A STUDY ON PEER FEEDBACK ACTIVITIES IN WRITING CLASSES AT QUANG BINH UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: This research aims to explore students' perceptions of peer feedback in English writing classes at Quang Binh University (QBU). In addition, it examines the reality of using peer feedback activities in some English writing classes and seeks solutions in order to improve peer feedback's efficiency as well as students' writing ability in English writing classes at QBU. The mixed method was used in this study. Data were collected from questionnaires with 70 students and semi-structured interviews with five English students in three English writing classes at QBU. Results of the study show that English - major students at QBU had positive attitudes toward the peer feedback' benefits in writing classes; especially when it helped learners to learn from their friends' mistakes and think critically. However, in reality, there were still some limitations in employing peer feedback activities at QBU. The findings also indicate some difficulties when conducting this technique such as students' English proficiency, students' cooperation, teacher guideline and motivation, time to organized peer feedback activities.

Keywords: peer feedback, improving, writing ability

1. INTRODUCTION

In English writing teaching, there are a lot of ways to give feedback and assess the students' writings such as teacher feedback, peer feedback or self-feedback. Peer feedback is the way to let students gives feedback to each other's work. It is defined as a collaborative activity involving reading, critiquing and giving feedback on others' writing to facilitate writing competence through mutual scaffolding (Hu, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhu, 2001). Each student receives a few pieces of work produced by their peers and gives feedback to them. By doing so, each student receives the feedback given to their work and revises it from their peer's comments. Yarrow and Topping (2001) claim that peer feedback plays an important role in "increased engagement and time spent on-task, immediacy and individualization of help, goal specification, explaining, prevention of information processing overload, promoting, modeling and reinforcement." (p.262). Peer feedback also gives students a less intimidating learning environment conducive for a successful acquisition of English as Second Language (Ferris and Hedgecock, 2005).

At QBU, the learner-centered approach has been used to teaching English. It aims encourages students to self-study to meet the demands of their current educational program. Thus, peer feedback is one of the techniques that can help students to develop their English learning ability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Claudia (1990) based on a review of the literature on writing reveals three major areas of feedback included peer feedback; conferences as feedback; and teachers' comments as feedback. Peer feedback, which is also known in the literature as 'peer review', 'peer editing', 'peer evaluation', 'peer critique' or 'peer response'. According to Topping (1998) and; Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans (1999), peer feedback can also be defined as an educational arrangement, in which students comment on their fellow students' work for formative or summative purposes (as cited in Pol et al., 2008). Liu and Hansen (2002) also defined peer feedback as "use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other is such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing". (p.1)

As regards using peer feedback in writing classes and its benefits, many studies have suggested the use of peer feedback in ESL writing classes with its valuable social, cognitive, affective and metalinguistic benefits (see Lundstorm and Baker, 2009; Pol et al., 2008; Yang et al, 2006; Rollinson, 2005; Storch, 2004; Ferris, 2002; Yarrow & Topping, 2001; Hyland, 2000; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Zhang, 1995)… Rollinson (2005), for instance, expressed that peer feedback can encourage a collaborative dialogue, a myriad of communicative behaviors and highly complex socio-cognitive interactions because it demands potentially high level of response and interaction between reader and writer. He also defined that when students provide useful feedback for others' writing, they can become critical readers and this may make them more critical readers and revisers of their own writings.

In 2006, Yang et al implemented a comparative study of peer and teacher feedback in two Chinese EFL writing classes taught by the teacher researcher. Students in both classes were given instructions and involved in three rounds of multi-draft composition writing for the same writing tasks. It concluded that feedback plays a very important role in Chinese EFL students' revision of writing, teacher and peer feedback were used to improve students' writing but teacher feedback had more impact and led to greater improvements in writing. However, the experience of peer feedback has a positive impact on students' perceptions and it was also associated with a greater degree of student autonomy. Furthermore, learners' writing skills were developed after using peer feedback on drafts followed by teacher feedback on final texts.

Lundstrom and Baker (2009) conducted a research at the English Language Center (ELC) at Brigham Young University with ninety-one students in nine sections of writing classes divided into the control group ("receivers") and the experimental group

("givers"). The study indicates that reviewing peer texts can help students improve their own writing by transferring abilities they learn and students taught to use peer feedback to improve in their own writing abilities less than students taught to give peer feedback.

Ting & Qian (2010) investigated peer feedback in a Chinese EFL writing classroom. The objectives of the research were to find out extent of incorporation peer's feedback and revisions, what kinds of revisions were made, and the quality of revisions in improving students' essays. Results showed that the students incorporated a large part of the peer feedback in their revisions. The revised drafts were improved in terms of fluency and accuracy but no significant differences in grammatical and lexical aspects. It also pointed out that peer-review activities could lead to self-correction among students and improve independently critical ability.

Another study which examined students' perspectives regarding peer in an English writing class was conducted by Sukumaran and Dass (2014). By using a mixed methods approach, the data was collected from a group of final year students revealed that the participants of the study had a positive perspective on the use of peer feedback and on the use of an online peer feedback tool. Peer feedback can help students improve their writings and they can learn from each other. Online peer feedback activities can contribute to critical feedback and be a time -saving factor but there are no significance in increasing interactions. Moreover, the past experience did not influence on a negative perspective of peer feedback among the participants.

In Viet Nam, Le (2014) conducted a study in an English writing course at The Experimental High School in Ho Chi Minh City with the participants including 48 high school gifted students to investigate the role of corrective feedback including teacher and peer feedback. Results of the study indicate that the corrective feedback, both teacher and peer feedback has significant improvements in students' attitude towards their learning in writing English. In addition, students hope to get more useful feedback, not only from their teachers and they want to learn from others' mistakes to improve their learning writing ability. Thus, the combination of teacher and peer feedback can encourage students in learning writing skill.

The research of Nguyen (2016) probed the practice of peer feedback in EFL tertiary writing classes through a semi-structured interview with sixteen English majors and observations of two English writing classes at a university in Viet Nam. The results revealed that students felt more comfortable when asking for help from friends than from teachers, so they were quite active in their learning and could improve their language from their peer responses. However, this activity was not implemented formally and students thought that they have few opportunities to develop their metacognition in this current approach. Thus, the learners' expectations for changes in peer feedback practice in their writing classes.

Despite its perceived benefits, some researchers found that it still exits some challenges when implementing peer feedback in English writing class. Rollinson (2005) indicated

some problematic aspects of peer feedback such as time constraints, students' characteristics and teacher role. He stated that it is a time consuming activity and teacher cannot oversee each group simultaneously. Besides, some factor of students' cultures, age and inter-language level can make them feel uncomfortable when giving or receiving feedback.

From the previous studies mentioned above, it can be said that the technique of peer feedback still remains little studied, especially to those in EFL environments. In addition, the effectiveness of the technique has to be confirmed by more empirical studies. These are the reasons why this study was conducted to bridge the gap of research, with the aim of investigating QBU students' perceptions of the benefit of peer feedback technique, reality of applying it and how to improve the learners' writing quality in writing classes at QBU.

This study is conducted with the main aims to discover the attitude of students at QBU of benefits of peer feedback in writing classes; the reality of using peer feedback in writing classes; and some difficulties when utilizing peer feedback. Three research questions are raised:

- What are students' perceptions of peer feedback in writing classes at QBU?

- What is the reality of peer feedback practice in writing classes at QBU?

- What are some difficulties when implementing peer feedback activity in writing classes?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This is a descriptive research design that combines and integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study (Gelo et al, 2008, Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, Bryman, 2012). By using this mixed method of the two approaches, the research is hoped to compensate for weaknesses in research that uses only one method. The researcher can also see the research problem from different aspects and has deeper understanding. The data also makes the findings of research more objective and accurate. Creswell (1999) indicated that a research problem can supply researchers with more comprehensive evidence when using the mixed methods research than either quantitative or qualitative methods only.

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 70 second year students who were majoring in the English language at QBU. The ages of the participants range from 19 to 21. Their English proficiency is pre-intermediate and intermediate. By investigating this group, the researcher was able to find out students' perceptions of peer feedback in general, peer feedback in writing, and the difficulties that they encountered in writing classes.

3.3. Data collection instruments

- Questionnaire:

Questionnaires can help the researcher gather opinions from a large number of respondents. It is usually paper based or delivered online and consist of a set of questions which all participants are asked to complete. It has been created, can be delivered to a large number of participants and also a large amount of data need to be coded and analyzed and it must be usable so that the reader can easily understand, interpret and complete it (Fowler, 2009; Adams and Cox, 2008). The data of a questionnaire are also easier to quantify and analyze process with the assistance of software such as SPSS. Besides, the researcher can see and present results quickly and clearly. Furthermore, with the large numbers, using questionnaire is more economical, compared with doing interviews (Bryman, 2012).

In this study, the questionnaire consists of 20 questions which are divided into 3 clusters. Cluster 1 is from questions 1 to 5; Cluster 2 is composed of questions 6 to 16 and Cluster 3 included questions 17 to 20. These questions base on five-point Likert Scale from 1 to 5 equivalent with *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The data were analyzed by using SPSS software version 16.

- Interview:

The method of interviewing is used with five students in order to have deeper understandings on research problems. It is a very helpful way to gain participants' real feelings, opinions and perceptions. Adams and Cox (2008) stated that the researcher makes use of interviews with the specific purpose when they wish to obtain more detailed and thorough information on a topic.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analyses were based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches which would be the most appropriate for the overall results that the study hoped to provide. Data collected from the questionnaires were synthesized by the means of SPSS software and illustrated in the tables. After that, data from interviews were analyzed qualitatively.

3.5. Procedure of the study

Seventy copies of the adjusted questionnaire were distributed to 70 participants. So as to secure a good return rate, the researcher asked all participants to do the questionnaire during the break time at university and collected right after students had completed them. Also, before delivering the questionnaires, the researcher told the participants to read the questions carefully, think conscientiously and choose the answers which personally suit them, not those that are correct theoretically. As soon as the questionnaires were collected, the data were compiled quantitatively and analyzed.

As for the interviewing, after designing interview questions, the researcher arranged to conduct interviews with five students learning in writing classes at QBU. Usually, the

author of this thesis began the interview by stating clearly the topic of the research so that the interviewees could have a general idea of what they are going to be asked. Then each interview question was posed by the researcher.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Students' perceptions of advantages of peer feedback advantages in some writing classes at QBU

To examine students' perceptions of peer feedback in writing process, the collected data from the questionnaires were synthesized and presented in the table below:

Table 1. *Students' perceptions of self-assessment's benefits*

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Item 1: Peer feedback helps me to be more critical of my own writing	70	3	5	4.47	.653
Item 2: Peer feedback increases collaboration and interaction among students	70	3	5	4.40	.623
Item 3: Peer feedback can help me more active in learning process	70	2	5	3.79	.991
Item 4: Peer feedback can help me to learn from my friend's mistakes	70	2	5	4.31	.772
Item 5: Peer feedback help me less dependent on teacher	70	2	5	4.00	.963
Mean of cluster 1	**70**	**2.80**	**5.00**	**4.1943**	**.54477**
Valid N (listwise)	70				

In Table 1, the mean score of Cluster 1 was high (4.1943) and mean score of all items in this cluster were higher than the average value of 3. That is to say, students generally agreed with statements in the cluster and had a good outlook about benefits of peer feedback in writing classes. The statement in item 1 got the highest approval with mean score of a 4.47, the second and the third position were item 2 and 4 with mean value of 4.40; 4.31 respectively. This indicates that most of students approve that peer feedback helps them think critically, learn from mistake and develop interaction among students. Item 3 got the lowest mean score of 3.79. That meant the minority disagreed with peer feedback's benefit of making them more active in learning process. It, hence, can probably be concluded that students at QBU were well aware of the benefits of peer feedback in English writing classes. This helps them to improve their wiring ability.

To understand clearly something from the responses of students in questionnaire about their perception of benefits of peer feedback in their class, researcher asked some interview questions with the following results:

"I think peer feedback is an important technique because I can learn something from my friend's mistakes. However, these mistakes need the check of my teacher." (Student 1)

"Although I know that peer feedback is very useful in learning English, especially writing skill, it also gives us some challenges. Thus, we need the help and feedback from our teacher after conducting peer feedback." (Student 3)

"Peer feedback helps us be more independent and to think critically. However, our English competence is low; we need the check and support from our teacher." (Student 4)

From the findings above, it can be seen that students were positively aware of benefits of peer feedback in writing skill. It can help students think critically, learn a lot from peers' errors and increase collaboration among them. These results concurred with the idea of prior researches which showed that peer feedback encourages learning from others' mistakes, a collaborative dialogue, a myriad of communicative behaviors and highly complex socio-cognitive interactions as well as critical reading (Rollinson, 2005; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Yang et al., 2006; Ting & Qian, 2010; Sukumaran & Dass, 2014; Le, 2014). However, they also realized that peer feedback can give them some challenges. Therefore, the students would like to conduct peer feedback with teachers' evaluation. It is understandable because combining two types of feedback can make use of all of their advantages. In short, students had good attitude toward peer feedback in the writing classes.

4.2. Reality of peer feedback practice in writing classes at QBU

In order to investigate the reality of applying peer feedback at writing classes at QBU, Cluster 2 was set up, consisting of 11 items from question 6 to 16. Mean scores of items were analyzed and described in table 2.

Table 2. Reality of peer feedback practice at QBU

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Item 6: My teacher often designs detailed guidelines for peer feedback writing activities	70	2	4	3.13	.900
Item 7: My teacher always manages and gives feedback our learning process with peer feedback	70	2	4	2.96	.788
Item 8: I often practice peer feedback at the post - writing step where I shared and exchanged my writing with another person	70	3	5	4.16	.605
Item 9: I often conducted peer feedback activity in class time	70	2	5	3.77	.904
Item 10: I often conducted peer feedback activity outside class time	70	2	4	2.89	.860
Item 11: I and my peer always gave comments and suggestions to each other	70	2	5	3.01	.970
Item 12: I always ask questions to my peer when I didn't understand their comments and corrections	70	2	5	3.14	.982

Item 13: When giving feedback, I always focus on all factors, such as: content and ideas; coherence and cohesion; lexis and grammar	70	2	5	3.39	.889
Item 14: I feel comfortable when giving feedback to my peer and satisfied with receiving feedback from my peer	70	2	4	3.00	.901
Item 15: I could always solve my writing problem with my peer	70	1	4	2.87	.916
Item 16: When revising my drafts, I always considered and included my peers corrections, comments and suggestions	70	2	5	3.30	.729
Mean of Cluster 2	**70**	**2.36**	**4.18**	**3.23**	**.400**
Valid N (listwise)	70				

Table 2 shows that peer feedback practice at writing classes at QBU was not very often since the mean scores of Cluster 2 and all items were low, around neutral value only. For all items, there were students choosing the highest value of 5 (strongly agree) and also lowest value of 1 (strongly disagree) in the five-point scale. Std. deviation values were quite large (.900, .904, .970, .982, .916) which means students' answers were recorded in a wider range. This was probably because students come from different classes, and activities in these classes were also different. On the other hand, Items 9, 10 with mean values of 3.77 and 2.89 respectively indicated that at QBU, this activity was mainly conducted in class time, and they did not always practice peer feedback outside class time. They did not also give comment positively as well as feel comfortable when receiving peers' comments. Besides, students also feel that they could not solve all writing problems with their peers. They still depend on their teachers' feedback.

After collecting questionnaire data, some interview questions were delivered to 5 students to find deeper information of reality of conducting peer feedback in writing classes and some difficulties when applying this technique.

"I often do peer feedback with my friends in class, not at home. I find their comments are very useful, especially those on grammar and vocabulary errors." (Student 1)

"I practiced peer feedback in class hour because my teacher controls our learning process and gives us marks. I did not conduct peer feedback outside class hour because the lecturer asked us to do peer feedback by ourselves outside class hours with a suggested checklist, but she did not double check whether we did it or not." (Student 2)

"My teacher gives us the chances to conduct peer feedback but we sometime did not read our peers' writing and give comment." (Student 3)

Another student emphasized: *"I sometime did not practiced peer feedback because it is an informal activity in my class. My teacher demanded us to do but she did not control and check again."* (Student 4)

Student 5 added: "*Peer feedback was not effective at all because we didn't do it seriously, especially at home. It was not compulsory. It is just an extra activity.*"

The above findings revealed that there were a lot of limitations in practicing peer feedback in reality. Students did not take part in this activity positively. Even though teachers combine this technique in writing classes, some students themselves did not try their best to practice. Moreover, they did not always give comments to others' writing or ask questions to their peer when they didn't understand their peers' comments. They also did not feel comfortable when giving feedback to their peer and did not satisfy with receiving feedback from their peer. The results from questionnaire and interview show that student often did this task in class time when their teacher demanded, they did not practice it at home. In some classes, peer feedback is an informal activity. This matches with findings by Nguyen (2016) that peer feedback as an extra activity and it was not formally implemented in this context.

4.3. Difficulties in practicing peer feedback in writing classes at QBU

From the reality of conducting peer feedback, students were also asked about difficulties when implementing this activity in English writing classes. The questionnaire results are presented in the table below:

Table 3. *Difficulties in practicing peer feedback at QBU*

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Item 17: Not enough time to implement peer feedback in class because it is time consuming	70	2	5	3.27	.977
Item 18: Lack of collaboration among students in sharing comments because they feel uncomfortable when their peer critique their writing	70	3	5	3.57	.714
Item 19: The English competence is different in class, some of students did not feel confident and enthusiastic in practicing peer feedback.	70	4	5	4.79	.413
Item 20: Lack of clear guidelines and motivation from teachers when we practice peer feedback	70	2	5	3.77	.663
Mean of Cluster 3	**70**	**3.00**	**5.00**	**3.85**	**.393**
Valid N (listwise)	70				

Table 3 shows that mean scores of 4 items are quite high from 3.00 (the lowest value) to 5.00 (the highest one). Min value is 2 and Max value is 5. Moreover, the statement 19 was supported most in the comparison with other statements (M=4.79). All statements had the value that is higher than the neutral value. It was clear that these statements get favor with students.

From collected data above, it was undeniable that students met some difficulties when practicing peer feedback in writing classes. Among the difficulties above, lack of English knowledge was the most important reason impacted on quality of peer feedback activities with the highest mean score (M = 4.79), then the guidelines and motivation from teachers were secondly agreed. Undoubtedly, teachers did not give a lot of guidelines and motivation fully enough, and there was lack of time for practicing peer feedback activities in class at QBU.

The difficulties when practicing peer feedback in writing classes are made clearly by some interview questions and the common responses from 5 students as follows:

"When implementing peer feedback, we encountered a lot of difficulties. However, the most thing we met is our English competence. Most of us come from countryside and our proficiency is still low". (Student 2)

"I think our English competence is low and teacher's guideline was not clear enough". (Student 3)

"Beside the low English level, we think that our teacher did not give us the motivation and clear guidelines enough to implement peer feedback effectively in class as well as at home." (Student 4)

"Time to conduct peer feedback in class and students' English level are the difficulties in practicing peer feedback". (Student 5)

In summary, a conclusion can be drawn that students at QBU did not conduct peer feedback activities very well because of many factors, from objective factors to subjective factors, from teachers to students. They are indicated in this study such as students' English competence, teachers' pedagogical methods or time to conduct peer feedback in class. The results of the current study are in line with the viewpoint of Rollinson (2005) in which the researcher highlighted the difficulties of using peer feedback in writing classes such as time constraints, students' characteristics and teacher role. However, this study defined clearly that students' English competence is the most difficulty they met when conducting peer feedback.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study indicates that English –major students at QBU have positive attitudes toward the peer feedback in writing classes; especially when it helps learners to learn from their friends' mistakes and think critically. However, in reality, there are still some limitations in applying peer feedback activity at QBU. Hence, to develop learners' writing ability through peer feedback in a most effective way, teachers need to offer chances for students to get familiar and practice peer feedback more often. Teachers should also design more detail guidelines and organize this activity in suitable forms both in and outside class time. If students are not given clear guidance from their instructors, they may not know how to comment on one another's writing in a specific and constructive way. In addition, they should create a motivating environment to

encourage students to involve in peer feedback activities in the writing classes and at home. In order to encourage s implement peer feedback constructively and effectively, teacher can use Social networking sites like Email, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Skype and etc. for peer feedback activity beside face-to-face peer feedback. When using an online page for peer feedback activity, students have more time to read and give comments. They also have time to look up vocabulary, documents to understand clearly content of peer writings if their English proficiency is low. An online page can be stored in a long time; hence, students could print or save the interaction instead of dependence on their memory to revise their drafts (Moloudi, 2011). In addition, combining teacher and peer feedback is necessary. Teacher should interfere and assist students when finding some problems from their negotiation.

Although the researcher makes a great effort in this research, it is impossible to avoid limitations. The research was carried out with a small number of students at QBU. With the small scale, the findings from the student interviews may not be representative of all students. In addition, the data collected from questionnaire and the interviews were not fully exploited. Therefore, it is suggested that further research can broaden the scale of the study with larger number of participants and at other universities.

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