Graduate students' self-reported perspectives regarding peer feedback and feedback from writing consultants

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Abstract This study reported how ten Taiwanese Master's students perceived their experiences of receiving feedback given by their peers and writing consultants to revise a shortened version of their thesis proposals. Collected over the course of one semester, data included students' writing portfolios and interviews with them. Analysis of the data revealed three major themes: (1) The participants felt quite positive about providing and receiving peer feedback, although they seemed cautious toward language-related peer comments; (2) they generally had positive experience with the writing consultants, although the perceived usefulness of the consultants' feedback varied with individual consultants and (3) the two types of comments served different functions for students, and questions arose from the peer editing process could serve as prompts for writing consultation sessions. Possible future research directions as well as pedagogical implication are outlined to conclude the paper.

Keywords Graduate students · Thesis writing · Peer feedback · Feedback from writing consultants · Writing centers

Introduction

Feedback plays a central role in learning to write a second language. It allows students to see how others respond to their writing and to learn from these responses. It also emphasizes, according to Hyland (2003), "a process of

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writing and rewriting where the text is not seen as self-contained but points forward to other texts the student will write" (p. 177). This study explored students' perceptions to two feedback sources, namely peer feedback and feedback from the writing consultants from the writing center of their university. Compared to peer feedback, which has been much studied, research on feedback from writing consultants is scanty. As more and more Asian universities are setting up writing centers on their campuses, more studies are needed to investigate writing center practices. This study is one such attempt, as it investigates students' perceptions to two feedback forms readily available to the student writers during the writing process. Such investigation will not only help to further the research on writing center practices in EFL settings, but also contributes to the research on the joint use of feedback from peers and writing consultants.

Literature review

The literature on L2 writing research abounds with discussions on the features and effectiveness of different types of feedback available to student writers (Hyland 2003; Liu and Hansen 2002; Miao et al. 2006; Min 2005, 2006; Paulus 1999; Zhang 1999; Zhu 2001). One type of feedback is peer feedback, which is also referred to as "peer response" or "peer review" (Hansen and Liu 2005) in the literature. Previous research has looked into (a) the effect of this form of feedback compared to teacher feedback (Miao et al. 2006; Paulus 1999) and self-revision (Suzuki 2008) on students' subsequent revision; (b) students' attitudes toward peer feedback and teacher feedback (Zhang 1999); and (c) training students to become effective peer reviewers (Min

2003, 2005, 2006). In the first line of research, the general conclusion is that teacher feedback triggered more revision than peer feedback. On the other hand, Suzuki (2008) found that her participants made almost twice as many text changes to their essays during self-revision as they did during peer revision. With regard to students' attitudes toward different types of feedback, the existing research seems to suggest that teacher feedback is more valued than peer feedback, but students also recognize the importance of peer feedback (Miao et al. 2006). The third group of research tackles the issue of training students to become effective peer reviewers. The training was found to help student reviewers avoid vague comments and misinterpretations of writers' intentions (Min 2005).

Feedback on student compositions can also come from other sources. One of them is the writing tutors in writing centers. According to Murphy and Law (1995), writing centers have been part of many American higher education institutions since the 1930s. In Taiwan, where the current study is situated, various universities have set up writing centers in recent years to help their students develop skills in English academic writing. A survey of the literature reveals that much research has been conducted on different aspects of writing center practices (Thompson 2009; Thonus 2002, 2004; Weigle and Nelson 2004; Williams 2004; Williams and Severino 2004). Many of these studies focus on the interaction between tutors and tutees (Thompson 2009; Thonus 2004; Weigle and Nelson 2004) and device guidelines on how to provide motivational and cognitive scaffolding to students. On the other hand, Williams' (2004) study explores how students take on the comments they received from writing tutors in their revision. It was found that surface-level features (such as grammatical and lexical choices) discussed during the tutorial were more likely to get revised than text-based problems. This is consistent with Conrad and Goldstein's (1999) finding that problems that were easy to repair tended to be revised more successfully.

Much of the previous research on writing center practices was conducted in American universities. According to Williams (2004), there is a need to expand the research to other kinds of students in other kinds of settings. A review of the literature indeed reveals the scarcity of research on writing center practices from EFL contexts. As many resources have been allocated to set up writing centers in Asian universities, more studies need to be conducted to understand students' experiences in the writing centers. On university campuses where writing centers have been established, students can seek feedback on their writing from writing consultants. Another possible feedback source is from their peers, as peer feedback is part of course design in many writing classes. The current study was designed to examine students' perceptions of these two feedback forms.

Research methodology

The research setting and participants

To allow students gain feedback from different sources, the participants of the current study were asked to have the first draft of their final paper (a 12–15 page paper which consists of a brief introduction of the writer's thesis research focus, a literature review, and a brief description of research methodology) read by two of their peers from the writing class and a writing consultant from the writing center of the students' university in Taiwan (hereafter University X). One of the free services the center provides is English writing consultation to enhance students' skills in academic writing. During the 50-min session, students will have an opportunity to discuss their writing sample with a writing consultant. After the session is over, the consultant will fill out an evaluation form (Appendix 1) and give it to the student. All the consultants are full-time lecturers of University X's language center. They hold a Master's degree in different disciplines, including English literature, linguistics, TESOL, translation, engineering, and applied science. When the study was conducted, there were eight writing consultants in the language center; three of them were native speakers of English and five of them were Taiwanese teachers. During the 18-week semester, each teacher is responsible for about 45 sessions of writing consultation. On University X's campus, the writing consultation service is extremely popular, as students often have to wait in long lines to make a reservation. The participants of this study reported that there was little vacancy left when they tried to reserve a consultation session in the second half of the semester, so they took whatever time slot that was left.

The participants of the study were ten MA TESOL students who were enrolled in my course titled "Thesis Writing," offered by University X's MA program in TESOL as a required course for the completion of the MA program. The objective of the course was twofold: to help students become familiar with the format and style of thesis writing and to develop analytical skills needed for thesis writing. These participants were in the second year of their study when the current study was conducted in the fall semester of 2008. All of them passed a competitive entrance exam (with an admission rate of less than 10%) to be admitted to the program in 2007. All of them were in their early 1920s, and all but one student are female. They, as well as the writing consultants,[1] are referred to by

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[1] The writing consultants are Ms. Kensington, Ms. Davidson, Mr. Smith, Ms. Lin, Ms. Chen, Ms. Cheng, Ms. Su, and Ms. Chang. The first three teachers are native speakers of English.

pseudonyms (Eric, Julian, Monica, Mandy, Cindy, Amy, Christy, Susan, Sarah, and Amanda) in the current study.

As mentioned earlier, the participants were asked to reserve one writing consultation session to receive feedback on the first draft of their final assignment. As for the pairing up of peer editing, students were free to choose their reviewers. In other words, peer feedback was exchanged among students working in self-selecting groups of three (also see Paulus 1999; Miao et al. 2006). In one of the class meetings near the end of the semester, students also had an opportunity to communicate their written comments with their peers, i.e., an oral feedback session which lasted for 2 h.

Data collection methods and analysis

As part of the course requirement, the participants were asked to compile a writing portfolio which consists of (a) the first draft of their final paper (see above for the requirement for this paper); (b) comment sheet completely by the writing consultant (Appendix 1); (c) peer feedback sheets completely by two peers (see Appendix 2 for the feedback form designed by the researcher); (d) a completed revision feedback sheet (Appendix 3) adopted from Liu and Hansen (2002) for which students were asked to list the major comments they received from the writing consultants and their peers, judge whether they would revise based on these comments, and most importantly, justify their decision; (e) a revised version of the final paper; (f) other assignments written over the course of the semester.

In addition to collecting the above documents, I also conducted a semi-structured interview (approximately 30 min) with each student once his/her writing portfolio was completed at the end of the semester. The interview, conducted in Chinese, was designed to understand students' overall perception of receiving feedback from their peers and writing consultants. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim by a research assistant first. The transcripts were then checked by the researcher to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. Each transcription represents a single file in the data bank, and when the data in an interview were discussed in the current study, they were referred to by the pseudonym of the interviewee, e.g., "interview with Julian."

Because I hoped to gain an understanding of the participants' perceptions of receiving feedback from their peers and writing consultants, I employed the grounded theory approach to data analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The data analysis was an inductive and ongoing process, and three major themes emerged: (1) The participants felt quite positive about providing and receiving peer feedback, although they seemed cautious toward language-related peer comments; (2) the participants generally had positive

experience with the writing consultants, although the perceived usefulness of the consultants' feedback varied with individual consultants; and (3) the two types of comments served different functions for students, and questions arose from the peer editing process could serve as prompts for writing consultation sessions. In the next section, data pertaining to these three themes will be reported.

Findings

Theme 1: Providing and receiving peer feedback

Overall speaking, students felt quite positive about the peer-reviewing experience. For most of them, this was actually their first peer-reviewing experience in their undergraduate and graduate study. In the interviews, many students expressed their gratitude to their peers for carefully going over their drafts and providing many constructive comments. From the editing process, students also discovered some common writing problems they were not aware of, such as the use of the definite article in academic writing. Reading and responding to others' writing also prompted students to reflect on their own writing. For example, Eric reported that he was inspired by some good sentences Mandy wrote in her draft and thought that he could imitate her writing style. On the other hand, Monica felt that Julian did not digest the information from the research articles well enough before citing it in her paper. She reflected that before submitting her draft to her advisor in the future, she needed to make sure that she did not simply present "chunks of undigested information."

Data also suggest that students were quite cautious toward peer comments, especially if these comments were related to grammar. Take Christy for example. She said in the interview, "My two peer reviewers corrected the same grammar points in my paper. I was not sure if they were right or not. I checked my grammar books before I made some revision" (interview with Christy). Eric voiced even more doubt on the "correctness" of many of his peers' comments on grammar. Compared with his classmates, Eric is a more experienced writer, since he had taken a similar course on academic writing before and his thesis research required him to become seasoned in doing textual analysis of English academic writing. In my interview with him, he said that he would reflect on his peers' comments after receiving them. He also told me that he found evidence to refute most of these comments.

Theme 2: Receiving feedback from writing consultants

Data indicate that many students had positive experience with the writing consultants. As mentioned earlier, they

were required to arrange one consultation meeting. All students attended two sessions, except Eric who attended just one and Cindy who attended three. Julian felt that although Ms. Lin, an alumnus of the TESOL program, was not familiar with her thesis topic, she was able to share her thesis-writing experience and gave her some concrete suggestions on how to organize her ideas. Eric felt that he benefited from Ms. Chang's expertise in translation. He enjoyed how Ms. Chang applied her knowledge in translation to help him select more precise words to express his ideas. In my interview with him, he admitted that before this consultation session, he did not have much faith in the quality of writing consultation. He was also very passive with planning his visit to the writing center. In fact, by the time he thought he should make a reservation for the writing consultation service, there was no vacancy left. Julian, who had reserved three sessions, kindly spared one session to Eric so that he could fulfill the course requirement. In the interview, Eric said that he was "pleasantly surprised" by Ms. Chang's ability to perform a detailed textual analysis of his writing during their meeting.

Julian's experience of writing consultation deserves more discussion. Like many of her peers, she attended two sessions. One of her consultants was, as aforementioned, Ms. Lin, and the other writing consultant was Mr. Smith, a native speaker of English with a background in engineering. During their consultation session, Mr. Smith questioned Julian's use of many words (e.g., *pre-school children*, *kindergarteners*, and *participant recruitment*), which Julian felt were "very standard" in the TESOL field. She described the scene, "My research focuses on the learning of elementary school students in Taiwan. I used some terms like *pre-school children* and *kindergarteners* in my paper. He told me he had never seen these terms and asked me to think of alternatives to replace them" (interview with Julian). Julian continued, "There was a long period of silence, as I was trying to think of alternatives. I thought I have seen these terms used so often in research papers, but you know, he is the native speaker. The session is so short, and he only focused on those few words!" Indeed, Julian sounded quite frustrated when she recalled her meeting with Mr. Smith. She said, "I was so confused and felt it was a waste of my time."

Because of their positive experience with the writing consultants, many students mentioned that they would definitely make use of this service during their thesis-writing process. The experience from this semester also prompted them to be more strategic when planning their future writing consultation. In Christy's words, "I think I should sign up more sessions in advance so that I can have the same teacher to review my draft at different points in time. Of course, this will require a lot of pre-planning because the service is very popular on campus" (interview

with Christy). Mandy also had the same thought, "I think I should use the service more strategically" (interview with Mandy). She continued, "I should pick a teacher I like and show her new things every time. This way, I will not waste my time by showing the same thing to different people again and again."

Theme 3: The nature and interaction of the two types of feedback

An analysis of the data revealed that unlike many of the comments from writing consultants, many peer comments went beyond the surface-level linguistic errors and focused on the content and organization of the paper (see Mandy's revision feedback sheet in Appendix 4 for an example). On the contrary, many participants reflected that the writing consultants seemed to focus on the surface-level errors (e.g., verb tense and the use of prepositions) of their drafts in the 50-min session. As Cindy remarked, "The writing consultants can only focus on the surface errors because they don't know what you are doing. They don't know what is difficult for you. But your peers know because they are doing the same thing themselves" (interview with Cindy). Compared to their doubt on the correctness of their peers' comments on grammar, those who received grammar correction from native-English-speaking writing consultants accepted these comments more readily; they appreciated the opportunity to have their surface-level errors checked by "these people with better language sense."

As mentioned earlier, the peer editing process helped some students raise their awareness on many writing problems, such as the use of the definite article. It was found that some questions arose from the peer editing process served as prompts for writing consultation sessions. This is illustrated by Cindy's experience. She talked about her discussion with Amy about the use of definite article during the oral feedback session, "In the oral feedback meeting, Amy and I spent almost the entire 2 h on discussing when to use *the*. We were surprised that after studying English for so many years, we are still not sure of how to use this small word in formal writing" (interview with Cindy). After this intense discussion with Amy, Cindy asked Ms. Davidson to specifically comment on the use of *the* in her draft during their consultation meeting. Cindy said that Ms. Davison gave her a few tips, which she found very useful.

Discussion

While it is not the purpose of the current study to investigate whether students prefer one type of comment to the

other (for example, see Tsui and Ng 2000) or how much revision each type of comment triggered (e.g., Suzuki 2008), it was found that students held a more cautious attitude toward comments made by their peers, especially if the comments pertain to surface-level writing errors. This finding conforms with Berg's (1999) remark that "in getting a response from a peer, the student cannot just take the advice as given and make the change, as is likely when the expert (i.e., teacher) provides feedback" (pp. 231–232). Instead, the student will need to "consider the advice from a peer, question its validity, weigh it against his or her own knowledge and ideas, and then make a decision about what, if any, changes to make." Although the participants of the current study may not take in their peers' comments as readily, the validation process is an important learning opportunity for them.

Data indicate that many comments made by writing consultants centered around lower order concerns. Despite the *better writers not better papers* (Williams 2004) mantra espoused by many writing centers, how to develop the writer (not the writing) in a short 50-min session is less clear. Data also suggest that compared to writing consultants, many peer comments went beyond surface errors. Because they were studying in the same program, students mastered more disciplinary knowledge for them to comment on higher order concerns than the consultants who had a wide range of academic backgrounds. One inherent constraint of the writing consultation is the limit of time. Compared to the 50 min each consultation lasted, some students reported that they spent as much as 4 h on helping their peers revise their drafts. Regardless of the focus on the comments (whether on lower or higher order concerns), students seemed to feel "the more, the better." With their different foci, the two types of feedback were found to complement each other. As shown in the case of Cindy, some students also used the writing consultation session to help them clarify on problems that arose from the peer-reviewing process. Those students who consulted native-English-speaking writing consultants also expressed their greater faith in these teachers' language sense and grammatical judgment. This perception is understandable, as students tend to have less confidence in their peers,' who are also English learners, English proficiency.

This study is also unique in its student population and writing task. Many previous studies on feedback were conducted in undergraduate English writing classes, in which students were asked to write on general composition topics, such as "Write about a famous person in history" in Suzuki (2008) and "The advantages/disadvantages (of a new technical invention)" in Min (2005). This study involved a group of graduate students who needed to draft a shortened version of their thesis proposals. Besides their writing teachers and advisors who are probably too busy to provide much detailed feedback to each individual student during the writing process, their peers, with their rhetorical knowledge on the conventions of the thesis and shared disciplinary knowledge, may be the best candidates to provide extensive feedback on their writing.

Conclusion

The current study examined how a group of Taiwanese graduate students perceived two feedback forms—peer feedback and feedback from writing consultants—on shortened versions of their thesis proposals. It was found that students generally enjoyed and benefited from seeking feedback from their peers and writing consultants. The two types of feedback also seemed to serve different purposes for students. While the writing consultants mainly served as proofreaders of local errors in the brief consultation sessions, students' peer reviewers were able to comment more on higher order issues. Future research can examine more closely learners' decision-making process when they receive conflicting information from different feedback providers. Other effective ways of assisting learners in the learning-to-write process (e.g., teacher–student conferencing, computer-assisted language editing) should also be explored to see if they could be utilized jointly with different feedback forms. A virgin territory in L2 writing research is writing center practices as situated in non-American EFL settings. Much can be studied in this domain, including students' expectations of writing consultation service, the interaction between writing tutors and tutees during the tutorial, writing tutors' personal beliefs in conducting tutorials, and the professional development of writing tutors.

On the pedagogical dimension, peer feedback should become a routine feature in writing classrooms. It worked effectively in the current study, as students shared similar English writing proficiency, disciplinary knowledge, and the same dedication to improve their academic writing skills and produce quality theses. Many students also enjoyed and benefited from their interaction with the writing consultants, suggesting that writing teachers should encourage their students to take the fullest advantage of such service if it is available on campus. Through some trail and error, as shown by the experience of Christy and Mandy, students can identity the writing consultant(s) they want to continue to work with to improve their writing. The findings of this study also support the combined benefits of using both writing consultants and peers for feedback. Before submitting the final writing product to their writing

teachers, these two groups of reviewers may provide many useful suggestions on bettering the writing.

Appendix 1

See Table 1.

Table 1 Writing feedback sheet from the writing center

Student name: Date: Counselor:

	Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Needs more practice
Format					
□ Title centered □ Double-spaced □ Paragraphs are (a) indented or (b) separated by a line					
Mechanics					
Punctuation					
Capitalization					
Spelling					
Content					
The essay is interesting[a]					
The essay shows that the writer used care and thought					
Essay organization					
The essay has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion (for *research paper*, it follows the *IMRD* structure)					
Introduction (clear thesis statement or *statement of purpose*)					
Body (uses logical division of ideas to organize ideas)					
Conclusion (summarizes or restates)					
Unity: each paragraph discusses one main idea, and there are no sentences off topic					
Coherence: the essay flows smoothly					
Transitions					
Paragraph organization					
Each paragraph has a topic sentence[a]					

Table 1 continued

Student name: Date: Counselor:

	Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Needs more practice
The paragraph contains supporting detail					
Grammar					
Subject-verb agreement					
Pronoun reference					
Verb tense					
Word choice or collocation					
Sentence structure					
Other					

[a] May not apply to *research papers* (N/A)

Appendix 2: Peer feedback sheet

1. What are the main strengths of this paper?
2. Are there consistent grammatical errors and stylistic problems? Please list them.
3. What is unclear to you in the paper? In your opinion, what should be changed, deleted, added, or restated? Please offer concrete suggestions.
4. What most impressed you about the paper?
5. Other comments on helping your peer improve his/her draft

Appendix 3

See Table 2.

Table 2 Revision feedback sheet (adopted from Liu and Hansen 2002)

Comment received	Who gave the comment?	Yes—I will revise the paper based on this comment	No–I will not use this comment in revision	Why?
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				

Appendix 4

See Table 3.

Table 3 Mandy's revision feedback sheet

Comment received	Who gave it?	Yes—I will revise the paper based on this comment	No–I will not use this comment in revision	Why?
1. There are some coherence problems, specifically on the use of singular/plural forms	Ms. Chen	✔		These are careless mistakes and they shouldn't appear if I had done my proof-reading, so I will have them corrected
2. Collocation inappropriate/ incorrect	Ms. Davidson	✔		As an English native speaker, Ms. Davidson knows the correct usage of collocation, and she can spot problematic collocation that I failed to see
3. Inappropriate use of article "the"	Ms. Davidson	✔		I was never sure about when and where to use "the", but Ms. Davidson gave me some principle guidelines and I decided to use them
4. The research context can be described in greater details	Amy	✔		I agreed that more details can be added
5. The term "English Table" in RQ appears a bit abrupt, and it needs more definitions before that	Amy	✔		In my draft the term was also mentioned vaguely at the end of introduction, and it's true that readers who are not familiar with English Tables might be confused. So I offered brief explanations at the end of literature review and before my RQ
6. "Significance of the study" can be added as a separate section of the proposal	Amy	✔		Adding such section can further solidify my study and form a stronger argument for the paper
7. There seemed to some sorts of mix up in the "data sources" section	Amy Eric	✔		Again, this was a careless mistake, so I fixed it
8. Research questions can be moved to the end of introduction	Eric		✔	Lots of the papers I read actually put RQs before going into the study and methodology itself, and I thought literature review can help form my RQs and allow the readers to understand more the base of such RQs
9. Some phrases can be more concise, such as "put the emphasis on" or "in relation to"	Eric	✔		I admit that I tend to use redundant words or phrases
10. Non-integral citation should be arranged according to alphabetical order	Eric	✔		The literature indeed should be listed alphabetically rather than chronologically when I look up some of the papers
11. It's better to use short AND long sentences instead of compound sentences all the way through	Eric	✔		Again, I have the tendency to write longer sentences. I'll try to break them up in my revision
12. Try to make the title clearer, and omit the hyphen in between	Eric	✔		I also consider my original title a bit vague, so I changed it
13. The hosting teachers in the research context should be specified	Eric	✔		For those who aren't so familiar with the system of English Tables, I admit that my original descriptions of the teachers can be misleading
14. The last sentence in the "participant" section doesn't seem to make any sense	Eric	✔		I originally wrote this sentence out of the comments I received from writing consultation, but later I took advisor's suggestions and changed my sentence into a more logic one
15. The word "figure" should be abbreviated in displaying figures	Eric		✔	That's not necessarily the case, as lots of the paper I read also use the full word "figure"
16. There should be more explanations offered in the literature review part	Eric	✔		I haven't quite finished the literature review section when I gave my peers the draft, so of course there'll be more coming up in my later paper

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