

PEER FEEDBACK THROUGH BLOGS: An Effective Tool for Improving Students' Writing Abilities

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of computer technology and expansion of the Internet has an increasing impact on writing instruction. The modes of peer feedback have shifted from traditional peer feedback to online peer feedback. This study investigated the effects of peer feedback activity through blogs on students' writing ability and examined their attitudes towards peer feedback activity. The research was conducted using a single group pretest-posttest design. Blog, the website, was used as a medium for peer feedback activity. Participants were 34 second-year students who studied EN 013 course (English for Expressing Ideas) in the first semester of the academic year 2012 at Bangkok University. Two writings tests and a questionnaire were used as instruments for data collection to acquire information. The results revealed that students' writing scores on the pretest and posttest were significantly different. It can be concluded that peer feedback activity through blogs had a significant role to play in improving students' writing skill. The students also expressed positive attitudes towards the value of peer feedback activity.

Keywords: Peer feedback, blogs, EFL learning, writing ability

INTRODUCTION

Learning to write is considered the most difficult skill for students who lack motivation to write in English, and whose writing capacity is not good. In order to improve students' writing skills, English teachers have to find the suitable, effective approaches or activities. Peer feedback activity is one of the effective ways to improve students' writing (Hyland, 2003). It facilitates further writing development. In general, peer feedback is used in the form of written commentary and verbal interaction between readers and writers in the preliminary and final stage of drafts. According to Hyland & Hyland (2006), feedback is perceived as an essential element to help writers make better subsequent drafts. Composition teachers, researchers, and scholars have acknowledged contributions of feedback to a powerful underpinning for autonomous learning as well as for revision processes.

At present, teaching and learning trend has shifted from the teacher-centered approach to student-centered approach. With the integration of educational technology into writing classroom, peer response has shifted from a traditional face-to-face environment to a networking computer mediated environment called electronic (computer-mediated communication) peer response, or e-peer response, in which the students are able to exchange their own ideas and respond to each other through computers online in the asynchronous or synchronous form.

As Warschauer and Ware (2006) stated, "the rapid pace at which educational technologies are growing creates a broad spectrum of ways in which technology can be integrated into classroom instruction" (p. 105). Under the influence of computer technology in L2 writing, some researchers claim that the technological developments can motivate student learning and make the writing classroom more creative, autonomous and collaborative (Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1996; Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

In recent years, Weblog also extends its popularity in English language learning context. The use of computer technology as a tool for language learning was fully supported by most of educational institutions. Mynard (2007) stated that blog was an influential and effective tool for language teachers to encourage students to communicate or reflect their ideas on their learning experience and add their response to their peers' blogs to encourage further expression.

Blogs also integrate students into the world of interconnected media; they become familiar with using blog both as a writer and a reader. In addition, blogs provide a great usefulness in developing writing skills, critical thinking skills, and literary skills (Richardson, 2006). With the potential for collaborative and cooperative learning, more learning opportunities, and means for learners to interact with each other and learn effectively, peer feedback activity through blogging can possibly help students develop their writing. It is a worthy activity to increase students' motivation in writing and enhance the interaction among peers and teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is a pedagogical cooperative learning technique, which commonly involves giving comments on each other's written drafts, waiting for the feedback to their own writing in return, and the their written drafts can be improved according to these comments (Nelson and Murphy, 1993; Paulus,1999).

Peer feedback is also called peer response, peer review, or student feedback. It's a cooperative activity in which students exchange their writing drafts with other students, their peers, give comments on their peers' writing draft so that their peers can improve their own written work (Nelson and Murphy, 1993). Students can do peer feedback activity with their friends, in pairs or small groups. Peer response has great potential benefits with regard to students' writing development. Through feedback from the student readers, the student writers are able to learn about their writing problems such as inappropriate language use, wrong mechanics, not understandable text, and illogical organization. Students can do peer feedback activity either in a written, oral, or computer-mediated mode (Liu & Hansen, 2002).

In addition, peer feedback is a writing activity in which students work in groups collaboratively and provide feedback on their peers' writing; the peer feedback activity can be done in form of an oral, a written or CMC model.

Using peer feedback is not meant to replace teacher evaluation, nor can it identify all the strengths and challenges in a piece of writing. However, when integrated into the writing task in a thoughtful way, peer feedback can be useful learning tools for both the writer and the student providing feedback.

According to Hansen and Liu (2005), peer feedback was defined as the 'use of sources of information, and interaction between each other'. Peer feedback is an integral part of most composition classes. Peer response comments can lead to meaningful revisions. Revisions based on peer comments can be better in vocabulary, organization and content. Actually there are three modes of peer feedback, name;

- written feedback,
- oral feedback, and
- online feedback.

Adapted from Tuzi (2004, cited in Wanchid, 2010), common features and differences of these three modes of giving feedback are presented in Table 1.

Table: 1
Common features and differences in oral, written, and online feedback

Criteria	Oral feedback	Written feedback	Online feedback
Mode of communication	Oral / Two-way communication	Written / mostly one-way communication	Written / Two-way communication
Pressure to respond	Pressure	Pressure	No pressure
Place and time	Dependent	Dependent	Independent
Components of communication	Nonverbal	No nonverbal	No nonverbal
Personal distance	Less	More or less	More
Level of cultural barriers	Greater	Greater	Fewer
Involvement	Greater	Greater	Greater
Frequency of meaning negotiation	More	Less	More
Delivery effort	Less	Greater	Less
Other facilities	Not available	No cut & paste	Cut & paste
Message permanence	Not available	Fewer	Greater

With regard to online feedback characteristics, the students can exchange their ideas and respond to each other through computers online.

They are able to access quickly the writing environment without time or place dependence. The use of networked computers offers students free communication, autonomous interaction and collaborative ideas shared in group discussion.

Moreover, online feedback environment can get rid of cultural impact. When making comments students reader or reviewers, they did not face them. This would encourage students more relaxing in giving feedback.

As a result, new ways of giving and receiving feedback seems a beneficial and effective activity in writing instruction (Morra & Romano, 2009).

Also, new technologies like wikis, podcasts, blogs, Twitter, Facebook and online forums are increasingly used in writing class.

Among these popular technologies, blogs seem to provide suitable features and characteristics that can support peer feedback activity in writing classroom.

Using Blogs in English Language Learning Context

According to Aljamah (2012), students can be motivated to write more in both academic and non academic. They can write and give comment on their friends' writing through blogging. Moreover, they can discuss and share their interests, their likes, and individual differences. Students can get feedback from other audiences through blogging; they also have an opportunity to get information in which they are interested and write things they really want to. In a similar way, Dawns (2004) claims that integrating blogs in writing classes improved students' writing skills. Nadzrah & Kemboja (2009) point out that students write their compositions with specific purposes through blogging. Moreover, it is asserted that there are many reasons that blogs are a powerful means to develop English language teaching and learning. Students are provided friendly and authentic learning environment through blogging. When writing, not only teachers but also peers are the audiences, including other people outside the classroom, a global audience (Noytim, 2010).

Galien & Bowcher (2010) state that students have an additional motivating opportunity through blogging since they are able to publish their works in a non-judgement fun environment. Moreover, blogs provide increased and more balanced students' communication and they allow the shy, quieter students to have more time to consider what to write and to formulate their responses. In addition, teachers can use blogs as a bridge between lessons; there are three kinds of blogs used in classroom; the tutor blog, the learner blog, and the class blog. Teachers are able to post teaching materials that recycle and review vocabulary and topics presented during lessons. Also, teachers can save the classroom time as information about schedule changes, homework assignments etc. (Campbell, 2003)

Previous Researches on On-line Peer Feedback in Language Learning

With the development of information technology, ways of providing and giving feedback have been shifted from traditional feedback to computer-mediated feedback. To understand whether on-line peer feedback are truly beneficial for improving students' writing ability, it is essential to know the findings of the previous studies about the effectiveness of using on-line peer feedback in language learning.

Many studies examined the teaching and learning of writing skill in relation to on-line peer feedback, and the results revealed its effectiveness in students' writing skill development. For example, Dippold (2007) investigated the usefulness of using blogs for providing peer feedback on ESL writing class. The results have shown that both student writers and student readers enjoy and get profit from doing peer feedback activity through blogging because of their friendly interactivity, easy and relaxing learning environment. However, more training for both student writers and student readers was necessary to enable them to use the blogs, learning tool, to their fullest potential. Similarly, Gedera (2012) investigated students' experience of receiving and providing peer feedback through blogging in a private university in Malaysia. The result showed that all the participants had positive attitude towards peer feedback activity through blogs.

The interactions and sharing through blogs enhanced them to use the authentic target language to a real audience. Students could improve their writing skill and became more independent and reflective learners.

Many studies were conducted to compare two modes of peer feedback on students' writing development (face-to-face and online), and most of the results demonstrated that on-line peer feedback produced better outcomes. For instance, Liu and Sadler (2003) studied the effect of different modes of peer feedback on EFL students' writing. This study was conducted with eight ESL students, divided into two groups. One group was assigned as online group, the other was face-to-face group.

The findings found that the overall number of comments made by the e-peer feedback group was larger for this group as well, thus resulting in a larger number of revisions overall. However, it also showed that the majority of the interaction of the majority of the online group, it focused on some irrelevant issues, which had less effect resulted for revision. Wichadee & Nopakun (2012) also studied the effect of two types of peer feedback, face-to-face and online feedback. The findings revealed that both kinds of peer feedback resulted in improving students' writing ability although students in online peer feedback group performed better writing work. In addition, both face-to-face and online peer feedback had a positive effect on students writing performance. Similarly, Hatime & Zeynep (2012) investigated the effect of online peer feedback through blogs on Turkish EFL students' writing performance and their perceptions. The control group consisting of 15 students attended in-class writing activities and utilized face-to-face oral discussions for peer feedback activity. In contrast, the experimental group of other 15 students attended classes in the computer laboratory and integrated blog peer feedback into their process oriented writing classes. The results revealed that although the students in both the control and experimental groups improved their writing in their revised drafts, students in the blog peer feedback group showed higher performance in revised drafts. Finally, the analysis of interviews and questionnaires revealed positive perceptions on the use of blogs in their writing classes.

It is noted that feedback received on-line tended to be more useful on the revised draft. Take an example of Song & Usaha (2009) who studied how EFL university students used e-peer feedback to revise their peers' writing in comparison with face-to-face peer feedback.

The findings revealed that the face-to-face group produced more comments than e-peer feedback group, thus resulting in many of comments used in revisions. However, e-peer feedback group produced more revision-oriented comments. The use of peer comments into revisions was different, so the students in e-feedback group had a better writing skill than those in the face-to-face group.

The result was similar to the study of Hatime & Zeynep (2012) in that students in the blog peer feedback group had better writing performance in revised drafts. However, it is interesting to learn that the results of some studies did not show any difference in students' writing improvement between the two modes: face-to-face and online peer feedback. For instance, Moradi & Karimpour, (2012) investigated students' experiences of online and offline peer feedback, two groups of students were asked to give comments on their peers' writing by using the checklist with a detailed way of writing self- and peer-assessment; one group gave online feedback while another gave feedback in classroom.

The finding indicated that there was not any significant difference between the feedback of the online and offline groups.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Objectives

- To examine the effects of blog peer feedback activity on students' writing abilities
- To investigate students' attitudes towards the blog peer feedback activity
- To study learning experience that students gain in blog peer feedback activity

Participants

This study employed one group pretest posttest design. The population was 2,040 second- year students enrolled in English for Expressing Ideas course (EN013) in the first semester of 2012 academic year. There were 51 sections altogether. Since students were already assigned to their sections, the cluster sampling was employed to get one section. As a result, this study was made up of 34 students from one section participating in this study.

Instruments

The effect on students' learning was proved by three kinds of instruments. There were two writing tests, a survey questionnaire asking their attitudes toward the peer feedback activity, and postings of learning to demonstrate students' experience on blogs.

First, the English writing tests designed in a parallel form were administered as a pre-test and post-test. Both tests required students to write a paragraph, consisting of 100-150 words based on a given topic. Time allowed for each test was 100 minutes with the total score of 20 points. In scoring the test, three examiners, including the researcher and two experienced teachers, are needed to mark the writing papers to ensure the fairness.

Second, to study how students thought about using peer feedback activities through blogs in their writing class and how it made an effect on their knowledge as well as their attitude in their increased capabilities, a questionnaire containing 12 items with a choice of five rating scale responses for each was distributed to the students after the posttest. In the summer class, this questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 students after they had participated in pilot learning of seven weeks. The students' feedback can be used to improve the questionnaire items, so the researcher can prevent any misinterpretation.

Finally, the third instrument was students' postings on blogs. To gain more details of students' mutual online learning, all students were encouraged to post their working experience on their weblogs at the end of the course. Students could share what they learned or got from learning with the team members through peer feedback activities on blogs. Also, they could give feedback on the difficulties they encountered and the benefits they gained while using blogs in doing peer feedback activities.

Procedure and Data Collection

In the first week, the pretest was given and the results were recorded, then the treatment started and lasted in 12 weeks. According to their scores, the subjects were placed in the high, average, and low groups. Using mean, median, and mode to group the students, the researcher got 6 groups, each of which contained 5-6 members; a high student, two average students and two low students.

Next, the teacher asked each group to create a group blog, with a safe password-protected and friendly environment for students to work together. The researcher suggested the students to use a popular, easy-to-use and free weblog provider: Blogger. Students were explained about how to give feedbacks; the training session was conducted before the lesson started. They were trained to be familiar with the peer feedback activity in order that they can produce more effective and specific comments.

After that, students were taught about how to write a good paragraph as well as how to write a main idea or a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence. Then they were given a topic and a writing practice. The researcher explained the scoring criteria on the first two weeks of the semester.

Then, students were assigned to write a paragraph every two weeks and posted their writing on blogs, then taking turn to give comments to their peers in group.

Each student had to give feedback to every member in group. That is, one student had to provide comments to the other four members. Students needed to write three pieces of writing assignments and posted on blogs. By doing so, students could learn the process of writing a paragraph, when having problematic areas of the paragraph writing, they could know how to solve it.

Moreover, it is the students' responsibility to make their decision whether to use comments from peers in revising the second draft or not. Then the students rewrote the second draft and posted it on blogs again. On week 12, the intervention was followed by the posttest and questionnaire.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Research Question: 1

To what extent do the students improve their writing abilities after doing peer feedback activity through blogging? This research question explored the effects of blog peer feedback method by examining the students' writing scores.

In order to find out whether the students improved significantly in their writing ability, the pretest and posttest mean scores were compared by using a paired samples t-test. Table 1 indicated that the mean score of the posttest was higher than that of the pretest. As evidenced by the significant difference at the level of .05, it clearly showed that students improve their writing abilities after using blogs in learning. (See Table: 2)

Table: 2
Means of the Pre-Test and Post-Test of the Students

	N	\bar{X}	S.D.	t	Sig
Pretest	34	12.60	2.11		
Posttest	34	13.91	1.73	-5.46	.000

Research Question: 2

What are the students' attitudes towards peer feedback activity?

Table: 3
Students' Attitudes towards Peer Feedback Activity

Statement	\bar{X}	S.D.	meaning
1. The peer feedback activity was a useful learning tool to improve my writing ability.	4.18	.58	positive
2. I felt relaxed to have my writing read by my peer and receive feedback.	3.94	.89	positive
3. I felt relaxed to give feedback to my peer.	3.76	.82	positive
4. The peer feedback activity increased my motivation in learning English writing.	3.82	.67	positive
5. The peer feedback activity enhanced my critical thinking and creativity.	4.03	.67	positive
6 The peer feedback activity improved my writing.	4.00	.70	positive
7. The peer feedback activity enhanced / instilled autonomous learning.	4.09	.62	positive
8. When revising my own writing, I considered my peer's comments or suggestions.	3.91	.57	positive
9. Revising or editing my peers' writing could increase my learning experiences.	4.12	.69	positive
10. I felt that peer feedback activity made me gain interpersonal skills.	3.74	.75	positive
11. I like my writing to be revised by my peers.	3.71	.76	positive
12. I felt that peer feedback activity made me learn more in a writing class.	4.15	.74	positive
Total	3.95	.40	positive

After the experiment, the students were asked to express their attitudes toward peer feedback activity. Table 2 indicated that students had positive overall attitudes ($\bar{X} = .95$). When considering each items, it was found that the highest score was on no.1 (The peer feedback activity was a useful learning tool to improve my writing ability, $\bar{X} = .18$), followed by no. 12 (I felt that peer feedback activity made me learn more in a writing class, $\bar{X} = 4.15$), and followed by no. 9 (Revising or editing my peers' writing could increase my learning experiences, $\bar{X} = 4.12$). However, the item that had the least mean score was no.11 (I like my writing to be revised by my peers, $\bar{X} = 3.71$). All of the items were at a positive level.

Research Question: 3

What is the students' learning experience in blog peer feedback activity?

As for qualitative data, the students were asked to write their feeling of things they liked and disliked about peer feedback activity, and post them on their blogs. From their posts of things they like, it was found that 24 out of 34 participants said that peer feedback activity was useful when applied in the writing course. That is, they could learn from their mistakes to improve their writing. Moreover, they could learn more new vocabularies and get more knowledge on how to write better. 7 out of 34 participants agreed that they got a wonderful learning experience through peer feedback activity. They got new ideas and new information while editing their peers' writing work. Three students identified that they learned to work cooperatively with others in groups; peer feedback activity enhanced the interaction and it built better relationship among classmates.

However, when asked about things they disliked in doing peer feedback, 20 out of 34 students complained they were not confident in their English capacity in giving comments or editing their peers' writing. They didn't understand some words and content of their peers' writing. 9 out of 34 participants said that they were uncomfortable to comment or edit their peers' writing because they feared that negative feedback would humiliate their peers, and their personal relationships could be broken later. Besides, 5 students revealed that it took times in giving feedback because they needed to check on organization, writing mechanic, grammar, choosing words, etc.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research finding indicates that online peer feedback through blogging can contribute to the improvement of students' writing abilities. When comparing the mean scores of the pretest and posttest, the result showed that the students' writing abilities significantly improved. This improvement was probably because of the two main reasons. First of all, it might be due to the nature of blogs which offer authentic learning environment through real communication (Noytim, 2010).

Peer feedback activity through blogs encourages active learner participation, an authentic communicative context, and audience awareness; it also offers friendly learning environment, lower writing apprehension (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Blogs can increase student-student interaction without time and place limitation. The more they joined the activity, the more they could practice and improve their writing skill. The second reason underlying this improvement was the beneficial process of peer feedback. Students can be encouraged to develop their writing through feedback activity. They realized that their writings were read, revised and edited by their peers; they were more careful in language use and grammatical structure in producing their written work. Peers' comments played an important role in improving their written work.

In other words, their written drafts can be improved according to those comments (Nelson and Murphy, 1993; Paulus, 1999). In addition, working through blogs helps shy and quiet students with low proficiency to have more time to consider what to write and to provide their responses (Galien & Bowcher, 2010).

This finding was found to be in accordance with the previous studies indicating that online peer feedback activity had a great impact on helping students to improve writing performance to some extent (Song & Usaha, 2009; Haytime & Zeynep, 2012; Wichadee & Nopakun, 2012).

The responses in the questionnaires showed that most of the students responded positively to the online peer feedback activity. Students viewed this activity as a useful learning tool to improve their writing ability.

This might be because they could get the comments from their peers and used them to develop their writing accordingly.

Moreover, students identified that revising or editing the peers' writing could increase their learning experiences. It suggested that students have grasped the benefits from doing this activity, for example, they could learn from mistakes to improve their writing. In addition, students felt relaxed in doing this activity because they were not limited by time and classroom context.

Meeting face-to-face with their friends and providing feedback in classroom might block the students to give constructive comments on their peers' writing. When students create and publish contents on blogs, their creative and critical thinking skills can be promoted. Students could also view their progress and monitor their improvement through blogs (Istifci, 2011).

This finding contributed to some researchers claiming that the technological developments can motivate student learning and make the writing classroom more creative, autonomous and collaborative (Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1996; Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

It could be said that the use of peer feedback activity through blogs did not only expand students' learning, it also encouraged students to be autonomous learners. They had to be responsible for their own learning, in giving and evaluation their feedback; moreover, they were more engaged in the writing course.

Yang et al. (2006) stated that peer feedback activity can promote interaction and construct knowledge from the actual level to potential level for developing their writing. The peer feedback also fostered learner autonomy because students had to make their own decision as to what, how much to make comments on their peers' written work.

In conclusion, the finding in this study has proved that the way to provide feedback is not restricted to face-to-face communication. With the use of technology, peer feedback can be done online.

Apart from providing more convenience for students to get involved with the activity, time spent for peer feedback in class can be saved for other skills like reading and speaking.

The benefits that students gain from online peer feedback activity do not include only writing skill improvement, but also cover the development of other skills such as critical thinking and autonomous learning.

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