Collaborative Feedback in a Blended Learning Environment:
A Case Study of an EFL Writing Class

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Abstract

Collaborative feedback in a blended learning environment was studied to encourage learner-centeredness in the process of writing. The study aimed to: 1) examine how Thai university students perceived collaborative feedback activities when conducted in a blended learning environment; and 2) compare students' perceptions toward collaborative feedback through face-to-face and online interactions. The participants were 24 English minors and the instruments used were a questionnaire and the students' reflections. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.81. The results revealed that the informants had high positive perceptions toward collaborative feedback activities both through face-to-face and online interactions. There was no significant difference between the two modes of delivery. The data obtained from the students' reflections also revealed that the informants preferred face-to-face interactions (41.67%) or both modes (45.83%). Only a few students (12.50%) preferred collaborative feedback via the online mode.

Keywords: collaborative feedback, face to face, online community, blended learning, hybrid learning, EFL writing

1.   Introduction

In applying the writing process to EFL learners, students are expected to improve their writing through time, responding to positive feedback (Stanley 2002). Among types of feedback, peer feedback is one of the most common alternatives adopted (Lewis 2002). This type of feedback benefits both the peer writer and peer reader because peer students are more practical but less formal than teachers. As such, it is believed that peer feedback can encourage collaboration among student writers and help to develop a positive attitude toward writing (Rollinson 2005; Lewis 2002). Thus, peer feedback has received a great deal of attention in writing research (Kulsirisawad 2012; Getzlaf et al. 2009; Abu-Jarad 2008; Guardado and Shi 2007; Yang, Badger and Yu 2006; Min 2005; Wible et al. 2001; Tsui 2000; Tsui and Ng 2000; Hyland 2000).

However, undertaking peer feedback activities in a writing class is a challenge. It is time-consuming, and the quality of the feedback is dependent on different factors such as student characteristics, cultural issues and the teacher's role (Rollinson 2005). To overcome the challenge and achieve the most from peer feedback activities, Rollinson (2005) suggests an approach through collaborative peer group responses as an option. Also, many scholars in EFL writing contexts have put focus on feedback in blended learning environments (Ho and Savignon 2007; Liu and Sadler 2003; Braine 2001; Huang 1998).

This study, therefore, aimed to investigate students' perceptions after they experienced collaborative feedback in a blended learning environment. Theories underpinning the study are outlined as follows.

1.1.   Collaborative feedback

The term *collaborative feedback* can have various meanings depending on how *collaborative* is defined. The definition proposed by Roschelle and Teasley (1995) seems to match the context of the present study. According to them, *collaboration* is "a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem" (p. 70). The term *collaborative feedback* in this study refers to activity in which students help one another to read and review their peers' drafts and provide feedback aiming at improving the quality of their writing.

Theoretically, collaborative feedback is associated with two sociocultural approaches: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding (Rouhi and Vafafar 2011; Tsui and Ng 2000). According to Vygotsky (1978), novice learners can develop skills with support and guidance from skilled learners, and interaction with peers can help develop existing skills to higher levels. Through the support and guidance of novice learners, the ZPD is established. Within the ZPD, the teacher can encourage cooperative learning among students. Interactions with peers are believed to help develop students' learning skills and strategies (McLeod 2007). Along with the ZPD concept, the term *scaffolding* has also been introduced into the field. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) define the term as the "elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (p. 60). Scaffolding, therefore, is like assistance or support that helps the novice learner to complete a task. At a certain point, scaffolding can be removed when learners are able to master the skill or task targeted, and will be able to undertake or complete the task on their own.

1.2.   Blended learning

According to Allan (2007), the increasing interest in e-learning in recent years has driven many academic practitioners to be more concerned about using blended learning in teaching and training. As implied by the name, this approach blends online learning with traditional methods

of learning and development (Kaye 2003). Blending widens learning opportunities as it incorporates the best constructs to meet specific requirements in terms of the available time, space and technologies of a particular group of students.

The advantages of blended learning include increased flexibility of learning and teaching approaches as well as increased enhancement of student engagement (Allan 2007). It also helps support all learning preferences and can provide a holistic model of personal development (Kaye 2003). Yet, a successful blended learning program depends on various factors, for example, institutions, teachers, students and pedagogic considerations (Stacey and Gerbic 2008).

In introducing collaborative feedback to students in a blended learning environment, some aspects of feedback activity should be taken into account. According to Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002), feedback aimed at enhancing students' cognitive skills and learning environment must be meaningful, of high quality, and timely. Schwartz and White (cited in Mory 2004, p. 776) also found that students expect feedback done in an online environment to be: 1) prompt, timely, and thorough; 2) ongoing formative (with regard to online discussions) and summative (regarding grades); 3) constructive, supportive, and substantive; 4) specific, objective, and individual; and 5) consistent. In addition, in assessing students' perceptions toward feedback, Strijbos, Narciss and Dünnebier (2010) focus on five aspects: fairness, usefulness, acceptance, willingness to improve, and affect. These aspects reflect content-related and social features of peer feedback.

2.   Objectives and research questions

The main objectives of the study were twofold. First, the research aimed to examine how Thai EFL university students perceived collaborative feedback activity conducted in a blended learning environment. The second purpose was to compare the means of feedback delivery: through face-to-face interactions as opposed to through an online community.
In other words, the research attempted to answer the following questions:

      1) What are the perceptions of Thai university students toward collaborative feedback in the blended learning environment of an EFL writing class?

      2) Is there a difference between students' perceptions toward collaborative feedback through face-to-face interaction vs. online community interaction?

3.   Method

1.1.   Participants

The participants were 24 second-year English minors studying at the Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University. Six of them were males (25%) and 18 were females (75%). They came from various majors such as tourism and hotel management, marketing, finance, history and geography. All of them were selected for the English minor program based on their academic background and their English proficiency test scores. In the second semester of the academic year 2012, they took the EN131 Basic Writing course as one of the requirements of the program.

1.2.   Materials

Because both quantitative and qualitative data were required in the study, the instruments used to collect the data were a questionnaire and the students' reflections.

3.2.1 The questionnaire

The questionnaire was prepared to survey the students' perceptions. It consisted of four parts. In Part I, students were asked to fill in demographic information regarding their experience in paragraph writing, peer reviews, and blended learning environments. Part II, III, and IV were prepared to survey the students' perceptions on collaborative feedback: in a blended learning environment, through face-to-face interaction, and through online community interaction. Each

part covered 18 statements adapted from the Feedback Perceptions questionnaire of Strijbos et al. (2010). These statements were used to measure feedback perceptions in terms of fairness (items 1-3), usefulness (items 4-6), acceptance (items 7-9), willingness to improve (items 10-12), and affect (items 13-18). Items 9 and 16-18 were negative statements whereas the rest were positive. The questionnaire was originally constructed in English and was translated into Thai. Then three experts were asked to review both versions. A pilot study was conducted and the reliability of the perceptions questionnaire was .81 (Part II = .76, Part III = .85, and Part IV = .80).

3.2.2 Students' reflections

Reflection writing was another instrument used in this study. Students were asked to write a paragraph of approximately 100-120 words in response to a given background situation as follows:

> In your study of EN 131 Basic Writing this semester, you have studied in class and participated in an online community via the *AT*utor system. One of the activities you have carried out both in class (face-to-face interaction) and in the online community has been collaborative feedback. You and your friends helped one another to revise written drafts—to read and review drafts. Considering this experience, if you could choose a method of giving collaborative feedback in an English writing class, which of the following would you prefer? Why?
>   ▪ Face-to-face interaction in class
>   ▪ Through an online community
>   ▪ Through the use of both face-to-face interaction in class and online community interaction

1.3.   Procedures

In the Basic Writing course of semester 2/2012, students were asked to write four assignments within a period of 15 weeks. For each assignment, students wrote four drafts and they were asked to do collaborative feedback activities on draft 1 and 2. Draft 3 was submitted to the teacher for proof reading, while Draft 4 was the final one. In draft 1, students were asked to focus on giving holistic feedback on content and idea, elements of a good paragraph, paragraph organization, and format. Draft 2 was for correction feedback in which the students were asked to pay attention to grammar and sentence structures. Students were informed at the beginning of the course that an e-learning course developed in *AT*utor would be used to support classroom teaching.

In developing a blended learning experience, the alternate modes of delivery proposed by Allan (2007) were applied. In the first two assignments, students were trained in giving collaborative feedback in both face to face and online situations. In the first assignment, the students were trained to give face-to-face feedback for two drafts of their assignment. Many feedback activities were introduced in class to enhance students' collaborative learning capabilities; group oral feedback, group written feedback, and blind author feedback were among them. In the second assignment, students were trained on how to give collaborative feedback via the e-learning course. In the online forum, they were asked to post their written drafts in a thread and the teacher asked every student to read and respond to the posted drafts within an assigned period of time. The teacher also posted instructions and suggestions as guidelines for peer review and demonstrated how to give online feedback. In the third assignment, students were asked to give feedback in the online forum where the teacher played the role of moderator and facilitator. In the last assignment, the students were asked to give feedback via the face-to-face approach in the classroom and the teacher assumed the same role.

At the end of the second semester, a questionnaire (Thai version) was administered to the students. In the final exam, one item was prepared to gather students' reflections. The students were asked to write a paragraph to reflect their thoughts toward the collaborative feedback activities they undertook in their classroom.

1.4.   Data analysis
Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data obtained from the questionnaire. Demographic information was presented by means of frequency and percentage. Students' perception data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation tools. Higher scores indicate more positive perceptions toward collaborative feedback. The interpretation of the mean range in relation to the scale value was adapted from Chomeya (2006). To compare students' perceptions toward collaborative feedback through face-to-face interaction and online community interaction, a paired-samples *t*-test was used. Also, the data from the students' reflections were analyzed and coded to support the data derived from the questionnaires.

4.   Results
1.1.   Demographic information of the participants
Table 1 reveals the participants' background regarding their experience in studying English writing, peer reviewing, and using e-learning. About sixty percent of the students experienced studying English writing at a paragraph level before taking a Basic Writing course, and approximately half of the students (54.17%) never had peer review experience before. Slightly over half of the students (62.50%) never used e-learning to support classroom learning before, and two-thirds of the students (66.67%) favored using an e-learning course together with classroom teaching. Furthermore, half of the students participated in e-learning during the Basic Writing course of the academic year 2012 once a week while the rest used e-learning twice (41.67%) and three times a week (8.33%).

Table 1
Demographic Information (N = 24)

Question	Answer	*f*	%
1. Have you ever studied English writing in a paragraph level before?	No	9	37.50
	Yes	15	62.50
2. Before taking Basic Writing course at university, have you ever read and reviewed your friends' written work?	No	13	54.17
	Yes	11	45.83
3. Have you ever used e-learning to support learning in classroom before?	No	9	37.50
	Yes	15	62.50
4. In Basic Writing class of academic year 2012, did you like using e-learning in support to in- class teaching?	No	8	33.33
	Yes	16	66.67
5. How often did you use e-learning in Basic Writing class of academic year 2012?	Once a week	12	50.00
	Twice a week	10	41.67
	Three times a week	2	8.33

1.2.   The participants' perceptions toward collaborative feedback
The participants' perceptions toward collaborative feedback in the blended learning environment of an EFL writing class are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Perceptions toward Collaborative Feedback in a Blended Learning Environment

Aspects	*M*	*SD*	Interpretation
Fairness	4.61	0.75	highly positive perceptions
Usefulness	4.57	1.09	highly positive perceptions
Acceptance	4.74	0.91	highly positive perceptions
Willingness to improve	5.07	0.72	highly positive perceptions
Affect	4.94	0.73	highly positive perceptions
Overall perceptions	4.81	0.66	highly positive perceptions

Overall, the students had highly positive perceptions (*M* = 4.81) toward collaborative feedback in a blended learning environment of their writing class. The students had highly positive perceptions toward the collaborative feedback activity conducted in such an environment under

all aspects examined. The mean scores for each aspect (fairness, usefulness, acceptance, and willingness to improve) were 4.61, 4.57, 4.74, 5.07, and 4.94, respectively.

1.3. The participants' perceptions toward collaborative feedback through face-to-face interaction and online community

To compare the students' perceptions through face-to-face interaction and through online community interaction, both qualitative and quantitative data are described as follows.

Table 3
Perceptions toward Collaborative Feedback through Face-To-Face Interaction and Online Community

Aspect	Face-to-face			Online community		
	M	*SD*	Interpretation	*M*	*SD*	Interpretation
Fairness	4.74	0.71	highly positive perceptions	4.68	0.81	highly positive perceptions
Usefulness	4.81	0.81	highly positive perceptions	4.86	0.75	highly positive perceptions
Acceptance	4.78	0.75	highly positive perceptions	4.69	0.70	highly positive perceptions
Willingness to improve	4.99	0.71	highly positive perceptions	4.99	0.67	highly positive perceptions
Affect	5.01	0.73	highly positive perceptions	4.94	0.75	highly positive perceptions
Overall perceptions	4.89	0.61	highly positive perceptions	4.85	0.58	highly positive perceptions

Table 3 shows that the participants' overall perceptions toward collaborative feedback through face-to-face interaction and online community interaction was highly positive, with the mean score for face-to-face interaction being 4.89 and online community interaction 4.85. The mean scores for each aspect of face-to-face interaction (fairness, usefulness, acceptance, and willingness to improve) were 4.74, 4.81, 4.78, 4.99, and 5.01, and those for the online community interaction were 4.68, 4.86, 4.69, 4.99, and 4.94, respectively.

Table 4
Paired Samples Test of the Perceptions through Face-To-Face and Online Interactions

		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		*t*	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Face-to-face Online	.0347	.17477	.03568	-.0391	.1085	.973	23	.341

A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare students' perceptions toward collaborative feedback through face-to-face and online community interaction. There was no significant difference in the two scores, perceptions toward face-to-face ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 0.61$) and via an online community ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.58$); $t(23) = .973$, $p = .341$. These results suggest that the students' perceptions through face-to-face and online interactions were not different.

The data from the students' reflections were analyzed as shown in the findings below. When asked to choose their favored method of collaborative feedback in a writing class, the students provided data as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
The Student's Preferred Modes of Delivery for Collaborative Feedback in a Writing Class

Mode of Delivery	*f*	%
Face-to-face interaction	10	41.67
Online community	3	12.50
Both	11	45.83
Total	24	100.00

The results show that a majority of the students preferred either face-to-face interaction (41.67%) or both (face-to-face and online interactions) (45.83%). Only 12.50% of the students favored collaborative feedback solely through online community interaction.

Excerpts from the students' reflections are illustrated as follows:
Face-to-face interaction
Face-to-face interaction in class will help you make new friends. This way you have to communicate to all of your classmates in giving feedback. It will make you know each other better.
(Student A, tourism and hotel management major)
If my friends don't understand about my feedback, I can explain it clearly than online community…..Finally, I don't have more homework. If we give feedback through face-to-face, we don't have to do it again in online community, so we don't have more homework.
(Student B, finance major)

Online community
There are more details in online community feedback. Your classmates have enough time to review your work carefully.
(Student C, finance major)
In online community, your friends dare to reveal the truth. They can give more their opinions than giving feedback by face-to-face.
(Student D, finance major)

The students also provided examples of benefits and drawbacks in their writing to support their claims. Conducting collaborative feedback through face-to-face interactions is more convenient and user-friendly as students can get prompt responses from peers. They can also get clearer feedback and develop stronger bonds among peers. However, some students may have problems with reading their peers' handwriting while some may not feel comfortable commenting on a draft in front of their peers because they are afraid of losing face or feel embarrassed. For the

activities in the online community, the students expressed the opinion that giving feedback online is convenient and user-friendly as they can give/receive feedback anywhere and anytime. They can also get more detailed and better quality feedback as their peers have more time to review drafts. Besides this, they feel more comfortable expressing ideas and comments on drafts without confronting classmates. Still, students may encounter technical or IT related problems and misinterpret the feedback as it is difficult to ask for clarification of feedback online.

With benefits and drawbacks to both modes of delivery, many students suggested doing collaborative feedback both face-to-face and through via online community interaction. They thought that they could gain benefits from both and each could complement each other. Some of their reflections are shown in the following excerpts:

> I believe that the best way to learn English is to use various activities.
> Collaborative feedback through face-to-face interactions and online community
> has its own advantages and disadvantages. If students use both, they may gain
> more effective feedback. Each can make up for the disadvantage of the other.
>
> (Student F, history major)

> Students can meet together only one time a week but online community can offer
> more time for feedback....In class we can give and receive feedback right away,
> but conducting peer review via online community is easy and comfortable.
>
> (Student G, marketing major)

> It offers more choices of giving feedback, so the students may feel more enjoyable
> about the course.
>
> (Student H, geography major)

5.   Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated Thai university students' perceptions toward collaborative feedback in a blended learning environment. It was aimed at examining how students perceived collaborative feedback activities, and comparing their perceptions through face-to-face and online interactions. The instruments used were a questionnaire and the students' reflections. The findings showed that the students had highly positive perceptions toward collaborative feedback activities in all aspects. They perceived that the collaborative feedback done was fair and useful in improving their writing. They accepted the feedback and were willing to improve their draft with comments from peers. The students also felt highly positively toward doing collaborative feedback. When the students' perceptions through face-to-face and through the online community were compared, the findings revealed that they had highly positive perceptions toward both and there was no significant difference between the two modes of delivery. The qualitative analysis corroborated the results obtained from the questionnaire to the effect that most of the students preferred conducting collaborative feedback either through face-to-face interaction or via both face-to-face and online modes of delivery. However, only a few students preferred having collaborative feedback solely through online community interaction.

These findings correspond to many studies. Huang (1998) and Ho and Savignon (2007) also found that the students preferred face-to-face peer review to computer-mediated peer review in EFL writing, and Braine (2001) found that students gained more benefits from traditional classes in EFL writing class than via computer-mediated classes. They perceived face-to-face interaction to provide an environment in which they could get clearer feedback and this mode of delivery to be suitable for their social interactions. As Ho and Savignon (2007) explain, as peer review is a highly interactive activity, oral communication is necessary and more effective than written

communication. The online community, on the other hand, offers a comfort zone for uneasiness caused by personal or cultural concerns. Students tend to feel more comfortable in expressing ideas/comments on a draft without confronting peers. Hartmann (2002) also found that students experienced cultural and identity issues that affected their L2 writing. However, more research is needed for explanatory purposes as there might be other factors affecting students' perceptions and preferences. As Lai (2011) remarks, a number of factors may moderate the impact of collaboration on student learning. These factors could include student characteristics, group composition, and task characteristics. The overall results of this study are also in accordance with the findings of Rouhi and Vafadar (2011) who have found that collaborative feedback helps boost students' ability within their ZPD, as well as promoting cooperative activity, mutual scaffolding, consciousness-raising, and social meaning-making process.

As far as pedagogical implications are concerned, it seems clear that EFL writing teachers should pay attention to two issues when introducing collaborative feedback activities in a blended learning environment. First, they should make sure that students understand the purpose of the collaborative feedback activity in question and should have a clear plan of activities. In order to have students acquire skills in giving feedback, teachers should also focus on scaffolding. As Hyland and Hyland (2006) point out student training is one important factor in determining the success of peer review activity. Teachers, therefore, should plan adequately and spend enough time on training students to provide collaborative feedback. Also, they should recognize their roles in the training process. Second, to form a blended learning environment, teachers should plan ahead and have clear procedures. The environment should be supportive and user-friendly so that students can stretch their learning abilities within their ZPD. Students' motivation and engagement are also a challenge in the online environment. As Kaye (2003) explains creating a blended learning environment takes time and patience. It is recommended that teachers start with a traditional classroom environment before linking collaborative feedback activities to an online community. The face-to-face mode can be used as a major platform for collaborative feedback training whereas the online community mode offers more learning choices for students. When the online mode is used to support the face-to-face mode, students can gain more advantages from both.

This study was conducted against the background of some limitations. First, it was an exploratory study of collaborative feedback in the blended environment of an EFL writing class. The results, therefore, cannot be generalized to all EFL writing classes. Second, the instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and students' reflections. The results drawn from these tools may not cover every aspect of students' perceptions. A face-to-face interview could be added in order to gather more in-depth data. Third, this study focused only on the perception of the students toward collaborative feedback. Further studies should be done on the quality of students' writing after the collaborative feedback activity. As the results also indicated the students' preference toward collaborative feedback via the use of both modes of delivery, further studies may focus on utilizing this dual approach. In addition, since this study yielded positive results toward collaborative feedback in a blended learning environment, more research should be conducted in this area and more factors related to collaborative feedback should be taken into account and studied.

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APPENDIX

The Feedback Perceptions Questionnaire

Statements	Not true at all					Completely true
1. I think the feedback is fair.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I think the feedback is justified.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I think the feedback is reasonable.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I think the feedback is helpful.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. The feedback helped develop my writing skills.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. The feedback provided me various ideas for my writing.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I agreed with feedbacks from peers.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I used the feedback to revise my writing.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I didn't use the feedback in the revision of my writing.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I was willing to improve my writing.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I was willing to invest a lot of effort in my revision.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I was willing to work on further text revision assignments.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I felt satisfied when I received the feedback on my revision.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I felt confident when I received the feedback on my revision.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I felt motivated when I received the feedback on my revision.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I felt dissatisfied when I received the feedback on my revision.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I felt uncomfortable when I received the feedback on my revision.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I felt discouraged when I received the feedback on my revision.	1	2	3	4	5	6