

A Review of Research on The Role of L1 For Peer Feedback in L2 Writing

Limo Zhang *

Department of Foreign Languages, Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong, 250100, China

* Corresponding Author Email: zhanglimo@xdf.cn

Abstract. The process-based writing approach has become more integrated with peer feedback. The function of the first language (L1) in this process has received increased attention. This present paper reviews research on native language use in second language (L2) writing classrooms with a particular focus on the peer revision process. The research demonstrates that L1 use in peer review acts as a cognitive and socio-affective mediator, facilitating second language acquisition. With L1, learners are able to reduce the cognitive workload entailed in the feedback process, improve writing quality, obtain affective support, and maintain peer interaction. The factors affecting the use of L1 in peer revision include pedagogical factors (e.g. task type, grouping, learning goal), learner factors (e.g. proficiency level, beliefs and goals, knowledge of writing), as well as teacher factors (e.g. beliefs, planning). Based on the findings, teachers should fully utilize peer review in the L2 writing course and allow the judicious application of L1 in peer interaction to enhance feedback quality and facilitate language learning.

Keywords: First language (L1), Mediator, Peer Feedback.

1. Introduction

Although the facilitative role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms has received increased attention from both theorists and researchers in the past few decades, research into its role in the peer revision process is ‘still in its infancy’ [1-4]. Shifting trends in language teaching methodology highlighted the process approach, in which writing was characterized as a ‘recursive and non-linear’ procedure [5]. English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who follow this approach increasingly involve peer review in improving essay quality. The inclusion of peer revision in L2 writing not only allows teachers to reduce the workload but also ensures that students receive substantial feedback during the multiple stages of drafting and revision. Among the vast number of research to test the effectiveness of peer feedback, or to provide instructional guidance on feedback training, the issue of language use was rarely touched upon. Research that addressed primarily the function of L1 use in peer revision is limited in number [4, 6, 7, 8].

The present paper endeavors to conduct a review of theoretical and empirical findings concerning L1 use during peer revision in L2 writing. Although the studies included may not be exhaustive, it endeavors to answer the following questions: in ESL/EFL writing classroom where students share the same first language, what are the functions of L1 in peer revision, and what are factors that affect learners’ usage of L1 during peer revision?

2. Theoretical Background

The majority of research being reviewed in this paper adopted Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) to analyze L1 use in peer revision [9]. Under this framework, language serves as a vital mediator for social interaction and language development, and thus has a significant role in second language acquisition [2-3]. With the assistance of an expert or more competent peers, scaffolding can occur, which allows one to achieve a goal that exceeds his own capability. The learning takes place in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and this notion in L2 acquisition is defined as “the difference between the L2 learners’ developmental level as determined by independent language use,

and the higher level of potential development as determined by how language is used in collaboration with a more capable interlocutor” [10]. Investigations on the function of L1 in peer revision have also been conducted using Activity Theory (AT), a branch of SCT [11]. As a symbolic artefact, language is used to mediate relationships with others to achieve learning goals. Thus, the above theories provide people with lens that sees L1 as a mediational tool, especially in cognitively demanding tasks such as peer revision.

3. Functions of L1 Use in Peer Revision of L2 Writing

Process-oriented writing instructions shift focus from a final product to evolving cycles of multiple drafts, in-depth revision, and peer collaboration. Specifically, learners may interact with each other by orally commenting on drafts or critiquing each other’s essays in written forms. Previous empirical research outlined several functions of L1 use in this process.

3.1. Cognitive Mediator

L1 operates as a cognitive mediator in the process of learning. De Guerrero & Villamil, for example, studied the verbal interactions of 54 university ESL students in Puerto Rico as they engaged in peer critique of drafts [12]. The study revealed that learners frequently resorted to L1 (Spanish) throughout the interactions, and access to this linguistic tool helped them to collect data from memory and produce content, which led to high levels of self-regulation and overall improvement of text quality. This benefit is not limited to oral interaction, as Yu’s research of L1 (Chinese) use in written peer review also drew a similar conclusion [8]. In her quasi-experimental study, 18 EFL university students in China were separated into two groups during the review task and were asked to individually fill up a survey report. The L1 group was instructed to utilize exclusively Chinese and the L2 control group was directed to solely rely on English. When compared to the L2 group, students from the L1 group diverted more attention from form to the content and were able to produce feedback in greater details. Yu arguably attributed this phenomenon to the reduced cognitive load required for peer response when writing comments in L1. That is, using L1 in written feedback allowed L2 learners to have more working memory capacity to divert from language issues to logical or structural issues in writing.

This cognitive benefit is not only manifest in the feedback process, but also in the following revision or uptake. Clay, for example, compared the peer feedback performance of 39 students at an English medium university in Japan, with language use as the changing variable [13]. An essay response sheet was distributed to two groups of students, and they were instructed to use one language only during the feedback activity. Data show that even though students took L2 comments on word, sentence and paragraph-related issues more seriously, feedback regarding coherence and appropriateness is incorporated to a greater extent in revisions if delivered in L1 (Japanese). Evident is the fact that students focused more on global issues if feedback is given via their mother tongue.

Although some of the above studies tend to dichotomize the usage of L1 and L2 in the experimental design, the role of L1 in reducing cognitive load and improving uptake is clearly identified. Peer feedback is assumed to be cognitively demanding for that learners need to assume the roles and responsibilities of teachers or tutors to read texts, identify issues and form critical comments. In practice, peer feedback is often criticized for being insufficiently elaborated or focusing primarily on surface-level issues. With L1 as a mediator, learners may sidestep the added cognitive burden of using L2 to focus more on macro aspects and improve their feedback quality.

3.2. Socio-Affective Mediator

L1 serves as a socio and affective mediator to facilitate peer interaction during the feedback process. Although not focusing exclusively on the peer revision task, Storch and Aldosari recorded learners using L1 (Arabic) in private speech during peer editing to confirm themselves when feeling uncertain [14]. Researchers divided 36 EFL college participants in Saudi Arabia into diverse

proficiency groups and studied their words and turns when engaged in the jigsaw, composition, and text-editing tasks. Data show that the revision task resulted in a larger quantity of L1 words than in other tasks. Apart from providing responses to a request when interacting, learners also produced speech directed to themselves (Private speech). This is ‘the result of stress that can accompany the task of constructing meaning in L1 and Target Language’ [3], which enables learners to find an outlet for emotions when they lack confidence in providing constructive feedback. Also, in De Guerrero & Villamil’s study of mutual scaffolding in peer editing, a microgenetic approach was employed to study the interaction between 2 beginner ESL college students when they engaged in essay editing. The contingent use of L1 (Spanish) through the revision allowed participants to build a shared awareness of task requirements, operationalize and control tasks [15].

Apart from affective factors, L1 provides a scaffolding role for social interaction. In the case study of Zhao on 18 Chinese EFL students, more than half of the interviewees claimed that using L1 (Mandarin Chinese) helped them comprehend the feedback from their peers, improving the efficiency of the feedback process [16]. Normally, the scaffolding allows low-proficiency learners to activate their ZPD with the assistance of more capable peers. Challenging the view above, Yu and Hu’s study proved that scaffolding can be bilateral rather than unidirectional [17]. In their case study of 2 EFL university students in China, participants claimed that L1 improved efficiency in interaction, particularly when they encounter unfamiliar grammatical terms, such as “jieci” (prepositions) or “binyu” (the object). Although several factors are at interplay, using L1 (Chinese) as a medium of discussion aided low-proficiency learners to be more engaged and to make greater contributions in their discussions with the high-proficiency learners.

When engaged in cognitively demanding peer feedback, learners are undoubtedly faced with negative emotions. Learners can sometimes hold a hostile attitude toward critical comments as feedback receivers or lack confidence in providing constructive opinions as feedback givers. These attitudes work against group collaboration, which may hinder the effectiveness of peer review. With L1 as the socio-affective mediator, learners can find outlets for their emotions, and better understand critical comments, which may contribute to a more supportive classroom environment.

4. Factors Influencing Learners’ Use of L1 in Peer Feedback

Researchers identified several factors that may affect learners’ use of L1 in peer review, some factors overlapping those found in other studies. The learners’ proficiency level and grouping are found to be an important influence [8,14,16,17]. In Yu & Hu’s research, for example, low proficiency level learners reported negative feelings towards using L2 in group editing work, and high proficiency level learners also regards L1 as effective in making clarifications when misunderstandings arise [17]. When forming heterogeneous groups, L1 has a role in mediating and providing mutual scaffolding for learners of diverse levels. Also, learners’ beliefs and teacher practices are found to affect L1 use in peer feedback [11, 14, 17, 18]. Yu and Hu, mentioned beforehand, uncovered factors including learners’ attitudes, teacher feedback practices, and feedback training. In the interviews, participants affirmed that L1 (Chinese) is more valuable for group reviewing tasks, especially when making comments using grammatical terms. In addition, participants mentioned their previous learning experience and claimed that L1 has never been prohibited by the instructors, even in speaking classes. Therefore, they grow accustomed to using L1 in peer editing. Moreover, De Guerrero & Villamil believed that participants relied primarily on L1 because L2 oral production was not assessed as part of the final evaluation, concluding that the nature of interactive tasks should be considered when choosing between L1 or L2 feedback [12,15]. If the learning goal is not placed on oral production, then learners can be given more freedom to choose the language with which they are more familiar. Knowledge of writing is also mentioned by researchers, such as Zhao, claiming that the extent of influence may be associated with learners’ previous knowledge of writing and genre [16].

Concluding the research results above, factors influencing L1 use can be seen in a wider classroom context on a multi-dimensional level. Learners’ choice of language use is dependent on variables such

as pedagogical factors (e.g. task type, grouping, learning goal), learner factors (e.g. proficiency level, beliefs and goals, knowledge of writing), as well as teacher factors (e.g. beliefs, planning). These factors influence learners' choice of languages when giving comments and may determine the effectiveness and effects of L1 in peer feedback.

5. Pedagogical Implications

5.1. Judicious Use of L1

The judicious use of L1 is sometimes discouraged in peer feedback, for the fear of its inhibiting role in second language acquisition. Influenced by certain methodologies (e.g. Audio-lingual method), ESL/EFL teachers may ask students to use the language they are still learning to give feedback on drafts. However, from a Vygotskian perspective and empirical studies above, people could conclude a facilitative role of L1 in peer revision. L2 writing teachers should make their pedagogical decisions bearing in mind the identified functions of L1. Teachers should not make it a strict rule to use L2 feedback, especially when there is a great number of low-proficiency learners in the classroom or when oral production is not among the primary teaching objectives. Rather than stigmatizing the L1 use, teachers should also strive to change students' mindset or raise their awareness of its potential benefits, so that they see their mother tongue as an effective tool.

5.2. Co-use of L1 and L2 Feedback

Although some of the studies tend to dichotomize the usage of L1 and L2 in the research design, it is not intended to imply that teachers should instruct students to solely depend on their L1 for the entire feedback process. Instead, they need to tailor instructions for the co-use of L1 and L2 to optimize feedback quality. For instance, L1 and L2 peer reviews can be combined and used separately to deal with micro and global issues. When students comment on language issues, such as lexical or syntactic errors, L2 feedback can be employed to enhance the following uptake. As for logical issues, such as cohesion or appropriateness, low-proficiency students should be given the freedom to use L1 feedback to reduce their cognitive workload and to generate high-quality comments.

5.3. Multi-dimensional Factors

The complexity of the teaching and learning environment places greater demands on the teacher's coordination skills. They need to consider the purpose of teaching, the student's background, and the lesson planning from a multi-dimensional setting. When guiding or giving instruction on language use in peer revision activities, teachers need to examine more carefully the language proficiency or knowledge background of the students and to clarify lesson goals to maximize L2 use, and at the same time to improve the uptake of feedback through the L1.

5.4. Transfer from L1 to L2 Feedback

Since L2 writing involves several stages of drafting and revision, learners' use of L1 or L2 may shift over time as they may get more familiarized with L2 feedback. Teachers should provide ongoing support to help make the transition. Common strategies include modeling through thinking aloud in front of the class or providing students with the relevant terminologies commonly used for L2 review. Teachers can project a sample essay on a screen and provide their responses to the problematic areas in L2 via thinking aloud. By following teachers' modeling, students can be directed to focus more on using L2 to comment on global issues. Also, teachers can provide students with ample terms and expressions in L2, so that the latter can know how to make specific and critical comments on grammatical errors, and logical structures or to operationalize tasks without having to switch back to their mother language.

6. Conclusion

This present paper argues for a facilitative role of L1 use in peer feedback in L2 writing classrooms. Peer feedback, unlike other forms of class interactions, demands a fine-tuned scaffolding role of L1 use and carefully designed instructional guidance to improve feedback quality. If L1 and L2 feedback modes can be appropriately interwoven, L1 may yield many benefits in writing classrooms. This puts greater demands on teachers to pay attention to the dynamics and contextual factors of the classroom.

Although inspiring, the studies reviewed in this paper focused unanimously on university ESL/EFL contexts, and little is known about whether conclusions can be generalized to other classroom contexts and age groups. Future studies with larger sample sizes and more learning contexts are required to look into the value of L1 in peer editing.

Also, while previous studies on the functions of L1 in peer revision have shed light on this area of research, longitudinal studies with data collection from several phases of the writing cycle need to be conducted to investigate whether and/or how learners' use of L1 or L2 feedback may shift over time to give us more insights. Another related and under-researched issue is the influence of peer feedback training on language use, so as to give more guidance for teachers in service.

References

- [1] Storch, N., & Wigglesworth, G. Is There a Role for the Use of the L1 in an L2 Setting? *TESOL Quarterly*, 2003, 37(4), 760.
- [2] Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. Task-based second language learning: the uses of the first language. *Language Teaching Research*, 2000, 4(3), 251–274.
- [3] Lantolf, J. P. Second language learning as a mediated process. *Language Teaching*, 2000, 33(2), 79–96.
- [4] Yu, S., & Lee, I. Peer feedback in second language writing (2005–2014). *Language Teaching*, 2016, 49(4), 461–493.
- [5] Zamel, V. The Composing Processes of Advanced ESL Students: Six Case Studies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 1983, 17(2), 165.
- [6] Ren, & Hu. Peer review and Chinese EFL/ESL student writers. *English Australia Journal*, 2012, 27(2), 3–16.
- [7] Hansen, J. G. Guiding principles for effective peer response. *ELT Journal*, 2005, 59(1), 31–38.
- [8] Yu, S. An Exploratory Study on the Role of L1 Use in Peer Written Feedback of L2 Writing. *Porta Linguarum Revista Interuniversitaria De Didáctica De las Lenguas Extranjeras*. 2016.
- [9] Vygotsky, L. *Mind in Society*. Harvard University Press. 1980.
- [10] Ohta, A. S. Applying Sociocultural Theory to an Analysis of Learner Discourse: Learner-Learner Collaborative Interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 1995, 6(2).
- [11] Yu, S., & Lee, I. Exploring Chinese students' strategy use in a cooperative peer feedback writing group. *System*, 2016, 58, 1–11.
- [12] Guerrero, M. C. M., & Villamil, O. S. Social-Cognitive Dimensions of Interaction in L2 Peer Revision. *The Modern Language Journal*, 1994, 78(4), 484–496.
- [13] Clay. Language Input Effects on L2 Composition Peer review Feedback. *TESOL International Journal*, 2018, 13(1), 33–46.
- [14] Storch, N., & Aldosari, A. Learners' use of first language (Arabic) in pair work in an EFL class. *Language Teaching Research*, 2010, 14(4), 355–375.
- [15] De Guerrero, M. C. M., & Villamil, O. S. Activating the ZPD: Mutual Scaffolding in L2 Peer Revision. *The Modern Language Journal*, 2000, 84(1), 51–68.
- [16] Zhao, H. Investigating learners' use and understanding of peer and teacher feedback on writing: A comparative study in a Chinese English writing classroom. *Assessing Writing*, 2010, 15(1), 3–17.
- [17] Yu, S., & Hu, G. Can higher-proficiency L2 learners benefit from working with lower-proficiency partners in peer feedback? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 2016, 22(2), 178–192.

- [18] Yu, S., & Hu, G. Understanding university students' peer feedback practices in EFL writing: Insights from a case study. *Assessing Writing*, 2017, 33, 25–35.