

# Effect of Peer Feedback on Students' Revision of Writing - A Case Study of Hong Kong EFL Students

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**Abstract:** Peer feedback, as one of the significant reviewing practices in writing classrooms, has been receiving growing attention. The majority of research, however, concentrates on the context of higher education, focusing less on the context of EFL secondary schools in Hong Kong, where the students have lower language and cognitive abilities and are strongly influenced by the Chinese culture background. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, this study sets the context in the secondary classroom of Hong Kong. Six students with different English proficiency participated in the study. Multiple sources of data are collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, including EFL writing teaching and learning materials, students' writing products and interviews records. Students' comments on peer's work were divided into three categories: grammar, language features, content & structure. The preliminary writing drafts and the completed works were graded and compared. Semi-structured interviews were also analyzed to investigate condition for students' feedback and their views on the peer review exercise. The findings indicated that peer feedback had a positive effect on students' rewriting, in spite of students' English proficiency difference. Students expressed their willingness and appreciation in providing as well as receiving peer feedback. Though the study also revealed that peer feedback comments were still limited to grammatical level. This study provides insight of peer feedback practice in the context of EFL secondary classroom, and can function to guide teachers' further instructional activities for more effective writing teaching.

**Keywords:** EFL Writing, Peer Feedback, Written Corrective Feedback

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## 1. Introduction

Writing is always a crucial component in English teaching and learning, while the critical importance of revision in writing process has long been acknowledged in many studies [1, 4, 7, 17, 22]. Language teachers should provide opportunities for students to revise their writing with feedback, since feedback coupled with revision activities tends to be most effective in writing improvement [8]. However, Hong Kong secondary students rarely have opportunities to do revision. This is partially due to the large number of students in each class and heavy workload of English teachers. In this light, peer feedback can be an alternative to teachers' feedback see [2, 5, 15], which enables students to conduct revision based on feedback without many increments to teachers' workloads. Despite a growing number of studies about peer feedback [5, 13, 18], not much is known about to what extent young secondary language learners in Hong Kong would

benefit from peer review and what their attitudes are towards peer review. The most important purpose of this research is to examine the effectiveness of peer review on students' writing improvement in Hong Kong context.

## 2. Literature Review

Peer feedback is a form of formative assessment in which equal status learners consider the level, value, quality of the outcomes of their peers [6, 17]. In the domain of writing, peer feedback is also referred to as 'peer review', which is believed to have yielded a number of beneficial effects for both L1 and L2 student writing. For example, in Mendonca and Johnson's study [13], peer review allowed L2 high proficiency tertiary students to actively participate in the thinking process as they could discuss and negotiate their ideas with their peers, and enhanced their communicative proficiency. The finding of this study confirmed Zamel's [21] assertion that peer review

improved students' audience awareness by providing responses from the perspective of other readers. Holliway and McCutchen [9] emphasized that the writer could be motivated to revise their work by noticing the readers attempt to understand it. As Wu [19] found out significant improvements could be made in students' writing proficiency. Additionally, Nelson and Murphy's study [14] indicated that, besides high proficiency L2 tertiary students, low-proficiency ESL tertiary students could also engage in and benefit from peer review process. With the development of technology at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, online peer feedback arises both in the practical instructional classrooms and in terms of academic research. The effect of peer feedback during online teaching and learning has also been researched and confirmed by many studies [7, 12]. Lv et al. [11]'s meta-analysis of the effectiveness of online feedback showed that peer feedback had a comparatively large effect size ( $g=0.777$ ).

However, as a controversial issue, the effects of peer review have also been challenged by many researchers. Topping [17] remarked that feedback was useful only when recipients acted upon it. Leki's study [10] showed that students often failed to make decisions about whether to adopt their peer's feedback, as they doubted about the validity of feedback by peer. This is mainly because that compared to teachers who are the 'experts' of the knowledge domain, students do not regard their peers as 'knowledge authorities' to provide qualified feedback. Nevertheless, in recent studies, Cui, Schunn, Gai, Jiang, and Wang [6] indicated that revision after peer feedback was more successful than revision after teacher feedback. Student autonomy was significantly increased as a consequence of peer feedback but not as a result of teacher feedback. This was because peer review included uncertainty, which could promote students to search for confirmation and make self-correction.

Cho and Schunn [5] that peer review could be as effective as teacher feedback.

In Hong Kong, the updated pedagogies, like 'task-based learning' and 'collaborative learning', in line with heavy workload of teachers call for a promotion of pair or group work, which includes a popular use of peer assessment and peer review. However, a research conducted by Tsui and Ng [18] in Hong Kong context showed that students still tended to trust teacher feedback and made more incorporation of teacher's feedback into revision compared to peer feedback. This problem is more acute when considering the influence of Chinese culture background [3, 14, 16]. Nelson and Murphy's study [14] found out Chinese students, who were used to valuing highly the authority of their teachers, were less likely to accept their peer feedback. This was not only because that students may regard their peers as not knowledgeable enough to judge their writing, but also due to the Chinese culture of maintaining group harmony, which caused the unwillingness to criticize others [3, 16].

The conflicting findings above indicate the need of more studies concerning effect of peer review, especially for L2 writing revision in the context of Chinese culture. In addition, most of the studies are conducted with tertiary students with little research concerning secondary L2 students whose

language proficiencies are much lower. Thus this present research aims at investigating the effectiveness of peer review in writing process in a Hong Kong secondary school as well as students' attitudes towards peer review.

Two research questions were addressed in the present study:

- 1) *Does peer review have a positive effect on students' rewriting?*
- 2) *What are students' attitudes towards peer review?*

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The present study took place in a Hong Kong secondary school. This is a Band 3 Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) secondary school. The participants were Form Five students in the same class who shared similar cultural background. Six students with different English proficiency were chosen based on their results in the Form 5 middle term English writing test. The participants were asked to complete a writing and reviewing task as part of their normal English lessons taught by the subject teacher, but students' writings were scored by an experienced subject-matter expert, who was the panel chair of the school English subject team and had been teaching for over 15 years.

#### 3.2. General Design

In this research, students were asked to write a complaint letter about bad quality of a restaurant (See Appendix 1 for details of the task). This was a genre-based writing task, which aimed to develop student's awareness of genre and help students write for communication.

All students worked as writers and reviewers in this research. After writing the first draft, they provided written comments to their partner's draft letter. And then they revised their letters based on the feedback given by their peers. The expert scored all first and second drafts based on the same rubric which was the rubric of writing for Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (See Appendix 5 for the rubric content). The scores were then used to measure the quality of students' writing.

After the writing and reviewing process, a semi-structured interview was conducted to find out students' attitudes towards peer review. Hence, the data collected in this study consisted of drafts and final written works by the students, peer written feedback as well as students' responses in the semi-structured interview.

#### 3.3. Instruments & Procedures

The research was conducted as the following procedures.

##### *Step 1: Writing of first draft*

The writing task was part of a normal English writing lesson. The teacher gave input on ideas, language features and structures of a complaint letter. Students then wrote their first draft in an 80- minute lesson.

##### *Step 2: Introduction about the use of 'Feedback Guidance Sheet'*

Students were provided with a Feedback Guidance Sheet (see Appendix 3) when giving feedback to their peers, as Berg [2] and Leki [12] suggest training of peer review is needed. Feedback Guidance Sheet included categories that students were expected to comment on. Furthermore, in order to make sure students understand the concept of giving feedback to other's writing, the teacher also demonstrated how to use the feedback guidance sheet.

The *Feedback Guidance Sheet* was developed by the researcher with reference to Yang, Badger, and Yu [20]. In the guidance sheet, students were provided with directed questions which acted as guiding prompts for their feedback, for instance, "Does the writing follow the correct structure of a letter?" The directed questions were categorized into three categories, namely Content & Structure, Language features and Your comments. These three categories dealt with both linguistic expressions (Structure & Language) and content of the letter (Content & Your comments). Therefore, students had feedback for development of both understanding of the writing content and the corresponding linguistic expressions [8]. In addition, students were asked to provide both positive and negative comments for each of the category.

#### Step 3: Peer reviewing

After introducing the use of *Feedback Guidance Sheet*, the class was randomly divided into pairs. Within each pair, students read their partner's draft letter and provided written comments either in English or Chinese. Step 2 and step 3 were conducted in a 40 minutes English lesson.

#### Step 4: Revision based on peer feedback

Students got their draft back together with the Feedback Guidance Sheet filled by their peer. Based on the peer comments provided, they revised the draft and produced a final writing product. Students completed the revision task at home due to the limited English class time available for the research. Students then handed in the final product together with the draft and peer's written feedback.

#### Step 5: Scoring of the writings by expert

Since scores of students' writing were a standard to examine improvement of writing quality, the reliability of the scores was of high importance. Hence, an experienced subject-matter expert was invited to score all the drafts and final products using the writing rubric for Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (Appendix 5). Based on this rubric, the full mark is 21, with each sub-section (Content, Language and Organization) carrying a mark of 7.

#### Step 6: Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Cantonese by the researcher, and probing questions listed on Appendix 4 [adopted from 19] were asked as follow-ups. During the interview, the drafts, final products and written peer comments were presented to the interviewees for their reference.

#### Step 7: Data analysis

First, a detailed analysis of students' comments was conducted to examine what kind of improvement students had made in their revision. Students' comments were divided into three categories: grammar, language features, content &

structure, which follows and reinforces the Feedback Guidance Sheet. For each category, two numbers were counted: the total number of comments made (Number I) and the number of comments that were incorporated by partner (Number II). Examples of the comments are referred to when reporting research findings. Afterwards, scores of drafts and final writing products were compared to measure the improvement of writing quality, and at the same time explore relationship between comments made and writing improvement. The data collected in semi-structured interview was also analyzed to investigate the reason and condition for students' feedback and their views on the peer review exercise.

## 4. Results

The research results from the writing task and interview are illustrated in this part. In order to investigate whether the effect of peer review differs with students' English proficiency, the six participants in this research are indicated as A (excellent), B, C, D, E, F (disastrous), following their results in the Form Five middle term writing test.

### 4.1. Analysis of Students' Comments

Research findings of students' comments are reported in three categories: Grammar, Language Features, Content & Structure, while analysis of students' language proficiency influence and students' incorporation of feedbacks are stressed afterwards.

#### Category 1: Grammar

Students were asked to underline partner's grammatical mistakes during peer review. It is found that all the six students got comments on grammar and the average number is (shown in Table 1 below), which indicates that students are able to provide comments about grammar. Furthermore, almost all peer comments on grammar were incorporated by students despite their language proficiency differences.

Table 1. Grammar Comments.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	Average
Number I*	3	5	3	15	9	19	9
Number II*	2	4	3	15	9	17	8.3

\* Number I - The total number of comments made &

Number II - the number of comments that were incorporated by partner

After examining the kind of grammar that was commented on, it shows that most of the comments are about spelling, article use or tense. Additionally, over half of the grammar comments were changes from simple present tense to simple past tense. That is because, the writing task in this research required students to describe their past experience which calls for use of simple past tense. Two examples of students' revision based on peer's grammar comments are shown below:

#### 1) Example 1. – Spelling

a) Original sentence – *The ashes falled onto the food.*

b) Changed sentence after revision – *The ashes fell onto the food.*

### 2) Example 2. – Use of simple past tense

- a) Original sentence – *they just keep working.*
- b) Changed sentence after revision – *they just kept working.*

There are only a few numbers of comments about more complex grammar items. For example, in the work of Student A, a comment is made about the use of present perfect and past perfect tense.

### 3) Example 3. – Use of perfect tense

- a) Original sentence – *When I arrived, they have already died.*
- b) Changed sentence after revision – *When I arrived, they had already died.*

### Category 2: Language Features

The writing task was to write a complaint letter, therefore, input such as sentences and phrases of stating the reason for writing the main complaints was given in teaching process. Students were reminded again to notice the language uses by probing questions in the Feedback Guidance Sheet. During peer review, students wrote the suggested language patterns directly on partner's draft. One example of comment and revision on language features is as below:

### 4) Example 4. – Stating the reason for writing the main complaints

- a) Original sentence – *The restaurant was not clean.*
- b) Comment – *use 'another problem was...' (written beside the original sentence)*
- c) Changed sentence after revision – *Another problem was that the restaurant was not clean.*

The result shows that students have the ability to provide comments of language features, and the comments do help improve students writing by reinforcing the taught language input again during their revision. However, students failed to figure out all the sentences that needed improvement, as presents in Table 2 following, the average number of comments made is only around 1. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that all the comments made were incorporated, which indicates the usefulness of peer review.

Table 2. Language Features.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	Average
Number I*	0	2	0	1	2	2	1.17
Number II*	0	2	0	1	2	2	1.17

\* Number I - The total number of comments made &

Number II - the number of comments that were incorporated by partner

### Category 3: Content & Structure

Students wrote comments on their partner's draft directly during peer review. Compared to grammar and language features comments, comments of content & structure are rather limited. 4 out of 6 students got comments of content & structure, and even among these four students, three of the comments were about wrong use of letter format. One comment on content for Student A's draft is as below:

### 5) Example 5. – content

- a) Original sentence – *the fish tasted stale.*
- b) Comment – *add "let alone the shrimps, crabs"*

(written beside the original sentence)

- c) Changed sentence after revision – *the fish tasted stale, let alone the shrimps, the crabs, and the soup.*

In this example, Student A was able to incorporate peer's comments and simultaneously made improvement beyond the comment. This example seems to demonstrate students' ability of giving and adopting peer comments, but it may also result from Student A's excellent language proficiency. In terms of structure, there is only one comment among all the six drafts, that is, Student C received a written comment "It is still better to write a story follow the picture" at the end of his writing. However, Student C didn't follow the suggestion which brings out the question of students' attitudes and choice towards incorporating peer comments.

Table 3. Content & Structure.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	Average
Number I*	1	0	1	0	1	3	1
Number II*	1	0	0	0	1	3	0.83

\* Number I - The total number of comments made &

Number II - the number of comments that were incorporated by partner

From the above tables and examples, it can be concluded that students are able to provide peer comments which can help improve writing quality in revising process, but students' ability of providing feedback is mainly at grammatical level, even though some efforts had been shown in commenting language features and content & structure, the effect is unremarkable and limited.

Compared Number II with Number I, the overall rate of students' incorporation of peer feedback is as high as 92.54%, which may show that students have a certain level of trust towards their peer's knowledge and ability. However, it is worth noticing that the high rate may be influenced by the fact that most of the comments provided are about grammar and language use which students themselves can make decision about the accuracy of the comments through self-evaluation before making changes accordingly.

In addition, Student F received most feedback and made most changes. Comparatively, Student A received much fewer feedbacks. This finding stresses the various effects of peer review towards students with different English proficiency. Lower level students tend to have more room of improvement and hence benefit most from peer review. While for advanced learners whose works are already fine written among peers, students are not knowledgeable enough to provide valid and useful comments.

## 4.2. Overall Score

Table 4. Scores of First Draft and Final Product.

	First Draft (Max. 21)	Final Product (Max. 21)
A	17 (6 + 5 + 6)	17 (6 + 5 + 6)
B	15 (6 + 4 + 5)	16 (6 + 5 + 5)
C	11 (4 + 3 + 4)	13 (4 + 5 + 4)
D	11 (4 + 3 + 4)	13 (4 + 5 + 4)
E	10 (3 + 3 + 4)	12 (4 + 4 + 4)
F	7 (2 + 2 + 3)	10 (3 + 4 + 3)
Average:	12	13.5

Table 4 above shows the scores of the six participants on their draft and final products, which demonstrates writing quality improvement after peer review. Based on the rubrics, the total score is the sum up of scores for each sub-section, namely Content (C), Language (L) and Organization (O). These sub-section scores are addressed to explore what area students' writing had improved and relationship between peer reviews with writing quality improvement.

As presented in the table, the average scores for the first draft and final product were 12 and 13.5 respectively, which showed an increase of 1.5 marks out of 21 (7.1%). The increase of scores demonstrated the improvement of writing quality, which indicates that peer review has generally a positive effect towards students' rewriting process.

However, when taking a close examination of the scores for each section, the score increment differs a lot. For Language, the score increased at 1 mark out of 7 (14.3%), while for Content and Organization, the numbers are 0.33 marks (4.8%) and zero respectively. The figure corroborates the fact that students comments were mainly about grammar with limited ones concerning language features and content & structure.

Moreover, considering individual student performance, Student A's score remained the same, while Student F's score increased at the largest scale – 3 marks. From this difference, it can be seen that the effect of peer review does differ with students' English proficiency, and the effect seems to be more positive and obvious for students with a lower level English.

### 4.3. Interview

The responses collected from interviews are generally positive. All six participants said that they enjoyed and benefited a lot from peer review. First, reading other's work motivated them to reflect upon their own writing. As Student B said: *"I will think about whether I have made the same mistakes when I comment on peer's draft."* They also found themselves much clearer with the writing criteria, and were more confident of producing a better work later. Moreover, corroborating the results above, peer review greatly benefits lower level students, as Student F said in the interview *"I learnt a lot about language use, structure and writing ideas when reading peer's work, which greatly helped their revision"*. Nonetheless, for higher level student, they also benefited from peer review practice, as it helped them enhance a sense of audience. When asked about what benefited her most in the interview, Student A said: *"Because I know my peer will read my composition, I think more before writing and I want to make sure that they can understand my writing"*.

In terms of the quality of peer comments, five participants regarded the peer's comments as with acceptable quality. But they emphasized that they would evaluate accuracy of the comments instead of directly following them like those by the teacher. However, Student C was disappointed with the peer feedback. When asked why he chose to ignore peer's comment on structure, he relied that *"I don't trust my partner, as his English level was lower than me, and the comment is not specific enough"*. He then emphasized that he did value peer review practice, but it really depended on partner's language proficiency.

## 5. Discussion

Overall, the findings shown above indicate that peer review does have a positive effect on students' rewriting, in spite of students' English proficiency difference. Firstly, the present study demonstrated that even with limitations, students are able to provide useful comments to peers, and students are willing to read their peer's comments, as can be seen from the comments made by students and the high rate of comment incorporation in this study. Moreover, the improvement of writing quality, as well as students' responses in the interviews demonstrates that students appreciated the value of peer review and respected peer comments, which goes in line with the findings in Mendonca and Johnson's [13] study and Tsui and Ng's [18] study.

However, as shown in the analysis of types of comments provided and students' scores increment in different sub-sections, it is obvious that peer comments were limited at grammatical level, which caused the result that students' writing quality only improved in terms of language use instead of content or organization. These findings confirmed the results of Tsui and Ng' [18] and Cho and MacArthur's [5] study that students were lack of confidence and ability to provide macro-level comments. Especially in this present study, the participants were Band 3 CMI school students whose English language proficiency greatly limited their ability of providing comments other than grammar. Additionally, the interview date also corroborated the influence of student's language proficiency on peer review effect. Lower level students tend to benefit more from peer review for two reasons: one is that their writing contains more mistakes to comment on, especially at grammatical level; another is that they have more to learn from others' work.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that despite language proficiency influence, all the six participants reported that they benefited from reading other's work. When giving feedback, they would reflect that whether they had made the same mistake and this was something they had never experienced in teacher review or self-correction. The other commonly shared benefit is the motivation to reflect upon one's own work. The high incorporation rate of peer comments and interview data showed that students would read their own work again to check the accurateness of peer comments, and they would only incorporate comments they agreed with. In this way, they were motivated to reflect upon their writing and find out their weakness which they had ignored. Students are involved into a process of reading their own work from a reader's perspective which enhances audience awareness and effective communication [5, 6].

## 6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the findings of the present research have shown that peer review generally had a positive effect towards students' writing improvement, and students valued highly peer review practice. It seems that peer review is a perfect alternative to teacher review, hence solving the problem of

heavy workload for Hong Kong secondary English teachers. However, the research also demonstrated that due to students' language ability, peer comments were mostly at micro-level which was grammatical correction, while there was a lack of macro-level feedback about content and organization. Hence, peer review cannot totally replace teacher review, contrastively, peer review can be a complement to teacher review so as to provide students with comprehensive and detailed feedback, as well as develop their learner autonomy and audience awareness.

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