

Paired Peer Review in a Distance-taught EFL Writing Course

Junhong Xiao

Shantou Radio and Television University, P. R. China

Researchers have adopted diverse perspectives on the effect of peer review on student writing in the field of teaching English as a First Language (E1L) and English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) in the past two decades. Nevertheless, researches have chiefly centered on conventional learning settings with on-campus students in mind; scant attention has been paid to peer review in the distance learning context despite the fact that distance EFL learning is a growing branch of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the world today. To fill the gap, this study reports on an action research project into paired peer review in a distance-taught EFL writing course at an open university in China to investigate the extent to which peer feedback was used to improve EFL writing, how it was accepted by Chinese distance English learners and how it impacted on their transferrable skills and self-efficacy, i.e. 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments'(Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Findings from the study indicate that peer review has yielded good educational benefits in these areas although there is still room for improvement. The article also discusses ways to overcome obstacles and to tap into the potential benefits of peer review in the study of other courses.

Key words: paired peer review, student writing, EFL, distance education

INTRODUCTION

In the past 20 years, research into the effect of peer review on student writing has been high on the agenda of many practitioners in the field of teaching English as a First Language (E1L) and English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) (van den Berg, 1999; Zhu, 2001). Various issues concerning peer review, either in groups or in pairs, have been examined in quantitative and/or qualitative studies, including students' acceptance of different types of feedback (e.g., Cotterall, 1999; Hu, 2005; Nelson & Carson, 1998), the impact of peer and teacher feedback (e.g., Berg, 1999; Paulus, 1999; Tsui & Ng, 2000), training students to be successful peer reviewers (e.g., Berg, 1999; Min, 2005, 2006), and the relationship between written and oral feedback (e.g., van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006), to name but a few.

Nevertheless, to date, research in the field seems to have centered on students in conventional learning settings. In contrast, there has been little research with a focus on distance EFL learners. This lack of interest is not justified in any sense since distance English Language Teaching (ELT) has become a growing branch of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) due largely to advancements in educational technology. For example, there are around 60,000 English majors at the Chinese Radio and Television Universities (RTVU) Network alone — China's mainstream distance education network (School of Foreign Languages, CCRTVU, 2007), not to mention another 1.7 million students who take English courses as part of their program of study at RTVUs (CCRTVUEIMC, 2007). Thus, research on peer review in a distance-taught English writing course is likely to be of relevance both to theory and practice in ELT.

'Writing is not a unidirectional process' and 'in learning to write, the complexity of the task should be reduced through interaction and co-operation with the teacher (or other learners)' (BÖmer, 1995, p. 246). Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis and Swann (2003) argue that 'relying entirely on lecturers' feedback can bring certain disadvantages for students'

intellectual development' (p. 40). Nevertheless, in conventional distance learning practice, feedback on students' writing is unidirectional with the students as passive recipients. Therefore, its facilitating role cannot be brought into full play from a pedagogical perspective, as also demonstrated in the section below. Moreover, in distance education, students are, most of the time, separated in space and/or time, and student-student interaction is not easily available, as opposed to classroom learning settings, unless it is integrated into the learning process.

This study attempted to fill the gap by reporting on an exploratory action research project in an undergraduate English writing course at a RTVU in China. The following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. To what extent did the students use peer feedback to improve their writing?
2. How did the students respond to peer review?
3. How did peer review impact on the students' transferrable skills and their perception of their ability to be distance EFL learners?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The rationale behind peer review has its roots in socio-constructivism and ESL/EFL acquisition theory and pedagogy. As Hu (2005) correctly sums up, 'Peer review is a collaborative activity involving students reading, critiquing and providing feedback on each other's writing, both to secure immediate textual improvement and to develop, over time, stronger writing competence via mutual scaffolding' (pp. 321-322). From a socio-constructivist perspective, peer review accords with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), whereby students should participate in activities which help promote interaction and thus co-construct knowledge in order to move from the actual development level to the potential development level. According to Poehner and Lantolf (2005), this move is not a one-off event; rather it facilitates the fostering of transferrable skills (see also Berg, 1999). From the perspective of

ESL/EFL acquisition, peer review is conducive to bringing into play the three functions of output in second language learning, i.e. the noticing/triggering function, the hypothesis testing function and the metalinguistic (reflective) function, all of which have positive impact on language learning (Swain, 1995). It is also in line with Little's (2007) argument that 'success in second and foreign language teaching is governed by three interacting principles: learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use' (p. 23). From a pedagogical perspective, as Storch (2005) points out, the use of small group and pair work is rooted in the communicative approach to language teaching. In terms of self-efficacy, peer review as a kind of peer interaction may increase students' learning motivation and thus improve their perception of their ability to learn a language in a distance mode, which is most likely to lead to greater language development (Raby, 2007). Moreover, peer review is a kind of assessment, which needs to be integrated into teaching and learning where students, like other stakeholders, should play a part (Falchikov, 1986; Felix, 2005; Gibbs, 1999; Inoue, 2005; McLaughlin & Simpson, 2004; Niu, Xiao, Wang, & He, 2005; Poehner, 2007).

The aforementioned theoretical bases apply both to conventional and distance learners. Separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time is a feature of distance education (Keegan, 1980), resulting in lack of teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction, both of which, nevertheless, are crucial to language learning. Therefore, peer review, a learning opportunity (Crabbe, 2007), has a bigger role to play in distance language learning.

METHOD

Participants

The study involved 30 second-year students doing a BA programme in English at Shantou Radio and Television University (SRTVU) in South China, with 6 from the 2005 (Autumn) Class, 8 from the 2006 (Spring) Class

and 16 from the 2006 (Autumn) Class. They were all part-time learners with job commitments. And some had family responsibilities. They were aged from 23 to 39 years old with an average age of 27.03 years.

All the students participated in the action research of their own free will. None of the students had received any training or had any experience in peer review before. The research was conducted first time in the autumn term of 2006 with the 2005 (Autumn) cohort, second time in the spring term of 2007 with the 2006 (Spring) cohort and third time in the autumn term of 2007 with the 2006 (Autumn) cohort.

The Peer Review Scheme

English Writing is a compulsory course on the BA program, offered in the third term, with the aim of reinforcing students' previous writing practice and creating more systematic and coherent opportunities for them to practice writing in English. In addition to consolidating basic writing principles and general writing skills, the course also emphasizes a genre-based approach to teaching letter writing, description, narration, exposition, argumentation, and research report.

The instruction of the course was Web-based with twelve optional face-to-face tutorials, each of which lasted two hours. In order to pass the course, the students had to complete eight self-study reports (one for each unit), four self-assessment quizzes (one for each two units), eight group conferences (one for each unit), and four tutor-marked assignments (TMA) as well as an end-of-course examination, all in English, on the Assessment Platform (<http://www.etas.com.cn>) of China Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU). The four TMAs, i.e. writing a formal letter, a description of a process, an expository essay and an argumentative essay, represent 30% of the end-of-term course score. The peer review took place with each TMA.

The peer review was conducted in pairs rather than in groups, given that the participants were part-time learners who had job and/or family commitments and therefore were not able to afford as much time as required

by group peer review. The idea of group peer review was unanimously vetoed by the participants in the pilot peer review activity.

The review scheme comprised the following phases:

Peer review training

The peer review procedure was available on the Assessment Platform before the course started officially. The strategies taught to students included how to follow the review procedure step by step, how to consult reference resources when in doubt, how to write up a concluding comment, how to use the Word Processing software, especially the Track Changes function, etc. Moreover, there was an in-class modelling at the first face-to-face tutorial when the tutor, who was also the researcher, used a sample TMA to explain what was expected of the students in peer review. The modelling was followed up by a discussion where the tutor answered queries from the students. In addition to the planned training, constant informal training was also encouraged in association with the group conferences throughout the study of the course. The topics of the conferences matched the key learning objectives of the units, and the students were required to present and critique each others' writings on the topic by drawing on the course materials. The tutor would comment on their peer review performance at the group conferences with emphasis on 'best practice'. Informal training helped the students to become more experienced reviewers.

Review pair forming

The students were encouraged to participate in peer review, but it was made clear that this was a voluntary activity. Interested students were advised to choose their partner to form a review pair. Their partnership lasted throughout the course study.

Peer review checklist designing

The peer review checklist was composed of two parts. Part I served as language tips, listing mistakes (grammar, word usage, spelling, punctuation, etc.) which often arise in Chinese students' writings to enhance students' language awareness. Its design was informed by the researcher's 25-year experience in ELT in China. While this part remained unchanged for all TMAs, Part II varied from one TMA to another, based on the specific

requirements of each TMA in relation to content/genre, language/style, and length (See Appendix A). The peer review checklist functioned as guidelines of peer review and was delivered to the students together with the specifications of each TMA.

Peer review process

Formal peer review was associated with each TMA. When the students finished their TMAs, they emailed them in the form of a Word format attachment to their partners who then critiqued the TMAs against the criteria listed in the peer review checklist by using Microsoft Word's Track Changes function to keep record of what the original TMAs were like and what corrections, revisions or suggestions and comments were made to them. The review was done in English. Comments concerning sentence-level issues were written over the text or linked to the margin in the form of sticky note. In addition to this, students were asked to write a concluding comment at the end of the article, covering issues of idea development/relevance, generic structure, and overall evaluation of language/style, etc. After the review, they sent the 'tracked' versions back to their partners, who would make revisions accordingly before submitting the TMAs to the Assessment Platform for marking. Meanwhile, the 'tracked' versions were carbon-copied to the tutor by the reviewers. To sum up, the peer review process described here coincides with Saunders' (1989) co-responding type of collaborative writing, by which is meant that the pre-writing and writing stages are individual work while assistance in the form of reviewing is not available until at the rewriting stage.

To maintain motivation and encourage co-ownership, the assessment of TMAs was both product-based and process-oriented: 80% from the final version and 20% from how well the student reviewed the partner's TMA. Non-participants' TMAs continued to be assessed by using the conventional strategy, i.e. solely depending on the final product.

Post-peer review

Before the tutor started to mark a TMA, he read the tracked version to check how many suggested revisions and comments were valid. He then went on to compare the final version with the tracked one, taking notes of how many valid and/or invalid revisions and comments were adopted in the final draft and how many revisions were made by the writer him/herself, i.e. uninitiated or self-generated revisions (See 'Findings' below

for details). Validity of revisions, whether sentence-level, paragraph-level or discourse-level, was assessed in view of the overall structure and content of the specific TMA. Contextualized assessment was a must for assessing paragraph- or discourse-level revisions as a matter of fact. The comparison process involved repeated proofreading and critical reading in relation to the assessment criteria. After this, the tutor would make necessary changes to address remaining problems and write a comment on the final draft as well as point out valid revisions and comments in the tracked version (if any) that were not accepted in the final draft. Apart from this, the tutor also commented on how well the student had reviewed the partner's work. When the marked TMA was returned to its writer, a copy was also sent to the reviewer via email so that s/he could find out what suggested changes and comments were valid and learn from false repairs.

Data Collection

Data collection methodology corresponds to the research purpose. Hence, a variety of instruments were used in the study to collect data for the research questions.

In order to examine the effectiveness of peer feedback in improving student writing, the tracked versions and final versions of all TMAs were analyzed in order to assess revision quality. The first step was to categorize revisions. There is no consensus on revision categories (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Lee, 2006; Min, 2006; van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006; Warschauer & Ware, 2006; Zhu, 2001). Different categorizations serve different purposes of research. Zhu's (2001) coding was adopted in this study, i.e. 'evaluative,' 'global,' and 'local' (p. 259). The three categories refer to attitudinal comments, suggestions on idea development/relevance/ organization, and sentence-level concerns, including mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and the like, respectively (See Appendix B). An independent rater was invited to evaluate the data (240 pieces of writings in all with 120 final versions and 120 tracked versions). Before inter rating, two raters discussed the coding in details and trialled rating eight samples, reaching consensus on the coding mechanism. The inter rater reliability was 92% in

the formal coding and disagreements were resolved through further discussion.

To learn how well peer review was accepted by the students and how it impacted on their transferrable skills as well as their belief in their capabilities as distance language learners, a questionnaire survey was administered. The questionnaire was designed in light of the research questions and piloted with 10 students from the 2005 (Spring) Class after they had participated in a 8-week pilot paired review activity. Based on the feedback, revisions were made to prevent possible misinterpretations.

The questionnaire contained 15 items with a choice of five Likert-scale responses for each. It was distributed to the participants at the last face-to-face tutorials at the end of each round of experiment. The response rates were 100%. The questionnaire survey was followed up by interviews.

Since only a very small number of students were available for face-to-face or telephone interview, a semi-structured written interview was conducted. The interview was intended to allow 'the researcher and learners to pursue topics of interest which may not have been foreseen' (Cohen, 2000, p. 28) when the questionnaire and/or the interview questions were originally drawn up. The instruments of questionnaire and semi-structured interview 'ensured both method and data triangulation' (Stracke, 2007, p. 60) since insights gained during the process were conducive to making precise interpretations of concepts and procedures.

Each student was given a list of questions specifically designed to elicit detailed responses to some questionnaire items and obtain further information about certain aspects of their peer review practices (See Appendix C). They were allowed one week to answer the interview questions in writing and send their answers back to the researcher via email. The response rates were 100% for the first round of experiment, 87.5% for the second round and 87.5% for the third round, with an average response rate of 90%. Responses to the interview questions were coded by the researcher and the independent rater to identify common themes. The inter rater reliability was 89% but consensus was reached through discussion.

The interpretation of the questionnaire and interview findings was also

supported by the researcher's reflection during and after the experiments. The researcher kept a teaching journal, noting down whatever crossed his mind with regard to peer review activities.

FINDINGS

Sample Analysis

As is shown in Tables 1 and 2, the extent to which the students used peer feedback to improve writing was very encouraging.

TABLE 1
Findings from Sample Analysis (I)

	Local				Global				Evaluative			
	V	EV	I	EI	V	EV	I	EI	P	Ne	V	I
Total	1610				105				123			
Num	1068	204	240	98	99	3	3		88	35	103	20
A	814	91	59	33	68	2	1			30		
%	76.2	44.6	24.6	33.7	68.7	66.7	33.3			85.7		
N	254	113	181	65	31	1	2					
%	23.8	55.4	75.4	66.3	31.3	33.3	66.7					

1. Num=number, A=adopted, and N=not adopted. The same applies to Table 2.
2. In the data, all the negative comments were accompanied by suggestions for improvement (e.g., *The conclusion is not convincing. You'd better elaborate on the reasons for your decision.*). Also included in this category were those which started with something positive but were elaborated by suggestions for improvement (e.g., *This paragraph is well organized, but you should explain the relationship between the two concepts in more details.*). If actions were taken on the suggestions, they were separately coded as 'adopted negative comments' and 'adopted global or local revisions' in relation to the specific aspect of writing evaluated. Otherwise, they counted as 'not adopted negative comments' and 'not adopted global or local revisions' separately. Positive comments referred to those which expressed the reviewers' positive attitude to the writing but were not followed by suggestions for elaboration (e.g., *A good beginning!*). Therefore, they were not coded as 'adopted' or 'not adopted'

Of the 1610 local revisions suggested in the 'tracked' versions, 1068 were

valid and 204 were equally valid, accounting for 79% of the total number. Moreover, 76.2% of the valid local revisions were adopted in the final versions, a result which serves as an important indicator of improvement in writing. And of the 240 invalid revisions and 98 equally invalid revisions, over two-thirds were not accepted in the final versions, a result, which, together with the findings about the equally valid revisions, shows that the students responded cautiously to suggested revisions from their partners. This conclusion is evidenced by the questionnaire survey and interview feedback, as can be seen in the next two sections.

As regards global revisions, there were 105 suggestions in total, 99 of which were valid and 3 of which were equally valid, representing 97.14% of the total sum. 68.7% of the valid global revision suggestions were accepted in the final drafts and only one out of the three invalid suggestions was taken up. There is no doubt that compared with the early drafts, the final versions improved significantly in terms of idea development/relevance/organization as a result of peer feedback.

When it comes to evaluative comments, 83.73% were correct (103 out of 123). 71.54% of the evaluative comments were positive in nature while 28.46% were negative, suggesting improvements to the author's writing. And students responded positively in 85.7% of the cases, especially when they were making global revisions. The students' open-minded attitude was also reflected at face-to-face tutorials and online conferences. For example, as mentioned earlier, peer review was encouraged at the online group conferences as part of the constant informal review training process. There were inevitably different views on some issues, and yet the students demonstrated a very tolerant attitude to negative comments on their contributions and were

TABLE 2
Findings from Sample Analysis (II)

	Uninitiated							
	Local				Global			
	V	EV	I	EI	V	EV	I	EI
Total					206			
Num	115	15	17	7	24	28		

ready to accept them once they realized these comments were valid.

Table 2 displays that in comparison with peer-suggested revisions, relatively fewer uninitiated revisions were made in the final drafts. Yet, of the 206 uninitiated revisions, there was a high valid rate of 88.34%, indicating the students' improvement in writing. I discuss below further evidence from interviews that suggests the majority of these self-generated revisions were actually initiated by relevant feedback, albeit in an indirect way.

Questionnaire Survey

TABLE 3
Findings from the Questionnaire Survey

Items	Rating	
Did you like peer review?	4.43	
Were the peer review checklists useful in reviewing your partner's writing?	4.53	
Did you use the assessment criteria to make suggestions and comments on your partner's writings?	4.06	
Did you benefit from reviewing your partner's writing?	4.66	
Were your partners' suggestions and comments appropriate?	4.36	
Did you consider your partner's suggestions and comments while revising your own writing?	4.66	
Were you pleased when you received praise from your partner?	4.30	
Were you pleased when you received negative comments from your partner?	4.40	
Did you like feedback from the partner?	4.66	
	the tutor?	4.86
Did you like reviewing your partner's writing?	4.76	
	having your writing reviewed by your partner?	4.66
Did you learn from the reviewing practice transferrable skills such as collaboration skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, information retrieval skills, problem-solving skills and self-management skills?	4.40	
Did peer review increase your learning autonomy?	4.66	
Did you learn more about yourself through peer review?	4.56	
Did peer review boost your confidence in writing?	4.10	
Did peer review increase your learning motivation?	4.36	

A choice of five Likert-scale responses was offered for each item described: 1=never or almost never true, 2=generally not true, 3=sometimes true, 4=generally true, and 5=always or almost always true.

From Table 3, we can see that all the items received high ratings from the students. Items 1—10 were intended to address the second research question how well peer review was accepted by the students. The students found the review checklists helpful in revision and tried to give feedback to others in light of the assessment criteria. They reported that they learned not only from reviewing others' writings but also from having their own writings reviewed by others. They also expressed high appreciation of feedback from their partners and claimed to take suggested revisions into serious account while revising their own writings. Moreover, although they welcomed positive comments, they did not reject negative ones. Some of these questionnaire findings are supported by the sample analysis above. The students' positive evaluation of peer review is also confirmed by response to Item 9, i.e. there was little difference in their attitude towards peer feedback and tutor feedback.

Responses to Items 11—15 show that the students reported peer review enhanced their transferrable skills and self-efficacy. Item 11 concerns the issue of transferrable skills. Interview findings shed more light on the issue (See the next section). In the distance learning context, autonomy, self-knowledge, confidence and motivation may be taken as indicators of self-efficacy. In these aspects, the students reported an increase.

Interview Feedback

Several themes were identified in the interview data through inter rater evaluation. All in all, feedback from the interviews confirms the sample analysis and questionnaire survey findings.

On the question of the advantages of peer review, the students reported several benefits. First, by reviewing others' writing, they became more sensitive to similar mistakes or drawbacks in their writing and were more likely to avoid or overcome these. This sensitivity was further enhanced when they had their own article reviewed by others and subsequently revised it according to the partner's feedback. Partners' feedback also brought to their

attention related issues which had not been noticed at both the draft and reviewing stages. Students all claimed that they took feedback more seriously than in the past when there was only tutor feedback with no chance for revision. One student wrote: 'I have benefited a lot from peer review. While reviewing my partner's writing, I could identify many errors which also often existed in my own writing. I became more conscious of similar mistakes and tried my best not to repeat them in my writing. As for suggestions from my partner, instead of taking a quick look and putting them aside as I used to do to the tutor's feedback, I considered peer suggestions one by one and adopted those which appeared to be valid in my revision.' Second, students reported that peer review had consolidated the knowledge and skills they had learnt. When giving feedback to others, they often referred to the course book, dictionaries, grammar books, or online resources, etc. to make sure the feedback they provided was correct. When they did not agree with their partners' comments or suggestions, they also turned to reference materials for clarification. Third, the facilitating impacts of peer review, as reported by the interviewees, were chiefly on grammar, wording, diversity in expression; topic relevance, idea development, generic structure, coherence; and learning autonomy and motivation, self-knowledge and confidence. Fourth, students noted that in the peer review process, they had to use collaboration skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, information retrieval skills, problem-solving skills and self-management skills. Many students reported that they had actually tried to employ such skills in studying other courses as well as in their employment or everyday life. A case in point was that the first two cohorts continued peer review practices when they enrolled on other courses after the experiment. Fifth, all students agreed that peer review was a learning opportunity.

In relation to the difficulties of peer review, students raised four main issues. First, some students noted that they could not always afford the time needed due to other commitments such as career or family responsibilities. Second, some were not very confident in peer review because of their low English proficiency; others were afraid of losing face by providing false

suggestions. But they all noted that they grew more confident and less intimidated with the passage of time. One student stated: 'I still remember how I felt the first time I checked my partner's writing. I was afraid of making suggestions because I feared that my own English was not good enough and that I might overcorrect. But now after several review activities, I feel more confident about my abilities.' Third, some reported that their partners did not take a responsible attitude towards peer review, thus undermining the collaboration. Fourth, since only 20% of the assignment score was allocated for the review performance, some students expressed their aspiration for a bigger incentive.

As for the review checklists, the students agreed that they were very helpful. By checking the criteria, they were able to evaluate their own articles as well as others' more accurately and specifically. With the checklists, students' feedback was more comprehensive and constructive, thus boosting their confidence. Many students would have a quick look at Part I of the checklist highlighting mistakes which often arise in Chinese students' writing every time before they wrote their articles or reviewed others'. They found that they became more cautious and sensitive after this quick review. And they would turn to Part II specially designed for each TMA before and after they did their writing as well as while they were reviewing their partner's article. Some students suggested that Part II be further elaborated so as to be more facilitative to evaluation.

Concerning the profile of an ideal partner, the students expected their partner to bring with him/her an open-minded, responsible, diligent, flexible, accommodating, initiative-taking and good problem-solving attitude. S/he should have good communication and interpersonal skills as well as team spirit. S/he should be frank with the partner and easy to get along with. Some would rather have a partner who has higher English proficiency than him/herself or at least the same proficiency, but others admitted that even weaker partners could provide good advice, not to mention that the gap between the two partners might mean more an opportunity of learning than an excuse for inaction for the 'more capable peer'. It is also worth

mentioning that some students suggested replacing the fixed partnership with a regular partner-switching mechanism, that is, having a different partner for each TMA.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the peer review implemented in this study accorded with Swain's (1995) three functions of output, i.e. the noticing/triggering function, the hypothesis testing function and the metalinguistic (reflective) function. Since the students' English was still at the interlanguage level, there were gaps in their knowledge of English. Through peer review, they became more aware of those gaps and then tried to fill them by observing how others dealt with them and/or by consulting other sources such as the course book, dictionaries, grammar books, and internet resources for help. This is consistent with Swain's noticing/triggering function of output. Writing is a process of hypothesis-testing as far as EFL students are concerned. Therefore, when the students received feedback from their partners, they could, to some extent, find out whether their hypotheses were correct or not, and make modification if necessary. This may be related to Swain's hypothesis-testing function. Finally, as a process of problem-solving that requires the use of English, peer review is also related to Swain's metalinguistic (reflective) function of output. In this study, the students gave each other different kinds of feedback, a large proportion of which was incorporated into the final drafts, resulting in significant improvement not only in language but also in content and structure.

While some incorrect feedback was adopted and some correct feedback was not adopted, in general, correct feedback was far more common, and was more commonly adopted than incorrect feedback. Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement. For example, in terms of feedback types, global revisions (0.875 piece of revision per article) appeared to be far less than local revisions. Similarly, uninitiated revisions (1.71 revisions per article)

were far less common than peer-suggested revisions. Students tended to focus their attention on local revisions, a result which coincides with previous studies (for example, McGarrell & Verbeem, 2007; Nelson & Carson, 1998). This suggests that more work needs to be done to encourage greater attention to global categories such as topic relevance, idea development, generic structure and coherence. Also, students need to be encouraged to give fuller play to the function of hypothesis-testing in their self-generated revision, taking hypothesis-testing as a learning tool. In other words, teachers need to emphasize to students that they could learn from hypotheses even if some of them might turn out to be wrong. In fact, appropriate use of partners' feedback can lead to more effective 'uninitiated' revisions if students master some deep processing strategies, by which is meant 'to make personal investment in the task through associations and elaboration' (Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003, p. 317).

Unlike conventional Chinese learners (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Storch, 2005), students in this study appeared to be more open to constructive criticism. Questionnaire and interview findings showed that their attitude towards positive and negative comments was equally favorable. This is supported by sample analysis results in that 85.7% of the negative comments were incorporated in the final draft. Moreover, their attitude to suggested revisions concerning local and global issues is another proof of their open-mindedness. That these students might be embracing what seemed to be a particularly western aspiration was perhaps the result of their exposure to western culture in the course of their learning and their psychological maturity as adult learners (Hurd & Xiao, 2006; Xiao & Hurd, 2007).

The questionnaire survey and interview findings suggest that the students learnt useful skills that may be transferred to new situations, for example, used in studying other courses as well as in their work or life. This study emphasizes skills which tend to be conducive to distance language learning in particular, including collaboration skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, information retrieval skills, problem-solving skills and self-management skills. To complete the review tasks, the students needed to manage their time

well and prioritize their diverse responsibilities, to keep pace and collaborate with their partners, to accommodate different opinions, attitudes and competences, to express their own opinions and attitudes appropriately, to refer to additional resources when in doubt, and last but not least, to tackle many problems on their own that came their way. The questionnaire item addressing these skills received a high rating of 4.4 out of 5. Interview feedback also indicated that the students were aware of the relevance and importance of these skills to language learning, as they began to use the skills learnt from peer review to study other courses. But it should be borne in mind that changes in transferrable skills are not as objectively verifiable as those in language and content/generic structure and that the students might have overrated the facilitating impact of peer review on enhancing their transferrable skills. Furthermore, it is worth noting that it took time to grasp these skills. Quite a number of entries in the teaching journal were related to problems arising as a result of poor mastery of these skills. It was not until the mid point of the experiment that they cooperated with each other relatively smoothly. Students therefore need to continue practicing these skills to benefit from them.

Good distance learners are not over-dependent on their teachers. They develop self-regulation and independent problem-solving capacity. They know their own strengths and weaknesses, trying to compensate for their limited knowledge of the target language. They remain highly motivated and are full of confidence in their distance learning (Hurd & Xiao, 2006; Xiao & Hurd, 2007). All these good qualities contribute to one's self-efficacy. The questionnaire survey results demonstrated a significant increase in the students' self-efficacy. Similarly, it was likely that they might have overestimated the increase although it was also reported in the post-survey interviews. Compared with autonomy and self-knowledge, it appears that more work needs to be done to further improve motivation and self-confidence in peer review. For example, only 20% of the TMA score, which, as mentioned earlier, represented 30% of the course score, was based on peer review performance, which means that the peer review accounted for only

6% of the course score. This incentive was insufficient to motivate students to spend more time on the activity. And since this was the first time that the students reviewed each others' works, it might take longer for them to be fully confident. Moreover, as students, they were aware of their limited knowledge of English and, as revealed in the interviews, they worried from time to time that they might not be able to give appropriate feedback to others.

There is no doubt that the students liked peer review, as is obvious from the research findings. In addition to the specific gains concerning individual TMAs (for example, higher scores and the tutor's acknowledgement of their progress) as well as possible development of transferrable skills and possible increase in self-efficacy, there might be three main reasons why the students favored peer review. First, they developed not only useful reviewing/learning skills but also good learning habits. Second, their language awareness was increased, which might impact positively on their distance language learning. Third, they learnt to take an accommodating attitude towards different or even opposite opinions from their peers. Progress in these three aspects can facilitate distance language learning. In the distance learning context, learners study on their own most of the time, they may possibly encounter more difficulties than on-campus students, and they may not be able to get assistance or guidance from their tutor and/or peers as conveniently as their counterparts on campus (Xiao, 2007). Therefore, with good learning skills and habits as well as keen language awareness, they may be able to tackle, in a more effective and fruitful manner, whatever learning problems that come their way. It is also worth noting that the electronic medium itself might contribute to the students' positive attitude to peer review. Because of the delay in email communication, they might take time to think and compose a message and feel less pressured than in face-to-face encounters (Kupelian, 2001), thus able to provide more constructive feedback and demonstrate more responsibility (Shang, 2007). Despite its advantages, further discussion about peer feedback is less likely than in face-to-face encounters because assignments have time limits. All in all, peer review is, to some extent, an instantiation of Little's (2007) interacting principles of learner involvement,

learner reflection and target language use, which he believes impact positively on second and foreign language teaching.

One of the rationales behind our experiment is Vygotsky's (1978) idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Therefore, one of the interview questions was to investigate what profile the students had of their partners. The findings in this study correspond roughly with findings from previous studies on good distance language learners (Hurd & Xiao, 2006; Xiao & Hurd, 2007). In a certain sense, this profile accords with Vygotsky's (1978) 'more capable peers' (p. 86). However, as Swain and Lapkin (2002) points out, '...in peer interaction, peers can be concurrently experts and novices' (p. 286). In our interviews with the students, some 'more capable peers' did admit that peer review was not merely a 'giving' process but a 'taking' process as well. Findings from Items 4, 5 and 6 in the questionnaire also evidenced this point, albeit indirectly. On the one hand, even less capable peers may contribute one way or another to their partners' writing. On the other hand, more capable peers can learn from giving feedback to others. As for the suggestion of partner-switching mechanism, it requires further research to testify its superiority over the fixed-partner practice.

Review checklists play an important role in distance peer review activities. Hence, much attention was paid to the design of peer review checklists in this study. Questionnaire Item 2 was highly rated by the students, proving the facilitating impact of the checklists on peer review. The students' rating of Item 3 also indicated that they often referred to the checklists in the peer review process. Interview results further supported the usefulness of the checklists in improving the quality of evaluation and the sensitivity to focal points, thus enhancing the students' confidence. Overall, the checklists designed for the experiment were well received by the students though a few of them suggested further elaborating Part II, which varied from one TMA to another.

Interview results indicated that the major obstacles the students reported included lack of time, low level of language competence, fear of losing face, dissatisfaction with partners' attitude, and desire for greater incentive. Peer

review is time-consuming, which is a big challenge to distance learners who usually have multiple roles to play at the same time (Niu, *et al.*, 2005). Thus, from the teachers' perspective, extra care needs to be taken to ensure the number of activities and the efforts required are not too demanding; from the students' perspective, effective self-management skills should be fostered so that they need not play one role at the sacrifice of others and may maintain continuing motivation. As for worries about language competence and losing face, findings from the sample analysis and tutorial observation revealed that the students fared better than they reported in the interview. For example, students' individual contributions to each online group conference should amount to a minimum of 400 words. Nevertheless, they contributed an average of 1504 words to each conference. In spite of this, encouragement may be needed to further increase students' self-image and enhance their confidence in peer review. Some students did not take peer review very seriously, perhaps because of the low incentive they received for their painstaking efforts. Others might take such an attitude as a result of inappropriate partnership. Obviously, not all the obstacles were attributed to themselves by the students. So efforts need to be made to deal with external factors like inappropriate partnership and low incentive, leading students to believe that with sufficient efforts and adequate knowledge or skills they can be competent reviewers. According to Weiner (1992), internal attributors are most autonomous with high perceived self-efficacy.

Although the experiment was repeated three times in the duration of one and a half year, it should be borne in mind, in interpreting the results and drawing conclusions, that this study has certain limitations. For instance, there was no control group and the number of students involved was relatively small. Nevertheless, findings from this study provide a good basis for further research which could use the insights gained to focus more closely on measures to cope with remaining problems such as developing a balanced focus on local and global issues, fostering effective deep processing strategies, reinforcing transferrable skills, and pairing partners.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the feasibility of paired peer review in a distance-taught EFL writing course. Participants gained benefits in terms of EFL writing proficiency, transferrable skills, and self-efficacy. It is hardly surprising that they expressed a preference for this activity despite some obstacles and room for further improvement, just as one student summed up her peer review experience in the interview, 'Honestly speaking, I felt peer review was troublesome at the beginning. I was not very clear about what benefits I could get from it. But after the first round of peer review, I started to like it because I learnt a lot from this process. I am now not only more sensitive to language errors but also more aware of idea development and generic structure in my writing. I have learnt how to use various skills to solve problems and I believe I can learn English well in a distance mode. I will continue to use these reviewing skills in my future studies.'

As is suggested in the discussion above, the significance of peer review can go beyond a writing course. Peer review, as designed and structured in this experiment, involves different kinds of language learning strategies (Xiao, 2007; Xiao & Hurd, 2007). For example, reviewers may have to employ cognitive strategies (e.g., check for grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage, originality, consistency, and use of generic structure; consult reference materials such as grammar books or dictionaries or ask for help in the case of difficult language points), metacognitive strategies (e.g., notice mistakes; arrange a schedule to study; think about progress in learning English), affective strategies (e.g., be confident; be uninhibited about own weaknesses in English; be willing to accept constructive criticism; do not get easily demotivated by unsatisfactory performance or outcome), and social strategies (e.g., work with other learners to practice, review, or share information). To be a good reviewer, one should possess qualities which characterize good distance language learners such as motivation, self-confidence, willingness to accept constructive criticism, being well organized, and ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses (Hurd & Xiao, 2006). Overall, peer review is a

learning tool integrating assessment into teaching and learning. The skills of peer review, as argued earlier, may be more helpful in distance language learning because by empowering students it provides more opportunities of student-student interaction and, to a certain extent, of teacher-student interaction, removing some of the obstacles to language learning in the distance learning context.

To use the strengths of peer review to the full, counteracting effects of courses delivered otherwise, instruction and assessment practices need to be re-conceptualized in an integrated scheme whereby peer review is integrated into the design and delivery of different courses on a programme, to meet different learning objectives. Informed by the findings, a pilot project is already in progress to implement an integrated peer review scheme. The project involves four courses on the BA programme in English at SRTVU. In this project, peer review is undertaken either in pairs or in groups, at online conferences or face-to-face tutorials, synchronously or asynchronously, in written or spoken form, and with a focus on content or on language skills, depending on the different learning objectives of these four courses. It is hoped that findings from the pilot project may reveal deeper insights into promoting peer review in China's distance ELT context as well as having some relevance to other contexts.

THE AUTHOR

Junhong Xiao is associate professor of English in the Department of Foreign Languages at Shantou Radio and Television University, P. R. China. His current research interests cover linguistics, applied linguistics, and open and distance learning. His recent publications include *Distance English Language Teaching and Learning: Practice and Theory* (2007) and *Teaching English at a distance in China's Radio and Television Universities* (2008).
Email: frankxjh@gmail.com

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Appendix A

The peer review checklist (Part II)

In TMA 02, you are required to describe a process. You can focus on describing what it is like to do something (a description) or telling other people how to do something (a series of instructions). So first of all, make sure that you know your partner intends to compose a description or a series of instructions. Then check the writing against relevant criteria.

Text type

Is this a description of how something is done or a series of instructions telling people how to do something?

Content

1. Is there anything taken for granted? If yes, add it so that readers unfamiliar with this process have no difficulty understanding the writing.
2. Is the information in logical order? Are the stages of the process clearly marked with adequate linking expressions?
3. Is there any irrelevant or redundant information included?
4. Does the whole passage make sense and is it easy to follow? In other words, can you do the same thing after reading the article?

Language / Style

1. Is the language in an appropriate style?
2. In the case of a description of how something is done, are the majority of the sentences in the indicative mood? Is the passive voice dominant?
3. In the case of a series of instructions telling people how to do something, are the actions expressed in the imperative mood?
4. Is the language accurate? Do check the grammar, spelling and diction.

Length

How long is the writing? Is it up to the required length?

Appendix B

Types of revision

Type		Examples (Suggested revisions in italics and uninitiated revisions in bold)
<u>local</u>		
V	1 st draft	Firstly, a resume should be included six parts.
	feedback	Firstly, a resume <i>includes</i> six parts.
	1 st draft	Take notes any special skill such as...
	uninitiated	Take notes of any special skill such as...
EV	1 st draft	In addition to my daily work...
	feedback	In addition to my <i>routine</i> work
	1 st draft	I am writing to you to apply for the position advertised on China Daily on 30 Sep.
	uninitiated	I am writing to you to apply for the job advertised on China Daily on 30 Sep.
I	1 st draft	As a Chinese saying goes, collaboration is power.
	feedback	As a Chinese <i>said</i> , collaboration is power.
	1 st draft	I feel keenly the need for further study in English.
	uninitiated	I feel keen the need for further study in English.
EI	1 st draft	I majored at hotel management...
	feedback	I majored <i>on</i> hotel management...
	1 st draft	I have been interested by your company.
	uninitiated	I have been fascinating by your company.
<u>global</u>		
V	1 st draft	It seems as if there is inconsistency between collaboration and independence. In fact, they are always intertwined together in our lives.
	feedback	<i>But the conclusion of your article will be better if you can mention the relationship of collaboration and independence in more details.</i>

	1 st draft	In conclusion, although there are some disadvantages of the web-based assessment, its advantages outweigh the disadvantages. So I would like to support the view that Web-based assessment is more conducive to distance learning. I believe the learners can make great progress under the web-based assessment system.
	uninitiated	Despite all the advantages, there are disadvantages of the web-based assessment too. Firstly, sometimes the platform may go wrong when we are doing the tasks, such as the real-time discussion, and we can't continue to finish the tasks due to the breakdown of the internet. Secondly, the word font is too small, and we have to take pains to read the words. This is not good for our eyesight. However, although there are some disadvantages of the web-based assessment, its advantages outweigh the disadvantages. So I would like to support the view that Web-based assessment is more conducive to distance learning. I believe the learners can make great progress under the web-based assessment system.
EV	1 st draft	There are two most important qualities for a successful distance learner. One is collaboration, and the other is independence.
	feedback	<i>You may as well define 'collaboration' and 'independence' here instead of in the second paragraph.</i>
	1 st draft	However, other people stand on a different ground. They point out that the Web-based assessment is not suitable for adult learners. Some adults do not know how to use the Internet or the computer well.
	uninitiated	However, other people stand on a different ground. They point out that the Web-based assessment is not suitable for adult learners. For example, the learners may not access the Internet very conveniently. Some may not be skilled at using the computer. So they may get low grades. They feel this is unfair.
I	1 st draft	I am writing to apply for the position of the sales manager which you advertised in Nanfang Daily on March 29 th .
	feedback	<i>Your letter does start with the purpose, but you need to give more details about yourself in this first paragraph.</i>
	1 st draft	No example in the data
	uninitiated	
EI	1 st draft	No example in the data
	feedback	
	1 st draft	No example in the data
	uninitiated	

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evaluative		
P	1 st draft	Conversely, independence needs students to accomplish their work by themselves. It is including self-management, learning habits and task-based strategies. The three strategies should be ordered that distance learners complete the study independently. For instance, the distance learners should manage themselves well after the tutorial. They have to review the lesson and do the homework independently. And it's necessary for them to set up long-term and short term goals, and then they may learn more things. As in doing the discussion, all the members should express their own opinions, try to comment on the other members' opinion and correct the mistakes.
	feedback	<i>The third paragraph is well written. Its topic sentence is logically developed.</i>
Ne	1 st draft	There are several things which you should pay attention to: First, before putting the clothes into the machine, all the things should be taken out of the pockets. Second, sweaters and overcoats should be put into the special netty bag in order to avoid mangling. Third, make sure the water should reach the required water level, if not, the wheel will not turn. Finally, keep children away from the washing machine when it is working.
	feedback	<i>The last paragraph is not consistent in style. The first two steps should be in imperative mood, like the last two ones.</i>
V	1 st draft	See the 'NE' example above.
	feedback	See the 'NE' feedback above.
I	1 st draft	See the 'P' example above.
	feedback	See the 'P' feedback above.

1. 'local', 'global' and 'evaluative' refer to local revisions, global revisions, and evaluative comments, respectively.
2. V=valid, EV=equally valid, i.e. as good as the original expression, I=invalid, EI=equally invalid, i.e. as incorrect as the original expression, P=positive, Ne=negative.
3. 'uninitiated' refer to revisions made by the writer himself/herself.
4. The same applies to Tables 1 and 2.

Appendix C

Email interview questions

1. Please give a detailed account of how you did your peer review.
2. Did you benefit from peer review? What benefits have you derived from this practice if any?
3. Was there any difficulty that you encountered in peer review?
4. What did you think of the review checklists?
5. What kind of person did you have in mind as your ideal partner in peer review?