Comparisons of Student Perceptions and Evaluations of Using Wiki to Conduct Online Peer Response: An Interschool Project

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Abstract

Recent studies have verified using wiki to foster collaborative writing in EFL (English as a foreign language) students. With the intention to expand the knowledge in applying CMC (computer-mediated communication) tools in peer response practice, this article reports an 18-week interschool study at two technological universities in Taiwan. The wiki group forums were set up as the medium for mixed groups of students to post reading responses and provide feedback to one another. This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyze data. To add new understandings to the prior research on peer response, the current study focused specifically on the comparisons of interschool student perceptions and evaluations of the online peer response activity. The research results suggest that student English proficiency levels, the locations of their schools, and their genders played important roles in affecting to what extent they enjoyed and participated in the wiki-based peer response activity.

Keywords: wiki, peer response, online collaboration

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Received June 21, 2012; accepted September 18, 2012; last revised October 5, 2012.
比較兩校學生對使用維基論壇的跨校協同寫作交流活動
之觀感與評估

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摘要

最近的研究已經證實:使用維基協同寫作,可幫助以英語作為外語的學生學習英文。為求進一步提供對於電腦輔助學習及同儕回饋學習方式之瞭解，本研究進行了一項為期十八週的跨校協同寫作交流活動。在本研究中，維基寫作論壇為兩所科技大學學生混組互動寫作交流之主要媒介，學生在論壇上相互針對英文寫作產品做出回應，並提供修改建議。本研究採用質化和量化兼用的研究方法來收集和分析數據，主要的研究目的，在比較不同學校的學生，對此線上同儕英文寫作回饋活動的看法和評價。研究結果指出，學生所具有的英語能力、兩所學校的地理位置、以及學生的性別，均影響了學生是否喜愛此項學習活動，及他們參與此活動的熱烈程度。

關鍵詞：維基、同儕回饋、線上合作學習、以英語為外語學習學生之寫作

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到稿日期：2012年6月21日；確定刊登日期：2012年9月18日；最後修訂日期：2012年10月5號。
Introduction

Background

Peer response, sometimes referred to as peer feedback, peer review, or peer editing, is an activity in which students take on the role of teachers, editors, or tutors to provide information on each other’s writing either through a written, oral, or computer-mediated mode (Liu & Hansen, 2005). Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of sociocultural learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and process writing (Elbow, 1973/1998; Emig, 1994; Moffett, 1968), peer response in second language (L2) writing is considered beneficial because it encourages students in active learning (Hyland, 2000), allows students to write for authentic readers (Coit, 2004; Keh, 1990) and receive feedback from multiple sources (Bell, 1991), enhances student writing (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Paulus, 1999), and lessens writing teacher workload (Ferris, 2004).

Peer response has become a prominent feature of L2 writing instructions (Hu, 2005); however, researchers also acknowledge its limits. One common concern is that students make vague or superficial comments when required to edit the writings of their peers due to time constraints or the lack of capacity to discern peer performance (Liu, 1998; Min, 2007; Stanley, 1992). To mandate this drawback, L2 writing researchers have made concrete suggestions by advocating training for the revision process (Berg, 1999; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Min, 2006; Saito, 2008).

Student attitudes when engaged in the task are another concern. Students from collectivist cultures (for example, Chinese students) “may refrain from giving constructively critical comments to avoid tension and disagreement and to maintain interpersonal harmony” (Hu, 2005, p. 326; also see Ge, 2011). Meanwhile, disagreement among peers may create uneasiness and even hostility (Amores, 1997; Jacobs, 1987). Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has indicated an approach to overcome the possible downsides that the face-to-face peer-response approach may encounter in classrooms because it allows both synchronous and asynchronous interactions beyond time and space limits, and therefore, eases tension and negative feelings possibly caused by face-to-face oral feedback.

Many L2 teachers have perceived the value of using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, such as e-mails, blogs, chats, forums, and wikis, to involve students in collaborative writing activities. Among them, wiki is a relatively recent technology tool that has been used in higher education, with the potential to foster collaborative writing in L2 students as verified by recent studies (for example, the studies by Arnold, Ducate, & Kost, 2009; Coniam & Kit, 2008; Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Kessler, 2009; Lee, 2010; Liou & Lee, 2011). Mendonca and Johnson (1992) suggested, “because peer reviews have become a common activity in L2 writing instruction, researchers need to broaden our understanding of the nature of the interactions that occur during peer reviews and determine the extent to which such interactions shape L2 students’ revision activities” (p. 745). Therefore, we consider it essential to expand the current knowledge of online peer response in L2 writing and explore the implication of the very recent CMC tool, wiki, in this area. Building on the growing body of research, we conducted an 18-week-long interschool online peer-response project by using the wiki forum function to engage students from two universities in Taiwan to respond to one another’s writing.

Internet-based Peer Response in L2 Writing Classrooms

Computer-assisted language learning has currently become an essential feature in L2 classrooms. Therefore, L2 writing researchers have started to compare the effects of peer response in electronic and traditional modes. Liu and Sadler (2003) used Moo (Multi-User
Domain Object Oriented application) to engage students in a technology-enhanced peer reviewing activity, and found that the overall numbers of comments and revisions the students made were larger than those by the traditional group. This indicated that the students found the Moo interaction more appealing. However, Liu and Sadler also noticed that face-to-face communication was more effective because it allowed nonverbal communication. Tuzi (2004) also compared the effect of electronic feedback and face-to-face meeting on the revisions of L2 writers. The results showed that students preferred oral feedback. However, e-feedback, as Tuzi noticed, had a greater impact on revision. DiGiovanni and Nagaswami (2001) selected interactive software (Norton Textra Connect) for students to interact with one another, both synchronously and asynchronously. Their findings suggested that students were more concentrated on task, teachers could monitor student interaction more closely, and students could rely on printouts instead of their memories (as in oral feedback) to revise their drafts. Although previous studies may not concord on which mode is more effective or motivating, they all suggest that electronic peer response provides a new form of revision and increases fruitful results when supplementing a face-to-face interaction.

Researchers have acknowledged the benefits of Internet-based peer response, leading to various computer-mediated communication tools used by L2 writing instructors to engage their students in meaningful peer response activities. Min (2007) introduced e-mail into a university level writing class and found that it made an immediate and positive effect on student motivation, participation, and interaction. Vinagre and Muñoz (2011) engaged their students from Germany and Spain to e-mail their counterparts and to provide error corrections. Their findings indicate that participating students were willing to correct their peers, and used different strategies and correction techniques to foster attention to linguistic forms.

In addition to e-mail, researchers also examined peer feedback in other asynchronous settings. Ware and O’Dowd (2008) investigated how and when post-secondary learners of English and Spanish provided corrective feedback in weekly asynchronous discussions using Blackboard, a password-protected course management system. After comparing and contrasting the perceptions and online transcripts of the students from Spain and the U.S., Ware and O’Dowd found students preferred focusing on language form in their feedback. Yet, unless encouraged, the students did not actively elicit such language feedback, possibly due to a lack of time, reluctance to switch the focus of the conversation, lack of confidence, or discomfort of assuming the teacher role.

Research has also examined the employment of synchronous medium, chat, in the peer-response activity. Honeycutt (2001) compared the effectiveness of e-mail and synchronous chat in grammatical correction when using both as vehicles for online peer response. Honeycutt found that the use of e-mail invited students to focus more on their contents and rhetorical contexts than chat did. Meanwhile, chat appeared useful for the formation of messages and immediate clarification, and therefore, led students to refer more to both writing and response tasks than when using e-mail. Honeycutt also observed that student preferences for individual media showed no significant differences, yet they perceived that e-mail was more formal and helpful than chat in terms of aiding revision.

**Purposes of the Current Study**

As discussed above, a large body of research suggests that integrating the Internet into peer response instruction is beneficial to L2 writers. However, many of the previous studies were conducted as intercultural projects. Students from two different countries (native speakers and non-native speakers of the target language) corresponded and provided language-focused feedback online (for example, the studies by Belz, 2003; Lee,
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Few studies have explored student perceptions and learning experiences when mixed groups of students with diverse English capacities, different genders, and various academic specialties participated in the online peer response activity. Ge’s research (2011) is among the limited numbers of studies investigating the online peer response experiences of students from the same class (in this case, Communications Engineering in China) but with varied English abilities. In his study, Ge found that students with higher writing abilities enjoyed the process of commenting as their confidence boosted; meanwhile, students with lower abilities might lose confidence, appearing to make the greatest progress among all the students. However, as Ge points out, the sample size of his study was small (36 students), so there is a need to expand the knowledge previously gained. Moreover, questions regarding how different groups of students perceive the learning experience, what factors affect their attitudes toward the experience, and whether different groups evaluate the experience differently or devote divergently to the learning activity have remained unanswered.

Although “online communication tools have been taken up eagerly by the foreign language teaching community” (Ware & O’Dowd, 2008, p.43), very few L2 writing instructors have employed the very recent CMC tool, wiki, in the peer response activity. Lee (2010) is among the limited number of researchers to investigate peer response experiences of students when employing wiki to facilitate the online interaction. The study results of Lee showed the positive effect of creating wikis on the development of student writing skills. She particularly noticed that scaffolding through peer feedback played a crucial role in the writing process as students helped each other organize content and made error corrections. Additionally, the study of Liou and Lee (2011) also showed that wiki-based collaborative writing tasks allowed students to learn from each other. The 18 EFL college participating students felt that these collaborative activities assisted their English writing. Because wiki is becoming a powerful tool to promote collaborative writing (Judd, Kennedy, & Cropper, 2010; Newuann & Hood, 2009; Ruth & Houghton, 2009), further investigation of its application in L2 peer response activity is necessary.

In an effort to compare the perceptions and evaluations of interschool students, we asked the following research questions about using a wiki forum for online peer response learning activities:

1. Is there any significant difference between student attitudes in the two universities toward the online peer response activity?
2. What factors cause different student attitudes?
3. Is there a significant difference between the two university students’ evaluation of the impact of the peer activity on their English learning?
4. Is there any significant difference between the two university students’ engagement in the peer activity?
Method

This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyze the data from various sources.

Participants

Considering the merits of a mixed levels of linguistic skills (Liu & Hansen, 2005; Zhu, 2006), the current study recruited a total of 103 sophomore students with diverse English proficiency from two universities in Taiwan. Forty-eight NKMU (National Kaohsiung Marine University) participants consisted of two different majors, including Shipping Technology (three females, 13 males) and Marine Engineering (32 males), while 55 KUAS (Kaohsiung University of Applied Sciences) participants (50 females, five males) all majored in English. Both groups were taking college writing courses and the two researchers were the instructors of the courses at individual schools. Both courses were required and had the same number of credits, meeting two hours weekly. Before beginning the project, students were asked to complete a pencil-and-paper essay and these pre-project writings were graded by two experienced EFL teachers, using the same scoring criteria. The result of the Pearson correlation test showed that inter-rater reliability was quite high ($r = 0.936$, $p = 0.000$). The mean scores of the two university students on their pre-project writings (10.87 vs. 2.91) revealed that the KUAS participants were much stronger English writers than the NKMU participants were. The independent t-test showed a very significant difference between the two schools ($p = 0.000$). Recruiting students with varied English competences from the two universities allowed a closer investigation into the differences of student perceptions and engagement, and hence a richer understanding was expected.

Context of the Online Peer Response Project

The online peer response project began in September 2010 and ended in January 2011, lasting 18 weeks. Students from the two universities were grouped into 17 teams. Each team had six to seven members, with equivalent numbers of students from both universities. Group members posted self-introductions and discussed their school lives on the group wiki pages to help build rapport. Both universities are located in Kaohsiung, a harbor city; therefore, it was relevant to have students write about ocean related themes. Because we were convinced of the benefits of integrating reading and writing in L2 teaching practices, students were asked to read three picture books of different genres (narratives, poetry, and letter), and to actively negotiate and construct meaning with their group members (Leki, 2001). The choice of picture books was based on the belief that they were short enough to be read in one sitting and contained thought-provoking concepts (Burke & Peterson, 2007; Murphy, 2009; Wilkins, Sheffield, Ford, & Cruz, 2008).

Student reading and writing tasks were organized into a three-week cycle: The researcher-instructors presented the picture book to the class in the first week; in the second week, students posted their reading responses on their group wiki forums; in the third week, group members responded to one another’s writing on the wiki. This study assumed that peer response should go beyond giving feedback on grammar or stylistic concerns, and “when properly implemented, peer response can generate a rich source of information for content and rhetorical issues” (Hansen & Liu, 2005, p. 31). Therefore, the students were assigned two different tasks when responding to one another: to offer suggestions on the language form of their group members, and to comment on the
traits or social inclination influences their contributions to the activity. This study initiated a small step in exploring the online peer response experiences of mixed groups of students. Future research could conduct further productive discussions with other L2 writing instructors worldwide.

Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by National Kaohsiung Marine University, Taiwan. (99AB015)

References

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