

Receiving feedback from more advanced learners of English through the internet.

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Typically, peer-feedback in L2 classrooms has occurred among learners at the same level of language ability in a classroom. One potential for enriching the sources of feedback from other learners in writing process seems to be the application of the internet to peer-feedback. Studies on feedback have mainly focused on activities in classroom of interaction between native speakers and learners of the target language. However, it would be beneficial to investigate how learners in an EFL context benefit from receiving feedback from more advanced learners in an ESL context. This is based on Vygotsky's(1978, 1986) concepts of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which strongly suggests the value of receiving support from more experienced peers in the feedback process.

This study intends to examine types of feedback 25 undergraduates in Japan received from more advanced learners and how these undergraduates incorporated advanced learners' suggestions. 25 undergraduates in Japan create their own websites and receive feedback on their websites about 1) grammar, 2) organisation, and 3) layout and content from 18 more advanced learners of English in the US. The undergraduates are also surveyed for their reactions to the feedback. The findings show that 22 of the 25 Japanese students (88%) revised their website based on the advice they received. These students incorporated the advice about content and organisation more than those on grammatical mistakes.

1. Benefits and difficulties of peer-feedback

As a result of findings of positive effects of peer-feedback in the L1 context, many studies have examined its benefits and difficulties in L2 classrooms, with sometimes contradictory findings (Jacob, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996; Storch & Tapper, 1997; Berg, 1999; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992, for example).

Being compared with self-correction and teacher feedback (Berger, 1990; Zhang, 1995; Cheong, 1994; Caulk, 1994; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1992; Rothschild and Klingenberg, 1990), findings of peer-feedback in L2 writing classes often show difficulties in accepting and providing feedback from peers.

In accepting feedback, students prefer teacher feedback to that from others, in written form in the case of FL students (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996), believing the teacher to be an expert and, at the same time, mistrusting the advice of peers (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Zhang, 1995). Unlike L1 writers, it appears that L2 writers seem to find teachers' comments useful (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), suggesting authoritative power of teacher. When some students are too critical of others, acting 'prescriptive' and authoritarian, for example, rather than collaborative (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992), they may be seen as inappropriately aggressive (Nelson & Murphy, 1992) and unfriendly. In fact, students appear to have different expectations from teacher and student feedback. They seem to expect teachers to focus on grammatical correction (Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988), while they may expect fellow students to comment on the content of their writing (Radecki & Swales, 1988). Students may not expect their classmates to find grammatical mistakes because of lack of linguistic skills, which seems to be related to difficulties in providing feedback.

Thus the difficulties in providing feedback are often due to students' English proficiency to identify grammatical mistakes and provide advice on the organisation of other students' work, (e.g. Connor & Asenavage, 1994, who report that only 5% of students incorporated peer feedback in their revisions). Students need to be trained to provide feedback as shown by Berg (1999), who finds that when peers are trained, the feedback of lower level writers is not less effective. Another difficulty can be social. They may not be too keen to be critical on fellow classmates' writing (Guputa, 1998) because as shown above they feel they lack authority to be critical of other students' work and they do not want to damage the relationship with other classmates by looking aggressive. This tendency to avoid participation in peer-feedback can be further enhanced by students' cultural backgrounds. Some may be reluctant to say what they think, circling the topic in order to avoid conflict or to avoid embarrassing the writer (Connor & Asenavage, 1994), and may not implement peer suggestions unless consensus is expressed (Nelson & Carson, 1998). Peer-feedback seem to create various types of difficulties.

However, potential benefits of peer-feedback cannot be dismissed.(Villamil and Guerrero, 1998; Paulus, 1999; Tsui & Ng, 2000) Peer-feedback certainly creates a chance to bring a real sense of

audience into the classroom (Paulus, 1999) and to raise awareness of student writers' strengths and weaknesses (Tsui & Ng, 2000). It seems necessary to acknowledge benefits of peer-feedback, which are different from those of teacher feedback (Villamil and Guerrero, 1998). For example, it was found that student feedback can be more specific in focus while teacher feedback can be general (Cauk, 1994). It is shown that students value peer feedback as one input to their writing process (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine & Huang, 1998), leading to greater focus on content, which Storch and Tapper (1997) suggest is of greater concern to L2 writers than to L1 writers.

Treating peer-feedback as interaction, studies examine it as a source for negotiation for meaning, emphasising social dimension of peer-feedback in classroom (Ohta, 1994; Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994; Guerrero and Villamil, 1994; Villamil and Guerrero, 1996). This is because although some studies of peer-feedback have mainly focused on students' linguistic improvement (Villamil & Guerrero, 1996, 1998), the positive outcome seems to be based on a supportive social context in which students are motivated to share peer-feedback (Guerrero and Villamil, 1994, 2000). In these social contexts, negotiation between the students seem to result in better memory and incorporation of suggestions (Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Villamil and Guerrero, 1996). These studies apply Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development to an L2 writing and *scaffolding*, its related term to describe language learning in peer-feedback.

2. Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) concept of ZPD establishes two developmental levels in the learner. One level is the actual developmental level, which is determined by what the learner can do alone, and the other is the potential level of development, which can be the level achieved in collaboration with an adult or capable peer (see p. 86 in Vygotsky, 1978). He refers to the former developmental level as what learners have achieved while the latter developmental level indicates what learners can potentially do in the near future. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) emphasises that although learners' capabilities are often judged by the former developmental level as their achievement, they should also be measured by the latter developmental level. This is because the measurement of the latter level may predict different achievement at a later stage. The ZPD is a scope of distance between these two levels, whose growth enhances potential development of learners by obtaining help from experienced peers -- "scaffolding" in his term.

While scaffolding can be provided by teachers traditionally, advanced peers can also be its providers. In their study, Guerrero and Villamil (2000) appear to have been able to facilitate growth

in ZPD in a class consisting entirely of learners with the similar proficiency level. However, because originally the theory of scaffolding and ZPD suggests a learner working at a higher developmental stage, pairing students with different linguistic proficiencies would produce even more favourable results. Application of the computer-based technology seems to contribute to this pairing.

3. Computer Mediated Communication

Communication through the internet enables students to engage in interactional activities with other students in disparate locations (Warschauer, 2001, 2003; Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004; Von der Emde, Schneider, & Kötter, 2001, for example). One example can be the use of online chatting to promote meaning negotiations among the students in disparate locations through writing (Blacke, 2000; Smith, 2003; Pellettieri, 2000; Toyoda and Harrison, 2002). Another example can be the creation of websites, which enables students not only to present their own ideas to a wider audience and to provide an opportunity to receive feedback from them. In fact, feedback through the internet would be preferable for learners as they were found to prefer feedback in written form (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994) to that in face to face interaction. In either case, the internet creates an opportunity to receive feedback from outside readers. Its benefits can be manifold.

First as providers of feedback, it is less threatening to be critical of those written by unknown students outside the classroom.

Second, as receivers of feedback, it enables students to receive it from more advanced learners whose advice can be more incorporated than that from the classmates with a similar proficiency level as the former may be considered to be more credible than the latter. The use of the internet helps to realise the Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development to form a pair between a novice and a more experienced peer in their learning process. The meaning of experienced peers here is not limited to native speakers of the target language. However, considering the possible interactants being the native speakers of the target language, studies typically use computer mediated communication to link native and non-native speakers (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004; Von der Emde, Schneider, & Kötter, 2001; Blacke, 2000; Smith, 2003; Pellettieri, 2000; Toyoda and Harrison, 2002).

In receiving and providing feedback, since the preferences and concerns of L1 and L2 writers

diverge (Storch & Tapper, 1997; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998), it would be educationally appropriate to link L2 writing classrooms. Moreover, to construct the relationship so beneficial for achieving growth in the ZPD, it would be useful to bring together students with higher language proficiency in an ESL environment and less advanced learners in a EFL environment. Then these two types of learners can play a different role in peer-feedback; having more authority more advanced learners can be feedback providers while accepting more status of advanced learners less advanced learners can be receivers of feedback.

4. This Study

This study applies Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) concept of ZPD to peer-feedback in L2 writing classrooms through the use of the internet. Focus is placed on the benefits of less advanced learners in an EFL context where they receive feedback from more advanced learners on their websites which introduce their hometown in English. I will also investigate the role of teachers in providing support to students. This is an early part of a larger study which will examine mutual benefits of peer-feedback through the use of they internet in the following year.

4.1. Research questions

- a. What kind of feedback (content, organization, grammar) do the EFL students want from the teacher and peers?
- b. What kinds of feedback do the EFL students receive from their classmates and ESL near-peers?
- c. What kinds of revisions do the EFL students make based on the feedback?
- d. What do EFL students think of feedback from their ESL near-peers?

4.2. Method

4.2.1. Participants

This study involves two types of learners of English: intermediate level EFL writing students and advanced level ESL graduate students. The former were 25 undergraduates with a Japanese English teacher in Japan and the other were 18 international graduates with an English speaking teacher in the U.S.A.

4.2.2. Data collection procedures

First, the undergraduates in Japan were asked about their preference of the type of feedback from the teacher and their classmates. To receive feedback, the Japanese students produced websites about their hometowns in 250 to 300 words of English as a classroom activity. When they were put them on the web with some illustrations, maps and pictures, comments on these websites were exchanged among the classmates. Then the international students evaluated them as a group activity, and they individually wrote letters of evaluation to each student. Their teacher checked grammar and organisation of these letters and emailed them to the Japanese teacher to distribute them to the website writers, who then revised their websites according to the suggestions received. The revised versions were again put on the internet so the evaluators viewed the revisions. To identify improvements, the two versions were compared according to the three criteria: 1) grammar and the lexis, 2) organisation, 3) content and layout, and the new version was also examined in relation to the feedback received from the international students. After the revision, Japanese students were surveyed about their reaction to the feedback given to their websites.

In total four types of data were collected in this study.

Data 1: 25 Japanese students' response to questions about the preferences of the type of feedback from teachers and their classmates in form of questionnaire.

Data 2: Comments on 25 Japanese students' websites posted on the internet from their classmates and 18 international graduates.

Data 3: 25 Japanese students' revised version of websites.

Data 4: 25 Japanese students' reaction to the feedback.

5. Results

5.1. Data 1 Preference of feedback among the Japanese students.

As Fredericks and Swales (1988) show, students may expect different types of feedback from teachers and fellow students. Thus, a question was asked about the type of feedback they expect from teacher and students. Table 1 shows a clear difference in expectations.

Table 1 Importance of corrections/suggestions from teachers and classmates

	teacher	classmates
Type 1. Content and layout	4	11
Type 2. Organisation	11	6
Type 3. Grammar	16	9

Notes: The above numbers include multiple answers.

From the teacher, students seem to prefer to have feedback about grammatical points such as the use of prepositions, articles, tense, phrasal verbs. By contrast, from their fellow students they expect feedback on the content. Some of them wrote: “it is useful to know how people in the same generation think” or “it is important to hear a different perspective”. It seems that they are expecting comments rather than grammar correction from fellow students. This difference may affect the way they incorporate feedback from teachers and fellow students.

5.2. Data 2 Feedback from international students to Japanese students

After Japanese students posted their websites on the internet, they have looked through all the classmates websites. Because the purpose was to learn from other students’ websites, the students were asked to write comments on three of them in English. These comments were distributed to all the students with maintaining writers’ anonymity. The students predominantly commented on the content, sometimes expressing their knowledge about the town. Some comments dealt with grammatical issues such as “pay attention to grammatical accuracy” but did not describe any specific problems such as the use of tense or voice of verb in certain places. This finding was not in agreement with that of Villamil and Guerrero’s study (1998). They show that among the five language aspects (content, organisation, grammar, vocabulary, mechanics), their students commented most on grammar in two modes of writing, 34% in narrative mode, and 38% in persuasive mode. It looks as if students in their study focused on surface level mistakes, which they acknowledge as one drawback of peer-feedback. However, they also stress that grammar correction is a cognitively demanding task, by referring to Beason(1993). Grammar correction for students at this intermediate level may be more demanding than commenting on surface level aspects of content as was also shown by Rinnert and Kobayashi(2001) who find that compared with inexperienced students, experienced students comment more on language than content.

Content being the major concern, websites dealing with interesting topics or local delicacies familiar to them attracted more comments than others. For example, one student who described his hometown, *Mito*, famous for Japanese food, “natto” and one of the famous historical figures in

the 17th century, received comments from as many as eight students, six of them are shown in Example 1. His website was full of linguistic mistakes but gave an impression that he was very fond of his hometown with the description of many interesting items.

Example 1 Comments from the undergraduates

1. I realise that I am from the same town. His introduction is interesting with full of his ideas. Maybe he could check the use of English words more carefully to avoid using wrong words.

2. His introduction is very exciting. I can feel his strong emotion towards his hometown. Although his hometown is very famous, I did not know a lot about it. Now after reading his website, I know more about Mito city.

3. The first paragraph was a little clumsy, but from the second, it runs well and easy to understand. Maybe you could check spellings.

4. Your site is very persuasive. As I am also from Ibaraki, I feel I share a lot with you. Natto is very healthy and delicious. I eat them with raw eggs, and mix it with tuna and Kimchi. I love them.

5. You explained sightseeing spots and local products in detail. I did not know that the statue of Koumon is standing in front of the station. But I have to say that I cannot agree with your sentence: Natto is delicious.

6. Your website is very interesting. The content of your site is attractive for me. Although I hate nattou, I want to eat Mito nattou!

Average number of comments students received being 3, this student certainly attracted more attention than other websites. It is interesting that although his website was full of linguistic mistakes, his grammatical mistakes were not pointed out in the comments and students often related themselves to his topics. Devenney (1989) argues that unlike teachers, peers did not apply grammar to the evaluation of students' writing, which may be related to not only lack of linguistic skills but also the social dimension in classroom. They may simply not want to be critical of classmates (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Connor & Asenavage, 1994) and want to be

friendly to them. In this study although students knew they remain anonymous to the writer, two students commented later that they were reluctant to be critical because they were writing to their classmates. They stated that they would have written differently if they had not known the writers of websites.

Compared to feedback from fellow classmates, feedback from the 18 international graduate students in the US was significantly different in many aspects. First, each website was given marks based on fair-good-excellent scale as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Scores given to websites by the graduate students

Scores given by the graduate students	Number of Japanese students
Excellent	1
Between Good and Excellent	1
Good	19
Fair	2
No marks	2
Total	25

The student who described Mito above received the following letter of evaluation.

The fact that the majority of students (19 of 25) received “Good” suggests very little difference among the quality of websites or the graduate students found it difficult to differentiate them. It was interesting that the student whose website received comments from as many as 8 students shown in Example 1 was one of the two students with fair mark– the lowest mark. It seems that the website drew attention from his fellow classmates but it was not given a good mark by an outside evaluator. He received the following letter of evaluation from the graduate student.

Example 2

Dear M,

I'm writing representing a panel of three students in an academic writing class at the University of M. We have evaluated your website on your hometown and would like to give you our opinion of its strengths, some ways we think it could be improved, and our overall rating on a scale of excellent-good-fair.

We enjoyed the interesting facts about your hometown you included. We also like the nice

pictures on your website. These pictures not only make your website more attractive, but also helped us to understand the interesting facts you mentioned. The contents are well organized, making it fairly easy to read.

A few changes could make your website impress its audience more favorably. First, more work on choosing and presenting all the interesting facts about Mito would be useful. For instance, if we were you, we would use the facts that Mito has an excellent surfing resort and a large stadium as reasons that Mito is an exciting city. We would also give more details about other facts. For example, we would explain what Nattou is made of to make it easier for the audience to imagine what it is. In addition, we could use more help understanding the geographical relationship between Oarai and Mito, as well as Mito and Japan. We think a map could be useful. Is "ho Mito!" a universal motto in Mito? If not, we would rather say "go Mito".

Let us also suggest alternatives for two of your sentences, to improve style and clarity.

- 1. "So, I explain three main reasons of Mito city." We know what you mean, but would say, "Mito is an exciting city for the following reasons."*
- 2. "Another of these reasons, there are good places around Mito." I guess you mean something like this: "In addition to the above reasons, Mito is an exciting city also because of the good places around it."*

We think your website is a good start on creating an attractive site. Overall, we've evaluated your website as "fair". I hope these comments help you with your writing. Thanks for sharing your love of your hometown.

Yours,

Y.

The above comment clearly shows that evaluators appreciated his effort but the writing was not clear enough to introduce his hometown to a total stranger. The comment emphasises that he has to consider the shared knowledge with the possible readers, which would be particularly beneficial for the writer as this is the perspective difficult to gain from the classmates. All the feedback letters given to the undergraduates were based on a group discussion and were checked by their English teacher.

To analyse the feedback from international graduate students further, comments were categorised into three types in Table 1, which represent students' expectations about feedback from their teacher and fellow classmates.

The criteria of categorisation are:

Type 1: Feedback about the amount of information and layout: Suggestions include adding extra information at word and sentence levels to clarify the information to readers.

Type 2: Feedback about organisation: suggestions only involve the moving of sentences or paragraphs without adding any extra information. Examples can be adding markers such as first and second, moving more general information before the detail, avoid repetition.

Type 3: Feedback about grammar and vocabulary: suggesting changes of words and sentences without changing the meaning such as changing "absorbed" into "merged" or correcting grammatical points.

Examples of each type are shown below.

Type 1

Personally, I'd like to point out that specific details in your website are missing. To attract people's attention to your hometown, I propose that you give more descriptive detail regarding the mountains and hot springs you referred to.

A few changes could make your website impress its audience more favorably. First, Tokyo is the most famous city we know because it is the capital of Japan. So you do not have to mention Yokohama and Takasaki to explain the location of Tokyo.

Type 2

...the last, third paragraph suddenly brings out a serious topic. It is that Kasukawa village

will be absorbed by Maebashi city. This new topic was a big shift in tone compared to the beginning of the letter. So I think the transition needs to be made clear from goofing around to a serious and sad tone. You could say maybe, " While Kasukawa is a beautiful and playful place, it faces one serious problem. ..." Then you need to tell why this is happening and what will really be lost.

Type 3

In " The most famous event in Sapporo is a snow festival.", the name of the festival should be The Snow Festival.

"And I also recommend a hat, ear muff, and gloves" should be "I also recommend wearing a hat, eat muffs, and gloves." You should make a complete sentence.

Types of feedback given to the undergraduates were based on a group discussion and were checked by their English teacher. Because some undergraduates received more types of feedback than others, Table 3 shows the number of students and the number of types of feedback they received.

Table 3 Type of feedback expected from teachers and fellow students

Type of feedback	Number of students received this type of feedback	Total number of students
Type 1: layout, amount of information, content	21	25
Type 2: organisation	14	25
Type 3: grammar, lexis at sentence level.	16	25

Table 3 shows that in general they tended to receive Type 1 feedback more than Type 2 and 3. This difference is well matched with their expectations of the types of feedback from other students shown in Table 1. A more detailed analysis shows that the majority of students received more than two types of comments covering a wide range of topics from the graduate students. A relatively few students received suggestions of only one type. For example, it was found that of 21 students who received type 1 comment, 5 received only this type. However, as this type covers a variety of topics such as layout and the amount of information, the range of suggestions was not so

limited. One student received only type 3 comments, which consists of three suggestions to change grammatical mistakes. These three types would help to improve undergraduates' websites in one way or another. The next question was how all the undergraduates perceived and incorporate them into their websites.

5.3. Data 3 Japanese students' revision and comparison between old and new versions.

When asked whether they were happy to revise their websites according to the feedback, the Japanese students unanimously agreed that they would revise, in which case revision would count as part of assessment. They were given two weeks to work on their own. When the deadline came, it was found that 22 of 25 Japanese students (88%) revised their websites one way or another. As can be expected, some went a long way to improve their websites along with the suggestions, while others simply added superficial changes. Thus among those 22 undergraduates who added some changes, students were divided into two types. The first type are those who only revised visual elements such as layout and size of font in their websites. 6 students adopted only this type. The second type are those who changed both visual elements and linguistic forms in relation to types of feedback they received (Table 2). 16 students belong to this type. Thus, 64% (16/25) of the Japanese students tried to improve their writing based on the feedback from the graduate students.

The first type often includes students who are relatively weaker in their linguistic skills than others, when we compare their other written course work. However, it has to be noted that the student who received the lowest mark with the letter of evaluation shown in Example 2 followed all the suggestions given by the graduate students.

To examine linguistic changes, focus was placed on the analysis of the second type. Students were divided into three types according to the changes they made whose criteria were the same as those used for the analysis of ESL students' feedback (see Data 2). Findings in each type were:

Type 1: changes in the amount of information/content

14 students added extra information to clarify information to readers. For example, 11 students added more detailed information about the place, the population, or adding a reference point to explain the location. Together with more detailed information, 2 students added their comments on the place being rural and the food as being delicious instead of describing it simply as the local food. These students added their own evaluation of the place and food to highlight the main

features of their hometown and consider the impression of readers to their websites.

Type 2: Changes in organisation:

10 students changed the organisation; mostly moving more general comment forward, placing detailed information after the general comment, adding discourse markers such as first and second, avoiding repetition, adding a topic sentence.

Type 3: Changes in grammar and vocabulary:

7 students changed words and phrases; 5 of them corrected grammatical mistakes while 2 changed to more appropriate vocabulary suggested such as absorbed to integrated.

These changes can improve students' writing in a different way. Type 3 changes added accuracy to the writing. By contrast, Type 1 change does not simply clarified the meaning but made the writing appealing to the possible readers and Type 2 change made the flow of their description easy to follow from readers' perspective. Because the student may perceive some feedback more important than others, they may pay more attention to some suggestions. Thus the number of students was counted according to the type of feedback they incorporated in Table 4. The number indicates that 14 of 21 students (66.6%) adopted type 1 suggestions, while less than half (7 of 16) students incorporated type 3 suggestions into their texts.

Table 4 Type of revision given and incorporated.

Type of suggestions	Number of Japanese students who received these suggestions	Number of Japanese students who incorporated these suggestions
1. layout, adding extra information on items	21	14 (66.6%)
2. organisation of text	14	10 (71.4%)
3. grammar, lexis, sentence level changes	16	7 (43.7%)

It seems that the undergraduates in Japan are more likely to take up type 1 and 2 suggestions than type 3, similar to the findings of Berger's (1990) study and those of Rothchild and Klingenberg's (1990) study. The difference in the amount of incorporation due to type of feedback is well matched with their expectations as they had from their fellow students shown in Table 1.

Furthermore, as most of the suggestions of Type 3 suggestions focused on relatively minor issues such as *use although, instead of though at the beginning of a clause* (see Type 3 examples), we need to ask how Japanese students perceived feedback from graduate students.

5.4. Japanese students' written comments on this project about its usefulness in their language learning process.

Because some students may be reluctant to revise and they may not be happy with the feedback they received, which may affect type of revision they made, questions were asked about why they agreed to revise, and how they found the feedback from the graduate students.

5.4.1. Reason for agreeing to revise.

In response to the reason for revision, 22 of 25 stated that they agreed to rewrite because their English would be improved. Of the remaining 3, one stated that he/she agreed because he/she preferred the revision to the examination and two did not answer the question. These two students may be two of the three who did not revise the websites. It seems that most of them had a positive attitude in revising their websites, which can be reflected on their incorporation of feedback into their websites.

5.4.2. Response to feedback from the US.

Two questions were asked about the feedback from the ESL students. One was about the usefulness and the other was about the appropriateness of the language used to express critical comments. For the first question, almost all the students (23 of 25) found the feedback useful. Only two students stated that they did not agree with some suggestions. They stated that although some of the comments may be critical, they found them useful because they realised their problems in writing and these comments can improve their writing. One student writes "I learnt what to clarify my thinking, to understand my grammatical mistakes, to take a reader's perspective."

Their linguistic context also seems to have given some status and authority to their comments. Several students pointed out that they agreed to their comments as those were from students working in an English speaking environment.

For the second question, nearly all the Japanese students (23/25) found the feedback letter from ESL students friendly, polite and appropriate. One student wrote "I was very happy to receive it.

Thank you.”

In fact, Japanese students’ positive comments can be related to the style and structure of the graduate students’ writing. With some help from their teacher, they learnt to balance critical and friendly tone in writing commentary on websites. For example, all the letters of evaluation started with positive comments shown below (also see Example 2).

Example 3

I really think you make your focus very well and the organization of your text and order are very consistent, so I can easily predict what is coming next. For instance, the opening starts with introducing that your hometown has many places to enjoy an atmosphere of nature, and then the second and third paragraph talked about the lake and the mountains. In addition, you include nice pictures for each of them. I thought that is neat.

Then the graduate student provided suggestions for improvement with mitigated language with positive wording as underlined below.

Example 4

If you changed a few things, I think your website would impress its audience more favorably. First I wish you could give more information in detail. For example, in the second passage, you talked about Suwa Lake. In your writing you pretty much say that the lake is famous, so many people visit specially in the night or summer. But that is about it. Wouldn't it be nicer if you explain why it is so attractive compared to other lakes, and where it is, as well as what kind of activity people can enjoy at the lake? Likewise, the third paragraph also mentioned about the Mountain, but you did not give enough detail. You said, "Mountain has lots of plants, birds and so on." I think the reader can hardly imagine what interesting things are there. Again, you need to write more information, why this mountain is so attractive, where it is, and why people enjoy being there, doing what?

These critical but friendly and polite comments may have induced the positive response from the

undergraduates in Japan. Obviously as this level of English proficiency was not expected from these undergraduates in Japan, it was certainly beneficial to have feedback from more advanced learners. However, these students did not always put it in action.

5.4.3. Action after receiving feedback

Because the large majority of the students seem to be grateful to the feedback they received individually, a question was asked about whether they sent a thank-you-message to the graduate students. With permission from the graduate students, the undergraduates were informed of email address of graduate students and given set phrases of thank you message in class.

However, only half (12/25) sent a thank-you-message. When asked about the reason for not sending a message, the following comments appeared in their response.

“I forgot...”

“I was too lazy...”

“I did not have access to the internet at home...”

“I did not want to tell somebody I don’t know...”

“I don’t remember how to send email...”

Writing a thank-you-message does not seem to come naturally to show appreciation to readers of their websites. Some students may need extra reason to write this message.

6. Discussion

6.1. Obtaining feedback from more advanced learners through computer-based technology.

Computer-based technology enables interaction between separated classrooms to take place, expanding opportunities to communicate among learners of English across language and cultural barriers. One potential of this technology was explored in this study in form of peer-feedback between learners with different English proficiency, applying Vygotsky’ concept of ZPD to language learners. This study has combined the internet use with receiving feedback from more advanced learners of English to examine how ZPD can be maximised by the use of computer-based technology. Although it is certainly beneficial to have feedback from the teacher and the classmates, receiving feedback from more advanced learners would obviously be beneficial. Questions are what benefits of benefits learners in Japan can enjoy and whether these benefits can be achieved in one classroom.

This study shows four types of the benefits of the use of computer-based technology to encourage growth in the ZPD of learners in Japan by receiving feedback from more advanced learners in the USA. First, it can help to solve the problem of lack of credibility on providers' side in peer-feedback because providers here were advanced learners in the USA, whose English proficiency and linguistic environment would give some status to and enhance credibility to their advice to the undergraduates in Japan. This raised credibility was shown in the comments of the undergraduates in Japan and had some effect on relatively high proportion of students incorporating the comments into their revised version, which can be equated with 76% of incorporated rate in the study of Villamil and Guerrero (1998). Obviously if students feel that their feedback is more credible, they would incorporate it more into their text.

Second, because feedback comes from readers with different language and cultural backgrounds, it can underline the importance of establishing shared knowledge, in particular for those in a monolingual and mono-cultural context, where it is difficult to raise writer awareness of readers with different background knowledge. Feedback about the content from those with no knowledge of Japanese geography and history was an eye opener to students in Japan. They certainly learnt that they cannot assume the same shared knowledge as they write in Japanese from students outside Japan. Comments on the content and organisation to clarify their meaning to explain their hometown to total strangers are one of the most difficult type of comments to provide in an EFL classroom. Their appreciation of this type of comment can be seen in the relatively high proportion of feedback about content/layout and organisation incorporated into their texts as opposed to those referring to grammatical mistakes. In fact, the fact that the undergraduates did not pick up grammatical mistakes pointed out by the graduate students may indicate their selective decision (Nelson and Murphy, 1993; Mendonca and Johnson, 1994; Villamil and Guerrero, 1998) or the role of feedback they expect in peer-feedback. We need to consider the type of feedback to focus on depending on whether it comes from the teacher or students.

Third, feedback from more advanced learners certainly can not only enrich the source for improving students' writing but also clarify the meaning by providing grammatical corrections which their teachers may have missed out. Although it was not incorporated as much as other types of feedback, it has to be noted that more advanced students can pick up grammatical mistakes undergraduate could not identify themselves. By giving feedback on content and grammar, advanced learners can play fill the gap classmates and teachers feedback may fail to do in providing.

Fourth, the computer-based technology enables providers and receivers of feedback to be in a different class, which is linguistically beneficial as both teachers and learners can concentrate on the different aspects of writing in class. Linguistically, because providing feedback requires more demanding linguistic skills than receiving feedback to revise their texts, it may be unrealistic to ask students to do both if they are only capable of producing texts. Thus the former work can be allocated to more advanced learners. Teaching less advanced learners, teachers can draw attention to the presentation of information and role of revision in producing a reader-friendly text, while dealing with more advanced learners, teachers can emphasise the importance of critical but friendly language to encourage revision to provide feedback.

Moreover, it is equally appropriate from a social perspective to separate providers and receivers of feedback in two locations as this seems to have helped to reduce social pressure under which to write critical comments. When writing comments on classmates' websites, undergraduates in Japan often tried to be friendly to other students by showing the shared knowledge about the town rather than commenting on the writing. By contrast, because the graduate students did not know the undergraduates, they were free to be critical and did not need to show any solidarity with the writer, which cannot be easily realised in one classroom (Sengupta, 1998). The physical distance and more advanced English language skills enabled them to be both critical and supportive.

It seems that feedback from more advanced learners provides various types of support even to replace teacher feedback. However, we should not forget how teachers can motivate and encourage students to explore the learners' benefits. In other words, students need teachers' support to maximise their growth of ZPD. Lack of incorporation of grammar mistakes from advanced learners' feedback may indicate students' expectations of feedback from students.

6.2. Teachers' involvement

Students seem to expect teachers to check grammar more than the content. They expect teachers to make their texts to be comprehensible, the first step in spreading the message. Then they expect comments on the content and organisation from the fellow students, possibly the second step to clarify the meaning and make the text reader-friendly. With more and more people to receive feedback from, teachers may have less role in helping students' writing. However, this study also indicates an enforced role for a teacher as somebody to encourage students to value the feedback and respond to providers of feedback. As Von der Emde, Schneider, and Kötter (2001) note, teachers have a role in designing meaningful activities, helping students analyze their

performance, and responding to their work. In addition, in some contexts, teachers must also help students create supportive social interaction. Their involvement also meets the desire of some students that peer feedback occur along with teacher and self-directed feedback (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998).

Obviously students can disagree to feedback from other students and do not always need to follow their comments. However, given that high proficiency learners possibly gain more from a networked environment in the target language than lower proficiency learners (Zahner, Fauverge and Wong, 2000), teachers need to help lower level learners make the best use of it, providing some criteria for accepting some feedback from others. For example, for lower level students, teachers need to direct students to prioritise their revising activities in the writing process by identifying more serious suggestions as some types of feedback may not be as useful as others. Accepting feedback is not as simple as it was originally thought. One type of feedback may be useful to some students but not for all the students. Changes at the level of formality and style may be too much to ask for intermediate level students.

For example, teachers can suggest that students may first focus on feedback on information structure and organisation. They need to become more selective in taking up the suggestions. In other words, we cannot simply expect students to incorporate everything they received as suggestions for improvement. Teachers should nourish critical views among the students to form their own criteria to improve their writing.

Another aspect teachers need to be involved is to encourage students in an EFL context to keep in touch with those in an ESL context. The fact that only half of students sent a thank-you message shows they need to be encouraged to send a message to their possible advisers in English writing.

7. Conclusion and implications

This study has examined types of feedback 25 undergraduates in Japan received on their writing shown on their websites from 18 more advanced learners in the USA and how these undergraduates incorporated advanced learners' suggestions. Comparison of feedback from the classmates and that from more advanced learners show a clear linguistic ability to comment on grammatical mistakes. Unlike the undergraduates, more advanced learners provided detailed and specific comments on undergraduates' grammatical mistakes and gave suggestions to organisation and the content. As it is difficult to encourage students in an EFL context to think of people who are outside their language and cultural environment, one precious experience for the

undergraduates was to receive suggestions on the content reminding them about the shared knowledge between the target readers and the writer. Awareness of readers can become a real issue with this type of suggestions. The findings show that a high proportion of undergraduates (22 of 25: 88%) revised their website based on the advice they received. Among the three types of feedback: 1)grammar, 2)organisation, and 3)layout and content from, the undergraduates incorporated the second and the third types much more than the first type into their websites. Their reactions to the feedback in questionnaire confirms the positive influence of the students in the USA gave on the undergraduates in Japan. The undergraduates were happy to receive individual letter of evaluation from more advanced learners of English. In the Vygotsky's term, feedback from more advanced peers provides scaffolding for growth in the learners' ZPD, while also reducing problems often associated with peer-feedback, such as lack of credibility of the peer evaluator, reluctance to be critical in the writing process.

Although the linguistic improvement has not been tested externally, it can be concluded that the findings show that scaffolding from more advanced learners help to improve writing. As emphasised by Villamil and Guerrero (1998), it is not the time to compare the benefit of teacher and student feedback. We need to make the best use of feedback we can obtain through various means of communication. The internet is certainly one of the useful means to link less advanced students in an EFL context to advanced students in an ESL context.

However, although students may receive various types of feedback, not all suggestions were incorporated into their texts. They were keen to incorporate some more than others, which may be due to the expectations of the students. Because students expect grammatical corrections from teachers and comments on the content and organisation from their peers, Japanese undergraduates mostly followed those related to the content, layout, amount of information but only half of them paid attention to smaller grammatical issues. At this stage, we do not know whether the undergraduates did not take up some suggestions deliberately or simply forgot to do so. But they certainly paid more attention to the suggestions to the content and organisation.

As this study deals with a small number of students, we need to extend the scale of study and we also need to examine the benefit from providers of the feedback.

For further study, although reaction to feedback was asked, it would be useful to interview undergraduates about the reason for not following some suggestions. Because the majority of the students found the feedback friendly and polite, it would also be useful to ask what makes them so. Furthermore, we also need to examine mutual benefits of giving and receiving feedback in

disparate locations.

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