

# Written and Spoken Peer Feedback in EFL Writing Instruction: A Case with Japanese Undergraduates

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## Abstract

Although it has not yet gained a significant place in EFL classrooms, peer feedback (PF) is becoming more common and its effects are being investigated in Asian classrooms. Previous research suggests that PF (using L1) exerts positive influences on revisions of EFL students' L2 writing. A previous classroom-based study hinted at the advantages of PF (using L2) in light of Japanese EFL students' motivation and engagement in L2 writing. To further explore the benefits of written-plus-spoken PF in L2, the present follow-up study investigated Japanese undergraduates' peer interactions over a 12-week-long writing class. The results showed dialogic interactions such as verbalizing reactions, asking/answering questions, and requesting/providing explanations about the content of peer writing. The results provided support for the claim that bimodal PF in L2 creates opportunities for social interaction and collaborative learning, thus enhancing student motivation and engagement in writing. Possible implications of the results are discussed as they pertain to writing research and pedagogy.

**Keywords:** written-plus-spoken peer feedback, EFL writing instruction, peer interactions, L2 use

## Introduction

Peer feedback (PF) has long been playing a major role in L2 writing classrooms, and its justifications come from interdisciplinary sources

related to language teaching (Liu and Hansen, 2002).<sup>1</sup> For example, both the process approach to and social views of writing have imparted impetus to its use (Lockhart and Ng, 1995). PF fits well with the process approach to the teaching of writing that emphasizes revisions, in which students help each other to revise and improve their writing based on PF. It also plays an important role in the more recent view of writing as a social act. This perspective of writing sees learning to write in the context of interactions with others. This social view adds importance to feedback on student writing and helps increase the popularity of PF by providing opportunities for social interaction (Rinnert and Kobayashi, 2001). By responding to each other's writing and exchanging feedback, students learn about writing while interacting socially.

In ESL classrooms, a significant number of studies examined the use of PF from diverse perspectives, for example, by comparing PF with teacher feedback (TF) (e.g. Caulk, 1994), comparing student writing before and after PF (e.g. Connor and Asenarige, 1994), examining the roles or stances students assume in PF (e.g. Lockhart and Ng, 1995), and investigating student interactions while they engaged in PF (e.g. Mendonça and Johnson, 1994). Results of past studies noted both benefits and constraints of PF's effectiveness. Some reported positive student perceptions (e.g. Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger, 1992), whereas others found them negative, questioning oft-claimed affective advantages of PF over TF (e.g. Zhang, 1995). In internationally mixed groups in a US classroom, Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger (1992) hinted at problems attendant to the use of PF by Asian students, who 'felt less confident about their ability to engage in peer review' (246) than students from other regions. Having investigated Chinese students' spoken peer interactions, Carson and Nelson (1996) concluded that these students did not collaborate, noting among their salient characteristics the reluctance to speak and criticize peers' drafts.

Although PF has not yet gained a significant place in EFL writing classrooms, it is becoming more common and its effects have been and continue to be investigated in Asian classrooms (e.g. Jacobs et al., 1998). A major line of research on the use of PF examined its effects and benefits on

revisions (e.g. Tsui and Ng, 2000). In contrast with mixed findings in ESL contexts, previous EFL studies seem to consistently indicate positive effects of PF, particularly using L1, on revisions (Huang, 1995 cited in Nelson and Carson, 2006). After comparing compositions before and after PF, Kamimura (2006) found improvements of both high- and low-proficiency Japanese undergraduates' L2 writing. Given a choice between L1 and L2, the students all gave and received written and spoken PF using their L1. Kamimura (2006) implied that many beneficial comments and suggestions would have been unlikely in L2. Examining PF use with Puerto Rican undergraduates, Villamil and Guerrero (1996) revealed the effects of peer collaboration on revisions facilitated by the predominant use of their L1, which they considered 'essential' (60). As hinted by Nelson and Carson (2006), homogeneous groups in EFL contexts may lead to successful peer interaction because 'speakers of the same language and cultural backgrounds will better understand the nuances and subtleties of each other's messages, allowing for both group harmony and improved writing'(48).

On the other hand, little research has focused on L2 use in the EFL writing classrooms. It is obviously no easy feat for EFL students who share their L1 to respond to each other's work in English because they have no practical need to communicate in English. Past classroom studies suggest that L2 use is much more difficult to implement because students are more inclined to prefer faster and easier methods of communication. Documenting Thai university students' reactions to their first PF experience, Jacobs (1987) noted that, although they were encouraged to use English for the spoken PF, they used Thai more than English. The students reported that they had communicated in L1 because (1) L2 use would have resulted in less feedback; (2) they had little confidence in commenting in L2; and (3) those reluctant to use L2 forced others to use L1 to communicate. Previous studies found that, given the freedom to choose between L1 and L2, students (almost) exclusively turned to L1 (e.g. Kamimura, 2006; Pennington et al., 1996).

Besides lack of necessity, student difficulty with L2 use is predictable. Among other factors such as student motivation to use L2, student L2 proficiency is crucial. Depending on the level, it can be un-educational to

demand L2 use, yet it is worth implementing in EFL classrooms, because it maximizes the chances of using the target language for communication. L2 use is considered especially important in output- and interaction-poor environments like Japan, where L2 writing is highly limited in and out of the classroom. Japanese students' level of motivation for writing English is conspicuously low compared with their high motivation level for speaking English (Koike et al., 1985).<sup>2</sup>

### **Rationales for the Present Instruction**

The present study was motivated by pedagogical concerns of employing PF for Japanese students, who are generally not accustomed to sharing their work, not to mention experiencing PF. The present instruction incorporating PF had the following rationales. First, the written and spoken modes were combined. Comparing written-only and written-plus-spoken PF in a Japanese university context, it was found that those students who experienced bimodal PF over a one-semester course became more motivated to write compositions and feedback than those who did written-only PF (Hirose, 2012a). Thus, the addition of the spoken mode was justified in terms of student motivation toward writing.

Second, L2 was mandated for both written and spoken PF. As noted above, the possible benefits of L2 use have been acknowledged but remain to be examined in classroom research.

Third, the impact of PF on revisions was not the focus of the instruction. Although PF was employed to ultimately improve students' writing ability, the primary objectives of the present instruction were to allow the inexperienced Japanese EFL writers to accumulate writing experience while learning about basics of English paragraphs. This pedagogical decision was made considering the L2 writing background of the students, who had little knowledge of English paragraphs and lacked experience beyond paragraph-level writing (Hirose, 2005). Distinctive from the majority of previous studies, these students were not required, although encouraged, to revise their

earlier writings.

Students were also given autonomy in responding to their peers' texts. They could give feedback about the content and language, being free to focus on either or both. This decision was made to extract which aspect(s) of peer writing they paid attention to.

Lastly, students worked in new pairs with dual roles as reader/writer in every class. As indicated by Nelson and Murphy (1992), group dynamics and students' roles in the group affect the effectiveness of PF, and it can take only one negative attacker to determine this effectiveness. In the instruction, new pairs were constantly formed not only to avoid such dominant influences from working with the same partner, but also to create chances to communicate with as many peers as possible.

## **The Present Study**

The present study directly builds on Hirose (2012b), which revealed that Japanese EFL undergraduates perceived the bimodal PF positively. They also perceived raised enjoyment levels of writing in English after 12-week class sessions. Furthermore, they improved both in quantity and overall quality in their post-course writings. Nevertheless, it was beyond the scope of that study to delve into what the students had engaged in during PF sessions, let alone consider what could have contributed to their positive perceptions and improved writing outcomes. To explore these unresolved questions, this study further examined the written and spoken PF data collected from one of the two classes that had participated in the previous study.

The targeted class was selected because of the ways in which it differed from the other class. First, the targeted students more closely represented typical Japanese EFL students. They were non-English major undergraduates with no obligations to write English for academic purposes. More importantly, they were not taking any other English classes at the time of the course. Therefore, writing improvement would have most likely derived solely from taking the writing class. Third, the targeted students regarded

PF more positively in terms of writing and receiving feedback in English. Furthermore, they produced significantly more written feedback and enjoyed providing written PF significantly more than those in the other class. By analysing these students' interaction data collected during regular class activities over 12 sessions, the present longitudinal study addressed the following research questions:

1. What do Japanese EFL students write in response to peers' compositions?
2. What do Japanese EFL students interact with in spoken PF?

The findings are discussed in relation to those of the previous study, and the pedagogical implications are drawn for the implementation of bimodal PF in L2.

## **Method**

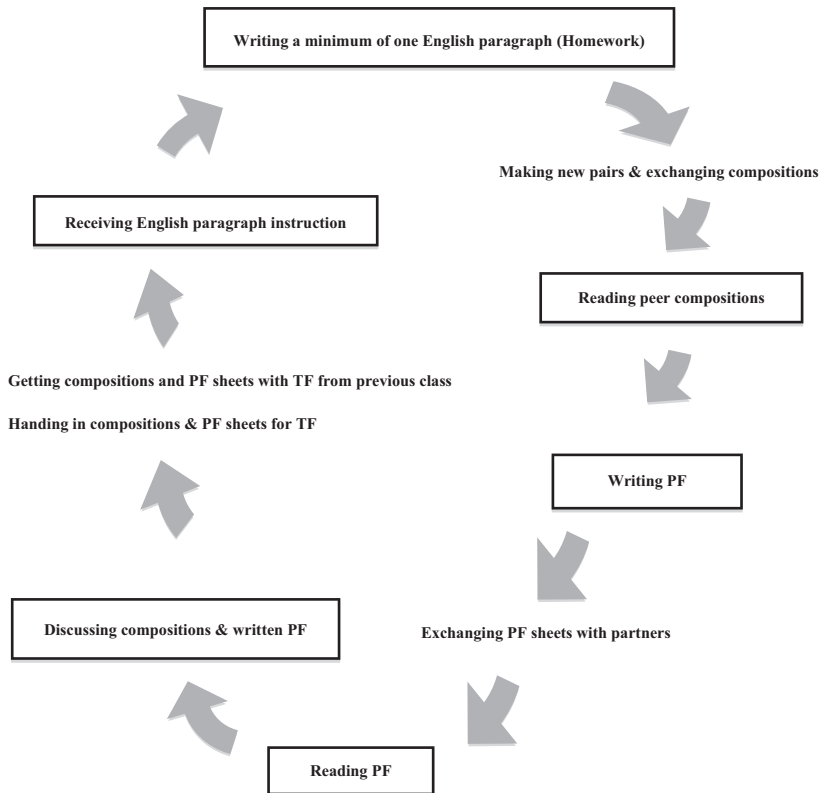
### *Participants*

The participants were 15 fourth-year Japanese undergraduates with no previous PF experience (14 females and 1 male, English proficiency level = mostly intermediate). They were students in an intact English writing class taught by me. They majored in languages other than English, such as French, Spanish, German and Chinese. Although the writing course was not their first ever, their English writing experiences had been extremely limited, and they were considered inexperienced writers of English. The majority had international experience of mostly a year both in English-speaking countries and the countries of their language of study. Although they were taking no other English classes while taking this course, they had received twice-weekly English classes for the past three years, including a weekly English writing course as third-year students.<sup>3</sup>

### *Class procedure*

The class met once a week for 90 minutes over a semester, and the course had two major components: PF and instruction on English paragraph organization. Figure 1 depicts each step of every class procedure. Boxed

steps are linguistic activities, whereas non-boxed steps are non-linguistic. The first 45 minutes were allocated to PF, while the remainder was spent studying paragraph organization such as *time order* and *cause and effect*. Prior to each lesson, students were required to compose at least one English paragraph on any topic. In pairs, students filled out and exchanged a PF sheet (see Appendix 1). On the sheet, the reader wrote in English what was good, confusing, and incomplete about the composition, i.e. ‘praise, criticism, and suggestions’ (Hyland and Hyland, 2001: 185), correspondingly. There was also space for further comments. The reader underlined the topic sentence



**Figure 1.** Class Procedure: Students' Activities

and any incomprehensible sections directly on the composition.

After reading the partner's PF sheet, each pair was free to discuss any topic that emerged from the compositions and written feedback. Students spent approximately 25% of the 90-minute class time reading compositions and writing feedback and another 25% reading PF sheets and engaging in spoken PF. The 45-minute allocation for the PF sessions was not predetermined but found necessary to complete the activities. Lastly, the class read and analysed sample paragraphs from the coursebook. Students wrote assignments for the following week using a newly learned paragraph organization form.

I scaffolded PF by providing additional written feedback on PF, monitoring and giving suggestions during spoken PF sessions, and illustrating good PF models in class. At the end of the PF sessions, all compositions and PF sheets were collected and then returned with written TF in the next class. My feedback supplemented PF by indicating confusing areas and highlighting grammatical errors the students had missed. As a second reader, I added simple comments about the content and used evaluative commentaries such as 'Very good!' and 'This needs revision.' To encourage elaborated feedback, I also supplied evaluative, mostly positive, commentary on specific PF points, including 'I agree!' and 'Good point!'

### *Data*

Written and spoken PF data were collected for 12 weeks. The written data totalled 147 sheets written by 15 students. The mean PF sheets was 9.8 (range: 6–12) per student. The sheet had a group mean of 79.3 words (range: 48.4–105.5). The compositions were also used to complement the analysis of the PF data. Students wrote a mean of 11 compositions (range: 8–12), with an average of 1.6 revisions (range: 0–3). That is, they wrote on a mean of nine different topics (range: 6–11). Students' compositions were mostly on topics of their own experiences, knowledge, and thoughts (see Appendix 2 for a sample list of composition topics). Reflecting their direct experiences overseas, the topics covered different parts of the world, ranging from Mexican food to the writer's first-hand work experience with an Australian family. These compositions had a group mean of 184.9 words



(range: 144.6–230.5) per composition, and most were typed (see Appendix 3 for a composition of average length).

The spoken data consisted of segments of each oral peer interaction from every class. Due to sheer logistics, it was impossible to collect all 15–20 minutes' interactions of seven pairs simultaneously from 12 class sessions.<sup>4</sup> A research assistant recorded part of each pair interaction with a hand-held camera, moving randomly between pairs during the spoken sessions. The total running time was 6 hours 15 minutes, and the mean total per student was 25 minutes (range: 18–35).

### *Data analysis*

Two raters, a university EFL instructor and I, coded all the written data. Ratings were made according to an adapted version of the negotiation categories used by Mendonça and Johnson (1994). The present analysis differed from theirs in several ways. First, the previous study analysed ESL students' spoken interactions in pairs, whereas the current study examined the written feedback data. Second, *reactions*, a sixth category, was added to their five categories, *questions*, *explanations*, *restatements*, *suggestions*, and *grammar corrections*, to reflect a large number of such cases in point. Third, to trace what aspects of compositions students responded to, each category, except *grammar corrections*, was further assigned as either content or form.<sup>5</sup> Form included vocabulary, sentence, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Prior to data analysis, interrater agreement was tested. After 90% reliability was achieved, the raters coded all the written data separately. When there were discrepancies, final decisions were made via discussion. Because the total number of PF sheets per student varied reflecting students' attendance rates, mean occurrences of categories per sheet were calculated for all students, and group means were calculated for each category.

Unlike the written data, the spoken data were analysed solely by me in relation to the written PF and compositions on which to provide spoken feedback. Quantitative analysis as performed with the written PF data was not possible because every student's spoken data were a collection of segments of interactions with different partners.

## Results

### **Research Question 1:** *What do Japanese EFL students write in response to peers' compositions?*

Category ratings were made at discourse (not sentence) level. For example, the following response was counted as one occurrence of *reactions* about content. Reading the essay 'The time I was exhausted in a city,' in which the writer described having had a difficult time meeting her friend in Sydney, the reader wrote:

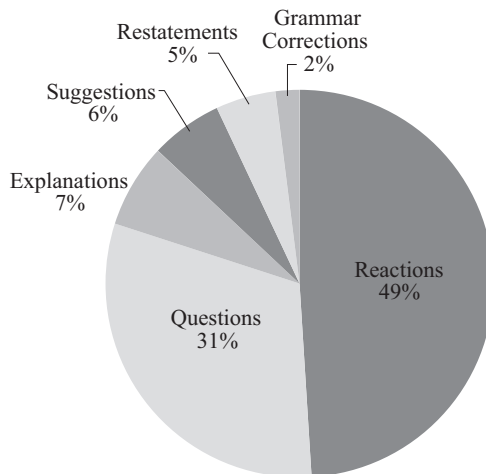
I was in Perth, too!! But I've never been to Sydney. Many people told me that Sydney is much bigger than Perth. I have a similar experience. At that time I didn't have a mobile phone so I realize how convenient a mobile phone is.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1 presents the means and ranges of each category/aspect per PF sheet. As Table 1 shows, written feedback was varied in light of all six categories, and a mean of 4.65 categories was encompassed per sheet. Among them, students produced *reactions* ( $M = 2.28$ ) most frequently, followed by *questions* ( $M = 1.45$ ), *explanations* ( $M = 0.32$ ), *suggestions* ( $M = 0.3$ ), *restatements* ( $M = 0.21$ ), and *grammar corrections* ( $M = 0.1$ ). As shown in Figure 2, *reactions* constituted nearly half (49%) and *questions* 31%, together accounting for 80% of the total. Except for the two most frequent categories, the remaining four included cases with no occurrences depending on individual students. For example, 10 students (66.7%) offered no *suggestions* over the semester. Regarding the content/form distinction, students provided feedback more than twice on content than on form (see Figure 3). As displayed in Table 1, overall feedback on form was infrequent, and there seemed to be individual differences in that some students never imparted form-related PF. Figure 4 displays the ratios of PF categories in combination of the content/form. Explanations and examples of the categories combined

with the content/form follow in decreasing order of occurrences.

**Table 1.** Means and Ranges of Each Category/Aspect per PF Sheet

Categories	Aspects	Reactions	Questions	Explanations	Suggestions	Restatements	Grammar Corrections	Sub-Total
<b>Content</b>								
	<i>M</i>	1.7	0.93	0.32	0.08	0.2	–	3.22
	Range	(0.5–3)	(0–2.6)	(0–1.27)	(0–0.44)	(0–0.8)		(2.33–4.27)
<b>Form</b>								
	<i>M</i>	0.58	0.52	0	0.22	0.01	0.1	1.43
	Range	(0–1.5)	(0–1.5)	0	(0–0.5)	(0–0.1)	(0–1.33)	(0.25–3)
<b>Total</b>								
	<i>M</i>	2.28	1.45	0.32	0.3	0.21	0.1	4.65
	Range	(0.6–3.9)	(0.6–3.4)	(0–1.27)	(0–0.78)	(0–0.9)	(0–1.33)	(3.17–6.7)



**Figure 2.** Ratios of Written Feedback in Terms of 6 Categories

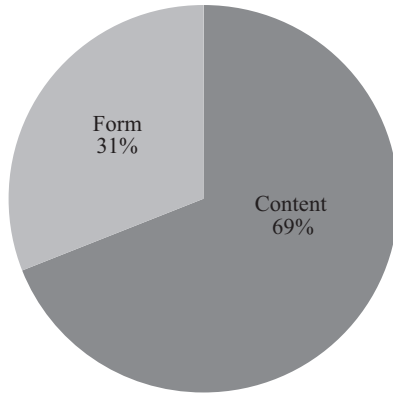


Figure 3. Ratios of Written Feedback in Terms of Content and Form

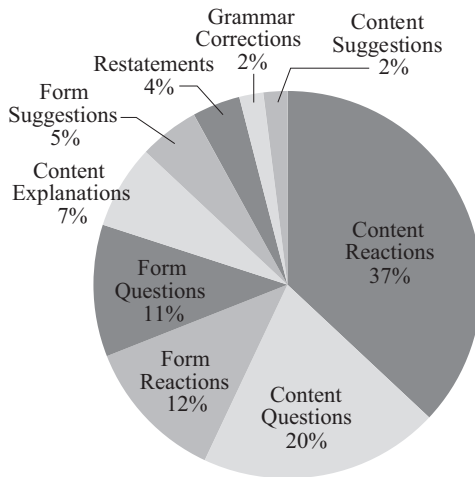


Figure 4. Ratios of Written Feedback by Category and Content/Form

*Reactions about content.* As shown in Figure 4, the students expressed *reactions* about content most frequently, comprising 37% of the total occurrence. *Reactions* contained readers' impressions, thoughts, and sympathies with writers. The following is a typical example that shows

reader *reactions*. In response to the composition ‘Escapism,’ which described how the writer was escaping from working on her graduation thesis, the reader wrote:

I’m always thinking about my graduation thesis, too. It is my stress ... I want to throw it out and go on a travel. For me, making a plan for my next trip is my escapism. I turned my computer on to write my graduation thesis, but I usually go on a website of travel agency in 5 minutes ....

As the example shows, *reactions* were mostly personal and not made merely at a superficial level (e.g. ‘I enjoyed reading your essay.’, ‘Your essay is interesting.’). The readers showed interest in and sympathized with what was written, shared similar experiences, or elaborated on the appeal of their partners’ compositions. Readers also included positive compliments.

*Questions about content.* Next to *reactions* about content, students asked *questions* about content. Reading the essay ‘Japanese food tastes good,’ in which the writer explained several ways of eating rice in her home prefecture, the reader asked, ‘I have never eaten rice with a piece of butter and soy sauce. How is the taste? Does every person in Hokkaido eat it?’ As this example illustrates, readers asked open-ended questions as well as yes/no questions. Concerning an essay about Lyons, France, the reader wrote the following:

You says that Lyon has a lot of interesting things, what are they? I have been to France twice. I have visited Paris, Avignon (province), Côte d’azur, Monaco. I think that each region in France has each special culture, so I want to go to the other regions, too. Where do you recommend me to visit next? Lyon? Or where?

This type of request for specific examples, if responded to and incorporated in the essay, could lead to additions and elaborations of the original composition. The rated questions did not always take a question form, but also contained statements formulated as ‘I wonder whether....’, ‘I’d like you

to explain....’, or ‘I’d like to know (more)....’

*Reactions about form.* As in the case about content, students mostly expressed *reactions* about the form of compositions, particularly vocabulary concerning paragraph organization that constituted 69% of all occurrences. *Reactions* about form included such general comments as, ‘You wrote 2 paragraphs (329 words!) That’s amazing!’ and ‘I didn’t correct mistakes in your English composition, because your composition is well organized!!’ As these examples illustrate, *reactions* were generally positive and also included specific compliments such as, ‘The list of ice cream flavors by using a semicolon is good.’ Students learned punctuation and vocabulary related to paragraph organization forms every class, and wrote a paragraph using a newly learned organization and related words for the following class (recall the *Class procedure* section). These congratulatory *reactions* applying the newly learned punctuation and vocabulary related to paragraph forms implied that reading peers’ compositions provided students opportunities to apply their knowledge.

*Questions about form.* Students asked *questions* about form, most frequently about vocabulary, comprising 56% of the *questions*. Readers asked the meanings of unknown words or phrases in peers’ writing (e.g. ‘What is mental strain? It means nervous or stressful?’).

*Explanations about content.* Although not as frequently as expressing *reactions* and *questions*, students added *explanations* about content by providing related knowledge concerning the composition topics. Readers’ *explanations* demonstrated that they connected relevant personal knowledge or experience with composition content. *Explanations* only concerned content (recall Table 1). After reading the essay ‘To go Dutch or not’ (see Appendix 3), the reader commented on the situation in Switzerland and Japan, based on her personal experience, as follows:

In Switzerland, people who invited the guests always pay all. In

Switzerland, I have never seen such situations that people split the bill at the restaurant. But here in Japan many people do so. Now I work part-time at the restaurant and I am always asked if guests can split the bill. Some guests just pay for just what they ordered without asking. I don't know which custom of payment is better ... But I don't like to see such a situation at the cashier ... But I don't like to see such a situation at the cashier.

*Suggestions about form.* Less frequently than *explanations* about content, students made *suggestions* about form. Although low in number, *suggestions* about form outnumbered those about content (recall Table 1).<sup>7</sup> In the following response, the reader suggested revising the topic sentence to better suit the content:

Although the topic sentence is 'My family consists of six people,' the specific details are about family's hobby. I think if you change the topic sentence to contain an assertion which refers to family's hobby, this essay may be better.

Regarding a two-paragraph composition entitled 'Television,' the reader suggested adding a new introductory sentence early in the composition indicating the number of main points to be addressed: 'There are many bad influences on TV, so at the beginning you can say, "There are 3 points I want to mention ..." like that. And we can figure out easily how many points there are.' Conversely, another example was to eliminate several sentences that were not closely connected to the topic sentence. More specifically, the reader suggested deleting the first two sentences enumerating many foods the writer liked, because the rest of the paragraph was about the food she liked, i.e. ice cream. Making such *suggestions* hinged on critical reading and embodied negative feedback.

*Restatements about content.* Students restated or summarized their partners' writing. *Restatements* always occurred in the section of the PF sheet where

they were invited to write what they liked about the compositions (B in Appendix 1). *Restatements* were made at the levels of sentence, paragraph, and beyond paragraph, and those at greater-than-sentence level were rated as content. Below is an example of *restatements* for the composition titled ‘Switzerland for me’:

You spent a year in Switzerland when you were a high school student. And there you learned a lot of things about that country and its culture. And what’s more, you made very good relationship between you and your host family. You love Switzerland that much and miss it very much.

*Grammar corrections.* Students rarely corrected grammar. The majority of corrections focused on subject-verb agreement (e.g. companies is → are), tense (e.g. need → needed), or verb complementation (e.g. like study → studying). It is notable that 12 students (80%) made no *grammar corrections* over the whole semester. Students underlined and added questions marks to incomprehensible parts directly on the compositions, but most grammar errors were left uncorrected. *Grammar corrections* were limited to those written on the PF sheet (C in Appendix 1). This manner of correcting required high levels of confidence, a lack of which may have made students hesitant.

*Suggestions about content.* Students’ least frequent *suggestions* concerned content, and this included adding examples and specific details. Proposed ideas included: ‘If possible, I think you can put some sentences in front of “I love my family.” They might make your writing stronger.’ ‘You can add more examples about internet using the expression in the text. I’d like to know how to use internet in your life more!!’

**Research Question 2:** *What do Japanese EFL students interact with in spoken PF?*

The spoken PF analysis revealed the following three recurrent common features: (1) each pair almost always conversed in English; (2) students



reiterated what was written on PF sheets; and (3) they discussed more than the written PF, dealing with both content and form. The first finding gives evidence that students gained opportunities to talk about their writings in English. Students' maintenance of L2 use deserves mention because the contingent use of the L1 was expected.<sup>8</sup> The videotaped data also disclosed smiles and laughter during the conversations. Many used hand gestures, too. These physical characteristics reveal features of the spoken PF that were in sharp contrast with those of the written PF, which had been done individually and in silence. They can be interpreted as evidence of active student involvement and participation in the PF activities. The second finding implied that, although the spoken data were not analysed quantitatively as with the written data, the results of the written PF would correspond with those of the spoken PF interactions: i.e. students focused on content while limiting focus on form, exchanging *reactions* and *questions* most. All six feedback categories were also identified in the spoken data. The rest of this section reports on the third finding, i.e. what they additionally discussed.

*Interactions about content.* Spoken PF overlapped written PF. Given autonomy to choose any aspect to discuss, students typically exchanged *reactions* with each other, expressing positive comments such as 'Your composition title is cool!' The *questions* on the PF sheets were asked, and answers followed. The readers sometimes added *explanations* for why the *questions* were raised. Follow-up *questions* and answers were frequently exchanged. For example, regarding one essay about the writer's work experiences at a linguistics conference, the reader asked on the PF sheet, 'How come did you join the conference as a staff member? Were you interested? or Did someone recommend you?' The writer then not only answered these *questions*, but also added *explanations* about linguistics, which she was majoring in, and her intent to study it in graduate school. As this case demonstrates, the spoken PF sessions stimulated new exchanges of information about composition content. While discussing content, students extended their conversations to related topics. During a conversation concerning the essay 'Superstitions in Mexico,' the pair discussed superstitions in the composition and then shared

many other superstitions they knew, including those from France and Japan. In this way, the spoken PF sessions created opportunities in English for discussing and extending the written feedback.

*Interactions about form.* In addition to composition content and written PF, spoken PF also made students focus on the form aspect of peer writing. As in the case of written PF, they focused on vocabulary, in particular word meanings. For example, one essay focused on Mexican food and culture. The reader asked ‘What is maize?’ on her PF sheet. During the spoken PF, the writer explained that maize was chosen over corn out of her respect for the local Mexican culture and because it is similar to the Spanish word, *maiz*. Because of this explanation, the partner learned not only the meaning of an unfamiliar word but also similarities between English and Spanish words. As this example illustrates, partners’ *questions* prompted the writers to explain more than asked.

Students also raised new form-related *questions* and offered *suggestions*. One reader, for example, realized the partner’s younger brother, described as ‘a second-grade’ on the composition, was not a primary school pupil and recommended revising to avoid similar misunderstandings. Given *suggestions* from the reader, alternatively, the writer could react immediately. Provided an alternative to her chosen word, one writer decided to change ‘maneuver’ to ‘control’ when she confirmed, via a dictionary, the suggested word fit her intention better. Such *suggestions* went beyond the word level, too. Some writers corrected phrases and sentences, accepting *suggestions* on the spot. These examples provide evidence that spoken PF interaction created new opportunities to raise *questions* and *suggestions* about language for either immediate or later revisions.

There was also a large possibility of problematic vocabulary arising in the course of conversation as well as in writing, creating incidental opportunities for vocabulary learning. For example, the essay ‘Escapism’ facilitated a sharing of experiences concerning writing graduation theses, as both reader and writer were working on theirs (in Japanese). This conversation inevitably necessitated the use of thesis-related vocabulary such as abstract,

introduction, and conclusion, which neither student knew in English but found together in dictionaries. Students encountered difficulty maintaining English conversation due to their lack of vocabulary specific to the topic concerned, but they overcame this collaboratively. By creating opportunities for word searching, making choices, or evaluating alternatives, spoken interaction enabled them to learn new words related to composition topics, thus helping them stretch their language beyond their current level.

## Discussion

This classroom study analysed bimodal PF interactions over the 12 sessions as they occurred naturally without teacher intervention. The quantitative analysis of written PF found that (1) regarding the content/form distinction, given the freedom to choose either or both, students focused on content (recall Figure 3); (2) in light of six categories, *reactions* and *questions* outnumbered the other four, whereas *suggestions* and *grammar corrections* occurred much less (recall Figure 2); and (3) individual differences occurred in the other four categories with no occurrences (recall Table 1). The spoken PF analysis corroborated the findings of the written PF, adding evidence of written feedback functioning as groundwork for spoken PF, which in turn generated collaborative interactions with mutually consequent social and linguistic benefit. These findings are discussed in relation to those of Hirose (2012b) (i.e. the students' positive perceptions of PF, increased motivation toward and improved L2 writing).

Students' focus on content, while limiting focus on form, appears to show that students used the written PF sessions for exchanging and sharing ideas rather than attending to language. This finding is consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Caulk, 1994; Mendonça and Johnson, 1994). On the other hand, it is inconsistent with that of Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger (1992), in which the majority of ESL freshmen, in providing written feedback, took a 'prescriptive' stance of considering correct form more important than ideas. Their students responded to texts written by those

from the last semester. Responding to the text in the face of the writer in the present study may have pushed students to respond to content more. The present findings accorded with Rinnert and Kobayashi (2001), who found that Japanese undergraduates with some English writing instruction rarely commented on language (i.e. grammar and vocabulary), speculating that this tendency came partly from lack of confidence. On the other hand, the present study also revealed student attention to language in the spoken PF. The immediacy of the spoken sessions might have been easier for them not only to express language-related concerns but also to solve them collaboratively. The present findings implied students' engagement in linguistic problems particularly about vocabulary and in building knowledge about it, providing evidence that the spoken PF created opportunities for 'collaborative dialogue' (Swain, 2000).

The bimodal PF sessions offered ample opportunities for exchanging *reactions* and *questions/answers*. *Reactions* and *questions* about content constituted more than half (57%) of written PF (recall Figure 4). The finding implied that in light of 'praise, criticism, and suggestions' (Hyland and Hyland, 2001), praise outnumbered the other two. This was partly due to students' compositions which were mostly non-academic and based on the writer's first-hand experiences, often those overseas. Infrequent occurrences of *suggestions* or criticisms about content are not surprising because it must have been difficult to suggest or criticize anything about the writer's personal experience. More likely, it provoked *reactions* and *questions* from readers, who brought their feelings and thoughts to feedback. In so doing, they made connections with their own experience or knowledge, typically expressing empathies (recall student's written feedback quoted above, 'I'm always thinking about my graduation thesis, too.'). asking/answering *questions*, and requesting/providing *explanations*. These reciprocal exchanges about common topics (such as learning foreign languages, writing the graduation thesis, and future career) as well as new information abroad (e.g. Swiss custom of paying bills in response to the Chinese custom of paying bills) provide evidence to show that their PF was social interactions.<sup>9</sup> The present results suggest that PF using L2 can create dialogic, interactive writing

practice in non-threatening supportive environments, while providing explanations for student increased motivation and enhanced engagement in writing (Hirose, 2012b).

Regarding the low occurrence of *suggestions*, the claim that students provided/received very few *suggestions* should be treated with caution, partly because they did so in the face-to-face spoken sessions, and partly because some *questions* could have functioned as *suggestions*, leading the writers to add, elaborate, and revise. Furthermore, the *questions* not explicitly formed as questions but coded as such (e.g. ‘I wonder whether ...’, ‘I’d like to know ...’) had the potential to be meant or interpreted as *suggestions* by the writers and the readers, respectively. The intended/interpreted meanings of *questions* were not analysed in the present study, but there is a possibility that they encompassed *suggestions* and even criticism. Carson and Nelson (1996) revealed that Chinese ESL students’ employment of harmony-maintenance strategies included asking questions to soften criticism. Questions deserve further examination.

The extent to which L2 use exerted influences on PF in both its focus and categories is not clear; however, its use must have facilitated content-focused social interactions, while limiting focus on form. Student attention to language varied: some students always focused on words and grammar, while others never did. For the purpose of facilitating more form-focused interactions, L1 use may be more desirable, if not ‘essential’ (Villamil and Guerrero, 1996: 60). It might have been more difficult to touch upon language-related topics in English especially when they had little metalanguage to do so. The low occurrence of written PF on form, most notably *grammar corrections*, may be also explained by the understanding that the teacher would also read the compositions and make corrections. Consequently, students accumulated writing experiences of feedback as well as compositions on new topics by using different forms of English paragraphs rather than polishing earlier writings (recall an average of 1.6 revisions over the whole semester as reported in the *Data* section). For extensive writing, content-focused PF using L2 seems to have played a facilitative role in motivating and engaging them in communicating in written English, leading them to improve the overall quantity and quality of their post-course compositions (Hirose, 2012b).

## Conclusion

The present results pointed to the effectiveness of PF not solely for immediate goals of revising earlier writings, but also for benefits of enhancing student motivation and engagement in L2 writing by creating opportunities for social interaction and collaborative learning. These benefits are particularly important for EFL student-writers who need writing practice. Nevertheless, more form-focused PF should be eventually encouraged for revision. Subsequent instruction should exploit ways to combine collaborative interactions with critical feedback to further improve students' writing ability.

To be more conclusive of its effects in EFL classrooms, more applications of the bimodal PF are needed. Although L2 use may have a limited role depending on the students' L2 proficiency levels, this can be further applied to other EFL writing classes. To further apply PF in L2, it is important to consider ways of teacher intervention. In the present instruction TF was intended to facilitate PF and played a complementary role, consequently resulting in the division of work, with students mostly referring to content and the teacher doing the rest. Exchanging such positive feedback as found in this study may need to be facilitated. In future instruction, other means of combining PF and TF should be devised and adopted to maximize the effectiveness of PF in EFL classrooms.

Despite potential benefits of written-plus-spoken PF in L2, it is also important to acknowledge its constraints and limitations. This study is based on a one-semester course, and more classroom research is required to confirm its findings. It is also necessary to conduct longitudinal research dealing with changes over a multi-semester course as students accumulate PF experiences. Future research needs to examine whether and how their interactions will change and their writing ability in English will develop longitudinally. Such follow-up research would greatly complement this small-scale classroom study.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> L2 in this paper refers to the target language, the language being learned.
- <sup>2</sup> According to Koike et al. (1985), probably the largest survey to date investigating Japanese university students' views of studying English, 61% of the respondents ( $N=10,095$ ) wanted speaking instruction, whereas only 3.1% wanted writing instruction.
- <sup>3</sup> The pre-course questionnaire revealed that no students had previously experienced PF activities as implemented in the course.
- <sup>4</sup> When the total number of students was uneven, the class had one group of three.
- <sup>5</sup> Although the written PF data were preliminarily coded and described in light of the six categories in a previous study (Hirose, 2009), the content/form distinction was added in the present analysis. The present paper is not only an extensively revised version of the previous study but also incorporates analysis of the spoken PF data.
- <sup>6</sup> Students' writings are all quoted unedited in this paper.
- <sup>7</sup> The examples of revising topic sentences and adding/deleting sentences were rated as pointing to form, rather than to content, in the present study, because the topic sentence form and absence/presence of the sentences were questioned by the readers, respectively. Unlike the vast majority of cases rated as form in this paper, the content/form distinction might be ambiguous because the readers made these form-related suggestions based

on the understanding of the composition content as a whole.

- 8 The research assistant who video-/audio-taped spoken PF was an advanced EFL student from China and she spoke English in the classroom. Considering she was approximately the same age as the students, she could have been viewed as a role model of a successful English communicator. There is no doubt that her presence, as well as that of the video camera, helped facilitate the students' use of English in the classroom.
- 9 Since students were a mixed group of the same year from four departments (recall the *Participants* section), this class make-up helped create opportunities for social interactions. A French major student, for example, had the chance to read an essay about how the writer got lost in Montreal. The following week, she read a composition on an ice cream café in Muenster written by a German major student. Then, another essay on Mexican soap operas by a Spanish major student followed, and a further one regarding the writer's job-hunting experience.

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## Appendix 1: PF Sheet

**Writer's Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

### Reader Response

- A. Underline the topic sentence (the sentence that states the dominant idea).
- B. Explain what you like.
- C. Describe where you are confused and wavy-underline the words/phrases you do not understand.
- D. Write what you would like further details about. Write any other comments if you have them.

**Reader's Name** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2: A Sample List of Composition Topics by One Student

1. Shopping
2. My family consists of 4 people
3. The time I was exhausted in a city
4. Let's make a sweet potato cake
5. Eyesight
6. Getting up early
7. A bagel
8. An *au pair* work
9. *Miso* (Translation: fermented soybean paste)
10. *Au pair* work (revised)
11. *Shusse uo* (Translation: fish that get different Japanese names as they grow larger)

## Appendix 3: A Sample Composition

### To Go Dutch or Not

The custom of payment varies from country to country. In Japan, when coworkers or fellows eat at a restaurant together, each person pays for just what he or she ordered, or they split the bill. This way can make group members relaxed without feeling the pressure. When I eat at a restaurant with my friends, we usually split the bill. On the other hand, it differs from the custom in China. When Chinese people eat out, everyone of the group insists on putting the meal on his or her check, or someone pretends to go to the rest room so as to pay the bill before the others notice. For Chinese people, paying the bill is a way of saving face and making a relationship firm and strong. For them, splitting the bill means the end of friendship. However, the term “AA-zhi” which means going Dutch has recently entered the Chinese language. Nowadays, some people follow the custom of paying just for oneself in China, too. The point is that we should decide the proper way of paying the bill according to the situation and the relationship. (187 words)