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Author	大野, 真澄(Ono, Masumi)
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An Exploratory Study on Peer Feedback Comments in the L2 Writing of Japanese University Students

ONO, Masumi

1. Introduction

Peer feedback, which is part of peer support and collaborative learning, is often incorporated into the process of writing for the purpose of revising one's drafts at different educational levels. The term 'peer feedback' is used interchangeably with 'peer review' or 'peer response' to "[refer] to the exchange of drafts between two or among multiple learners for oral, written or a mix of oral and written feedback" (Chang, 2016, p. 82). Peer-involved activities vary depending on their focus and perspective, and the research and teaching purposes. The activities include peer revision (Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996), peer review (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994), peer evaluation (Stanley, 1992) and peer response (Berg, 1999; Caulk, 1994; Levine, Oded, Connor, & Asons, 2002). One prominent characteristic of peer feedback is that, according to Chang (2016, p. 82), "peer feedback stresses the provision of rich feedback without grades or formal evaluations" unlike peer assessment or peer evaluation, which place emphasis on the judgement or grading of written products.

Peer feedback plays a vital role in second language (L2) writing classes (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Zhang, 1995) since it has a number of advantages and positive effects on the improvement of writing itself as well as a person's development as a writer. Rollinson (2005), who examined the effect of peer feedback in English as a second language (ESL) writing classes, claims that peer readers are able to give useful feedback on peers' writing. He also states that "[p]eer feedback, with its potentially high level of response and interaction between reader and writer can encourage a collaborative dialogue in which two-way feedback is established, and meaning is negotiated between the two parties" (Rollinson, 2005, p. 25). Stanley (1992) states that in both first language (L1) and L2 settings, "peer evaluation can provide student writers with a wide range of benefits,

including reduced writing anxiety, improved sense of audience, and increased fluency"（p. 217）. In addition, Crinon and Marin's（2010）study is noteworthy since they supported the concept of "dialogism" expounded by Bakhtin, and emphasised the important role of readers of texts in peer feedback. Their study investigated young French learners' L1 writing development by using peer feedback in the process of collaborative revision activities. They found that the readers of texts who adopted the role of tutor benefited from peer feedback more than the writers of the texts who received comments from the readers. In other words, the readers identified the strengths or weaknesses of peers' writing critically while reading and providing feedback comments, and they were able to employ a "knowledge transformation strategy"（Crinon & Marin, 2010, p. 111）when revising their own texts in terms of coherence and quality.

Peer feedback can be employed either in written or oral mode or in synchronous or asynchronous mode. Since each mode has pros and cons, teachers ought to understand them and choose the most suitable or preferred mode for peer feedback in the classroom environment. In addition, peer feedback is an intricate activity in which affective, cognitive, sociocultural and linguistic aspects are involved（Liu & Hansen, 2002）. In employing peer feedback in classroom settings, teachers need to give explicit guidance to students so that they can understand each of the aspects and benefit from this activity effectively and without anxiety.

Furthermore, the focus of peer feedback varies depending on the purpose and stages of writing tasks and the proficiency of writers; feedback comments are divided into two categories, namely, global or local issues: "'global' refers to those comments that provide feedback on ideas, development, audience, purpose, and organization of writing, while 'local' comments typically focus on grammar, style, and editing concerns"（Liu & Hansen, 2002, p. 136）. Like teacher feedback, peer feedback focuses on the various aspects of writing above, paying attention to global issues or local issues or both.

Many researchers have investigated which dimensions of writing students make comments on in peer feedback activities since the role of reviewers or readers has been regarded as important in peer feedback. Hirose（2009）studied 15 Japanese university English as a foreign language（EFL）writers' peer feedback behaviours. The students had no prior experience of this activity and their English proficiency was the high-intermediate level. In the peer feedback, the students focused on the content of the writing the most,

while the second most important focus of attention was vocabulary among the other five aspects, namely, *sentence*, *grammar*, *paragraph*, *mechanics*, and *overall*. On the other hand, Sawaya and Yokoyama's（2013）study revealed that Japanese EFL students paid most attention to the style of the writing instead of global aspects of *content* or *organization*, presumably because of the influence of form-oriented L2 instruction given by the language teacher. However, it was found that the students with higher writing ability were able to incorporate peers' comments regarding *content* or *organization* into their revised writing, which suggests that these writers successfully transferred the knowledge gained from peer feedback to their own writing, although they could not provide comments on global issues. Thus, a question remains of whether students with good writing ability can identify problematic global aspects of writing, while students with lower writing ability focus more on local areas of writing.

A number of empirical studies on peer feedback have been carried out in classroom settings. It is assumed that the behaviours and perceptions of EFL writers are different from those of L1 and ESL writers. In ESL contexts, such as the U.S., ESL learners vary in terms of their language and cultural backgrounds, whereas in EFL contexts, such as Japan, EFL learners share language and cultural backgrounds. For example, Levine et al.（2002）reported that ten EFL writers in Israel and 14 ESL writers in the U.S. differed in terms of the quality and quantity of peer feedback activities. However, only a few studies on peer feedback have taken place in EFL contexts（Hirose, 2009; Ruegg, 2015a, 2015b; Sawaya & Yokoyama, 2013; Wakabayashi, 2013）. In addition, among Asian countries, the quantity of research on peer feedback in Japanese contexts is still small compared to other Asian countries such as China or Taiwan（Chang, 2016）. Therefore, more research on peer feedback should take place in EFL contexts to investigate how EFL writers conduct peer feedback.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate what feedback comments Japanese EFL learners provide through peer feedback on L2 essay writing at a research-intensive Japanese university. This study uses the phrase *peer feedback*, which means the evaluation of the text and written comments given by a peer. It is expected that the present study sheds light on the nature and features of peer feedback from a point of view of feedback givers and suggests how peer feedback should be implemented in classroom contexts.

The following four research questions were addressed. The first two questions were

established from the perspective of Japanese university students as a whole group while the latter two questions focus on the skilled writers and less-skilled writers.

（1）Which comments are more often provided in peer feedback, positive comments or constructive comments?

（2）What dimensions of essays do students comment on in their peers' essays through peer feedback?

（3）Do the feedback comments of skilled writers differ from those of less-skilled writers in terms of quantity?

（4）Do the feedback comments of skilled writers differ from those of less-skilled writers in terms of quality?

2. Methods

2.1 Participants and the background of the class

The participants were 63 Japanese first-year students learning EFL enrolled in a compulsory Integrated English course in a university in Japan. Their English proficiency was an intermediate level corresponding to a score of 456.15（paper-based Test of English as a Foreign Language（TOEFL））on average. Two groups of students participated in this study. One group（$n = 41$）majored in medicine, nursing, or medical science and the other group（$n = 22$）majored in maths, chemistry, physics, or biology. In each group, the members had known each other for two months by the time this study was conducted since all of them took compulsory English modules three times a week as well as other compulsory or optional content- or language-related modules. They were familiar, or at least acquainted, with each other as classmates. The atmosphere of the two classes was neither tense nor quiet.

In the English course, they received instruction in paragraph writing and essay writing in terms of the basic structure of an essay（i.e., introduction, body, and conclusion）and linguistic properties（e.g., the use of conjunctions, punctuation）. They had written 100-word essays twice in class and had experienced self-feedback activities in the class, in which they identified the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing. After they submitted the essays, the teacher marked them and gave written review comments on them, specifying strengths, and further improvements that could be made in the individual essays. The

participants had never experienced peer feedback in class before, which was found from a questionnaire conducted at the beginning of the course.

2.2 Materials and procedures for data collection

It was decided to use written peer feedback, instead of oral feedback, in this study so that the participants would be able to refer to the written feedback comments given by peers when revising their own essay at home. Peer feedback sheets were prepared for this study, which consisted of open-ended questions instead of specific yes/no questions, since the researcher expected the participants to express their opinions and evaluation on any aspect of writing in their own words, freely and flexibly. No checklists concerning feedback which covered dimensions of essays and relevant discursive features were shown to the participants. More specifically, the following three questions were asked in the peer feedback sheet: (1) What are the strengths of the peer's essay?; (2) What are the weaknesses of the peer's essay?; and (3) What impression did you get when reading the peer's essay? All the questions in the feedback sheets were asked in Japanese and the participants were instructed to answer the questions in Japanese so that their opinions and suggestions would be fully expressed in the feedback sheet and understood by the peers. The participants were encouraged to make as many comments as they wished.

As for the data collection procedures, the participants wrote a 200-word essay in English to answer the question "Which do you prefer: buying a few expensive luxury clothing items and wearing them for many years, or buying lots of cheaper, fast fashion items and wearing them for a few years?". This writing task was conducted as homework and the use of dictionaries was allowed. After they had written the essay, the participants filled out the self-feedback sheet during the class. In the classroom, the teacher gave instruction on peer feedback emphasising the following five points: (a) the purpose of peer feedback; (b) the importance of honest evaluation and revision; (c) the value of both positive and constructive comments; (d) the usefulness of detailed comments instead of one word evaluations such as 'good' or 'bad'; and (e) the acknowledgement of the writer as a decision-maker (Liu & Hansen, 2002). The participants formed pairs randomly and exchanged their essays with their peers. They read the peer's essay and filled out the peer feedback sheet within 20 minutes. After they had completed the peer feedback activity, they exchanged the peer feedback sheets and read the peer's comments. The

written essays and the peer feedback sheets were collected for data analysis.

2.3 Data analysis

The collected essays were marked by the researcher and an instructor of an English course working in the same department. The markers used Educational Testing Services' holistic rubrics（2014）for independent writing tasks, which was a six-point rating scale （0-5）. Among the 63 essays marked, 13 high-scoring essays（with a score of 4 or above） and 13 low-scoring essays（with a score of 2 or below）were selected in order to make a comparison of the feedback comments between skilled writers and less-skilled writers.

This study focused on the analysis of the peer feedback comments in terms of quantity and quality in order to investigate whether feedback comments differ between skilled and less-skilled writers. As for the quantity of the feedback comments, the number of positive and constructive comments and the number of Japanese characters in each comment were counted and compared for the comments given by students of high-scoring essays（skilled writers）and low-scoring essays（less-skilled writers）. As regards quality of feedback comments, each comment that the participants pointed out in the peer feedback sheets was coded by using a modified framework of Jacobs et al.'s（1981）taxonomy. This taxonomy was selected because it was a well-established taxonomy in marking essays written by non-native speakers of English. The taxonomy had five dimensions, namely, *content*, *organization*, *vocabulary*, *language*, and *mechanics*, and the new dimension of *length* was added since *length* was a task requirement and the participants occasionally mentioned the length of the essays in their comments in the feedback sheets. Individual participants' feedback comments were coded using the six-dimensional framework above, in which each feedback comment was categorised into one of the six categories and the number of each of the six categories was counted.

Types of feedback comments were further classified and analysed so that the quality of feedback comments would be revealed based on comment types. This study employed three coding categories, which was a modification of previous studies which used four categories, namely, evaluation, clarification/elaboration, suggestion, and alternation（Liu & Hansen, 2002）. More specifically, the present study adopted the categories of evaluation, but the evaluation category was divided into positive or constructive（i.e., negative）forms of evaluation due to its nature. In other words, positive evaluation means

expressing praise, while negative evaluation refers to problematic areas of the writing. Additionally, instead of the clarification/elaboration category, the category of 'reason' was employed in this study because feedback givers frequently gave reasons or justification for their evaluations rather than asking writers for clarification/elaboration. Furthermore, the category of alternation was merged into the category of suggestion and the suggestion category was employed only when constructive comments were made. The modified categories used in the present study were as follows. Positive comments were categorised into (a) praise & reason, and (b) praise. Constructive comments, on the other hand, were categorised into four categories: (a) problem, reason, & suggestion; (b) problem & reason; (c) problem; and (d) suggestion. Each feedback comment was coded based on the analytic schema above, independently by two researchers. The inter-coder reliability was calculated by dividing the number of coded items agreed upon by the coders by the total number of instances. Consequently, a relatively high inter-coder reliability of 91.35 percent was obtained. All the disagreements were discussed until agreement was reached. Then, the final number of comments in each category was counted and compared between the skilled writers and less-skilled writers.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Research question 1: Positive comments vs. constructive comments

A total of 173 comments were made in the peer feedback sheets of 63 student writers, which consisted of 103 positive comments and 70 constructive comments. Therefore, it was revealed that the student writers with no prior experience of peer feedback provided more positive comments than constructive comments. This result was somewhat consistent with Nilson's (2010) observation on peer feedback, where students' feedback comments tended to be "too uncritical, superficial, [and] vague" in general, suggesting that they were not constructive comments. However, this study found that students tended to give more positive comments including praise and highlighting strengths of peers' writing than constructive comments concerning the problematic areas of peers' writing. These findings suggest that student writers feel more comfortable making positive comments than constructive comments or they tend to be good at giving praise by reviewing peers' essays. Alternatively, there is a possibility that they may be hesitant to point out problematic areas

of peers' writing even when they are aware of them. It is generally said that teachers' feedback comments often focus on the problematic areas of student writing and do not give praise. Therefore, peer feedback may help student writers develop their confidence and motivation since any piece of writing is supposed to have at least one positive aspect and students can preferably identify positive aspects of the writing (Sadoshima & Ohta, 2013).

3.2 Research question 2: Dimensions of peer feedback comments on the essays

The results of analysis of the peer feedback comments indicate that the participants paid most attention to the *content* of the essays either pointing out strengths or weaknesses of their peers' essays (Table 1). Fifty-six positive comments (88.9%) on *content* were made and 33 constructive comments (52.4%) were observed in terms of *content*. This finding is in line with previous research in which Japanese university students paid the most attention to the *content* of compositions in their peer feedback (Hirose, 2009). However, this finding was opposed to the finding of Sawaya and Yokoyama's (2013) study. In their study, regardless of the writing ability of Japanese university students, they commented on issues of the *style* of peers' compositions more than *content* or *organization*. They argued that grammar and form-oriented writing instruction in L2 writing classrooms may have affected the way in which the EFL writers reviewed their peers' compositions. Unlike their study, the present study indicated that the majority of the participants found positive aspects in the *content* of peers' essays and almost half of the participants found some improvement in the dimension of *content* in peers' essays. Since the *content* of essays is a global, meaning-level issue which should receive ample attention, teacher instruction prior to peer feedback needs to clearly explain the importance of paying attention to such global, meaning-level issues, as Liu and Hansen (2002) state.

Furthermore, the dimension of language, which received the second largest amount of attention, was perceived as a strength of the peer essays (36.5%) rather than as a weakness (19.0%). The dimensions of *organization* and *vocabulary* received attention more or less equally and positive comments were made more frequently than constructive comments in each of these dimensions. Because a relatively short essay writing task (i.e., 200-word essay) was assigned in the current study, the participants may not have a significant problem concerning the *organization* of the essays. Peers' attention to the dimension of

Table 1   *Dimensions of Peer Feedback Comments*

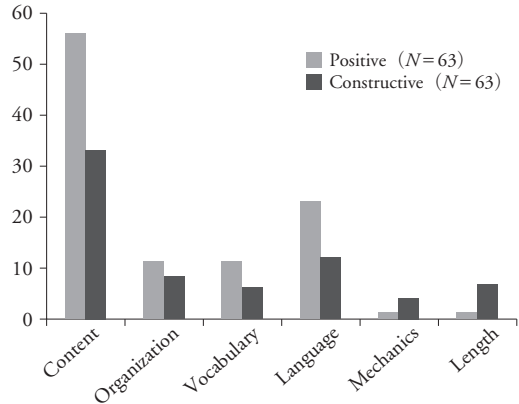| Dimension	Positive Comments		Constructive Comments	
	($N = 63$)	%	($N = 63$)	%
Content	56	88.9	33	52.4
Organization	11	17.5	8	12.7
Vocabulary	11	17.5	6	9.5
Language	23	36.5	12	19.0
Mechanics	1	1.6	4	6.3
Length	1	1.6	7	11.1
Total	103		70	

Note. Multiple responses were counted.

Figure 1   *Dimensions of Peer Feedback Comments*

organization may depend on the genre and length of assigned writing tasks, with a general assumption that longer essays tend to be more difficult to organize in terms of the coherence and cohesion of the overall structure.

Figure 1 clearly shows that the dimensions of *content* and *language* were perceived as strengths of the peer essays more frequently than as weaknesses. The participants focused on *mechanics* and *length* far less, and these two dimensions were seen as weaknesses of the peer essays. In consideration of the number of comments made on *mechanics* and *length*, it is assumed that these two dimensions may be considered less important than the other dimensions. This may be because the issues related to *mechanics* and *length* are taken for

Table 2　*Number of Japanese Characters in Peer Feedback Comments*

Type of Comment	Skilled Writers (*n* = 13)			Less-Skilled Writers (*n* = 13)		
	Total	Mean	*SD*	Total	Mean	*SD*
Positive	554	42.62	29.95	432	33.55	22.51
Constructive	369	28.38	21.17	338	26.00	25.31

granted by the writers since mechanical and length-related issues could be regarded as fundamental requirements in essay writing. Although one of the problems in peer feedback is that peers' comments tend to focus "on content alone, missing organization, structure, style, and so forth" (Nilson, 2010, p. 35), the participants in the present study seem to have managed to achieve a balance between the global and local issues, pointing out a range of dimensions in their feedback comments.

3.3 Research question 3: Quantity of peer feedback comments

　　The results for the quantity of peer feedback comments given by the skilled writers and the less-skilled writers showed that the former group made more detailed comments than the latter group as regards both positive and constructive comments. In fact, the skilled writers provided 19 positive comments while the less-skilled writers gave 20 positive comments in total. However, as Table 2 shows, the former group provided more specific, longer comments than the latter group in terms of the number of Japanese characters provided in their comments. Similarly, the skilled writers gave 13 constructive comments whereas the less-skilled writers provided 12 constructive comments.

　　These results indicate that the skilled writers were able to conduct finer, more specific diagnoses of the essays and made more profound comments on wider aspects of the writing, compared to the less-skilled writers who tended to make simpler, shorter comments. As for the nature of peer feedback comments, Ruegg (2015a, p. 131) reported "peer feedback was more often nonspecific whereas teacher feedback was more often specific". The present study implies that the quantity of peer feedback comments varies between the skilled writers and the less-skilled writers. Alternatively, the former group might have had more motivation and engagement in peer feedback than the latter group and therefore they tended to provide more comments than the latter group.

Table 3   *Types of Comments Given by the Skilled and Less-Skilled Writers*

Types of Comments	Skilled Writers (n = 13)	Less-Skilled Writers (n = 13)	Total
Positive Comment			
1）Praise & Reason	17	11	28
2）Praise only	2	9	11
Total number of comments	19	20	39
Constructive Comment			
1）Problem, Reason & Suggestion	3	3	6
2）Problem & Reason	3	7	10
3）Problem only	0	1	1
4）Suggestion only	7	1	8
5）None	2	3	5
Total number of comments	13	12	25

3.4 Research question 4: Quality of peer feedback comments

The skilled writers and the less-skilled writers were compared in terms of quality of written peer feedback comments, and the results indicated remarkable differences between the two groups. Among 17 positive comments, the skilled writers specified good aspects of the essays and their reasons whereas only two of their comments offered praise without giving its reason（Table 3）. In contrast, in the case of the less-skilled writers, among 20 positive comments, 11 referred to both praise and its reason while nine specified praise only. These results imply that the skilled writers can diagnose good aspects of the essays and explicitly explain their reason or justification in their own words, critically and analytically. On the other hand, this tendency was found to be weak among the less-skilled writers who provided only praise without explaining the reasons why the work was good. If a receiver of peer feedback comments understood the reason behind the positive comment on a good aspect of the essay, it would be fine; yet, there is a possibility that a receiver may not be able to understand why such praise was offered. Therefore, positive comments only giving praise might not help the receiver of comments comprehend the peer's evaluation of his/her own essay at a deeper level. In theory, it is better that both praise and its reason should be provided in peer feedback comments, especially when feedback comments are given to less-skilled writers to enable their better understanding, since such writers may not

be able to identify what is good and why, even in their own writing.

Constructive comments were also analysed, and the results showed considerable differences between the comments made by the skilled writers and the less-skilled writers (Table 3). The skilled writers tended to provide concrete suggestions based on their diagnosis of the essays while the less-skilled writers seldom made suggestions for further improvement. Interestingly, the skilled writers made comments on the problem and its reason, and gave suggestions ($n = 3$), and often provided only suggestions ($n = 7$) without specifying the problem and its reason. However, the less-skilled writers made only one comment which specified the problem in the essay, gave the reason, and made a suggestion, and one comment with a suggestion only. These findings may imply that providing suggestions for revision may be a difficult operation involving a higher-order treatment since it requires a clear view on required revision, namely, how to solve the problem by revising the essay appropriately. Constructive comments made by the less-skilled writers tended to specify the problem and its reason ($n = 7$) and failed to suggest further improvements. The combination of specifying the problematic area of the essay and its reason is still helpful as a constructive comment since receivers of such comments would be encouraged to consider how to revise the essay based on the specified problem and its reason. However, this type of comment seems to work well only when receivers of the comments understand the problem and come up with solutions for revision by themselves (Aoki, 2006). Although it is ideal if writers themselves can find the best way to revise their essays, it seems challenging for novice writers or unskilled writers to consider and make a decision on how to revise and improve their essays by themselves (Aoki, 2006) if feedback comments given are vague and do not provide any suggestions for revision. For both skilled and less-skilled writers, the participants tended to succeed in explaining the reasons for problems once they had found the problematic areas of the essays. These findings suggest that student writers are able to read peers' essays critically, diagnose them, and specify 'what' is problematic and 'why' it should be improved in essays, but the less-skilled writers seem to struggle with explaining 'how' their essays should be improved. The lack of ability to provide suggestions for revision may be because they cannot envisage any solution or they cannot verbalize their vague thinking and vision, or they cannot choose the best method of revision among the multiple possible ways. On the other hand, constructive comments which include suggestions seem helpful for

receivers of the comments but it is questionable if receivers of the comments are truly able to understand what the actual problem is and why it should be revised the way it was suggested. Furthermore, suggestions given by peers may not always be correct or comprehensible although suggested advice might be a clue for further revisions.

Another critical issue was observed in that two skilled writers and three less-skilled writers could not provide any constructive comments in peer feedback activities, as shown in Table 3. Since two skilled writers did not provide any constructive comments, this incidence might be related to their psychological, interpersonal or sociocultural aspects of peer feedback, rather than their lack of critical reading and thinking skills. That is, the five writers were either hesitant to give negative opinions or not confident enough to give any constructive comments, being afraid of giving 'wrong' suggestions, face-threatening comments or hurting peers' feelings with their evaluative comments. This potential fear and hesitation has been problematized in the literature of peer feedback（Nilson, 2010）. That is to say, evaluation or judgement-based feedback can be frightening and overwhelming for certain students or in certain sociocultural contexts such as the classroom settings where students are not keen on participating in face-to-face activities and are afraid of getting too involved in interpersonal requirements. Since the participants' attitude and perceptions of peer feedback vary among students, it would be worth conducting "re-examination of the cultural influence of individualism and collectivism on L2 reviewers' interactional patterns"（Chang, 2016, p. 94）.

There seem to be three ways to engage all students in peer feedback activities. First of all, training in peer feedback activities needs to be conducted by not only explaining the rationale of peer feedback but also by showing appropriate feedback comments as examples, including some variations of useful phrases and getting students to do peer feedback activities using sample essays. Students may be nervous or afraid of peer feedback activity, so their affective filter needs to be considered by creating a comfortable atmosphere（Liu & Hansen, 2002）. Second, instead of employing common judgement-based feedback, identification and personal reaction-based feedback can be introduced as an alternative method of peer feedback. That is, the identification and personal reaction-based feedback can be more helpful and engaging for students since this method "do［es］ not have emotionally charged consequences for the feedback giver or recipient" and "students … perform cognitive operations - primarily comprehension and analysis - rather

Table 4　*Dimensions and Comment Types by the Skilled and Less-Skilled Writers*

Dimension	Types of Comments	Skilled Writers (n = 13)	Less-Skilled Writes (n = 13)	Total
Positive Comment				
Content	Praise & Reason	10	5	15
	Praise only	1	7	8
Organization	Praise & Reason	2	3	5
Vocabulary	Praise & Reason	3	3	6
	Praise only	0	1	1
Language	Praise & Reason	2	0	2
	Praise only	0	1	1
Mechanics	Praise only	1	0	1
Total		19	20	39
Constructive Comment				
Content	Problem, Reason & Suggestion	1	1	2
	Problem & Reason	0	3	3
	Suggestion only	3	0	3
Organization	Suggestion only	4	0	4
Vocabulary	Problem & Reason	0	2	2
Language	Problem, Reason & Suggestion	2	0	2
	Problem & Reason	1	1	2
Mechanics	Problem & Reason	1	1	2
Length	Problem, Reason & Suggestion	0	2	2
	Problem & Reason	1	0	1
	Problem only	0	1	1
	Suggestion only	0	1	1
Total		13	12	25

than the more difficult and demanding process of evaluation" (Nilson, 2010, p. 37). Third, anonymous peer feedback may also be worth using, instead of face-to-face peer feedback or identifiable feedback since anonymous feedback tends to help students improve the honesty and criticality of their comments, which leads to a positive influence on students' revision outcomes (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

　　The results of a detailed examination of the written feedback comments showed the differences between the skilled writers and the less-skilled writers when focusing on the

dimensions and types of comments (see Table 4). As for the positive comments, while the skilled writers tended to provide praise with reasoning or justification concerning the dimension of *content* ($n = 10$), the less-skilled writers tended to offer praise only ($n = 7$) and occasionally gave reasoning ($n = 5$). This difference can be accounted for by the fact that the skilled writers were able to justify their evaluation by providing reasons for their praise or opinions about the essays, instead of providing vague subjective impressions about the essays. However, the other dimensions did not show this tendency.

Constructive comments regarding the content indicate different tendencies between the skilled and less-skilled writers, where only one skilled writer provided 'problem, reason & suggestion' and three skilled writers offered suggestions only. On the other hand, one less-skilled writer provided 'problem, reason & suggestion' and three less-skilled writers gave 'problem & reason'. These findings imply that the less-skilled writers are able to identify the reasoning behind their evaluation, yet providing suggestions for revision seems difficult for them. Similar tendencies were observed in terms of the dimension of *organization* in which only four skilled writers pointed out suggestions, whereas no less-skilled writers offered any constructive comments on the dimension of *organization*. Since the *organization* of the essays is meaning-level issues, this dimension can be demanding and challenging for less-skilled writers to diagnose and offer constructive comments upon. Furthermore, the dimensions of *vocabulary* and *language* indicate that less-skilled writers were able to give constructive comments on these two dimensions, but they did not offer any suggestions.

4. Conclusions

By comparing skilled writers and less-skilled writers, this study has investigated the characteristics of feedback comments that Japanese EFL learners provide through peer feedback in L2 essay writing. The overall findings are summarised as follows. First, student writers provided positive comments more than constructive comments. In practice, teacher feedback tend to focus on problematic areas of student writing, providing constructive comments exclusively; therefore, peer feedback can be utilised for encouraging student writers to be more confident and motivated about writing, and can help them understand the good aspects or variations of peers' writing compared to their own. Second, the

dimension of *content* was found to receive the most attention in both positive and constructive comments while the second-ranked dimension as regards number of comments was *language*. The other dimensions, such as *organization* and *vocabulary*, were occasionally mentioned in peer feedback. Therefore, student reviewers seemed to identify both global and local issues in the peers' writing. Third, the skilled writers tended to offer more detailed, longer comments than the less-skilled writers although the number of comments given was similar between the two groups. Fourth, the skilled writers provided 'praise & reason' in their positive comments while the less-skilled writers usually offered praise only, without specifying reasons. In the constructive comments, the skilled writers tended to give clear suggestions for revision whereas the less-skilled writers merely gave comments on 'problem & reason' or the problem only, without suggestions for improvement. Thus, the skilled writers seemed to be better at providing reader-centred, comprehensible peer feedback than the less-skilled writers.

Pedagogical implications are suggested. When employing peer feedback in classrooms, writing teachers need to consider the best mode of this activity to use: a combination of written and oral peer feedback can be worth employing since both modes have pros and cons and students' preference may vary. In such a case, oral discussion can occur after the written peer feedback to elaborate upon or clarify comments and suggestions fully, which leads to dynamic two-way negotiation and interaction between the students. Furthermore, pairing is an important aspect of peer feedback; a pair comprising a skilled writer and a less-skilled writer may be ideal since the former writer can provide more comprehensible explanations and suggestions, which would help the less-skilled writer understand how to improve his/her writing. Ideally, more than one student should read the peer's writing so that different perspectives or comments can be provided and students will gain more opportunities to learn from each other. Having said that, it is noteworthy that comments from skilled writers may be useful but their concrete suggestions do not always help less-skilled writers (Aoki, 2006); there is a possibility that one-way interaction could occur due to an unequal knowledge-based 'power' balance between a skilled writer and a less-skilled writer. Therefore, teachers need to observe their feedback activities and intervene when necessary. Teachers also can encourage students to share their impressions and concerns about their writing as well as their understanding and strategies of the process of revision with peers in order to facilitate peer feedback and to

create an active environment of collaborative learning.

　This study has shed light on the nature of peer feedback of Japanese university students in terms of quality and quantity. Further studies need to examine students' essays before and after peer feedback and revision. Scrutiny of the actual essays, including revised essays, seems to help verify whether the essays are improved through peer feedback activities and whether a "knowledge transformation strategy"（Crinon & Marin, 2010, p. 111）occurs when the writers revise their essays. By combining examinations of the essays with interview analysis, writer development can be investigated more effectively, taking texts, writers and readers into consideration. Such a study may offer more insights into the most effective implementation of peer feedback in classroom settings and may enhance our understanding of L2 writers' perceptions of peer feedback as well as the effective process of writing.

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