Peer Feedback on Writing by Japanese College Students

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Abstract: This study examined 33 Japanese university students' writing feedback assessments to investigate how learners of English as a second language paid attention to peer feedback. Using quantitative and qualitative data from feedback on writing compositions, we looked at: (1) word-level language-related points such as plural and third person singular –s and, (2) essay writing at a structural level including topic, supporting, and conclusion sentences. Participants used a rubric table to give feedback to each other. The result showed that learners paid more attention to word-level language-related points than structural ones. Our findings demonstrate the benefits of should conducting writing feedback activities among peers in a classroom. Additionally, the research indicates that, and how teachers should conduct more learners-centered writing in an active learning classroom.

Keywords: Peer feedback, L2, Writing assessment, Structures, ESL writing

Introduction

In the current educational setting, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, has introduced "active learning methods" to all school children and students in Japan. Traditionally, instructors in Japanese classrooms teach English by writing on a blackboard, and students tend to be passive learners. In these situations, the teacher controls communication opportunities between students. On the other hand, active learning gives students more opportunity to talk, write, read and reflect meaningfully on the content and topic. With active learning, students have more interactions with each other to create and share their ideas (Amran, Yokoyama, & Nishino, 2016). Active learning methods are sometimes employed in English classes to motivate learners to exchange their opinions and provide feedback for essay writing activities. Therefore, this study investigated how Japanese university English learners paid attention to other students' writing compositions in peer feedback and how it affected their writing.

Previous studies in peer feedback in ESL / EFL writing

Previously, Paulus (1999) found some positive effects of peer feedback in writing. He discovered that ESL (English as a second language) students in peer feedback gave surface-level revisions such as spelling, tense, punctuation and meaning-preserving changes, where they rewrote text without changing the original meaning. Wang (2014) examined Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners using a rubric reference for peer feedback in writing. The study showed that students' limited English proficiency might lessen the perceived effectiveness of peer feedback for improving language use. The study indicated that the learners had a lack of linguistic input because it was difficult for them to deliver the right words and grammatical features while giving feedback to each other. The findings revealed that peer feedback was more effective from a global point of view, meaning that the learners looked at writing their essays more holistically rather than focusing on local coherence of their EFL writing. Interestingly, the learners in the peer feedback group improved their vocabulary accuracy rather than diversifying their vocabulary use. As grammatical accuracy of the initial essay decreased, it suggested that the perceived usefulness of peer feedback for motivating grammar accuracy was higher than that

for diversifying sentence structures regarding syntactic accuracy level. Suzuki (2008) examined the processes of negotiation regarding the conditions of self-revision and peer revision in writing. The study looked at coding text changes, where three points were categorized: word-level text changes, sentence-level text changes, and discourse-level changes. In the study, the learners paid attention to improving the content of the writing such as topic, content, and ideas of the text in peer negotiation, while students improved vocabulary choices and length of sentences in self-revisions. Findings showed that the students used more metatalk during peer revisions than during self-revisions. On the other hand, the students focused on morphology and lexis mistakes with repetition of L2 of words during self-revision time. These studies illustrate the important role of peer interaction in EFL learners' writing development.

Research Questions

The current study addressed the following research questions:
1. In what points do Japanese students pay attention most to peer feedback in writing?
2. How do learners perceive the rubric's criteria in their feedback practice?

As the essay writing rubric table (see Appendix A) points out, the elements of essay writing include topic, supporting and conclusion sentences. The question asked was whether or not learners change their writing style or the number of written words after feedback from their fellow students. We created this essay writing rubric table for considering the current students, which was based on the previous research of writing essays for Japanese college students (Kuru, Y., Otoshi, J., Masaki, M., & Kinshi, K, 2011).

This research was conducted in the spring term for first-year university students. Participants had just started learning paragraph writing in their writing class; therefore, we inferred that we might see insufficient essay writing in their documents, specifically deficient construction of topic or deficient supporting and conclusion sections. On the other hand, because participants already had education in English grammar, we inferred that we would see improvements in grammar (e.g., surface level error corrections of singulars or plurals, third person singular –s) after peer feedback.

Procedures

Subjects

The participants in this study were 33 students (*n=33*). Their first language was Japanese, and none had any experience with international education. Their ability in English as a second language was calculated by averaging scores from CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication) and a selected part of the TOEIC® (Test of English for International Communication) test (Matsumoto, Shibayama, Narushige and Brantley, 2018). Their majors were Politics, Business Management, Geography and Law. Of the 33 students, 13 were female, and 20 were male.

The initial pool of participants was 79 students who had participated in a writing assignment in their writing and reading class, which was compulsory for first-year students. Those students who belonged to the upper-middle and lower-middle levels were determined by an online test (CASEC). Those in the upper-middle level ranged 451-599 points, and those in the lower-middle level achieved 300-450 points on the CASEC test. 72.15 percent of the possible participants (*n=57*) had taken the EIKEN test, which is a test in practical English proficiency run by the Society for Testing English Proficiency in Japan. Of those, grades were: Grade 3, 32.91 percent (*n=26*), Grade Pre 2, 21.52 percent (*n=17*), and Grade 2, 17.72 percentage (*n=14*).

Potential participants who had experienced international education were excluded via a questionnaire. The questionnaire inquired: (1) Do you have EIKEN certification? Which grade? (2) Have you ever experienced international education for more than three weeks? Where? For how long? (3) Have you experienced an academic writing class? Furthermore, potential participants were classified by their scores from a grammar and reading section of the TOEIC® test. The mean of the selected score was 13.81, and the standard deviation was 2.26. The writing data were collected from students who scored more than 11 points out of 27 points.

Data Collection

In the class during the second semester in 2018, the writing data was collected as follows (see Figure 1):

A. Students had 25 minutes to write their essays by hand without the aid of a dictionary or the Internet. The topic of this essay was based on a quote from a study of Japanese student essay writing (Okugiri, Ijuin, & Komori, 2014). Specifically, the students were required to write an essay in response to the statement: "*Currently, people worldwide are able to use the Internet. Some people say that since we can read the news online, there is no need for newspapers or magazines, while others say that newspapers and magazines will still be necessary in the future. Please write your opinion about this issue.*" This statement was used because the topic is universal and was familiar to everyone.

Figure 1 Procedure

B. After writing, students exchanged their papers with other students, correcting the essay and giving feedback within 20 minutes. Students were instructed to make corrections using a scale of 0-5 points, specified in a rubric created by the instructors. Finally, the essays were returned to the authors and were rewritten by the original author in 10 minutes. The method of feedback was conducted as follows (see Figure 2):

a. Grade from 0 to 5 points according to a rubric developed by the instructors.
b. Underline errors of spelling and vocabulary and correct them.
c. Put a wave line on grammatical mistakes and correct them.
d. Circle sentences that are not appropriate to the theme and correct them.
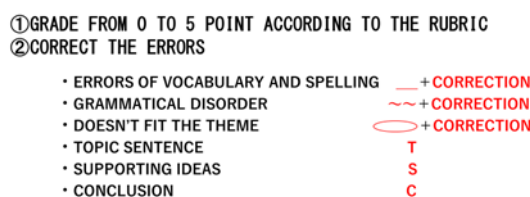e. Mark T, S, and C on the topic sentence, supporting ideas, and conclusion.

Figure 2. Feedback

Results

We used multiple measurements to understand the results of peer feedback correction based on the research questions. Feedback corrections were divided into twelve different types including word-level language corrections (e.g., 3rd person singular -s, tense, singular / plural), sentence-level corrections (e.g., adding or deleting sentences), and feedback mistakes (see Table 1). Essays were also reviewed holistically, with rubric criteria corrections divided into six different types including word usage, grammar, theme, and essay structure (i.e., content, topic, support, and conclusion sentences) (Table 2). In addition, the number of written words was counted in both the first and second writing after peer feedback.

The *t*-test showed strong significant differences with regard to the number of words before and after peer feedback (t=-2.864, $p<0.01$). The effect size was small (d= 0.3). The mean of the number of words for the first writing was 99.69 while that for the second writing was 110.00. The standard deviation for the first writing was 32.31 and that for the second writing was 29.80. Regarding word-level language correction, most of the learners paid attention to singular or plural mistakes (24%) followed by vocabulary (adding word) (21.96%) and spelling

(11.36%) such as adding relative pronouns or prepositions (Table 1, Figure 3). Regarding sentence-level correction, most of the learners paid attention to adding sentences (11.36%) rather than deleting sentences.

Table 1. Peer feedback correction (*n*=33)

| Type of corrections		Peer correction
Word-level language correction	1a. 3rd person singular-s	2.27
	1b. tense	0.75
	1c. singular / plural	24.24
	1d. capitalization	4.55
	1e. spelling	11.36
	1f. punctuation	1.51
	1g. vocabulary/word change	10.61
	1h. vocabulary/ adding word	21.96
	1i. vocabulary/ deleting word	3.03
Sentence-level correction	2a. adding sentences	11.36
	2b. deleting sentences	2.27
Feedback mistakes	incorrect word	6.06
Total %		100
Total corrections		132
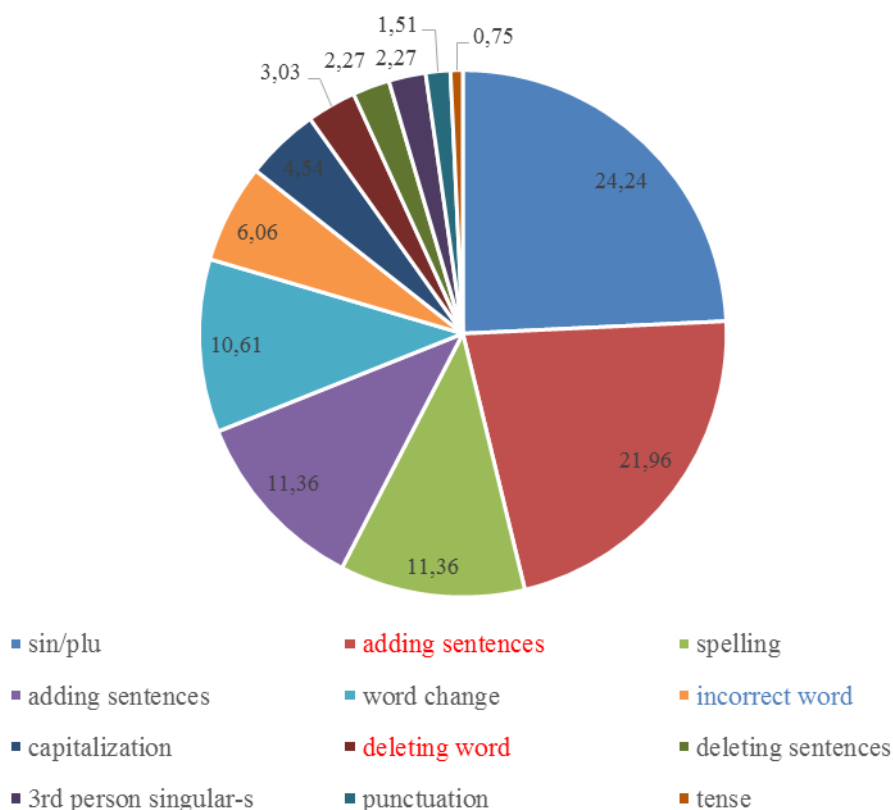
Figure 3. Percentage of Peer Feedback Correction (*n*=33)

We also looked at results using the instructor-derived rubric (see Table 2). Using the rubric sheet, participants gave a score from 0 to 5 points for each section. Given that there were six different elements scored, the total available points were 30 (Appendix A). The element with the lowest score was conclusion sentence structure, with only 12.08% of feedback given to this part of the essay. It is possible that the conclusion sentence got less feedback because participants did not have enough time to finish the conclusion; additionally, it is possible that participants' language level hindered them from giving adequate feedback for conclusion sentences. Instead of correcting issues, participants tended to simply add more sentences. Therefore, the total number of words was increased in their second revision paper. The mean number of words in the first writing was 99.7, and the standard deviation was 31.83. On the other hand, the mean number of the words after peer feedback was 110.00, and the standard deviation was 29.35.

Table 2. Rubric criteria feedback (*n=33*)

Type of holistic feedback	peer feedback	
Word usage	aspect of words and spelling	16.36
Grammar	accuracy of grammar	16.12
Theme	matching with the topic	18.32
Essay structure	a. topic sentence	18.93
	b. supporting sentence	18.19
	c. conclusion sentence	12.08
Total %		100
Total score		819

Discussion

As for our first study question (In what points do Japanese students pay attention most to peer feedback in writing?), we were able to confirm that Japanese learners focus on word-level corrections rather than structure-level corrections. In particular, they paid more attention to mechanical grammar points such as singular or plural mistakes, and they tended to add additional words. Additional research should be conducted on which area participants had difficulties in giving feedback to each other. Specifically, research should focus on whether learners pay more attention to errors which they have already learned to correct (e.g., surface-level grammar corrections) rather than paying attention to errors beyond their level of learning (e.g., topic sentence construction). Furthermore, we do not know if the relationship between students affected peer feedback or not. Questionnaires or an interview could be conducted after the peer feedback for the next study to understand more details from a psychological point of view.

In terms of our second research question (How do learners perceive the rubric's criteria in their feedback practice?), we found that the rubric was useful for feedback. The Japanese students included in this research were not well-educated in English writing; they answered the initial questionnaire saying they did not have any experience in essay writing in English. Although they did not have experience writing essays in English, they did recognize the rubric criteria and were able to correct elements of essay writing including topic, supporting and conclusion sentences. They tended to increase the number of written words after feedback. Master (1995) found that corrective feedback was effective with classroom discussion. We observed the students discussed how they should have evaluated the essays when discussing the rubrics between themselves, meaning that their feedback may have changed if they had discussed the rubric before giving feedback. Our research demonstrates the benefits of using the rubric in the L2 writing class, where teachers could provide more opportunities for learning feedback rather than teaching directly to the learners in language learning. This idea is directly related to the current Japanese educational method for active learning.

Further Study

In this study, we did not record the process of how the participants corrected their error mistakes and provided feedback to each other. Wang's (2014) research indicates that the perceived usefulness of peer feedback was affected by students' concerns with interpersonal relationships. Japanese L2 learners are known to be comparatively shy and hesitate to articulate their opinion to others. It appears that participants hesitated to mark corrections on other students' papers boldly. While the written feedback was marked on the page, there is some evidence that oral feedback is beneficial too. Oral feedback could be researched as metatalk among learners, in which we could see what grammatical or structural points were corrected and how L2 learners understand the target language with using their compressible input through output (Suzuki, 2008). More study on this tendency by Japanese learners must be done.

In addition, teachers should also give feedback using the rubric for future work. Further research should investigate the problem of how to score grades when student evaluation and teacher evaluation differ when using the same rubric. The rubric can be effective if the same results come out, but it is unclear how effective the rubric is when student and teacher evaluations conflict. A future goal should be to design rubrics that make it less likely for differences between student and teacher evaluatio

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Appendix A

Essay writing rubric table

	0 point	1 point	2 points	3 points	4 points	5 points
Accuracy of words & spelling	(1)Words and idioms are inappropriate. (2)Spellings are inaccurate.	(1) Few words and idioms are inappropriate. (2) Few spellings are correct.	(1)A few words and idioms are appropriate. (2) A few spellings are correct.	(1)Some words and idioms are appropriate. (2) Some spellings are correct.	(1) Most words and idioms are appropriate. (2) Most spellings are correct.	(1)All words and idioms are appropriate . (2) All spellings are correct.
Accuracy of grammar	(1)The writing has no cohesion. (2)Sentence structures are inaccurate and have many errors.	(1) The writing has few cohesion. (2) Few sentence structures are accurate. Most are inaccurate.	(1) The writing has a few cohesion. (2) A few sentence strictures are accurate.	(1)The wring has some cohesion. (2) Some sentence structures are accurate.	(1) The wiring mostly has cohesion. (2) Most sentence structures are accurate, few mistakes.	(1)The writing has a variety of cohesion. (2) All sentence structures are accurate.
Theme	The ideas are totally different from the theme.	The ideas are unclear from the theme.	The ideas are slightly clear from the theme.	The ideas are somewhat clear from the theme .	The ideas are mostly clear from the theme.	The ideas are clear from the theme.
Topic sentence	No statement that indicates the main idea.	The paragraph begins with a statement that is inappropriate to the main idea.	The paragraph begins with a statement that is hardly appropriate to the main idea.	The paragraph begins with a statement that is somewhat appropriate to the main idea.	The paragraph begins with a statement that is mostly appropriate to the main idea.	The paragraph begins with a strong statement that is appropriate to the main idea.
Supporting ideas	No supporting statements.	Supporting ideas are unclear without facts .	Supporting ideas are weak and have few reasons with facts.	Supporting ideas are generally clear and have explanation with facts.	Supporting ideas are clear and have reasons with examples and facts.	Supporting ideas are highly clear and have strong reasons with examples and facts in details.
Conclusion	No concluding statement.	Ends with a concluding statement that does not relate to the topic sentence.	Ends with a concluding statement that rarely relates to the topic sentence.	Ends with a concluding statement that somewhat relates to the topic sentence.	Ends with a logical concluding statement.	Effectively ends with a highly strong and logical concluding statement.