Contribution of Online Peer Review to Effectiveness of EFL Writing

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Abstract Since the 1990's, the online peer review has held the growing amount of attentions and has turned into a research focus for global educational experts and language professionals. However, there are very limited studies worked on the part of online peer review. In this paper, we stressed on the effectiveness of online peer review on improving EFL writing among Chinese undergraduates. Two groups are picked as the experimental group and the control group respectively, the conclusion was made on the basis of carefully collected data and qualitative-quantitative methods. The results proved that the online peer review contributed to the effectiveness for college students' writing performance. Admittedly, our research has deficiencies in both width and depth of processing and analysis. More efforts are expected to carried on the afterward exploration.

Keywords: online, peer review, EFL, writing, effectiveness

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most challenging yet the most creative skills among all four basic language skills which presents the learner's overall abilities in English learning. Wang once said "English writing is equally important as the spoken English in communication, sometime it is even more important than oral English and more widely used in daily life, such as in the communication with foreigners on the internet and writing blog in English." [11]. In this process not all students achieve enough from teachers' instruction.

It could be explained from two aspects: for one thing, most of teachers' feedback is attached to the details such as grammar and spelling mistakes which lead the writing practice totally into a mixture of vocabulary and grammar practice rather than a process beginning with critical thinking. For another part, students, as the center of the writing process, are not encouraged to provided radical ideas in case of getting poor grade in exam. With unclear writing purpose, students tend to lack appropriate motivation. For the above, the present EFL writing instruction to Chinese undergraduates is more like teacher centered. Accordingly, students motivation is supposed to be a key point in this process, peer review is naturally taken as a good way to promote writing skills through cooperation with others. As the internet dynamically developed, Chinese English instructors focus their attention increasingly on online assistance instead of the traditional instruction, encouraging learners make advantage of their fragmentary time and condition to promote possibility for learning and improve the working efficiency. Peer review based on the internet technology may improve the quality of students' writing and release the teachers' load. Most importantly, students have the access to the opportunities to redesign the overall system of English writing pattern.

This paper examines the effectiveness of online peer review based on two target questions: Does the online peer review effectively improve Chinese undergraduates' writing achievement? How does it work? And according to the result, the paper provide the subsequent analysis on students' preference for teacher feedback or online peer review and the effectiveness of the online peer review on EFL writing.

2. Related Works of the Study

According to Munice [12], feedback is vital in helping learners to improve their writing skills and whatever forms it takes, it can have a positive effect on the learner's awareness in terms of writing. There are basically three types of present EFL writing review: self check, peer review, teachers' feedback. The traditional self check and peer review suffer the poor quality, directly blamed to students' low language proficiency plus the limited language learning resources. Mostly, they could only provide minimum vocabulary corrections or the basic grammar adjustment at the most.

Teachers' remarks traditionally played a vital role in writing process. As Garcia (1999) points out, teacher feedback can help students become aware of errors and other writing problems which they failed to notice when they wrote their drafts. However, due to the fact that teachers' remark mainly focus on lexical, grammatical and content mistakes, the moment teachers' feedback offer the authentic remarks, the negative comment as well as the mistakes may easily frustrate the students to write. As Hyland (1990) explained that student's learning depends

on the kind of feedback methods that the teacher provides and on the teacher's ability to encourage the students to continue working on their draft. Some recent researches basically compared the different ways of teacher feedback to make the full advantage of it. Zhou and Chen [13] employed the correction method into their experiment to find out correction instead of commentary helps students performance more with corresponding explicit explanations in writing accuracy.

Peer review, as another productive way of feedback, is a particular activity in the revising stage where students share their draft with their peers to exchange different comments, suggestions and even corrections for refining their writing. According to Liu and Hansen ([9]:1) peer review is "the use of learners as the sources of information, and interact ants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a normally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing."

The early foreign scholars primarily paid more attention to the comparison between the effectiveness of teachers' feedback and that of peer review. Most of them found the former one was less effective than the latter one [12]. Their research also present the reasons why peer review did not achieve its expected results was that students' slow in providing concrete and effective feedback. Further more, Reichelt [10], based on studies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, admitted the effectiveness of peer feedback on the improvement in students' writing proficiency, but meanwhile he posed that more qualified studies were expected. In Ferris [6] study, benefits of peer feedback like building up students' confidence, critical thinking skills through reading other's essay were listed.

Chinese professionals also conducted considerable studies on peer review. Besides the theoretical or descriptive studies remaining the similar view as the above ones, Jiang, however, pushed the face-to-face peer review to online one. According to him, peer review based on the internet might be more helpful to enhance students' writing proficiency, improve learners' inspiration and motivation in English writing, increase their ability in revising composition as a whole and reduce anxiety and stress of students. With the popularity of internet, peer review can be refined with the help of online tools, such as wikis, blog, email, QQ and Wechat, which possibly make up for the deficiency of the traditional peer review. The most distinctive difference is described as "face-to-face instruction, typically conducted in a classroom setting in a lecture or discussion or note take mode" (Liu, 2005); whereas, online feedback can be implemented both inside and outside the classroom with the support of technological tools and materials. (Zhao, 2003). According to Chai's [5] research, wechat was taken as an instant messaging software among college students. Chai applied this type of popular software into their college English audio-visual teaching and the attempt was proved to be of great significance.

Catera and Emeigh [2] used to ask EFL students to set up their own blogs in their own small group, and post personal issues relating to their own lives, commentaries to class reading, or paragraphs of their own writing on which peers could comment. The online peer review obviously leads to win-win situation for students to learn from each other and from the infinite information online.

Since the online peer review can improve the motivation of students both in writing English as well as evaluating English.

Their study was more on the qualitative side, for a more objective result, our study combine the qualitative with quantitative analysis.

3. Research Methodology

In order to figure out the effectiveness of online peer review applied in writing instruction, this research attempts to answer the following questions: 1) Does the online peer review effectively promote Chinese undergraduates' writing achievement? 2) How does it make the goal?

3.1. Subjects

For the study, 20 freshmen from Geophysics and Oil Resource Institute with the same English teacher were randomly arranged into control group and experimental group. According to the pre-test, all participants are of the same writing level and all from the same English educational settings (different province takes different English textbooks in senior high school, which may cause varied requirement for teaching and eventually result in students' different language proficiency). The only English teacher taking charge in grading the pre-test and post-test has taken part in grading CET4 writing more than once, who is a qualified evaluator.

3.2. Instruments

There are three parts involved in this study. They are 1) the pre-test and post-test to evaluate students' writing improvement; 2) the follow-up interview on students' understanding of the use of the online peer review.

3.2.1. Pre-test and Post-test

Both topics of pre-test and post-test are from the writing section of the latest CET-4 examination, which proved to remain on the same difficulty level. More importantly, CET-4 is professionally designed by National Testing Committee of College English, it provides the unique grading standard. CET-4 range-finders (Table 1) is the classical scoring standard, concerning content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and form. The full mark of CET-4 writing section is 15, and there are five stages for grading: 2.5.8.11 and 14. Therefore, the quantitative analysis applied in this session. All the marks of participants were listed after the test.

Table 1. CET-4 Range-finders

2 points	The writing is incoherent and disordered in content, segmented language or most sentences contain serious mistakes or errors.
5 points	The writing is by and large consistent with the given topic, the ideas are not expressed clearly and it is not coherent in content, there are many serious mistakes or errors in language.
8 points	The writing is basically consistent with the given topic, but the ideas cannot be expressed clearly and the sentences are not coherent, a lot of serious mistakes and errors in language.
11 points	The writing is consistent with the given topic and coherent in content, but there are a few mistakes and errors in language.
14 points	The writing is totally consistent with the given topic and coherent in content, there are mostly no mistakes and errors.

The pre-test was conducted separately in CG and EG in regular class, with the same working condition for all students. The teacher collected all the test paper and marked them, the grade of which is to be employed later.

Post-test was carried out after the instruction in 8 weeks. Participants took part in the test in the same way as what it was in pre-test. The same pattern, which is also from CET-4, was adopted in order to keep the reliability.

Both the topic for the above tests are the description of cartoon. This particular style of writing involving narrative, exposition and argument, which examine students comprehensive skills of writing. According to The New College English Curriculum Requirements, students need to "write a composition at least 120 words according to given topic or outline.". The most importantly, all the participants are from 2016 freshmen who never tried such topic before, which proves the validity of the result.

The topic for pre-test (Table 2) and for post-test (Table 3) are presented respectively on the below.

Table 2. pre-test

Pre-test on Writing
Time allowed:30 mins

Name:_____	ID:_____
Class:_____	Date: _____

Directions: For this part, you are allowed 30 minutes to write an essay based on the picture below. You should start your essay with a brief description of the picture and then comment on parents' role in their children's growth. You should write at least 120 words but no more than 180 words.

"Good news mom! I was accepted to the college of your choice."

Table 3. post-test

Pre-test on Writing
Time allowed:30 mins

Name:___	ID:___
Class:___	Date: ___

Directions: For this part, you are allowed 30 minutes to write an essay based on the picture below. You should start your essay with a brief description of the picture and then comment on parents' role in their children's growth. You should write at least 120 words but no more than 180 words.

"Once I learn how to use Google, isn't that all the education I really need?"

3.2.2. Follow-up Interview

The interview section (Table 4) deals with more detailed issues. It mainly includes the following aspects: participants' reaction to the online peer review; the way they benefit from the online review activities; their final choice between traditional teachers' feedback and online peer review. The qualitative analysis is adopted in this phrase.

Table 4. Interview on Students' Attitude Towards the Online Peer Review and Teachers' Feedback

1. Do you like the use of online peer review in writing process? Why or why not?
2. Do you think your writing capacity has been improved than before?
3. Do you think you yourself benefited from providing feedback to others? If so, which part is it?
4. Do you think online peer review benefit you? If so, which part is it?
5. Can you accept the mere online peer feedback instead of teachers' feedback ?

3.3. Procedures

The study lasted 8 weeks. The control group adopt teacher feedback while the experimental one take online peer review. The procedures of the study involving the training of online peer review system and the phrase of feedback which involving the pre-test followed by four topic writings practice (Table 7), post-test and the follow-up interview. (Table 5) presents the different sessions of the study.

Table 5. Procedures of the Study

Week 1-2 Apr.17.2016-Apr.30.2016	1. training of online peer review system (EG) 2. pre-test on participants writing proficiency before the experiment (CG&EG)
Week 3-4 May 1.2016-May. 14.2016	four topic writing practice with intervention (CG&EG respectively)
Week 5-6 May 15.2016- May.28.2016	
Week 7-8 May 29.2016-Jun.11.2016	1. post-test on participants writing proficiency after experiment (CG&EG) 2.the follow-up interview on students reflection of online peer review (EG)

One of the tricky parts in the experiment is the training for online peer review since it is a tough task to let students keep in minds the detailed rules and theories. The training for online peer review was carried out in the following phrases: 1) teacher adopted an evaluation form (Table 6), covering the main parameters of an excellent essay. [3] students are asked to fill in the form after reading the peers' writing. They may get the direct sense of what's the excellent essay like and then apply it to their own writing. Teacher herself evaluated the final draft with the same form and grade them with the CET-4 range-finder. 2) teacher posts one most successful student's writing online to show what elements of feedback should focus on and what's the clear and supportive suggestions. 3) teacher posts a writing draft online, and students are free to evaluate it in terms of the main parameter. In the whole writing process, students are encouraged to enhance their confidence to make sure they are relaxing and friendly. In this case, all participants were not afraid of making mistakes and losing faces.
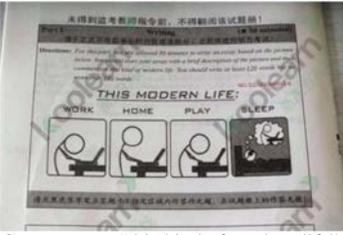
Table 6. Evaluation

Content 1	relevance	creativity	clarity		
	A B C	A B C	A B C		
Content 2	development	conciseness			
	A B C	A B C			
Organization 1	statement	Topic sentence			
	A B C	A B C			
Organization 2	paragraphing	coherence	unity		
	A B C	A B C	A B C		
Language 1	Vocabulary	Word variety	Idiom activity		
	A B C	A B C	A B C		
Language 2	Structure range	Sentence variety			
	A B C	A B C			
Language 3	Word errors	Sentence errors	Grammar errors		
	A B C	A B C	A B C		
Language	spelling	punctuation			
	A B C	A B C			
Language 5	Formal ()	Informal ()	Colloquial ()		
Impression	Excellent ()	Very good ()	Good ()	Pass ()	Weak ()

(Excerpted from [3]).

Four topics for practicing are from the latest CET-4 test. The first and the third one are more on the narrative and explosion side, while the second and the fourth one are more comprehensive and the writing pattern is closer to the pre-test and post-test.

Table 7. Four topics for practice

2014.06	Suppose a foreign friend of yours is coming to visiting your hometown, what is the most interesting place you would like to take him/her to see and why?	Narrative. Explosion
2015.06	Comment on "this kind of modern life"	Narrative. Explosion Argument
2014.12	A campus activity that has benefited you most	Explosion Argument
2013.12	"the impact of the internet on the way people communicate"	Narrative. Explosion Argument

4. Data Collected and Discussion

4.1. Qualitative Analysis of Pre-test and Post-test

From Figure 1 and Figure 2, CG's mean score rise from 6.38 to 6.54, while in EG's rise from 6.64 to 7.87. Comparatively, after the instruction with the assistance of online peer review, writing proficiency of students in EG improved significantly while ones in CG

To sum up, from the collected data gained during these two sessions, the online peer review worked in experimental group no less effectively than teachers' feedback in control group. In another words, the online peer feedback can make for a lower difference in the performance of writing, compared with the teachers' feedback.
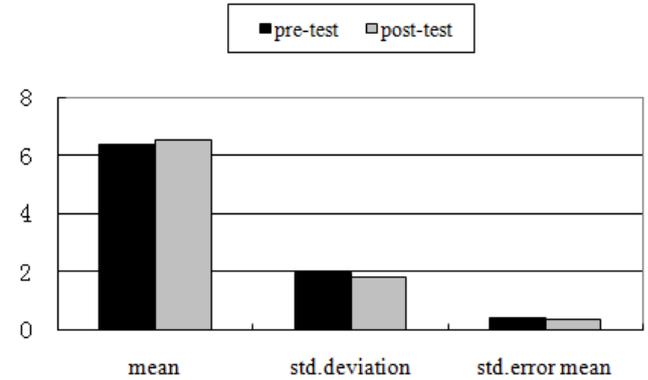

Figure 1. The collected data for CG

4.2. Discussion of Feedback Session

WeChat was taken as the online platform through which students posted their feedback or followed the peers feedback. WeChat, with the lower cost than short messages, proives varied API interface. It also supports Android, iOS, Symbian, Windows Phone and BlackBerry five mainstream operating platform [14].

After the pre-test and relative preparations in the first two weeks, students began to work on four topic writings and revisions. Teacher collected all the statistics of both CG and EG to make a comparison analysis.
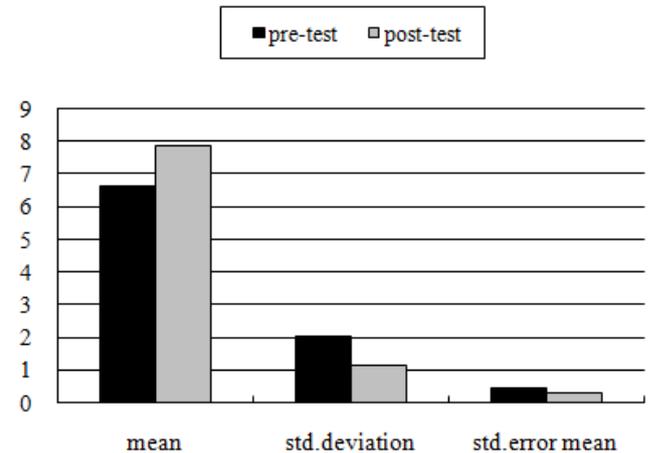

Figure 2. The collected data for EG

During the training for online peer review and the first three writing practice, students in EG has been accustomed to the activities of evaluating their peers' writing and offering objective feedback as well as integrating reviews from peers into their later draft.

The first and the second practice has covered most of the writing skills required by the CET-4 criteria, and the third writing is relatively easy to evaluate. So all the data collected from the third topic *a campus activity that has benefited you most* had been taken as the sample of later analysis.

According to the statistics of the third topic writing practice, the biggest distinction is on the word counts instead of the number of comments, which is presented in the Table 8.

Table 8. word counts of comments and number of comment for CG and EG

Contents		CG	EG
Numbers of Scripts		10	10
Numbers of Commenter		1	5+
Words count	Min-Max	23-49	11-194
	mean	12	41
Numbers of comments	Min-Max	1-1	5-9
	mean	1	6.1

From the table, there are two noticeable points. The first of which is the different numbers of commenter, every students draft received at least 5 comments from their peers in EG while there was only one teacher providing feedback in CG. In this case, students could be stimulated by multiple critical thinking so that inspire their further draft. And peer review online may allow the instant reflection from their peers which proved the efficient communication and interaction. The second point is the word account, the highest is 194 of the online peer feedback, compared with the 49 as the highest teacher feedback. It shows that students are willing to use their online tools such as QQ and Wechat as their immediate communication tools to provide feedback. They are also capable of typing with these online Apps.

But as to the precision of the error location, online peer review may be fuzzy and time-consuming to locate. In CG, teacher feedback could be directly noted in the margin. While in EG, students had to direct their friend with the words "the second word on the 3rd line", which meant some words counts were less effective.

In a word, online peer review encourages students to feel free to provide their comments, which improve their critical thinking as well as their willingness to write in English. They are also easier to read so that are more helpful for the following draft. While teacher feedback proves the better construction but the weakness is too much formal correcting of mistakes causing students' frustration.

4.3. Discussion of the Follow-up Interview

In the last week of this experiment, 5 randomly picked students were interviewed orally with five questions concerning students' attitude and suggestions about the effectiveness of online peer feedback in college English writing instruction.

In response to the first question *Do you like the use of online peer review in writing process?*, almost all students hold the favorable attitude. As to them, online peer review inspire them talk freely and vibrant peer review allow more information to expand their imagination. As to the second question *Do you think your writing capacity has been improved than before?*, all students especially boys provided positive answers. Interestingly, they preferred to the online way for the reason that it occupied no extra time when they browsing the net, chatting with friends. And they had easier access to the electronic dictionary when they evaluating peers' writing. As for this question, there was a girl student argued that she had no improvement through online peer review. According to her, peer review was less trustworthy than teacher's feedback, and it made no constructive suggestions for her writing in total organization nor in vocabulary use. When it came to question 3&4, " *Do you think you yourself benefited from providing feedback to others?*", " *Do you think online peer review benefit you?*", 4 students including the above girl admitted that their biggest worry was that their language proficiency is high enough to provide effective feedback. The answers to the last question " *Can you accept the mere online peer feedback instead of teachers' feedback ?*" were surprisingly negative. All students admitted the effectiveness of online peer review but teacher's feedback was more reliable and authentic.

To sum up, the prime issue is the students' language proficiency leading to their dependency on teacher's feedback. Online peer review, on the other hand, encourages students inspiration to read, think, evaluate and even write in English.

5. Implications and Suggestions

Simple stated, the pedagogical implication of this paper is to arouse the awareness of the influence of online peer feedback on Chinese EFL undergraduates writing interest. From the research, it is undoubtedly that the online peer review is effective. The following suggestions are drawn from the subsequent discussion.

First, online peer review could be applied to Chinese EFL writing class since it is proved to be effective to improve writing interest and performance; second, teacher interference is required in the online peer feedback session. It is highly recommended for teachers to offer the detailed training of students' online feedback. A proper guideline and efficient instruction in the process of writing from teachers are supposed to take due to the varied limitation in students' language proficiency. Third, more strategies are expected to be adapted by different level of non-English majors according to their varied competence of language.

In order to prove experiment validity, some functions such as audio communication, voice message and even video meeting are not allowed to use in the experiment. These media access may definitely improve the effectiveness of communication even the efficiency of feedback for both sides.

For this experiment, researcher is working with these particular majors in this semester, which confined the subject size as well as their language proficiency. Therefore, the further study needs larger sample size for better validity.

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