

JAPANESE ESL LEARNER ATTITUDES TOWARDS PEER FEEDBACK

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Abstract

While much research has been conducted on the attitude of Japanese EFL learners towards peer feedback in writing classes, little research has been done on Japanese students who are studying English abroad. For Japanese students in the United States in particular, differences between Japan and America in both acceptable styles of communication and classroom expectations may inhibit the perceived effectiveness of peer feedback activities. This research therefore investigated the attitudes towards peer feedback of four Japanese university students studying English in the United States, as well as the impact peer feedback had on their writing.

Introduction and Literature Review

As Taylor (1981) states, English language learners require productive feedback in order for them to improve their writing skills. Traditionally in academic writing classes, this feedback is provided by the teacher. Research has shown, however, that feedback from peers can also have beneficial effects on English language learners (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Liu & Hanson, 2002; Saito & Fujita, 2004). Peer feedback possesses several advantages over teacher feedback. It helps students gain a clearer idea of their audience (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Leki, 1990). It forces negotiation with peers about the content, grammar, and rhetoric of their papers, providing students with an opportunity to use English authentically for a

communicative purpose (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Liu & Hanson, 1998). It gives students the chance to compare others' work to their own, which in turn gives them ideas about how to express themselves (Liu & Hanson, 1998). Additionally, it provides the students with a chance to see the difference between what they intended to write and what their peers actually perceived (Saito & Fujita, 2004).

But are these benefits experienced equally by all English language learners? Differing cultural and pragmatic expectations can lead to situations which detract from students' experiences of peer response. For example, Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) point out that students from cultures which view the teacher as the only acceptable source of knowledge may be uncomfortable with commenting on other students' papers or receiving feedback from peers. Leki (1990) refers to the research of Hinds and others which shows that those from different cultural backgrounds may have very different ideas about the rhetorical patterns that characterize "good writing," possibly leading to conflict among peer group members. The potential effectiveness of peer feedback, therefore, may vary based on the cultural background of the students involved.

Japanese English language learners studying in America in particular may have difficulty giving and receiving peer feedback due to differences between America and Japan in both acceptable styles of communication and in classroom expectations. For instance, direct demands, rejections, and challenges are usually avoided in Japanese society whereas they occur relatively often in American conversations (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). Furthermore, disagreement tends to be expressed ambiguously rather than directly in Japanese (Kitao & Kitao, 1985). In addition to these communication style differences, Japanese and American education styles differ as well. The Japanese education system promotes a more teacher-fronted environment, with information being presented for memorization and little discussion taking

JAPANESE ESL LEARNER ATTITUDES TOWARDS PEER FEEDBACK

place; on the other hand, the American education system tends to promote teachers as facilitators that encourage questioning (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). Group work, which is utilized in both education systems, is viewed differently in Japan compared with America. Whereas the Japanese classroom tends to use group work to build solidarity between the students, in American universities the emphasis on group work is to complete a task (Saito & Fujita, 2004).

Because of these communicative and cultural differences, English language learners from Japan studying in the United States may not view peer feedback activities as useful. While Saito and Fujita (2004) studied Japanese college students' learner attitudes to peer rating in an EFL environment and found an overall positive response, little research in this area has been done on the attitudes towards peer feedback of Japanese students studying English abroad. Therefore, this project will investigate the attitudes towards peer feedback of four native Japanese-speaking undergraduate students studying at an American university and the impact peer feedback had on future revisions to their papers.

Participants and Setting

Four undergraduate students enrolled in a high-intermediate level academic ESL writing class at a large American university in San Francisco volunteered to participate in this study. Participants attended class three times a week for one hour each class. The class utilized a process writing approach to teaching academic writing, with multiple drafts, student-teacher conferencing, and peer reviews required for all submitted essays.

The participating group consisted of three female students and one male student. The three female students—Akiko, Kiyoko, and Yukiko—were international students from Japan. The male student, Yoshi, was an American citizen by virtue of having

been born in the United States. However, he had been raised in Japan in a household where only Japanese was spoken and considered Japanese his native language. He was therefore deemed qualified for participation in the research.

In terms of English language learning background, Akiko, Kiyoko, and Yoshi spent six years studying English in Japan in middle and high school. Additionally, Kiyoko spent two years at a Japanese college studying English before transferring to the United States. Yukiko, on the other hand, studied English for three years in Japanese middle school and then attended and graduated from a private international school in the United States. All of the participants had taken previous ESL classes at the same university where the research was conducted before enrolling in the current class. They indicated they were familiar with peer feedback from these previous classes.

Methodology

As part of their first essay assignment in their ESL writing class, participants were asked to write a three to four page paper responding to two readings that had been discussed in class. The participants were then required to trade rough drafts of their essay with a partner (not necessarily from the participant group). The partner filled out a peer feedback evaluation form (Appendix A) provided by the teacher and returned it to the participant. Copies of these completed feedback forms as well as drafts of the participants' essays both before and after the feedback were collected to investigate what changes the participants made based on the peer comments.

Additionally participants filled out a short questionnaire (Appendix B), modeled on a similar one conducted by Saito and Fujita (2004) to assess student attitudes towards peer feedback. Part I of the questionnaire collected background information about the participants. Part II of the questionnaire consisted of six statements.

JAPANESE ESL LEARNER ATTITUDES TOWARDS PEER FEEDBACK

The participants were asked to choose the phrase they thought best completed the statement in each case:

1. When revising my essay, peers' comments (helped very much / helped a little / didn't help much / didn't help at all)
2. Evaluating peers' essays is an activity that is (very good / good / not so good / not good at all)
3. In my final draft of the essay, I used (a lot / some / very little / none) of my peers' suggestions.
4. By evaluating peers' essays, I (learned a lot / learned a little / didn't learn much / didn't learn at all)
5. As raters, peer students are (very reliable / a little reliable / not so much reliable / not reliable at all)
6. As a rater, I am (very reliable / a little reliable / not so much reliable / not reliable at all)

The third part of the questionnaire asked the participants to explain in their own words how they felt about peer feedback:

1. Did you find peer feedback helpful? Please write a few sentences (in Japanese or English) explaining why or why not.
2. Did you change your essay based on peer feedback? Please write a few sentences (in Japanese or English) explaining why or why not.
3. Do you think peer feedback or teacher feedback is more helpful? Please write a few sentences (in Japanese or English) explaining why.

Results

The data from Part II of the questionnaire was quantified by assigning a numeric value to each answer on a scale from one to four, with “four” being the most positive response and “one” being the most negative. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 <i>Participant Responses to Part II of the Questionnaire</i>						
Participant Name	Question #1	Question #2	Question #3	Question #4	Question #5	Question #6
Kiyoko	3	4	2	3	4	3
Yoshi	3	3	2	3	3	2
Akiko	3	4	3	4	4	2
Yukiko	4	3	4	4	4	3
Average Score (M)	3.25	3.50	2.75	3.50	3.75	2.5

In general, the participants showed an overall positive response ($M \geq 2.5$) to peer feedback, which corresponds to similar results found by Saito and Fujita (2004). The only negative responses appeared in Question #3, in which two participants claimed they did not use much of the peer feedback, and Question #6, in which two of the participants professed unease with their own abilities to evaluate peer essays.

The answers to Part III give us some more insight into these responses. As in Part II, in general all of the participants responded positively to peer feedback. Kiyoko, for example, cited a specific instance where the peer feedback was useful because it helped her figure out a better way to transition between two paragraphs she was having trouble connecting. Yoshi, on the other hand, felt that the peer feedback was useful for determining the overall clarity of his essay but expressed doubt about the

JAPANESE ESL LEARNER ATTITUDES TOWARDS PEER FEEDBACK

accuracy of the specific peer comments he received. He felt that due to his own lack of confidence in reviewing peers' papers, he could not be sure if the feedback he was receiving was correct.

All of the participants indicated in Part III that teacher feedback was more useful than peer feedback. Akiko, for example, recognized that ultimately the teacher was the intended audience of the final essay and therefore felt teacher feedback was more useful because she could write what the teacher expected. Despite preferring teacher feedback, all of the participants also commented on the benefit of peer feedback. Yukiko, for instance, realized that implementing the peer feedback comments would make her paper better.

Examining the participants' feedback sheets and essays both before and after receiving feedback provides some interesting observations. Participant fears about feedback not being accurate appear to have been unfounded. All of the peer reviewers made valid suggestions that potentially would have improved the participants' papers. Interestingly, even participants who felt that peer feedback was very accurate only implemented about half of the suggested changes. Both Yukiko and Akiko, for instance, were advised to use APA format to cite their quotations. This advice was in keeping with explicit instructions from the teacher to use APA-style to cite all sources. Yet even in the final draft both of them failed to properly cite the source of their quotations.

Even when participants did take peer suggestions into account and changed their drafts, the changes were not always successful. Yoshi, for example, was recommended to use fewer details during the portion of his essay where he summarized the readings. Instead of removing the unnecessary details, however, he instead joined some of the shorter sentences together with conjunctions and varied his word choice. Similarly, Kiyoko was advised that the topic sentences in her

paragraphs did not relate back to her thesis statement. She subsequently changed these sentences cosmetically by adding or removing words, but still failed to link the overall meanings of the sentences back to her thesis statement.

Discussion

This research investigated the attitudes to peer feedback of four English language learners of Japanese cultural background and examined how those participants used peer feedback in their revision process. The participants in this study showed a positive affective regard for peer feedback, but still preferred teacher feedback over peer feedback. This preference for teacher feedback may result from the participants' exposure throughout their Japanese education to a teacher-centered system in which knowledge is passed down from the teacher to the students. However, because lack of confidence in their own reliability as peer reviewers was cited as a reason for disprefering peer feedback, it is also possible that the raters' lack of training in effective peer feedback techniques may have contributed to this preference.

Despite peer feedback being viewed positively overall, the participants in this study did not seem to be able to effectively implement many of the peer suggestions. In some cases, this seems to be due to a lack of trust in the peer reviewers. In many cases, however, attempts to change the essay based on peer feedback wound up failing to address the indicated issues. It is difficult to assess why these failures occurred. As the focus of this study was only on what changes were made and not why, future studies should examine how Japanese ESL learners choose to interpret and implement peer feedback.

Another potential future study could examine Japanese students' attitudes towards giving peer feedback. During Part III of the questionnaire, Yoshi commented that "it [was] difficult to present disagreement." None of the Japanese participants expressed

JAPANESE ESL LEARNER ATTITUDES TOWARDS PEER FEEDBACK

great confidence in their ability to review their peers' papers. Given the Japanese cultural tendency to avoid overt disagreement, a future study that examines how Japanese learners give peer feedback might provide useful insights.

Conclusion

The participants in this study showed an overall positive attitude towards peer feedback. Despite this, however, in many instances they were unable to make effective use of helpful feedback or ignored it entirely. While this small-scale study cannot give a definitive reason as to why these failures occurred, it is possible that their Japanese cultural background led them to treat peer review comments less seriously than if the teacher had made the same comments. Because ESL students like these participants have studied English for many years both in their native countries and the United States, the effect their cultural backgrounds have on the peer review process may not be readily apparent. Therefore, ESL writing teachers need to take precautions to ensure that their students' cultural backgrounds are not interfering with the peer feedback process. Ferris & Hedgcock (1988) suggest that this can be accomplished by making sure students clearly understand the benefits of peer feedback, modeling good feedback, and holding students responsible for carefully considering their peers comments by having them explain, perhaps in journal entries, why they chose to implement or disregard the feedback they received.

References

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JAPANESE ESL LEARNER ATTITUDES
TOWARDS PEER FEEDBACK

Appendix A – Peer Review Worksheet

Reviewer name: _____
Essay #1 by _____

PEER REVIEW

1. Does the introduction provide background information on business ethics and lead smoothly to thesis?

2. Is the thesis statement clear? Is it focused on the main question of the prompt?

3. Are the topic sentences of every paragraph logically connected with the thesis?

4. In **body paragraphs**, are topic sentences and concluding sentences logically connected?

5. Is the summary clear? Would you be able to understand what happened in the story without reading it?

-2-

6 Are both articles properly introduced?

7. Do you find the writer's analysis of the story convincing? Are Solomon's rules explained and applied reasonably and logically?

8. When quoting and paraphrasing, does the writer use the APA style appropriately?

9. Does the conclusion follow the essay logically? Is it logically connected with the thesis?

10. Are grammar errors in the paper distracting?

11. What is your overall impression of this essay? Is it focused on the assignment? Are you convinced by the author? What can be done to make this paper better? Make some suggestions to the writer.

JAPANESE ESL LEARNER ATTITUDES
TOWARDS PEER FEEDBACK

Appendix B – Peer Feedback Survey

Part I

Please answer the following questions.

1. How many years did you study English in:
 - a) Japanese middle school:
 - b) Japanese high school:
 - c) Japanese college:
 - d) American university:

2. How many years total have you lived in the United States (including previous visits, home stays, etc.)?:

Part II

*Please mark the answer in the parentheses that you think fits best. You can underline or **boldface** the answer, or you can delete the choices you don't think fit.*

Example: I like (ice cream, cookies, candy, vegetables) best.

Possible answers:

*I like (**ice cream**, cookies, candy, vegetables) best.*

I like (ice cream, cookies, candy, vegetables) best.

I like (ice cream) best.

1. When revising my essay, peers' comments (helped very much / helped a little / didn't help much / didn't help at all)

2. Evaluating peers' essays is an activity that is (very good / good / not so good / not good at all)
3. In my final draft of the essay, I used (a lot / some / very little / none) of my peers' suggestions.
4. By evaluating peers' essays, I (learned a lot / learned a little / didn't learn much / didn't learn at all)
5. As raters, peer students are (very reliable / a little reliable / not so much reliable / not reliable at all)
6. As a rater, I am (very reliable / a little reliable / not so much reliable / not reliable at all)

Part III

Please write a short answer to the following questions.

1. Did you find peer feedback helpful? Please write a few sentences (in Japanese or English) explaining why or why not.
2. Did you change your essay based on peer feedback? Please write a few sentences (in Japanese or English) explaining why or why not.
3. Do you think peer feedback or teacher feedback is more helpful? Please write a few sentences (in Japanese or English) explaining why.