

## **The Efficacy of Three Different kinds of Error Feedback on EFL Students' Writing in China: Teacher's Explicit and Implicit Feedback and the Guided Peer Review**

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### **Abstract**

*Feedback is very important for learners to improve their writing but providing effective feedback is not an easy job for the teachers who teach English writing. This is particularly true in tertiary education in Chinese context. Teacher's explicit feedback (TEF), implicit feedback (TIF) and the guided peer review (GPR) are three types of feedback commonly used by English teachers in the EFL writing classes in China. This paper aims to examine the effects of these three different types of feedback on college students' writings in Chinese context by using a pretest and posttest treatment, questionnaires and a case study. The qualitative results reveal that the three types of feedback are all valued by students and do help to improve their writing. GPR and TIF are preferred mostly by advanced learners but GPR triggers more self-initiated revisions and more unsuccessful revisions are found in the TIF class. TEF is mostly favored by students with lower language abilities and more successful revisions are reported in this class. These findings are consistent with the results of the pretest and posttest from the three classes. The quantitative data show that GPR contributes the highest mean score to students' writing, and TEF the second while TIF the last. The implications of these findings are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** Writing feedback, explicit feedback, implicit feedback, guided peer review

### **Context and Rationale of the Study**

Providing effective feedback is a central concern for any teacher of writing and an important area for both first and second writing research. For many English teachers in China, to teach English writing and provide feedback to students is not an easy job. Though their feedback is highly valued by students (Hu, 2002), Yang et al (2006) hold that the mistakes in these essays keep on repeating themselves, and they argue that this is partially to do with the number of students in each class. From 1999 onwards, China increased its tertiary enrollment and the number of college students in each class has become larger and larger. Nowadays, it is quite common to see 40 students, or even more, in one class, not to mention their quite differentiated English writing abilities because of their English language proficiency. Under these conditions, most of the English teachers have overwork load to teach writing and provide feedback as well, for providing effective feedback is a quite time-consuming and demanding job.

As to the feedback given to students' writing errors, most studies on error correction in L2 writing classes have provided evidence that students who receive error feedback from teachers improve in accuracy over time (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Other studies find that peer review also helps students improve their writing, though students may prefer teacher feedback to peer view and students who have received teacher feedback score higher than

those who have received peer review after rounds of class study (Yang, et al, 2006). As proven to be efficient to improve students' writing accuracy and fluency over time by researchers, teacher feedback and peer review are commonly adopted by English teachers in their writing classes in China. But two problems about teacher feedback and peer review need further exploration here. The first is concerned with the specific way teachers provide feedback. Should a teacher provide explicit feedback by underlining errors and pointing out the error types or should the teacher provide implicit feedback by underlining errors without pointing out the error types for students? Considering English teachers' overwork load because of large class size and class teaching, teacher's explicit feedback (TEF) and teacher's implicit feedback (TIF) are two quite common pedagogical practices adopted when English teachers give feedback on students' writing. The second problem is concerned with peer review. Though peer review is proven useful for improving students' accuracy and their autonomy as well by researchers over time, we can still find a problem about this kind of feedback as pointed out by many researchers. The problem is that many students are not capable of providing effective peer review in terms of their skill, proficiency and experience (Jacobs, et al, 1998; Paulus, 1999; Rollinson, 2005; Yang, et al, 2006). People argue that guided peer review should be taken when teachers adopt peer review in their writing instruction (Brown, 1994; Jacobs, et al, 1998; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Nelson, 1995). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that teacher guided peer review (GPR) in which the teacher underlines the errors and then students do the peer review based on the teacher's guidance can be a remedy for peer review in Chinese context. Raimes (1983:148) explains the rationale for guided peer review:

If students are alerted to what to look for and how to look for it, they can be very helpful to each other. It is not productive just to expect students to exchange and actually mark each other's papers.... With guidance, with clear, specific instructions on what to look for and what to do, they can be useful readers of drafts.

## **Literature Review**

There has been a considerable body of research done between explicit feedback and implicit feedback or between teacher feedback and peer review in order to test their different effects on students' writing quality before and after intervention in the writing classes (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Chandler, 2003; Nagata, 1993; Paulus, et al, 1999; Yang, et al, 2006). Chandler (2003) has investigated the efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2 student writing. Findings are that both direct correction and simple underlining of errors are significantly superior to describing the type of error, even with underlining, for reducing long-term error. But Roberts & Ferris (2001) provide a different answer concerning the effects of explicit and implicit feedback. They investigated 72 university ESL students' differing abilities to self-edit their texts across three feedback conditions. They found that both groups who received feedback significantly outperformed the no-feedback group on the self-editing task but that there were no significant differences between the "codes" and "no-codes" groups. They conclude that less explicit feedback seemed to help these students to self-edit just as well as corrections coded by error type.

These findings are not surprising. Many studies offered only short treatments and assessments tapping explicit knowledge (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Accordingly, Sanz & Morgan-Short argue that "it is probable that implicit groups are at a disadvantage" (2005, p249). Moreover, studies showing positive effects of explicit feedback are generally limited to specific aspects of the language—mostly syntax and some morphology—and to specific forms and rules (Sanz & Morgan-Short, 2005).

Yang et al (2006) examine whether peer feedback may provide a resource for addressing limited provision of teacher feedback by examining two groups of students at a Chinese university writing essays on the same topic, one receiving feedback from their teacher and one from their peers. This study revealed that students used

teacher and peer feedback to improve their writing but that teacher feedback was more likely to be adopted and led to greater improvements in the writing. However, peer feedback was associated with a greater degree of student autonomy. One point that should be pointed out in this study is that students are only guided by a peer review sheet when correcting their partners' essays after a modeling training without teacher's supervision. Students may make wrong decisions by ticking a choice for those standards listed in the sheet simply because they are not able to make an informed choice, which may mislead or even do harm to their partners' writing improvement. This problem of peer review was recognized by some scholars (Yang et al, 2006). As Frodesen and Holten (2003) claimed, students in the same ESL writing class can vary widely in their command of English grammar, in their familiarity with the structures and vocabulary used in academic writing, and in their background in formal instruction. So it can be argued that a teacher's supervision and direction provided when or after students are doing peer review may be needed for those peer reviewers.

Guenette (2007) points out that we cannot conclude from studies (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) that feedback has lasting effects on improvements in accuracy although the results of these studies showed that students improved their accuracy on a particular piece of writing after they were guided by their teacher. Instead, Guenette (2007) concludes that the fact that positive results were seen in the short term shows that pedagogical intervention that pushes learners to pay attention to language is useful. So what is of particular interest to teachers is whether or not students can sustain this improvement on subsequent writing.

In summary, considering the Chinese context for English teaching, the present writer believes that it is of great importance to bring together TEF, TIF and GPR on students' writing into a study, hoping to find out their effects so as to guide teachers' writing teaching in future.

## **Research Design**

### **Research Questions**

1. Do the three different types of feedback have any effects on students' overall quality of writing?
2. What are the students' perceptions and preference towards the three different kinds of feedback?
3. How do students use the feedback to improve their writing?

### **Data Sets of the Research**

Three sets of data were collected. The first one included the pretest and the posttest data. The second one came from a questionnaire survey carried out in the three classes. The teacher gave students in each class 20 minutes of class time to fill in the questionnaires. The questions mainly covered: (a) how useful did they find the feedback given to them? And (b) if given chances to choose from the three kinds of feedback, which one do they prefer according to their English proficiency? The third set of data came from a case study in which six students, two students from each of the three classes, were randomly chosen. Their information is shown in table one below. Mainly two things were involved with the case study students: the first one was to collect their drafts written for the last time of practice before the posttest and the corresponding final products of the drafts in order to understand how their revisions were made according to the feedback points given to them. The second thing was an interview conducted after students had finished writing the topic for the last time of practice before the posttest. During the interview, students' drafts and the final products were presented to them for reference when specific feedback and revisions were discussed. The interviewees were allowed to use Chinese so that they could express their ideas more freely and clearly. The interviews were transcribed and translated

into English by the teacher. The interview was expected to help us understand better the conditions under which how students adopted feedback points and in this way it can supplement the findings of questionnaires.

**Participants and Treatment**

Three second-year writing classes taught by the teacher researcher were chosen to be the study subjects. They were given parallel writing instruction and the same writing topics for practice, except for the types of feedback given to them. One class received one type of feedback different from the other two classes. The study lasted 12 weeks and there were five times of topic writing for students’ practice besides the two writing topics for the pretest and posttest. The writing class was conducted every two weeks with one writing topic for students to do each time. The three classes were randomly assigned to three treatment groups according to their “feedback condition”.

For the TEF class (n=52), the teacher underlined those parts with grammatical mistakes and also wrote down clues of mistake patterns. Students revised the paper and then handed it in to the teacher. The teacher checked on the papers and returned them to students.

For the TIF class (n=46), the teacher underlined the parts that had grammatical mistakes without any comments or revisions. Students were then asked to revise their first drafts according to the teacher’s feedback. The teacher would provide an oral comment to the whole class on general problems. Students revised the paper and then handed it in to the teacher. The teacher checked on the papers and returned them to students.

For the GPR class (n=50), the teacher first underlined those sentences or parts with grammatical mistakes but without any clues for the mistakes. Students were required to form a pair with a classmate according to their own choice. Then they were given a peer feedback modeling on how to offer feedback points. After finishing writing the first draft of each topic, students gave feedback on their partners’ writing. When giving feedback, students could follow teacher’s clues by referring to the underlined parts or they could make their own corrections. Then the paper was returned to the writer in each pair. The writer revised the paper and then handed it in to the teacher. The teacher checked on the papers and returned them to students.

Table 1: Background information of the case study students

Name	Age	Sex	Major
Students from teacher’s explicit feedback class			
Dong	19	Female	History education
Wang	19	Female	History education
Students from teacher’s implicit feedback class			
Lin	20	Male	Chinese education
Tang	19	Female	Chinese education
Students from guided peer feedback class			
Tan	20	Female	Computer science
Li	20	Male	Computer science

Names are pseudonyms of students.

**Quantitative Findings and Discussions**

**Whole class data**

This section covers the analysis on the students’ writing and the questionnaire. Students’ writings in the pretest and posttest were scored based on the scoring system used for scoring the writing papers in the College English

Test for Non-English Majors-Band 4, a very authoritative and standardized scoring system in China. Another two independent raters, two experienced English teachers in the same university, were invited to score the papers together with the teacher researcher. The mean score of the three scores for one student’s paper was the final score the student had in pretest and posttest. The total score for the writing part in the pretest and posttest is 15 points.

As a measure of reliability the intraclass correlation coefficient was calculated on the scores given by the teacher researcher and another two independent raters. The scores include the pretest and posttest. The coefficient ranged from 0.711 to 0.821, which suggests a high reliability. A One-way ANOVA was performed by using SPSS 19.0 to show that there was no significant difference in the Pretest among the three classes,  $F(2, 69) = 1.036, P > .05$ , but significant differences were reported in Posttest among the three classes,  $F(2, 69) = 6.764, P < .05$ . That is tabulated in Table 2. Because the mean scores in the three classes were different, post-hoc comparisons using Tamhane were done as shown in Table 3. From the table, we can find that all the three types of feedback helped to improve students’ writing. GPR, being the most effective feedback, contributed the greatest improvement to students’ writing by 1.64 points; EF, being the second effective feedback, contributed to students’ writing by 1.05 and the IM contributed the least improvement by 0.68.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for students’ writing quality in Pretest and Posttest

Feedback type	Pretest		Posttest	
	M	SD	M	SD
TEF class	8.5000	1.22474	9.5455	1.10096
TIF class	8.0000	1.15470	8.6800	1.06927
GPR class	8.2800	1.20830	9.9200	1.44106

Table 3: Results of *Post Hoc Test* for the Posttest scores

(I) class	(J) class	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
TEF class	TIM class	.86545	.31754	.027
	GPR class	-.37455	.37170	.684
TIM class	TEF class	-.86545	.31754	.027
	GPR class	-1.24000	.35889	.004
GPR class	TEF class	.37455	.37170	.684
	TIM class	1.24000	.35889	-.004

The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The results of the questionnaire were tabulated separately from Table 4 to Table 6 for the three feedback classes.

Table 4: Students’ perceptions on the feedback they received

	View of TEF		View of TIF		View of GPR	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Very useful	18	34	8	17	11	22
Useful	30	58	28	62	19	38
A little useful	4	8	8	17	14	28
Not useful	0	0	2	4	6	12
Total	52	100	46	100	50	100

**Error! Not a valid link.** Table 5: Students’ preference of feedback based on their English proficiency

	TEF		TIF		GPR	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Excellent	8	5	5	3	28	19
Good	26	18	15	10	16	11
Average	10	7	1	0.7	3	2
Poor	24	16	5	3	7	4
Total	68	46	26	16	54	36

Percentage may not equal 100 because of rounding.

**Case Study Data**

The six case study students’ drafts written for the last time of practice before the posttest and the corresponding final products of these drafts were collected and analyzed to identify the following two things: the feedback points given by the teacher researcher and peers and the changes between the drafts and the final products. In this way we can understand how many revisions have been made and whether these revisions are successful or not. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Utilizations of feedback points and their effectiveness

Case study students	Words in draft/product	Feedback points		Revisions		
		Given	Used	Successful	Unsuccessful	Self-initiated
Explicit feedback						
Dong	132/146	18	18	18	0	0
Wang	125/136	13	13	13	0	0
Total	257/282	31	31	31	0	0
Implicit feedback						
Lin	122/130	12	10	10	2	0
Tang	133/145	13	8	8	2	0
Total	255/275	25	20	18	4	0
Guided peer feedback						
Tan	119/145	15	15	15	0	3
Li	125/136	10	10	10	0	4
Total	244 / 281	25	25	25	0	7

Given: feedback points provided by the teacher; Used: feedback points adopted by students.

**Qualitative Findings and Discussions**

**Students’ perceptions on the feedback they received**

When asked if feedback was useful in the revision, most of the case study students offered positive answers. But there are some differences among their support of feedback usefulness. The usefulness of teacher’s feedback, whether explicit or implicit, was accepted by students. In the interview, students said that the teacher was more “experienced” and more “professional” than their peers. The students from the explicit and implicit feedback classes gave positive comments as follows:

I believe Mr. Chen can give me more accurate corrections about my problems.  
Mr. Chen is very experienced in correcting students' papers.

But they also offered concerns about whether the different types of feedback could be useful to students with different language abilities as follows:

Maybe those good English learners do not want the direct corrections about their problems in papers; instead, an indirect revision may be better for them because they can know how to revise their problems if they know where their problems are.

The implicit revisions may not work sometimes for those students whose English is not so good. They may want direct corrections.

The usefulness of guided peer review was also expressed with reservation by the two students from the guided peer review class because they used such words as "partially, sometimes, a little bit or not very" to show their attitudes towards the usefulness of the feedback they received. Their comments on the feedback included:

I can have more communications freely with my partner because, as peers, we have much in common.

I can learn something from my partner because everybody has his own advantages.

I don't think my partner has the abilities to solve my problems although Mr. Chen has pointed out where my problems are. The feedback given to me is partially useful, sometimes, is not trustworthy.

Their acceptance of the different types of feedback is in line with the questionnaire data as shown in table 4. In the explicit and implicit feedback classes, 92% and 78% of the students respectively thought the feedback they received was useful; while 60%, a comparatively lower support of students, from guided peer review class thought so. Accordingly, in the guided peer review class, 28% of students regarded the feedback they received was a little useful and even 12% students thought it was not useful. The two numbers are much higher than those in the explicit and implicit feedback classes.

Such a finding is not surprising. On the one hand, students think that the explicit and implicit feedbacks are useful ways to improve students' writings because they believe in the teacher's experience; but on the other hand, they are worried that whether students with different language abilities can benefit more from the different types of feedback given to them. Students' above concerns are truly a problem for the English teachers when they teach writing classes. The solution is to give different types of feedback to different students who have different English language abilities.

There can be two reasons to account for the polarized acceptance of GPR. On the one hand, students have realized the importance of peer review based on the teacher's guidance. But on the other hand, some students do not have enough confidence in their or their classmates' language abilities to do this job.

### **Students' preference of feedback based on their English level**

An important and interesting question is to understand what type of feedback is preferred by students with different language abilities based on their perceptions about the feedback they were given. When all the students in the three classes were asked in the survey what type of feedback they wanted to receive concerning their English language abilities, students with different language abilities offered quite different answers. Most of the excellent English learners like to have guided peer review; but for other students, whether their English is good, average or poor, most of them like to have the explicit feedback. As table 5 shows, 46% of the students from

the three classes like to have the explicit feedback while 16% of the students from the three classes like to have the implicit feedback and 36% like to have the guided peer review.

Traditionally, Chinese students, especially those average English learners, are quite used to relying on their teachers' direct corrections about their problems. Therefore, the biggest number of students prefers the explicit feedback. And this can also explain why not many students, especially those who think that their English is not so good, like to choose the implicit feedback because they do not have enough confidence to revise their problems. It is not difficult to know why those excellent English learners like to have the guided peer review. When choosing this way of writing feedback, they can have more communications with their partners and learn from each other.

### **Utilizations of feedback points and their effectiveness**

Table 6 shows that students valued highly the three different types of feedback because the feedback points given to them were all used. But revisions for the two students in the TEF class were all successful while there were unsuccessful revisions in another two classes, and even the unsuccessful revisions in the TIF class were many. What's more, self-initiated revisions were found in the final drafts by students from the TEF and GPR classes.

#### *Successful and unsuccessful revisions*

Successful revisions were regarded as those correct improvements of feedback points while unsuccessful revisions were regarded as those incorrect changes of feedback points. In Table 6, we can find that the two students in the TEF class made all successful revisions. They explained their reasons in the interview as follows:

Student Dong:

Since my teacher has pointed out where my problems are and also offered the problem types, these problems become very easy for me.

Student Wang:

The feedback points are very useful because they can help me find out and solve my problems very quickly. I like this kind of feedback since it can improve my writing effects in a very short time.

Students Li and Tang explained their unsuccessful revisions in the interview in the following comments:

After reading the feedback points, we know where our problems are. But sometimes we still couldn't find out the right answers to these problems or sometimes we misinterpreted the teacher's intentions and then made incorrect revisions because of our poor English abilities.

As for the GPR students, Tan and Li commented their feedback in the interview as follows:

This is a very useful way to improve our English writing. When we are doing this, we can learn from our teacher and also from our partners because we can refer to our teacher's suggestions to make revisions and also we can communicate with our partners when we are meeting troubles correcting the papers.

#### *Self-initiated revisions*

The revisions that were made by students themselves, not initiated by the teacher, were marked as self-initiated



revisions. From table 6, we can find that different amount of self-initiated revisions happened in the process of revisions. No self-initiated revisions were found in the two students' drafts from the explicit and implicit feedback classes. Students seem to deeply depend on their teacher and then have less incentive to do some other revisions themselves since they can refer to the teacher's explicit or implicit comments. The over-dependence on the teacher feedback tends to lower students' motivation to do self-initiated revisions. Berg (1999, p232) has also reported similar findings in the study.

In contrast, seven were found in the two students' drafts from GPR class, which suggests a stronger tendency for self-initiated revisions in the GPR class. Mostly, the self-initiated revisions mainly focused more on meaning or structural changes rather than on grammatical changes. An example by student Tan in the guided peer review class is as follows:

The draft sentence reads:

Many people nowadays would like to put their cell phones in the pockets of their shirts or pants and a lot of research proved that this kind of behavior is not good for their health. In order to avoid the potential danger, we suggest that you try to keep a distance between you and your cell phones.

Feedback from the teacher: No feedback

Feedback from student Tan's partner:

You'd better add some examples about how cell phones influence our health. In this way the readers can have a more vivid understanding about the potential danger of cell phones.

## **Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications**

The following three conclusions can be drawn from this study concerning the research questions. First, feedback plays a positive role in Chinese EFL students' revisions of writing. Students can improve their writing quality by reading feedback although the improvement of writing is not as dramatic as expected.

Secondly, students view different types of feedback with different preference. Students with high language ability valued highly the implicit and the guided peer review while students with lower language ability tend to prefer the explicit feedback.

Thirdly, students valued the feedback they received highly. All the feedback points were incorporated, leading to successful revisions in most cases with some unsuccessful revisions by the students in the implicit feedback class and some self-initiated revisions by the students in the guided peer review class. Unsuccessful revisions are mainly because of students' low English abilities and misinterpretations of teacher's comments. Self-initiated revisions are mainly about meaning and structural changes and happen especially when students have negotiation of meaning so that mutual understandings can be improved and misinterpretations reduced.

The present study can inspire the English writing teachers in China in the following two ways. First, although it can be difficult for teachers to give feedback that will cater for all students' expectations, teachers still need try to differentiate students' English proficiency and use a more suitable type of feedback for students' writing in the class. Secondly, the incorporation of peer review into the writing process implies a transformation of the classroom context and students' roles. Guided peer review takes students away from individualized learning to cooperative learning in which the teacher and the students all become the source of knowledge. Teachers' guidance, encouragement and the negotiation of meaning between students all become the essential parts of students' writing. Then students can take more control over their learning in the writing classroom.

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