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Do Secondary L2 Writers Benefit from Peer Comments?

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The bulk of the studies conducted on the effectiveness of teacher comments and peer comments have been done with tertiary L2 learners, and conflicting findings have been obtained. While some found that peer comments were viewed with skepticism and induced little revision, others found that they did help learners to identify and raise awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in writing. This article reports on a study of the roles of teacher and peer comments in revisions in writing among secondary L2 learners in Hong Kong. Both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained and triangulated. The findings show that some learners incorporated high percentages of both teacher and peer comments, some incorporated higher percentages of teacher comments than peer comments, and others incorporated very low percentages of peer comments. While all learners favored teacher comments and saw the teacher as a figure of authority that guaranteed quality, only those who incorporated very low percentages of peer comments dismissed them as not useful. From the interviews with the learners, four roles of peer comments that contributed positively to the writing process were identified. Peer comments enhance a sense of audience, raise learners' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, encourage collaborative learning, and foster the ownership of text. This suggests that even for L2 learners who are less mature L2 writers, peer comments do play an important part. The implications of the findings of this study for the writing teacher are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Revision has been widely acknowledged as a crucial component in the writing process in both L1 (see, for example, Faigley et al., 1985; Onore, 1989) and L2 (see, for example, Arndt, 1993; Leki, 1990a). However, whether revision leads to improvement in writing depends on not only the writer's ability but also the

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quality of the feedback that he or she receives from the reader. As Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992, p. 256) point out, revision is "a complex process carried out with varying degrees of success depending upon the writer's competence and the effectiveness of the instructions received." Arndt (1993, p. 91) highlights the importance of feedback as a "central and critical contribution to the evolution of a piece of writing. Feedback *informs* the writing process, permeating, shaping, and moulding it" (author's emphasis). It raises the writer's awareness of the informational, rhetorical, and linguistic expectations of the intended reader (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994).

Teacher and Peer Comments in Revision

A number of studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of teacher and peer feedback in revision. While studies on teacher comments in single-draft settings have found that different types of teacher comments had little impact on students' subsequent writing in either L1 writing (see, for example, Hillocks, 1986) or L2 writing (see, for example, Cohen, 1987; Leki, 1990a; Robb et al., 1986), studies in multiple-draft settings showed that teacher comments did help students to improve their writings. For example, Fathman and Whalley's (1990) study found that, even in the absence of teacher feedback, L2 students showed improvement in the content of their revisions; those who were given teacher feedback made greater improvement. In Ferris' study (1995), 93.5 percent of the 155 respondents indicated that teacher comments helped them to improve their writing. In a subsequent study, Ferris examined 47 university ESL students' first drafts and revised drafts and found that text-specific teacher comments in the form of marginal notes, teacher comments that requested information and clarification, and teacher comments on grammar appeared to induce the most substantive revision (see Ferris, 1997). Straub (1997), in his questionnaire survey of 142 L1 freshmen's reactions to written teacher comments, found that students favored specific and elaborated comments on global matters of content, purpose, and organization, as well as local matters of sentence structure, wording, and grammar. The most preferred comments were those that provided advice, used open questions, or included explanations that guided revision.

The beneficial effects of peer comments have been outlined by a number of researchers in L1 writing (see, for example, Beaven, 1977; Gere & Abbot, 1985; Kroll & Vann, 1981) and L2 writing (see, for example, Allison & Ng, 1992; Arndt, 1993; Chaudron, 1984; Keh, 1990; Lockhart & Ng, 1993; Mittan, 1989). They have pointed out that, firstly, peer feedback is pitched more at the learner's level of development or interest and is therefore more informative than teacher feedback; secondly, it enhances audience awareness and enables the writer to see egocentrism in his or her own writing; thirdly, learners' attitudes towards writing can be enhanced with the help of more supportive peers, and their apprehension

can be lowered; fourthly, learners can learn more about writing and revision by reading each other's drafts critically, and their awareness of what makes writing successful and effective can be enhanced; and, fifthly, learners are encouraged to assume more responsibility for their writing.

The above views on peer comments, however, have not gone unchallenged. Leki (1990a) identified several problems with peer comments: students tend to respond to surface errors instead of semantic or textual ones; they tend to give advice that does not facilitate revision; and they have difficulties deciding whether their peer's comments are valid. These problems are more acute in L2 than in L1 writing, according to Nelson and Murphy (1993). Firstly, L2 students may not trust their peers' responses to their writings because they are not native speakers of English. Secondly, L2 students from cultures that see the teacher as the only source of authority may consider their peers not knowledgeable enough to make sensible comments and ultimately not incorporate the comments into their writing. In Lockhart and Ng's (1993, p. 23) survey of 56 L2 students' perception of peer comments, while students agreed that peer feedback enabled them to gain an awareness of the audience and improve their writing, they were "unsure of their strength as competent readers." Mendonca and Johnson (1994) conducted a study on verbal peer feedback and how it shaped students' revision activities. They found that while students agreed that peer feedback helped them to locate problems in their own writing, they only selectively incorporated the feedback into their revision. Nelson and Carson's (1998) interview of four L2 university students showed that students preferred teacher comments to peer comments and that they incorporated teacher comments in their revisions more frequently than peer comments.

From the above review, it can be seen that while the effectiveness of teacher comments in multiple-draft settings appears to be established, the value of peer comments is not, particularly in L2 writing.

Comparative Studies of Peer and Teacher Comments

Apart from studies on benefits of peer and teacher comments, a number of comparative studies have been conducted on the relative effectiveness of teacher and peer comments in facilitating revision. Early research on L1 and L2 writing yielded conflicting findings. In L1 writing, some found that peer comments were as effective as teacher comments (see, for example, Pfeiffer, 1981; Pierson, 1967; Putz, 1970) while others reported that groups receiving peer comments improved more than those receiving teacher comments (see, for example, Ford, 1973; Karengianes et al., 1980).

Early comparative studies in L2 writing research, though scant and inconclusive, seemed to cast doubt on the value of peer comments. Partridge (1981, cited in Chaudron 1984, pp. 3–4) found that teacher feedback brought more improvement than peer feedback and that the students "doubted the quality and

accuracy of their peers' corrections and comments." Chaudron (1984, p. 10) compared written peer and teacher comments and found that neither of them helped L2 students to improve in their revisions. In his attitude survey, however, the students were more positive about feedback from native speakers, suggesting that "foreign students are cautious about the value of peer feedback as a source of aid in revising their writing."

More recent comparative studies in L2 writing similarly yielded findings more in favor of teacher comments. Connor and Asenavage (1994) traced the amount and types of revision made by eight L2 undergraduates on their drafts in response to peer comments and teacher comments, respectively, and found that the effect of peer comments was small. Overall, only 5 percent of the revisions resulted from peer comments as compared to 35 percent resulting from teacher comments. Sixty percent of the revisions were motivated by sources other than the teacher and peers, such as self-revision. In other words, students were more receptive to teacher comments than to peer comments although their revisions were largely self-motivated. Zhang's study (1995) showed that students preferred teacher feedback to peer or self-feedback. Eighty-one L2 college freshmen were asked to state their preference between teacher and non-teacher feedback and, for the latter, between peer and self-feedback. It was found that 76 chose teacher feedback over non-teacher feedback. Teacher feedback was significantly more preferred than peer or self-feedback whereas there was no significant difference between the latter two.

The above findings in L2 writing show that teacher comments were either more effective than peer comments in facilitating revision or were at least looked upon more favorably than peer comments by students, even if they did not bring about greater improvement. This raises the question of the value of peer comments and whether they have a role to play in L2 writing. Jacobs et al. (1998) argue that studies that force students to make a choice between peer comments and teacher comments are misguided because peer and teacher comments should not be mutually exclusive. Their questionnaire survey of 121 L2 undergraduates found that 93 percent of students preferred to have peer feedback as one type of feedback on their writing. This suggests that when students were not forced to make a choice, they welcomed both peer and teacher comments. Similarly, Cault (1994), in a comparison of L2 written peer responses, teacher comments, and students' self-analysis of their own papers, found that 89 percent of students were able to give advice considered valid by the teacher and 60 percent made appropriate suggestions not mentioned by the teacher. They also made more specific and localized comments than the teacher. The study suggests that peer comments may well complement the role that teacher comments play in revision.

The conflicting findings show that the effectiveness of peer and teacher comments in facilitating revision needs further exploration and that more empirical studies are needed. Moreover, the studies reviewed so far were

mostly conducted on tertiary L2 learners. Very few studies have been conducted on secondary L2 learners who are relatively less mature and less competent L2 writers.

This article reports on a study to investigate peer and teacher comments in revision in L2 writing in a secondary school setting. The study covers a period of three months during which learners completed two writing tasks. The data collected consist of drafts and revisions produced by learners in response to peer and teacher comments, a questionnaire survey, and semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of students. The findings show that learners incorporated significantly more teacher comments than peer comments in their revisions and that teacher comments were perceived as significantly more effective than peer comments. However, they also show that peer comments have roles to play that cannot be filled by teacher comments.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH METHOD

Research Questions

This study addressed three research questions.

1. Do peer comments and teacher comments facilitate revision?
2. Do teacher comments facilitate more revisions than peer comments?
3. What are the roles played by teacher comments and peer comments in prompting students to make revisions in their writing?

Research Method

The study took place in a secondary school in Hong Kong that uses English as a medium of instruction. The students in this school belong to Bands 2 to 3 in the Hong Kong school banding system with Band 1 being academically the most able students. Most of them are working class children living in the housing estates near the school. The average class size in secondary schools is 40. In Secondary 6 and 7 (that is, Grades 12 and 13) however, the class sizes are usually smaller, ranging from 20 to 30. This study involved 27 Chinese students in Secondary 6 and 7 (Grades 12 and 13) that are pre-university years in Hong Kong. Prior to the study, they were used to the one-draft one-reader writing practice that placed much emphasis on grammatical accuracy. At the beginning of the school year, they were introduced to a process-oriented approach to writing in which for each writing task, they were engaged in a "writing cycle." Each writing cycle lasted 6 weeks and consisted of the production of a first draft after a whole-class brainstorming session. This was followed by the teacher giving whole-class feedback on common problems found in the first draft. Students then read the first drafts of their peers'

compositions and provided written comments. This was followed by a peer response session during which peer comments were discussed in groups. On the basis of the written and oral peer comments, students had to produce second drafts that were read and commented on by the teacher. In response to the teacher's written comments, the second drafts were revised by students to produce the final drafts. The following is a diagrammatic representation of the writing cycle (see Fig. 1). There were altogether four writing cycles in the school year when the study was conducted.

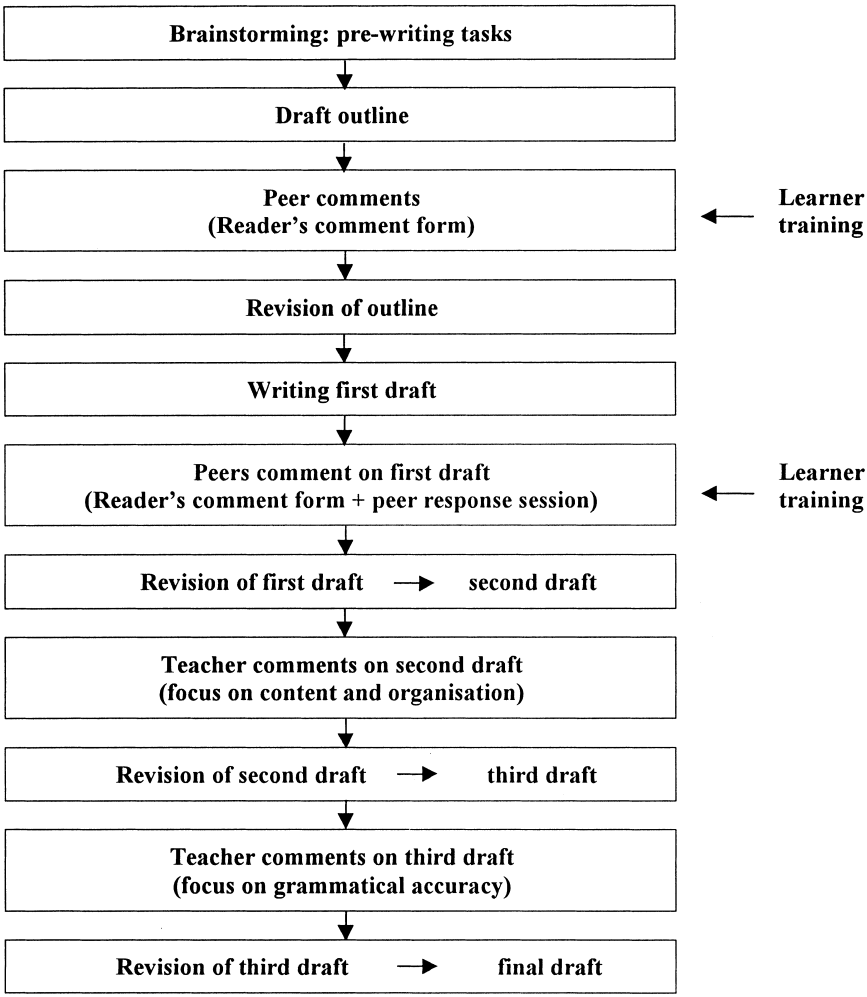

Figure 1.

The data collected consisted of, firstly, a questionnaire survey administered at the end of the fourth writing cycle. Secondly, to ensure that students were familiar with providing comments and revising their own writings, the drafts and comments in the first two writing cycles were discarded and only those in the last two cycles were collected for analysis. Thirdly, follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of six students were conducted.

Questionnaire Survey

At the end of the fourth writing cycle, a questionnaire was administered to all 27 students. There were altogether 40 items in the questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire, items 1–8, asked for students' attitude towards writing in the year prior to the study when a single draft product-oriented approach was used and their attitude towards writing in the year the study was conducted when a multiple draft process-oriented approach was adopted. They also tapped the reasons why they were afraid of writing and why they became more or less afraid of writing or why they liked writing more or less compared to the previous year. In the second part of the questionnaire, parallel questions were asked regarding students' perceptions of the following constructs: (a) the usefulness of reading peers' writings (items 9–14), (b) the usefulness of peers' oral comments given in the peer response sessions (items 15–20), (c) the usefulness of reading peers' written comments (items 21–26), and (d) the usefulness of teacher's comments (items 27–32). In the last part, questions were asked about the extent to which they incorporated teacher comments and peer comments in their revisions (items 33–34) and which aspects of their writings improved after the revisions (items 35–40). Because of the limit of space, only the questions and findings of the second part of the questionnaire are reported in this article (see Table 1).

Drafts, Peer, and Teacher Comments

The writing tasks for the third and the fourth writing cycles were, respectively, an essay discussing old people's care in Hong Kong and a letter from the Head Boy/Girl of the school to persuade Secondary 6 (Grade 13) students to become tutors of younger students. Students were asked to read their peers' writing and provide written comments. In order to provide some guidance to students when responding to peers' writings, they were given broad categories under which they needed to write comments (see Allaei & Connor, 1990; Leki, 1990b; Stanley, 1992 on the need for training in peer response). They were then randomly put into groups of three or four to provide oral responses to their peers' writings. The grouping remained constant throughout the period of study. There were altogether nine groups in each session. All peer response group discussions on the first draft were audiotaped,

TABLE 1

Questionnaire Findings ($N = 27$)
Q1–Q8 in the questionnaire

	Mean (*SD*)
1. Did you like the way writing was taught **last year**?	3.22 (1.05)
2. Do you like the way writing was taught **this year**?	4.22 (1.03)

3. In general, I am afraid of writing compositions.

1	2	3	4	5	6
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
←					→
strongly disagree					strongly agree

If your answer to Q.3 is "4," "5," or "6," please answer Qs. 4 and 5.
If your answer to Q.3 is "1," "2," or "3," please answer Q.6.

4. Why? You can tick more than one reason.

1	☐	I have no ideas.
2	☐	I do not know how to express my ideas.
3	☐	I do not know how to organize my writing.
4	☐	The topics are boring.
5	☐	Others. Please write them down. (You can write in Chinese if you want.)

_____

5. Compared to **last** year, are you more or less afraid of writing compositions **this** year?

1	2	3	4	5	6
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
←					→
much more					much less

If your answer to Q.5 is "1," "2," or "3," please answer Q.7.
If your answer to Q.5 is "4," "5," or "6," please answer Q.8.

6. Compared to **last** year, do you like writing compositions more or less **this** year?

1	2	3	4	5	6
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
←					→
much more					much less

If your answer to Q.6 is "4," "5," or "6," please answer Q.7.
If your answer to Q.6 is "1," "2," or "3," please answer Q.8.

7. Why? You can tick more than one reason.

1	☐	I do not like revising a piece of composition over and over again.
2	☐	I do not know how to revise my own compositions.
3	☐	My compositions were no better after revisions.
4	☐	I prefer writing more compositions to revising the same piece of composition.

(continued on next page)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

5	☐	I did not find reading my classmates' compositions useful.
6	☐	I did not find my classmates' comments in peer response sessions useful.
7	☐	I did not find reading my classmates' comments useful.
8	☐	I did not find reading my teacher's comments useful.
9	☐	Others. Please write them down. (You can write in Chinese if you want.) _____

8. Why? You can tick more than one reason.

1	☐	I like revising compositions.
2	☐	I have a chance to revise my own compositions.
3	☐	My compositions improved after revisions.
4	☐	I prefer revising compositions to writing more compositions.
5	☐	I found reading my classmates' compositions useful.
6	☐	I found my classmates' comments in peer response sessions useful.
7	☐	I found reading my classmates' comments useful.
8	☐	I found reading my teacher's comments useful.
9	☐	Others. Please write them down. (You can write in Chinese if you want.) _____

Questions 9–34
1 = not at all
6 = very much

Item no.	Questionnaire item	Mean (*SD*)
9.	I liked reading my classmates' compositions.	4.04 (1.29)
10.	I found reading my classmates' compositions useful.	4.04 (1.19)
11.	Reading my classmates' compositions gave me more ideas.	4.56 (1.16)
12.	Reading my classmates' compositions helped me to improve the organization of my composition.	4.19 (1.11)
13.	Reading my classmates' compositions helped me to improve the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of my composition.	3.85 (1.13)
14.	I benefited from reading my classmates' compositions.	4.15 (0.95)
15.	I liked the peer response sessions.	3.48 (1.25)
16.	I found my classmates' comments in peer response sessions useful.	3.63 (1.42)
17.	My classmates' comments in peer response sessions helped me to enrich the content of my composition.	3.56 (1.34)
18.	My classmates' comments in peer response sessions helped me to improve the organization of my composition.	3.33 (1.18)

(continued on next page)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

19.	My classmates' comments in peer response sessions helped me to improve the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of my composition.	3.59 (1.15)
20.	I benefited from my classmates' comments in peer response sessions.	3.63 (1.15)
21.	I liked the way that my classmates gave me written comments on my compositions.	4.15 (1.20)
22.	I found my classmates' written comments useful.	3.78 (0.93)
23.	My classmates' written comments helped me to enrich the content of my composition.	3.63 (1.18)
24.	My classmates' written comments helped me to improve the organization of my composition.	3.30 (1.17)
25.	My classmates' written comments helped me to improve the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of my composition.	3.37 (1.12)
26.	I benefited from my classmates' written comments.	3.59 (1.01)
27.	I liked the way that my teacher gave me comments on my composition.	5.48 (1.01)
28.	I found reading my teacher's comments useful.	5.52 (0.58)
29.	My teacher's comments helped me to enrich the content of my composition.	5.19 (1.00)
30.	My teacher's comments helped me to improve the organization of my composition.	5.33 (0.92)
31.	My teacher's comments helped me to improve the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of my composition.	5.74 (0.10)
32.	I benefited from reading my teacher's comments.	5.19 (1.15)
33.	How often did you take into consideration your classmates' comments when you revised your compositions?	3.74 (1.32)
34.	How often did you take into consideration your teacher's comments when you revised your compositions?	5.33 (1.11)
35.	My composition became better after revisions.	
36.	After each revision, the content of my composition became richer.	
37.	After each revision, the organization of my composition became better.	
38.	After each revision, the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of my composition improved.	
39.	Revisions helped improved my composition.	
40.	I hope that my English teacher will continue to use this approach to teach writing next year.	
N.B.	Q 9–32: 6 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree. Q 33–34: 6 = all the time, 1 = never. Q 35–40: 6 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree.	

making up a total of 18 recordings for the two writing tasks. Teacher comments provided on the second draft were also collected. For each of the 27 students, a global impressionistic comparison was made by one of the authors (who was their English teacher). The number of peer comments on the first drafts of the two compositions each student wrote was compared with the amount of

revision on the second drafts and the number of teacher comments on the second drafts was compared with the amount of revision on the final drafts to determine the extent to which the student incorporated peer and teacher comments into his/her revisions.

A sub-sample of six students, two incorporating more teacher comments than peer comments, two incorporating roughly the same percentages of teacher and peer comments, and two incorporating a relatively low percentage of teacher and peer comments, were randomly selected by the authors for a detailed analysis of the first draft and the subsequent revisions to examine the extent to which peer and teacher comments facilitated revision. The two students who incorporated more teacher comments than peer comments obtained grades A and C, respectively, in HKCEE (Hong Kong Certificate in Education Examination, which is a school leaving public examination) Paper 1 (Writing); the two students incorporating roughly the same percentages of teacher and peer comments obtained D and E; and the grades for the two students who incorporated a relatively low percentage of teacher and peer comments were C and E.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Cantonese by one of the authors who was their English teacher with each of the six students. The interview data was translated into English and every effort was made to keep the translation as close to the original as possible. A list of core questions was given to each student regarding peer and teacher comments. For peer comments, the questions were the following:

1. Were your peers' comments of any use to you when you revised your compositions? If so, what uses were they? If not, why not?
2. What types of peer comments do you prefer?
3. Did you benefit from giving comments to others? If so, what were the benefits? If not, why not?
4. Would you like it if there were only peer comments but not teacher comments? Why?

For teacher comments, the questions were:

5. Were teacher comments of any use to you when you revised your compositions? If so, what use were they? If not, why not?
6. What types of teacher comments do you prefer?
7. Would you like it if there were only teacher comments but not peer comments? Why?

Probing questions were asked in response to the answers provided by students. In the course of the interviews, the drafts, the written and oral comments in the peer response sessions, and the revisions were presented to the students to help

them to recall why they did or did not make the revisions. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Questionnaire Results

To establish the reliability of the items pertaining to each of the four constructs, that is, students' perception of the usefulness of reading peers' writings (items 9–14), the usefulness of peers' oral comments given in peer response sessions (items 15–20), the usefulness of reading peers' written comments (items 21–26), and the usefulness of teachers' comments (items 27–32), respectively, Cronbach's alpha for testing internal consistency of the items for each construct was used. The reliabilities were high, with 0.86 for reading peers' writings, 0.92 for peer response sessions, 0.90 for reading peers' written comments, and 0.79 for teachers' written comments, indicating that there is high internal consistency for each of the four constructs. Students were asked to respond on a Likert scale of six, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 6 indicating strong agreement with the statements (see Table 1 for the mean scores of these items).

The overall means for the usefulness of (a) reading peers' writings was 4.14; (b) peers' response sessions, 3.54; (c) reading peers' written comments, 3.64; and (d) teacher's comments, 5.30. A comparison was made between the means of each construct in pairs to see if there were any significant differences between them. Therefore, paired *t*-tests for comparing the means of two variables for the same group were conducted on the means of each section and the results showed that there were significant differences at $p < 0.0001$ between the mean scores for (a) the usefulness of reading teachers' comments and peers' written comments ($t = 5.5$), (b) reading teachers' comments and the peer response sessions ($t = 8.39$), and (c) reading teachers' comments and reading peers' writings ($t = 8.10$). There were also significant differences at $p < 0.05$ in the means scores for (a) reading peers' writings and peers' written comments ($t = 2.94$) and reading peers' writings and peer response sessions ($t = 2.98$). There was no significant difference between peer response sessions and reading peers' written comments. The results indicate that students favored teacher comments significantly more that peer comments and that they liked reading their peers' compositions significantly more than reading their written comments or getting their feedback in the oral response sessions.

Two questions were asked on the extent to which students incorporated peer comments and teacher comments into their revisions (items 33–34). The mean for the former was 3.74 and for the latter was 5.33, with 6 indicating "all the time" and 1 indicating "never." A paired *t*-test was conducted on the two means and the result showed that the difference was significant ($t = 5.94$, $p < 0.0001$),

TABLE 2
Distribution of Students Incorporating Peer and Teacher Comments in Revisions (*N* = 27)

	Peer comments	
Teacher comments	>50%	<50%
>50%	4	21
<50%	0	2

indicating that students incorporated teacher comments into their revisions significantly more often than they did peer comments.

Analyses of Peer Comments, Teacher Comments, and Revisions

The result of the impressionistic comparison of the proportions of peer and teacher comments incorporated into the revisions by the 27 students yielded the following distribution (see Table 2).

Table 2 shows that four students incorporated more than 50 percent (>50%) teacher comments as well as peer comments and that 21 students incorporated more than 50 percent teacher comments and less than 50 percent (<50%) peer comments. Only two students incorporated less than 50 percent teacher comments as well as peer comments, but none of them incorporated more peer comments than teacher comments. The findings corroborated the results of the questionnaire survey in that the majority of the students incorporated more teacher comments than peer comments. A sub-sample of six students, two from each of the three categories, were selected for detailed analyses.

The drafts produced by these six students, the written peer and teacher comments, and the oral comments that they received in the oral peer response sessions were analyzed. (The tape recordings of the sessions in which these six students were involved were transcribed and analyzed.) A comparison was made between the first draft and the revisions made in the second draft after receiving peer comments, both written and oral. This was done by coding the verbal comments according to whether they required any revisions, and if they did, whether they were incorporated or not in the second draft, and whether the revisions were self-initiated. The number of comments that were incorporated in the revised draft was divided by the total number of comments requiring revision to arrive at a percentage of comments incorporated. A comparison was also made between the second draft and the revisions made in the final draft after receiving teacher comments. Again the teacher's comments were coded according to whether they required any revisions, and if they did, whether these comments were incorporated or not in the final draft, and whether the revisions were self-initiated. The number of teacher comments that were incorporated was divided by the total number of teacher comments requiring

TABLE 3
Revision Profile of a Sub-Sample of Students

Category	Name	Percentage of teacher comments addressed (%)	Percentage of peer comments addressed (%)
(1) Incorporating high percent of teacher and peer comments	Patrick	83	78
	Vanessa	100	75
(2) Incorporating high percent of teacher comments and low percent of peer comments	Janet	100	20
	Wendy	85	35
(3) Incorporating low percent of teacher and peer comments	Nigel	57	54
	Stanley	68	26

revision to arrive at a percentage of comments incorporated. Table 3 shows the extent to which the students incorporated teacher and peer comments (see Table 3).

As we can see from Table 3, all six subjects incorporated more teacher comments than peer comments in their revision, though the extent varies. Patrick and Vanessa belong to the category that incorporated high percentages of both teacher and peer comments; Janet and Wendy belong to the category that incorporated a higher percentage of teacher comments than peer comments; and Nigel and Stanley belong to the category that incorporated a relatively lower percentage of teacher and peer comments.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview data was first analyzed by one of the authors according to the responses provided by each student to each of the interview questions listed above. This was checked by the other author and a consensus was reached on the interpretation of the data. The findings of the interviews will be reported in this section according to the three categories of students identified above.

Category 1: Incorporating High Percentages of Teacher and Peer Comments

Vanessa and Patrick both incorporated high percentages of teacher and peer comments. In fact, Vanessa incorporated all teacher comments. The reasons that they gave were that the teacher was more experienced and a figure of authority and that teacher's comments guaranteed quality. When asked whether they found peer comments useful; they indicated that peer comments helped

them to revise and improve their writing when peers were able to provide concrete suggestions for revision. The following is an example from Patrick's first draft and his revision on the basis of the peer comments that he received. (The parts that were commented on and revised in the second draft are italicized for easy reference.)

In Patrick's first draft, he wrote:

> Now, when you walk in the streets, you can see many old people who don't have their homes. *This phenomenon is terrible. Hong Kong is a modern city.* Everything is improving except the care of old people. Most of the Hong Kong people are only care of their jobs. They claim that their pressure of life are very great. They don't have time to take care of the old people.

His peer made the ensuing written comment on the sentence underlined: "The phenomenon is terrible. Why terrible? You better explain further." In Patrick's revised second draft after the peer response session, he wrote:

> Now, when you walk in the streets, you can see many old people who don't have their homes. Hong Kong is a modern city. *Modern city should have good living environment for all people. How can the old people homeless? So, this phenomenon is terrible*. Everything is improving except the care of old people. Most of the Hong Kong people are only care of their jobs. They claim that their pressure of life are very great. They don't have time to take care of the old people.

Patrick made three changes to his first draft. Firstly, he reversed the order of "Hong Kong is a modern city." and "This phenomenon is terrible." Secondly, he elaborated on the idea of a "modern city" by adding "Modern city should have good living environment for all people." By doing this, he was contrasting "old people who don't have their homes" and "good living environment for all people." Thirdly, he added a rhetorical question "How can the old people homeless?" that referred back to his previous point about many old people in Hong Kong being homeless. By making these changes, Patrick substantiated his statement "This phenomenon is terrible."

When Patrick was asked in the interview how he was able to make such changes, he explained that in the peer response sessions, he had the opportunity to explain his intended meaning to his peers and discuss how best to revise his writing. He said, "When I first got my composition book back, I didn't understand what they meant. That's why I asked them in the peer response session. If there is no peer response session, I can only know that my peers did not understand me but I would not know what to do." In other words, being able to discuss his writing with his peers was an important reason why he was able to incorporate peer comments in his revision.

Peer comments also helped to enhance a sense of audience. Patrick pointed out that because he knew that his peers would be his "readers," he became more conscious of his audience when writing. He said,

> I will wonder whether my classmates understand what I write or not. If they don't understand they have to spend more time reading my composition. So I read my composition a few times more. Before writing a sentence I will think once again whether to write it or not and whether there are any mistakes. . . . They reminded me not to be too subjective when writing compositions and think that others would be able to understand me.

Interestingly, Patrick gained his sense of audience only through writing for his peers to read, not from his teacher. He pointed out that if his writing were read by the teacher only, then he would not have been as audience conscious. He said, "Because I think the teacher should be used to reading students' compositions and should manage to understand them. . . . I think it is in fact reading each other's composition that is of much use." To Patrick, the teacher should be able to work out his intended meanings because she was an experienced reader of students' compositions. It was writing for peers that heightened his sense of audience.

Apart from a sense of audience, peer comments as well as the peer response sessions helped to foster a sense of ownership of text. Patrick said that upon reading the comments, he would discuss them with his peers (in the peer response sessions) and then make his own decision about whether to make the revisions or not. "I read all the comments first and think whether all the comments need to be considered. . . . I will ask my peers how this part is inadequate. They then give me comments. I will listen and think it over again before deciding whether I will add some points or not in my revision." In other words, he, the writer, is the one to make the final decision about his own text and not the reader. Similarly, Vanessa incorporated peer comments into her compositions only when she agreed with her peers; otherwise, she would ignore the comments.

Another benefit of getting peer comments, to Patrick, is that it encouraged the students to learn from each other. He said, "You can treat the peers as your teacher, they can teach you things and help you." Even for weaker students, he could benefit from working with them. He observed, "If a peer is weaker in English, then it may be I who help others . . . He may know something I don't and I may also know something he doesn't . . . He can spot it and tell me. Maybe we can't spot as many problems but there is still some use."

Patrick saw a great deal of merit in getting peer comments. However, he also felt that teacher comments served roles that peer comments could not. One important role mentioned was inducing "macro-text-based" changes (Connor & Asenavage, 1994, p. 262) that refer to changes at the macro level of the text such as the reorganization of chunks of text and a change in the direction of the idea presented. According to them, such changes could not be induced by peer comments. Patrick pointed out that peers could only respond to what was written and provide feedback on whether the points were relevant or whether they needed elaboration. However, they could not suggest a better organization. He commented as follows: "Peer comments won't . . . help me to organize the points. They

won't tell me this doesn't seem to be a good place to put a paragraph . . . The teacher is more experienced and has read more compositions. So she can suggest better organization patterns." Vanessa also found that teacher comments helped her organize her compositions better while peer comments could not. She said, "(with peer comments) I can still realize my organization is not good. But I don't know how best to organize the points. . . . They can't tell me how to make revisions. . . . For example, this sentence can be rephrased. Peer comments can't tell you in detail how to do it. . . . Peer comments induce fewer changes."

To summarize, Patrick and Vanessa valued highly both teacher and peer comments. They valued the teacher's comments because of the teacher's authority and experience. They were able to incorporate in their revisions peer comments that gave concrete suggestions for improvement. Patrick, in particular, found the peer response sessions useful in clarifying his thinking and expressing his intended meanings. Having peers provide feedback on his writing heightened his sense of audience and fostered a sense of ownership of text.

Category 2: Incorporating Much Higher Percentages of Teacher Comments Than Peer Comments

Both Wendy and Janet incorporated much higher percentages of teacher comments than peer comments. Like Vanessa and Patrick, they had more confidence in the teacher because the latter is more experienced. Wendy felt that this feeling was shared by all her peers. She said, "I don't know but I think everyone thinks so. There is surely more confidence in teacher comments. They guarantee quality." Similarly, Janet said, "For example, after writing a composition, I feel that it's perfect. Then teacher comments suggest improvements, then I think yes, why didn't I think about it before? . . . the teacher makes apt comments . . . teacher comments are really really beneficial." In fact, like Vanessa, Janet incorporated all teacher comments in her revisions. She admitted that there were times when she incorporated teacher comments in her revisions even though she did not quite agree with them because "teachers read the most compositions and know what should really be added."

This, however, does not mean that they did not see any value in getting feedback from peers. Both Wendy and Janet found it useful to have peers read their writing because the latter would be able to spot weaknesses that they themselves would not be aware of. Wendy observed, "I think the value of the peer response sessions is that I can read others' composition and also let other people read my composition. I think it is good to let more people read it and get more comments . . . because I may think my composition is good, coherent, and with well-knit paragraphs, . . . but others may think that I have overused connectives or something is lacking. There are things that only other people can spot, not me." She also found the peer response sessions valuable because

very rich feedback could be obtained as a result of the collaboration among peers to improve each other's writing. The feedback, according to Wendy, could be even richer than that provided by the teacher, especially when students were experienced in responding to peer writing. She said, "With three peers giving comments in a four-member group, the comments can be very rich, much richer than those of the teacher's who has to rush through all the compositions in a short time." In her opinion, if peer responses are effective, "they can do 70 percent of the job" and the teacher comments "can do the remaining 30 percent."

Both Wendy and Janet also pointed out that giving comments to their peers helped to raise their awareness of the weaknesses in their own writings and to think of ways to improve them. Janet said, "For example, I say that certain points should be organized clearly and better developed, then when I write compositions, I would remember it. . . . I would think about how I could organize it and what style I should use." Giving comments to their peers also helped them to respect others' rights over their texts. Wendy emphasized the importance of preserving the writer's original meaning. She said, "I have a principle when giving comments: I try to keep the writer's original idea. . . . If I make a lot of changes, even to the meaning, the writer may not know what to do. He may think, 'What can I do now that you have changed so much of my composition? How can I link this up with the rest of my composition? and what you have written is not my original idea.' So I'll try to keep the meaning."

In other words, Wendy and Janet saw the teacher as the authority and would incorporate the teacher's comments no matter whether they agreed with the comments or not. They saw the value of peer comments not so much in terms of helping them to actually make revisions but rather in terms of spotting and raising their awareness of the weaknesses in their own writing. They also benefited from collaborative learning in the peer response sessions.

Category 3: Incorporating Comparatively Lower Percentages of Teacher and Peer Comments

Both Stanley and Nigel incorporated relatively lower percentages of teacher and peer comments. In the case of Stanley, the percentage of peer comments incorporated was very low, only 26 percent. It was clear from the interview that they did not trust their peers' ability to make judgements on their writings. When Nigel was asked what difficulties he had in incorporating peer comments in his revision, he said, "I don't have much confidence in my peers. We are peers. I can't trust entirely that their judgements are correct." Similarly, Stanley admitted that he largely ignored peer comments. He said, "I turn a deaf ear to their (peers') comments. . . . They have no authority, so their comments aren't of much quality."

By contrast, they felt that teacher comments were of better quality despite the fact that they did not incorporate a high percentage of teacher comments.

Stanley compared his reaction to a peer comment and a teacher comment, both of which asked for elaboration. His peer made the following comment, "I think your composition is quite good but some point you can elaborate more." However, there was no specific reference to the part of the text that needed elaboration. By contrast, the teacher pointed out the specific part of the text that needed elaboration. Stanley said, "This (peer comment) only says 'some.' How do I know where? But the teacher points at this part (specific part of the text). . . . If you say 'some,' I may not find the right spot. Won't it be senseless if I identified the wrong spot?" Similarly, Nigel observed that he did not respond to a peer comment because it did not locate the trouble spot. He said, "they (his peers) can't specify which point needs elaboration. If they tell me which point I need more elaboration perhaps I will do it. They only said, 'I think you can elaborate more.'"

In addition to specific reference to the text, teacher comments often explained what the problem was. Stanley pointed out that comments like "What do you mean?" were useless even if the exact trouble spot was identified because he would still be unable to make revisions without an explanation of what the problem was.

Though Nigel thought that "the teacher's English is better" and that she could "locate more problems" on his compositions than his peers, he did not accept all teacher comments. He said, "sometimes I have doubts when you (the teacher) say my concepts are incorrect. I'd think, 'What's wrong?' This should be so. This is acceptable. Why is it wrong? . . . I do not think you must be right." Similarly, when asked why he incorporated a low percentage of teacher comments, Stanley explained, "because I don't agree with you (the teacher)." Both Nigel and Stanley felt that they had ownership of their own texts and did not feel obliged to incorporate any comments they disagreed with, even those comments from the teacher.

To summarize, neither Stanley nor Nigel had much confidence in the judgement of their peers. In addition, they were dissatisfied with the quality of peer comments, which were often not specific enough and did not explain what the problems were. They only incorporated comments they agreed with, whether they may be from their peers or teacher.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented above confirmed those in previous studies on tertiary L2 writing that found that teacher comments were more favored by most students than peer comments and induced more revisions (e.g., Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Zhang, 1995). In addition, this study found that students benefited more from reading the writing of their peers than from the written comments, as can be seen from the higher mean score for reading peers' writing compared to reading peers' comments in the questionnaire. The interview

data corroborated the questionnaire findings and provided more insights into the reasons why teacher comments were favored and what value they saw in the peer response sessions and the peer comments. From the interview findings, we can see that whether students incorporated a relatively high or low percentage of teacher comments, there seemed to be a consensus about the value of teacher comment. Firstly, students have more confidence in teacher comments because the teacher is considered more experienced and more authoritative. Moreover, teacher comments were considered to be of better quality. They were more specific, were able to explain what the problems were, and were better able to make concrete suggestions for revision.

For peer comments, however, there were differences. Those who incorporated a low percentage of peer comments saw the teacher as the sole source of authority, did not have confidence in their peers who were non-native speakers of English, and did not think that they were able to provide good quality comments, as Leki (1990a) and Nelson and Murphy (1993) observed. However, those students who incorporated a high percentage of peer comments saw the value of getting feedback from peers despite their reservations about the ability of their peers as competent L2 writers, which confirmed the findings in Lockhart and Ng's (1993) study and Mendonca and Johnson's (1994) study. They felt that peer comments did help them to revise and improve their writings when they were able to provide concrete suggestions for revision. Moreover, they found it beneficial to obtain input from more than one person and to work collaboratively in discussing each other's work, explaining their writing to each other, and helping each other to improve their writing in the peer response sessions.

What is interesting is that no matter whether the students incorporated a high percentage or a relatively lower percentage of peer comments, they saw peer comments as having certain roles to play. Four roles could be identified.

The first role is enhancing a sense of audience. The students perceived the teacher and peers differently as readers. They expected the teacher to be fully able to understand their compositions. When the teacher indicated difficulty in understanding an idea in the compositions, Janet asked, "Do you really not know?" and Nigel even stated, "I know you know what I mean." Patrick confessed that he would not care as much about what he wrote if his peers did not have to read his writing. Only his peers were the real audience to his writing.

The second role is awareness raising through reading peers' writings. The students expressed inability to spot their own weaknesses in their writings and peer comments helped them notice the problems. Nigel pointed out that though he and his peers made the same mistakes, he was able to spot their mistakes but not his own. Hence, peer response heightened his awareness of his own problems. Awareness raising is achieved not only through getting feedback but by giving feedback to peers as well.

The third role is encouraging collaborative learning. In peer response sessions, students had the opportunity to clarify their intended meanings to the reader and

to negotiate a way to convey the intended meaning more effectively. In a collaborative setting, students can learn from each other and gain mutual support. As both Patrick and Wendy observed, peers can take over part of the job of the teacher. This applies to not only more able students but also weaker students, as Patrick pointed out.

The fourth role is fostering ownership of text. Because peer comments are not seen as authoritative, students feel that they have autonomy over their own text and can make their own decisions on whether they should take the comments on board or not. This contrasts with their treatment of teacher comments that they tend to incorporate even if they disagree with them, as in Janet's case. The long-term effect of this sense of ownership of text is that students become less reliant on the teacher and more confident in themselves as writers.

The above four roles are roles that teacher comments may not be able to fulfill. However, there are also roles that peer comments may not be able to fulfill. All students pointed out in the interview that teachers were better able to provide suggestions pertaining to the macro-level of text organization. According to Wendy, teacher comments induced major changes because the teacher was more knowledgeable than her peers. The peers might not have the confidence to suggest major changes because they might think the original was acceptable or they simply might not have any idea of how to make major changes. Such a view has been expressed by the respondents in Arndt's (1993) survey of students' preference for teacher and peer comments. Arndt (1993, p. 98) recorded some typical student responses towards teacher comments, one of which being "grammar mistakes may be careless, but organization, I can't help to improve unless you tell me how." Cault (1994, p. 184) compared teacher and student comments and found that student comments "rarely contained suggestions for the whole piece of writing." Considering that it is cognitively more demanding to respond to macro-level features than micro-level ones, it is not surprising that students have difficulty in suggesting macro-text-based changes.

In other words, as Cault (1994) points out, the roles played by the teacher and the peers are complementary and, as Jacobs et al. (1998) observe, any effort to establish the superiority of one over the other seems to us misguided.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this study, we have shown that secondary L2 learners, despite the fact that they are less mature L2 writers compared to tertiary L2 learners, have important roles to play in providing feedback to their peers' writing. Although L2 learners favored and incorporated more teacher comments than peer comments in the revisions of their writing, the former do not substitute for the latter. Teacher comments tend to induce more revisions to the macro-structures of a text whereas peer comments

have the specific roles of enhancing a sense of "real" audience in the students, raising the students' awareness of strengths and weaknesses of their own writings, encouraging collaborative learning and fostering an ownership of text. This study also shows that written peer comments work better when they are supplemented by oral peer response sessions in which learners are given the opportunity to clarify their thinking, explain their intended meanings and collaboratively explore effective ways of expressing their thoughts and arguments.

Despite the limitations in terms of the small sample size, the study has certain implications for the teaching of writing. Teachers who use peer feedback as an integral part of a process-oriented approach to writing may wish to note the following. Firstly, the use of written comments as the only means of providing feedback to peers may not be sufficient and could also be too demanding for L2 learners. Opportunities should be provided for learners to discuss the comments orally. Secondly, since some L2 learners are skeptical about getting feedback from their peers, as part of learner-training, the teacher should highlight the fact that responding to peers' writings is a learning process that will raise their awareness of what constitutes good and poor writing, help them to identify their own strengths and weaknesses in writing, and make their texts more reader-friendly.

The incorporation of peer comments into the writing process implies a transformation of the classroom context. Peer comments take students away from individualized learning to collaborative learning in which the teacher is not the only source of knowledge. The ownership of text fostered by the use of peer comments also induces a new power relationship between the teacher and learners. As learners develop a sense of autonomy over their own writings, they no longer indiscriminately accept comments, even if these comments come from the teacher. As they discover their own competence as writers and language users, they become more confident in themselves and take more control over their learning (see Kutz et al., 1993). In other words, the writing classroom is no longer one that gives absolute control to the teacher but rather is, as Silva (1990, p. 15) points out, "a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment within which students ... can work through their composing processes." The writing teacher is no longer engaged in assessing his/her learners' writing, but in negotiating meaning and collaborating with learners to clarify and voice their thinking, emotions, and argumentation as well as in helping them to develop strategies for generating ideas, revising, and editing.

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