As a side note, the rubric questions that guided the participants to review their peers' assignments were tailored made by the researcher.

In the student interface, during the composition stage, the participants were asked to upload their drafts before the deadline; after that, they were asked to provide peer feedback according to the rubric developed by the researcher. The peer comments were available when the participants revised their compositions.

### Procedures

To help two participants provide effective peer comments, six hours of training sessions took place in a face-to-face setting. During the first two-hour session, the participants were informed what this research was about and what they were expected to do. They were also instructed to read and sign an informed consent letter that protected their privacy. The researcher explained and demonstrated how to employ feedback strategies in making comments on compositions. Based on the existing taxonomy of Ho (2015), the strategies could be summarized as having global and local dimensions; the former involved the content and organization of a composition, and the latter related to word choice, grammar, spelling, and mechanics. In the second two-hour session, the participants practiced offering global comments on sample papers (e.g., "Descriptions in the first paragraph is not clearly stated" and "Sentences are not relevant to the picture"). The participants were also told to pay attention to local comments (e.g., word choice and grammar).

In the last two-hour training session was organized to help all the participants employ the learned strategies (e.g., global comments) while using Peergrade, and, more importantly, become familiar with the functions of the platform. Two groups were formed: trained (Li and Mimi) and untrained (Bao and Yuan) learners. The participants were told to complete first drafts of one assignment, to review each other's assignments online, and to revise their drafts in a week and a half. The three assignments took approximately one month to complete.

After completion of the assignments, the stimulated-recall interviews were arranged individually in a face-to-face environment. The participants clarified the intended meaning of the comments they gave their peers as they were requested to comment in the target language. All the participants took part in the interviews in Chinese, each lasting around 40 minutes.

## Data Analysis

Data, including peer comments and compositions, were kept in the online system and were analyzed to identify whether they related to the ideas or rhetorical devices of a composition, grammar, or word choice note that learners' compositions were used to check whether revisions were made appropriately when learners received comments from their peers. Liu and Sadler (2003) and Ho (2015) provided insightful guidelines for organizing the comments according to the functions of evaluation, clarification, suggestion, alteration, response, and other; each function was subdivided into two categories of global and local issues, and each category included revision-oriented and non-revision-oriented comments (e.g., "I think you can start with a general idea about the story rather than the detail in the beginning of the composition" was a suggestion/global/revision-oriented comment). In this study, each type of trained or untrained feedback addressed local and global issues, and each contained specific and unspecific comments (see the results section for examples). The stimulated-recall interview data were first transcribed verbatim and then used to clarify the unclear features.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the peer feedback collected from the cases are reported in this section. Overall, all students were more likely to give local comments than to give global ones, as the local comments (N=35, 71.4%) outnumbered the global comments (N=14, 28.6%; see Table 1). When compared to the untrained group, which accounted for 15 local (30.6%) and 0 global comments, the trained group made more comments, with their respective counts being 20 local (40.8%) and 14 global (28.6%). While the untrained group did not make any global comments, the trained group produced 14 global comments (28.6%).

Table 1. Frequency of trained and untrained comments

Types	Trained comments				Untrained comments			
	Local		Global		Local		Global	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Specific	17	34.7	8	16.3	11	22.4	0	0
Unspecific	3	6.1	6	12.3	4	8.2	0	0
Total	20	40.8	14	28.6	15	30.6	0	0

Although Li and Mimi, the trained learners, gave both local and global comments, their local comments were more specific than their global comments. An example given in Table 2 illustrates that Li specifically pointed out the Chinese characters 遊 and 游 due to the two words sounding exactly the same but having different meanings, as the former refers to "tour" or "travel," while the latter means "swim." However, his global comments did not particularly locate the problematic areas in his peer's writing. In the stimulated-recall interviews, he stated that he used his "gut feeling" and that it was challenging and time-consuming to give specific ideas to improve the writing when he commented "there is room for improvement of the writing."

In Mimi's data, she gave both local and global feedback with unspecific comments. For instance, in a comment about a local issue, she stated, "There are some incorrect

usages of grammar and vocabulary (語法與用字皆有誤) in the first task.” During the interview session, she expressed she was unsure about some linguistic items used by her peer, so she gave an unspecific comment. Instead, she chose parts of the composition she felt confident in understanding and commenting. She also highly valued working with her group member who gave a different point of view on her compositions.

In the untrained group, both learners preferred giving local and specific/unspecific comments; for example, Bao considered the quantifier an unnecessary in a particular context and provided an unspecific comment for his peer, “There are some vocabulary and grammatical errors.” During the interviews, he stated he did not know what comments should be given about the writing. He noticed part of the content given by his peer did not correspond to the picture, but he did not provide any written comments because of a lack of confidence in the target language.

Similar to Bao, Yuan expressed that she did not have any ideas about what to consider while reviewing her peers’ writing; she selected incorrect words, such as a local and specific comment relating to the phrase “house riverside” with clarification function. In addition, although she was aware of incorrect vocabulary, she did not give detailed information because she was not certain in her thinking, and as a result, she gave unspecific comments (“In the second paragraph...”).

Table 2. Examples of trained comments

Names of students	Trained learners			
	Li		Mimi	
Overall comments	Comments involved local (e.g., word choice and punctuation) and global (e.g., overall ideas of the story).		Both local and global comments were given; however, they were not specific.	
Types	Local	Global	Local	Global
Specific	1.用錯字「遊」，應該是「游」。(You’re using an incorrect Chinese character <i>yóu</i> “swimming”) 2.這個句子少了一個逗點。(This sentence is lacking a comma.) 3.1.文章結構有問題，都沒有逗點符號。(The structure is problematic because of lacking commas.) 4.動態助詞「了」	1.第一句話與後面二句話不太有合邏輯。(The first sentence and the following two sentences are not logically written.) 2.第三張圖片似乎沒有敘述。(The description of the third picture was missing in your story.)	1.«脫»的動態助詞有錯誤。(The dynamic auxiliary <i>tuō</i> “take off” is incorrect.) 2.«太好了»後面要加上驚嘆號，否則句子結構會有問題。(After <i>tài hǎole</i> “very well,” you need a <i>jīngtànghào</i> “an exclamation mark”; otherwise, the entire sentence is problematic.)	1.第三句是指目的，所以少了「為了」。(The third sentence lacks the connector <i>wèile</i> “in order to.”)

	有問題。(The dynamic auxiliary “le” is incorrect.)			
Unspecific	N/A	<p>1.文章有改善的空間。(There is room for improvement of the writing.)</p> <p>2.故事內容不太順暢。(The storyline is lacking fluency.)</p> <p>3.應該可增加一些有趣的故事內容。(You should include some interesting content in your story.)</p> <p>4.加油!(Keep up the good work!)</p>	語法與用字皆有誤。(There are some incorrect usages of vocabulary and grammar)	有些句子太長，很難讀懂。(Some sentences are too long which cause difficulty in understanding of them.)

Table 3. Examples of untrained comments

Names of students	Untrained learners			
	Bao		Yuan	
Overall comments	Comments were mostly relating to local dimensions (e.g., quantifiers).		Comments were limited to local issues (e.g., misusing the word).	
Types	Local	Global	Local	Global
Specific	這個男生走到一個河邊，這個量詞不需要。(The boy came to a [the] river. The quantifier is not necessary [in Chinese].)	N/A	這句話有點不太懂，「房子河邊」是什麼意思。(This part, <i>fángzi hé biān</i> “house riverside,” is not fully understood. What do you mean by that?)	N/A
Non-specific	1.詞彙和語法有誤。(There were some vocabulary and grammatical errors.) 2.第三句的語法怪怪的。(The third sentence sounds odd.)	N/A	第二段的內容使用了不正確的詞彙。(In the second paragraph, some incorrect vocabulary occurred.)	N/A

## Conclusion

The current investigation observed whether peer feedback instruction had an impact on the quality of feedback by CSL learners via an online platform. The qualitative and quantitative results show that trained learners had a wider repertoire of feedback strategies than untrained learners, as the former were more capable of giving global comments (e.g., detecting illogical thoughts in writing) and more likely to provide specific comments, while the latter were focused merely on local issues, such as grammar and lexis.

The results of this study imply that when learners are instructed to engage in global strategic processes in terms of expressing their ideas coherently, articulating their ideas logically, and giving sufficient examples for an argument. Thus, teachers are encouraged to instruct their students to practice peer feedback inside the classroom, demonstrating the steps of peer reviewing, like identifying and explaining problems in writing, and making specific suggestions to revise the problems.

The limitations of this case study were, first, the small sample size; there were only four students involved in this study; second, students' proficiencies were limited to advanced and fluent levels. The purpose of this study was to examine whether learners' language abilities, as a factor, affected the quality of the feedback given. It would be worthwhile to explore the impact of feedback training on learners of different proficiency levels who may generate global comments like the advanced learners produced. Finally, an online platform is considered a useful tool for teachers to understand how their students acquire the target language as the technology keeps the log files of learners.

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