Students' Perceptions of Peer Feedback in Computer-mediated Communication

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Abstract: Feedback forms an integral part of teaching and learning a second language and is an important stage in the process of learning. In most EFL contexts, the teacher is always viewed as the ultimate possessor of knowledge, and his feedback was valued as the only acceptable source of information. However, very recently this trend is changing, and feedback offered by other students is receiving acceptability. This change in form was accompanied by a change in the means of feedback provision after the launch of the internet and its soaring popularity in the pedagogy. Currently with the spread of Covid-19 and reversal of world institutes to online education, computer-mediated feedback is gaining popularity. Researchers have investigated computer-mediated feedback and have compared its efficacy to traditional interactional peer feedback and that of an expert teacher. What follows is a definition of computer mediated peer feedback, a thematic categorization of students' perceptions through investigation of 8 empirical studies, and pedagogical implications gleaned from this taxonomy. The article can be particularly useful for many teachers in ESL/EFL/EAP/ESP contexts.

Keywords: Computer-mediated peer feedback, writing, COVID-19.

Introduction

Peer feedback, assessment or peer review, is a term which refers "to the use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and

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responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing" (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p.1). Although it has been positively viewed by teachers as it not only lifts the bulk of providing feedback from their shoulders, but is also an occasion for collaborative learning, some scholars, as well as students themselves, cast doubt on the efficacy of peer feedback (Amores, 1997; Hyland, 2003; Leki, 1990;). Besides, there are some real concerns about the infeasibility of peer feedback due to time constraints in real classrooms. (Breuch, 2004; Tuzi, 2004).

However, computer as a means of feedback provision seems to address some of the constraints of peer feedback. Breuch (2004, p11) utilizes the word "virtual peer review'' and defines it as an activity in which computers are used to "(1) write documents; (2) exchange written documents electronically... and (3) to converse with reviewers about those documents, through electronic documents produced either synchronously (real-time) or asynchronously (delayed time).'' According to him, writing is intermediated through the medium of technology both in the process of production and that of reviewing it. Computer mediated peer communication (CMC) materializes itself through different means in various studies: blogs (Ciftci & Kocaoglu, 2012), online chatrooms (Liu and Sadler, 2003), MSN and E3 (Chang, 2009), MSN and Blackboard (Chang, 2012). In the field of ESL/EFL some studies have explored the effects of CMC on students' types and quality of feedback (AbuSeileek, 2013; Chang, 2012 ; Guardado & Shi, 2007;), while others attempted to measure students' participation, engagement and their perceptions of CMC (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Ho & Savignon 2007; Zhang et al. 2014;). The study of students' perceptions of peer feedback, however, yield very conflicting results in the literature. The literature review in this paper will uncover students' perceptions in the light of two conceptual matrices: anonymity and mode of delivery. The following empirical studies were anthologized from the literature through ERIC database and were categorized in two groups: In the first three studies, the articles were compared according to whether or not the identity of feedback providers were known to feedback receivers. The review of following five studies compare their modes of delivery and their research designs.

CMC and Anonymity

One recurrent variable that has affected the perceptions of the students is the question of anonymity. In some studies, the identity of the feedback provider is known while in others it is not revealed to the feedback receiver. For example, Wu, Petit and Chen (2015) studied the differences between peer feedback versus expert feedback online and students' perception of it. The 35 Taiwanese participants aged between 20 and 21, all majoring in English, were all trained using a rubric based on 6+1 Traits Strategy (Mesa, 2013). The students provided feedback to their peers in an online platform designed by one of the authors. Anonymity was preserved in this study and students were not informed about the identity of the feedback provider. In order to gauge perception, researchers adopted focus group interviews and found that students preferred experts' reviews. Although there was no significant improvement in learning outcome using an online platform, students believed that the open forums in peer feedback allowed them to ameliorate their critical thinking abilities. However, they were dubious about their competence to comment on their peers' writings as they compared themselves to their experts. Furthermore, much to the scholars' surprise, students did not interact and negotiate with their peer reviewers, a result, which could be attributed to the factor of anonymity and which confirmed Guadrado and Shi (2007). One limitation with the study was that in spite of the lengthy span of the treatment, it incorporated only two tasks, and, furthermore, the training that they provided for the students was based on a school rubric for the choice of which the researchers did not provide any solid rationale.

Similarly, Guardado and Shi (2007) studied the experiences of Japanese university students at a western Canadian university about online peer feedback, and analyzed whether they followed or ignored peer comments. They used Blackboard as a mode of delivery and student reviewers' identity was kept anonymous. After a follow-up interview with 22 students, they found out that there was a balance of both positive and negative attitudes to e-feedback. For example, some of the students complained about e-feedback and said that "they missed the immediate interaction in face-to-face modes and wished they could interact online with the reviewers to clarify some of the comments" (p. 457). Others, however, enjoyed anonymity in peer e-feedback as it offered opportunities to avoid open criticism of their peers. Despite this, the writers suggest that the lack of interaction and one-sidedness of e-feedback could "scare" some students from "negotiation". Furthermore, according to them, students have to struggle with not only syntactic and lexical levels but also have to read each other's essay critically, which could be cumbersome given that there is no interaction between them. The writers conclude that e-feedback cannot be a simple alternative to peer-feedback. A serious limitation

with this study is the lack of training and encouragement on how to use Blackboard. The students in this study did not interact through Blackboard although they had been informed. Had the students been encouraged to use this feature of Blackboard, they might have had a better experience of e-feedback as a direct result of interaction.

In contrast to these studies, however, when anonymity is not preserved, students' experience of CMC could turn out to be not only less intimidating and but also a joyful activity. For example, Chen (2012) studied 67 university- level Chinese students' perceptions of CMC using a 35 Likert-scale questionnaire and end of the term essay to reflect on their class experiences of peer review via web blog. Training was provided to students based on a five-grid rubric: idea, development, organization, style and mechanics and format. The students were required to provide peer reviews on a learning management system designed by the university. In sharp contrast to Guardado and Shi (2007), the research found out that students had positive attitudes to CMC as it helped improve their writing quality and that they "felt comfortable letting others have online access to their writing to receive feedback, enjoyed reading their classmates' writing, and would like to use an online peer review process in other classes" (p.283). However, this difference could be attributed to the fact that students in this research knew their feedback providers, and although the scholar did not provide ample evidence if they had any interaction in their peer review processes, students "were encouraged to discuss and interact with their partners to explain their thinking when offering feedback or when composing their paragraphs" (p. 282). Again, although it is not clear how often or on what frequent basis students were encouraged to interact, the results are in stark contrast to Wu et al. (2015) and Guardado and Shi (2007), in which student reviewers were anonymous and were not encouraged to interact.

In summary, although anonymity provides opportunities for openness, and despite the students' concession that it might have several marginal benefits such as amelioration of critical thinking, it seems that students are scared, disinclined to interact and avoid negotiation in CMC with a cached identity, and therefore do not have positive attitudes towards peer CMC as an offshoot of anonymity. When students do not know the identity of their peers, they do not see the necessity to interact with their peers. Anonymity encourages openness while nefariously murders communication by depriving students from meaningful communication.

CMC: delivery mode

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One reason that students could have different perceptions and attitudes towards CMC is the mode of its implementation. For example, Ciftci and Kocooglu (2012) designed a quasi-experimental study in which 15 Turkish students in the control group received face-to-face oral discussion for peer feedback whereas the experimental group (equal number) utilized e-feedback through blogging. Their analysis demonstrated that students in the experimental group showed significantly higher performance and had positive perceptions about e-feedback. The results of end of the term questionnaire indicated that students thought that blogging was effective and could help them improve their writing. The scholars attributed their positive feelings to writing for a purpose and a real audience since blogging was not just for their teachers to read. The study's findings that students are positive about e-feedback are aligned with other studies (Chang. 2012; Zhang. 2014) although the reasons for their preference vary. Furthermore, when questioned if they would prefer blogging as a future possible pedagogic source, most of the students cited time and effort as two reasons why they would rather not, a fact that points to the time-consuming mode of CMC (here blogging) delivery as a reason for students' dislike of future implementations.

Adopting a different approach, Chang (2012) set out to uncover students' perceptions by combining three modes of face to face, synchronous and asynchronous peer reviews and measured 24 students' interest in the three modes using a questionnaire and interviews in an 18 -week writing course in Taiwan. The feedback providers were not kept anonymous in this study and the students knew their feedback peers. In one writing task, all three modes were utilized: After the first draft submission on Blackboard, peer review was provided asynchronously, after which there was in-class face to face review. The students then submitted their second submission and they offered after-class synchronous feedback using MSN which allowed users to send and receive text messages instantly. Afterwards, students posted their final draft for the teacher to review. Although the results of the interview and questionnaires of students' perceptions were conflicting, most of them agreed that each mode of feedback "help them gain multiple comments'' (p. 73). Some students cited interaction as the most effective factor in synchronous and face to face interaction, while others preferred asynchronous mode because it offered them sufficient time and place, results reminiscent of the question of time and place discussed in Breuch (2004) and in line with Chang (2009). However, one of the constraints of this study is that since the anonymity was not preserved, students may have offered courteous responses as they knew their peers. Another issue with this article is the combination of the three modes in one writing task and multiple submissions which could have had an attrition

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effect on students and their consequent perceptions of CMC. Furthermore, there was no training of the students before peer feedback using a well-designed rubric.

Using a different research design, Zhang et al (2014) studied students' attitude to blog-mediated peer feedback with 36 sophomore English major students in China. The students first wrote a one - paragraph essay and then a five-paragraph one collaboratively on a freely accessible blog. They were required to submit their drafts online and their peers were supposed to respond to the drafts and comment on topic sentence, support details, reworded sentence, unity, coherence, organization and mechanics. The study used a questionnaire and interview with a focus group and the results show "that that blog-mediated peer feedback is significantly positively correlated with learner motivation ($r=.450$, $p<.01$), collaboration ($r=.561$, $p<.01$), and satisfaction with the writing course ($r=.487$, $p<.01$)" (p.677). Students cited immediacy and availability, attention from others and saving face as their reasons for their motivation. As for collaboration, students endorsed accomplishment of a goal with a team member and acquaintance with others. They also attributed their satisfaction of the course to the dynamic of collaboration in and outside classroom. The scholars conclude that blog-mediated peer feedback encourages self-reflection and self-confidence. The positive attitudes to e-feedback is in line with Ciftci and Kocooglu (2012), and Chang (2012): Interaction, collaboration, immediacy and availability are the thematic commonalities for the students' perceptions and positive attitudes in these studies. One of the limitation with this study, however, is the shortness of the treatment. It is not clear how students would have reacted had they used e-feedback in not just two instances but on a more often basis.

Students do not always seem to have positive attitudes to CMC especially when the mode of delivery does not allow for direct interaction. For example, in Ho and Savington (2007), the 33 Chinese students, enrolled in a two- year program at a university in Taiwan, did not demonstrate an auspicious attitude to CMC. Quite different to other studies, students in this experiment used the Word program with Track Changes on, and emailed the annotated drafts to their peers. They did this asynchronously, from their home or in a lab. The scholars set out to examine the students' perceptions of face to face and computer-mediated feedback using a Likert scale questionnaire and an interview. They found out that students had a more favorable attitude to face to face peer review than computer mediated despite the latter's convenience and less pressing requirements. The results of the interview revealed that lack of face-to-face oral communication was considered the major drawback for CMC,

which is in line with Guardado and Shi (2007). Furthermore, many students in this context also avoided critiquing their friends' writings in face to face review in order to maintain their friendships, a factor the writers attribute to Chinese cultural background. The scholars conclude that training in feedback as well as combining CMC with traditional modes are needed to reap the highest benefits.

Another example in which students experience lack of communication in online modes is Chang (2009). The case study explored the nature of comments in synchronous CMC and asynchronous CMC of 30 Taiwanese undergraduate students, and compared their engagement and perceptions of face to face interaction and online modes during an 18-week writing program. For synchronous mode, the students used MSN and for asynchronous review they were encouraged to utilize E3, a web-based course management system. During the writing process, students had a face to face pair work review before commenting on their peers' drafts synchronously via MSN. After their second submission, they were required to review the drafts asynchronously through E3. A Likert-scale questionnaire and interview questions were developed to gauge students' perceptions of online modes. Students believed that both online modes helped them better improve the quality of their writings slightly better than face to face. However, one of the major problems with online modes was the lack of communication, confirming the results in Guardado and Shi (2007) and Ho and Savington (2007). Students in online modes did not enjoy the same opportunities the face to face communication offer them and cited it as a significant drawback in the interviews. Furthermore, typing and scheduling time outside classroom were considered other reasons for the ineffectiveness of online modes. As the scholar acknowledged, one of the constraints of this study, however, was "the lack of follow-up interviews in each writing cycle" (p. 59), which could have yielded better understanding of students' perceptions about each mode.

To conclude, it seems that different research designs bring about divergent attitudes to CMC. While some studies compared face to face peer review to asynchronous mode (Ciftci & Kocaoglu, 2012; Ho & Savington, 2007;), others also included synchronous mode (Chang 2012; Chang 2009). One study explored students' perceptions to just asynchronous peer feedback. (Zhang et al. 2014). The use of different CMC vehicles with its own particular features to deliver messages could also have affected students' perceptions of CMC. In order to reach a consensus about students' perceptions about CMC, further research is needed to address this gap by designing studies that explore the differences between either synchronous or asynchronous mode and face to face peer feedback.

Classroom implications

The study of theses eight empirical studies reveal that CMC is more effective when students set a goal and write for a real audience and purpose (Ciftci & Kocooglu, 2012; Zhang & et al. 2014), and more efficient when it offers them an opportunity to interact and collaborate (Chang, 2012; Chen, 2012; Guardado and Shi, 2007; Wu et al. 2015; Zhang, 2014; Ho and Savington 2007). Furthermore, in order to maximize its efficiency, the CMC mode should be available and easy to use and less time-consuming. (Breuch, 2004; Chang 2012; Chang, 2009; Ciftci & Kocaoglu, 2012; Zhang et al. 2014, Ciftci & Kocaoglu, 2012). Even if in certain cultures where students are more reserved and disinclined to critique their peers, the use of anonymity should be accompanied by an encouragement to interaction.

With the spread of new COVID-19 and the mandatory turn to online education, peer feedback can reduce teacher's bulk of responsibility and stress of having to provide feedback for every single student. Furthermore, some online tools provide opportunities to create individual meeting rooms for students. The online synchronous peer interaction and response to writing with a purpose and focus can be of enormous value to students, educational institutes and teachers.

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