Responding to Students Writing: Peer and Teacher Feedback[1)]

Jeongwan Lim
(Daegu University)

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This paper is a brief review on second language writing feedback research. The research on feedback in second language writing is categorized into two types: that focusing on teacher feedback and that focusing on peer feedback. The studies are reviewed in terms of their effectiveness and ineffectiveness, showing how differently they are presented in the field of second language writing. The results of empirical research are inconclusive because the available empirical evidence is limited and sometimes contradictory. More research needs to be done before any conclusions can be drawn. Implications for future research are recommended.

Keywords: [second language writing/peer feedback/teacher feedback/제2언어 작문/동료 피이드백, 교사 피이드백]

I. Introduction

In the past three and a half decades, the nature of the writing process was generally considered to include a series of discrete stages in a linear sequence (Rohman, 1965). The teaching of writing was primarily product-oriented in that teachers placed heavy emphasis on the accuracy of students' compositions and highlighted all grammatical error students made on their final product using

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numerous red marks. However, due to the discovery of some researchers of writing for native speakers of English (Emig, 1971; Graves, 1975; Perl, 1978, 1979; Pianko, 1979), the views of the nature of writing began to change from a linear process to a recursive process and writing teachers became dissatisfied with traditional approaches to teaching writing and these findings suggested a different direction.

Strongly influenced by the change in teaching writing in first language education, teaching writing in English as a second language underwent a paradigm shift from product-oriented approach to process-oriented approach (Hairston, 1982). The shift was motivated from the dissatisfaction to the failure of the product-oriented approach to foster students' thinking and self expression and research to the process of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). The composing processes were seen as non-linear, exploratory and generative whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempted to approximate meaning (Zamel, 1983, p. 165). This change in writing theories influenced tremendously the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) writing. A large part of writing intervention was implemented during the students' writing processes and giving feedback on the multiple drafts, as a result, was seen almost unanimously by researchers and classroom teachers as a major and essential part of the writing instruction.

In the process-oriented approach to writing, feedback is emphasized in students' development of writing skills. The effect of feedback in second language writing classes has recently become a source of controversy among researchers. The research on feedback in second language writing consists of two types: that focusing on teacher feedback and that focusing on peer feedback. In the following section, teacher feedback is discussed first, and peer feedback is explored later. Finally, comparing the effectiveness of different feedback sources is presented.

II. Contents

1. Teacher Feedback

Teacher feedback can be divided into two categories: teacher-student conferences and teachers' written feedback. Since relatively few studies dealt with teacher-student conferences, the discussion here focuses on teacher's written feedback. There have been several research studies conducted on the effect of teacher's feedback, and the results are quite different depending on the nature of the studies.

1) The Ineffectiveness of Teachers' Written Feedback

First language researchers have probed into the reasons why teachers' written comments have failed to improve students' writing. Hillocks (1986) and Knoblauch and Brannon (1981) looked closely at teachers' comments and students' revisions and reported that teachers' written comments produced no significant improvements in students' subsequent revisions. This failure can be attributed to the fact that the teachers' written comments were too general or too specific, and focused too narrowly on surface features.

Second language researchers (Cohen, 1987; Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985) also reported similar depressing results: despite the fact that teachers put paramount efforts into written comments, errors persisted. Studies from different perspectives attempted to account for the causes of the ineffectiveness of teacher comments. Zamel (1985) analyzed 15 teachers' written comments on 105 students' compositions. She concluded that the teachers misread the students' texts and appropriated them in such a way that the resulted revisions became less coherent; that they attended often to sentence level local errors and neglected the larger meaning-related problems; that they provided vague and abstract responses that confused the students; that they offered text-specific comments that were not applicable to later revision tasks other than the immediate revision.

Cohen (1987) investigated the issue from the students' perceptions of teachers' feedback in relation to their subsequent actions. He found that as much as 20% of the students in his study did not read teachers' comments, particularly when they received a poor grade. Cohen also found that the students had only a

limited repertoire of strategies to deal with the teachers' comments: most of them just made a mental note of them. His findings suggested that many inexperienced ESL student writers did not know how to incorporate the teachers' comments when trying to revise their drafts.

Another factor that possibly leads to the failure of the teachers' feedback is the mismatch between students' and teachers' preferences for comments. Cohen (1987) and Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) reported that students preferred to receive more feedback on content but were getting more feedback on grammar and mechanics. Leki (1991) and Radecki and Swales (1988) also attempted to understand students' preferences for the types of feedback on their papers. However, their studies revealed a somewhat different picture. They found that ESL students equated error correction to revision, and these students overwhelmingly desired that their errors be marked by their teachers even though they showed a growing interest in content and organization. This indicated that the ESL students in the studies still had unrealistic expectations in that they wished all their errors to be marked and corrected by their teachers. This mistaken notion of equating revision with correcting surface errors and the unrealistic expectation for perfect grammar might lead to a lack of improvement in students' revisions.

2) The effectiveness of teachers' written feedback

Whereas earlier research (Cohen, 1987; Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985) provided primarily negative evidence regarding the effectiveness of teachers' feedback, more recent studies showed that teachers' feedback had an affective advantage and resulted in improvement in students' writing. Leki (1990) reported that ESL students expected and valued their teachers' feedback. Zhang (1995) compared different sources of feedback and found that teachers' feedback had an affective advantage over peer feedback, self feedback, and other sources of feedback. The results of her study showed that claims made about the affective advantage of peer feedback in first language writing did not apply to ESL writing. Saito's study (1994) also revealed that ESL students preferred teacher feedback to non-teacher feedback. The gap between the teachers' and the students' interests in feedback seemed to have been bridged to a certain extent (Leki, 1992).

Ferris (1995, 1997) examined in detail students' reactions to teachers' responses and the relation between teachers' comments and students' revisions in a multiple draft setting. Her earlier study revealed that overall the students found the teachers' responses helpful when revising their drafts; that the students tended to reread their papers and teachers' comments on the earlier drafts rather than on the final drafts; that the proportion of the students who reread their papers was greater than the one that was reported in Cohen's study (1987). Ferris's second study (1997) categorized teachers' comments by using four criteria: length, type, use of hedges, and text-specificity. The results showed that many of the techniques used by the teachers in this research were effective. These techniques included limited grammar feedback (more general comments on grammar paired with underlined examples of particular error patterns in the body), marginal comments functioning as requests for information or for revision, and focused text-specific comments that provided clear directions for the revision tasks.

Some researchers have been exploring strategies that can enhance the effectiveness of teachers' comments. Connor and Farmer (1990) proposed the technique of topical structure analysis as a revision strategy for ESL learners. In this procedure, students circled the topic of each independent clause in their texts and analyzed the pattern of the development of the topics. This allowed them to see the connection of topics between sentences and the degree in which they brought up new subjects. The researchers concluded that the students who were trained to use this method could better revise their writing on the global coherence level.

The technique of paragraph analysis, originally suggested by Brannon and Knoblauch (1984), requires students to write down the topic of each paragraph so that they become aware of the overall structure of their texts. This procedure is potentially effective for ESL writer for it is a non-evaluative strategy that enables students to see the organization of their own writing (Leki, 1992).

Various other responding strategies were also claimed to be effective. Leki (1992) suggested a limited approach in which teachers never commented on all the problems but gave feedback only on some aspects of content and form in

each paper. Reid (1993) proposed that teachers have students commit to making only a few changes after they understood the teachers' feedback; Jenkins (1987) had students involved in written dialogues in response to the teachers' comments.

The success of these responding strategies seems to imply that the good intentions of writing teachers who give comments is not sufficient. Specific techniques that involve students in analyzing certain characteristics of their own text (Connor and Farmer, 1990) can enhance students' knowledge and ability to revise their own writing.

Another study related to this line of research was Tyson's (1997, 1998, 1999, 2000). He carried out research with Korean college students in writing classes at two major universities in South Korea over a period of four years. Data collected from questionnaires, student reflective writings, and other ethnographically-oriented techniques suggest that some of the techniques used in these classes helped students to produce longer and better-developed compositions, as well as increased their confidence and motivation to write. Specific techniques students found helpful included the teaching of prewriting activities, writing in multiple drafts, teaching students how to peer- and self-edit effectively, instructor comments on early drafts that focus more on content and organization than on grammar, group activities that encourage interaction and sharing of ideas among students, and an emphasis on the publication of students' work.

2. Peer Feedback

1) The Effectiveness of Peer Feedback

First language researchers have claimed that peers' feedback motivates students to do revisions, for it provides them with genuine questions and responses from authentic readers (James, 1981; Koch, 1982). Peer feedback helps student writers to develop not only their audience awareness but also their critical thinking ability, which is essential for good writers (James, 1981). Other benefits such as stimulating students through multiple and mutual reinforcing perspectives and equipping students with power to express themselves are also

illustrated (Lamberg, 1980).

Although first language writing studies have reported that peer response had various advantages, it is still questioned that second language learners benefit equally from this technique. Those researchers who favor peer feedback maintain that second language students could benefit similarly if teachers implemented the peer feedback procedure carefully and give students substantial training.

Mittan (1989) reported that he successfully helped college ESL students with peer feedback in his writing class. He stated that the effectiveness of the peer feedback technique could be attributed to the training the students received and the careful integration of the peer feedback procedures. Stanley (1992) also emphasized the importance of training. She compared two advanced groups of students doing peer feedback. The experimental group received seven hours of peer feedback training, whereas the control group only received one hour of training. The results showed that the experimental group evidenced more responses to peer evaluation and a higher number of revisions than the control group.

Other studies (Davies & Omberg, 1987; Leki, 1990; Mangelsdorf, 1992) investigated the effectiveness of peer response from the point of view of perceptions. These studies used questionnaires, students' journals and interviews to gather data. The results indicated that peer review sessions helped students clarify, generate, and develop ideas, and improve the organization and style of their writing. Mendonca and Johnson (1994) also provided information about the effectiveness of peer feedback. Their findings showed that peer review sessions helped students develop their sense of audience, which is essential to good writing.

2) The ineffectiveness of peer feedback

While positive comments from the students seemed to confirm teachers' and researchers' perception that peers' feedback was beneficial to students, problems emerged, especially in heterogeneous collaborative groups. The major problems that the students experienced in the peer review process were the following:

first, the quality of the responses was questioned; students felt that their peers offered unspecific, unhelpful and even incorrect feedback because they lacked the knowledge of the second language or the knowledge in specific content areas (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Leki, 1990). Second, critical and overly direct responses were destructive; they caused discomfort (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Murphy, 1992). Third, students felt uncomfortable when making negative comments; they were afraid of making honest and critical comments because they feared such comments might hurt other people's feelings (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Leki, 1990; Mangelsdorf, 1992). Fourth, students indicated uncertainty about altering their texts to accommodate their peers' comments in their revisions (Leki, 1990). Fifth, students felt that their limitations in terms of language skills constrained them in making contributions in the peer response process (Allaei & Connor, 1990).

Another research trend focused more on the input and dynamics of peer response on revisions. Seeing that the social dynamics in a group could influence the ways students reacted to their peers' feedback, a group of researchers looked into the nature of interactions in peer response sessions and its impact on revision. Nelson and Murphy (1992, 1993) analyzed one writing group over six different collaborative sessions. Their earlier study discovered that the students were on task and incorporated a fair amount of their peers' suggestions into their revisions. During the interactions, four roles emerged: the attacker, the weakest writer, the best writer, and the mediator or facilitator. In the later study, using the same set of data, the researchers focused on the types of interaction that triggered revisions. The result indicated that when writers interacted with their peers in a cooperative manner, they were more likely to use their peers' suggestions in revising. When writers interacted with their peers in a defensive manner or did not interact at all, they were less likely to use the peers' comments (p. 140).

Mendonca and Johnson (1994) also attempted to illustrate the nature of peer interaction in relation to revision. Analyzing the frequency of students' incorporating their peers' suggestions, they concluded that in 53% of the instances of revisions, students incorporated their peer's comments; in 10% of the instances, they did not use t heir peers' comments; and the remaining 37%

they revised their first drafts without discussing these changes with their partners in the peer response sessions.

The studies conducted by Nelson and Murphy (1992, 1993) and Medonca and Johnson (1994) concluded that students on the whole followed a fair amount of their peers' suggestions. On the other hand, Connor and Asenavage (1994) reported opposite findings. They found that only 5% of the revisions in their study came directly as a result of peer input; 35% of the revisions resulted from the teacher's comments; 60% of the revisions resulted from self and other sources. This finding might discourage those who believe in the positive impact of peer revision. This research did not provide an explanation of the reasons why so few revisions were initiated by peer comments. Further research could use think-aloud protocols or interview procedures to find out about students' decision-making strategies and their perceptions of different feedback techniques.

Allaei and Connor (1990) discussed the sociolinguistic differences in the expectations of students who came from different cultural backgrounds. Differences in expectations concerning the amount of talk, the role of interlocutors and politeness strategies could contribute to a high level of discomfort in multicultural collaborative peer response groups. Carson and Nelson (1994) underscored two cross-cultural issues in the dynamics of ESL groups: individual versus collective goals of groups; in-group versus out-group relationships. They argued that students from a background with collective goals (i.e. China and Japan) collaborated in order to benefit the group, but students from western countries expected to work together in the group to serve the needs of the individuals. Furthermore, students from collective cultures that emphasized harmony, cooperation, and consensus exhibited cooperative behaviors while working with in-group individuals (i.e. students from the same culture) but they did not exhibit similar behaviors with out-group members (i.e. students from different cultures). These differences in cultural orientation might cause problems when students from different cultures have to work together in collaborative peer response groups.

In summary, the important findings on group dynamics in relation to peer response included that positive attitudes in interactions seemed to ensure the occurrence of revision (Nelson & Murphy, 1992, 1993); that different cultural

backgrounds might cause conflicts and discomfort in cross-cultural interactions in peer groups (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Carson & Nelson, 1994). They also revealed potential problems with the peer response technique in the context of a diversity of cultures. Teachers who favor the peer feedback technique have to be aware of these potential problems.

3. Comparing the effectiveness of different feedback sources

Since there was no consensus among researchers on the most efficient source of feedback, some researchers employed an empirical research design to compare different ways of giving feedback. Hedgcock and Leftwits (1992) contrasted the effectiveness of teachers' written feedback with that of the peers' feedback. The results showed that students who received peers' oral-aural feedback scored significantly higher than those who received teacher's feedback in the control group at the end of a ten-week term.

Berger (1990) contrasted two groups of ESL student writers in a freshman English composition class and discovered that the peer feedback group did make more revisions than the self-feedback group. This suggested that there was an overall favorable effect on revision when students used peer rather than the self-feedback (p. 28).

Two research studies (Patridge, 1983; Zhang, 1995) offered opposite results. Patridge (1983) saw greater improvements with the group that received teacher's feedback. Zhang (1995) compared three ways of providing feedback and found that teacher's feedback was preferred over peer and self-feedback.

In sum, the results of empirical research are inconclusive. It is difficult to decide which feedback technique works most effectively for ESL students. More research needs to be done before any conclusions can be drawn.

III. Conclusion

Various issues with regard to feedback in second language writing are

reviewed. It must be acknowledged that the available empirical evidence is limited and sometimes contradictory. More studies need to be done to provide further evidence or discussion for the unresolved issues and questions. Apart from the areas already mentioned, there are several other directions in which future research should explore.

First of all, more research should be done to examine the effectiveness of feedback in relation to students' long-term improvement (Leki, 1992). Most of the studies that discussed the effectiveness of responses to ESL writing had examined only the relationship between feedback and subsequent drafts. However, the effectiveness of the feedback should be evaluated from a long-tem perspectives since the immediate success of revisions do not guarantee improvement in the long run.

Second, more research needs to be done to explore teacher-student conferences in ESL or EFL context. Various benefits of this technique have been claimed (Zamel, 1985), yet Goldstein and Conrad (1990) concluded that the mere implementation of the technique did not ensure successful revision; it depends rather on the negotiation between the teacher and the student. More research is needed to examine closely the discourse in the conferences and the correlation between the discourse and the revision.

Third, with gaining importance of computers as writing tools, teachers have started to provide feedback on students' diskettes or via e-mail and networking environment like MOO (Baker, 1995). The effectiveness of these alternative feedback techniques should be studied.

Finally, as we go through the issue of giving feedback to ESL students' writing, it is clear for us to see the population of students that are in the center of discussions are almost always at the college level; there was hardly any attention given to ESL student writers at the lower levels. How these students' writings are received and helped by their peers and teachers in the elementary and secondary schools could be very different from the situations of older students as discussed in this paper since many of them are developing writers as a very young age. It is definitely needed more research to focus on issues related specifically to responding to these younger ESL writers.

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Jeongwan Lim
Department of English Education
#15 Naeri, Jillyang, Gyeongsan,
Gyeongbuk, 712-714, Korea
053-850-4125
jwlim@daegu.ac.kr

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