

EFL Writing Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences Regarding Multiple Interaction Activities

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Abstract

While research on feedback has focused a great deal on whether self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback could improve student writing proficiency from the perspectives of student participants, teacher perceptions and experiences regarding these three types of feedback have received relatively little attention, especially in the context of large multilevel EFL writing classes. This study investigated three EFL writing teachers' perspectives, practices, and problems regarding multiple interaction activities. A semi-instructed interview was administered to three college English instructors in a private university of technology in the southern part of Taiwan. The interview data had been transcribed and translated before a coding list was developed for the process of analysis with Atlas.ti 5.6. The results of this study show that self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback are indispensable as a series of instructional activities in a large multilevel EFL writing class in spite of the fact that self-directed feedback, for certain students, may not be as beneficial as peer and teacher feedback in improving student writing proficiency. In addition, teacher feedback activities can compensate or reinforce the function of either self-directed feedback or peer feedback in a large multilevel EFL writing class, and this is especially true in terms of the benefits students receive from a student-teacher conference. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications that arise from the study.

Keywords: Multiple interaction activities; Modified teacher feedback; Peer feedback; Self-directed feedback

Introduction

Most research on feedback on student writing has focused on the advantages and disadvantages of self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback activities with regard to student writer perspectives. Little emphasis has been directed to the study on teacher experiences and perceptions regarding multiple interaction activities (self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback carried out as a series of pedagogical activities) in a large multilevel EFL writing class. Since Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, and Huang (1998) had proposed that feedback on student writing should “take a middle way on the issues of types of feedback” (i.e. self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback are all indispensable) (p. 314), no research on teacher experiences and perceptions of these three types of feedback was conducted. This study investigates three EFL writing teachers’ responses to multiple interaction activities by means of a semi-structured interview after they had implemented these activities in their classes. It is hoped that this research may present a holistic view of these three types of feedback on the ground of EFL writing teachers’ perspectives, instead of isolated views of only one type or comparison of any two of them. This study reports on one section of a larger study (Lin, 2010) that investigates how teachers and students perceive and experience multiple interaction activities in large multilevel EFL writing classes, focusing specifically on the practice, attitude, and belief of the EFL writing teachers as a result of the implementation of the multiple interaction activities.

Because no previous studies on teacher perceptions and experiences of multiple interaction activities have been conducted in a large multilevel EFL writing class, the literature review is focused on student responses to three types of feedback. Literature on comparative studies of self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback has highlighted some issues that are particularly related to student experiences and perceptions of different types of feedback— the relative value of each type, the revision brought by individual type, and suggestions for improvement.

Several comparative studies on self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback have investigated student perceptions of the influence of different types of feedback on subsequent revision, and the findings were quite mixed. The first selected study was conducted by Connor and Asenavage in 1994. The purpose of their research was to probe the influence of peer responses on subsequent revisions and compare peer feedback with teacher and self/other feedback (self-revision or written comments from tutors in the writer center). They analyzed L2 student writings to identify the types of revisions. The results showed that peer feedback did not contribute much to the revisions in the subsequent drafts. Only 5% of changes made was attributed to the result of peer feedback; 35% to that of teacher feedback; about 60% to that of self/other. In other words, peer comments did not have much impact on the redrafts, and the changes Group 1 made were on surface level whereas those in Group 2 were on meaning level. By contrast, the

revisions made in both groups as a result of teacher feedback were surface changes. As for self/other comments, the researchers did not provide any report about the type of revision. The suggestions they made for improvement included that the concepts of text-based and surface changes should be clarified, more trainings and follow-ups should be implemented for peer response activity, the teacher's supervision and help during peer response sessions is recommendable, and students could be asked to review each other's papers.

Another research study on the multiple feedback types was conducted by Zhang in 1995 by means of a questionnaire to gather 81 students' perceptions of self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback after assuring that the students had had experiences with and training on these three types of feedback. The result revealed that the students ranked teacher feedback first, peer feedback next, and self-directed feedback last—exactly the opposite finding of results from Pierson (1967) who maintains that peer feedback in L1 classrooms is more favored than teacher feedback. Zhang (1995) suggests that practitioners in ESL writing be more careful about transplanting the theories, practice, and findings from L1 writing context to their own classrooms, and take more into consideration the differences in cultural background.

In response to the findings of Zhang, Jacobs, et al. (1998) collected questionnaire data from 121 college students in Hong Kong and Taiwan to investigate their attitude toward teacher and peer feedback. According to their null hypothesis, L2 learners would prefer not to use peer feedback as one type of comments on their writing if they did not regard it highly. The finding was that most students (93%) preferred to have peer feedback as one type of feedback for their revision in spite of the fact that the students still ranked teacher feedback higher than peer comments. Based on the findings, the researchers suggest that all three types of feedback were indispensable because they were complementary to each other.

Paulus's (1999) study is another attempt to investigate the effect of peer and teacher feedback on student writing. She analyzed 11 ESL student essays to categorize the types and sources of revisions so that she could investigate how peer and teacher feedback affect student revisions in a multiple-draft, process-approach writing class, and whether required revision improves the overall quality of student writing. The findings revealed that the majority of revisions made by the students themselves to their essays were surface changes while those from peer and teacher feedback were meaning changes. The students incorporated more self/other-influenced sources (51.8%) into their redrafts than teacher feedback (34.3%) and peer feedback was the least influential one (13.9%). Her findings are consistent with those of Connor and Asenavage (1994) in terms of the relative value of each type of feedback contributing to redrafts. Based on the findings of her study, Paulus suggests that the effect of peer and teacher feedback on meaning-level

changes should not be ignored by writing teachers and that the process-oriented, multiple-draft approach, coupled with peer and teacher feedback, could improve overall student writing proficiency.

Saito and Fujita (2004) made a comparison of the effect of self-, peer, and teacher rating. They studied 47 college students in an English writing class to examine their attitudes and perceptions towards self-, peer, and teacher ratings. They found that students placed teacher rating over peer rating which in turn was more favored than self rating in terms of reliability (Saito & Fujita, 2004) due to personal perception of self-efficacy and subjective viewpoints. As a whole, their responses are associated with students' judgment about expertise and writing abilities. Students regard teachers as professionals in writing and evaluation while they view peers as partners who are capable of detecting blind spots that evaded their own attention. Owing to some psychological factors like "students' self-esteem, self-confidence, a culture value of modesty, and habits of overestimating self-ability" (Saito & Fujita, 2004, p. 47), and actual writing abilities, students do not count on self-rating as one of the important ways to improve personal writing performance. Based on their findings, they suggest that peer rating could be used as an effective way of evaluating students' writing performance in addition to teacher assessment and peer rating was conducive to the practice of learner-centeredness in EFL writing classrooms.

Yang, Badger, and Yu (2006) merely compared peer and teacher feedback from two groups of college students to examine whether peer feedback could be a way to address the problems of examination-focused programs and of large-size classes. The findings revealed that the students adopted more teacher feedback than peer feedback to improve their writing, and that peer feedback was conducive to developing writer autonomy because it led to a great deal of students' self-correction when they had doubts about the correctness of peer feedback. Teacher feedback brought about more changes at the surface level whereas peer feedback provided "a higher percentage of meaning-change revision" (Yang et al., 2006, p. 193). They suggest that peer feedback was helpful in improving students' writing skills and that peer feedback activity should precede teacher feedback activity so that students might not feel the pressure of saying nothing or saying something wrong.

Finally, Zhao (2010) examined learner's use and understanding of peer and teacher feedback in their redrafts. Since most of studies had focused the attention on the use frequency as a way of measuring their relative value for developing learners' writing proficiency, the researcher casted doubt on the effect of learning they might have brought about for learners. On the basis of analyzing students' use and understanding of feedback and the affecting factors for students' adoption of feedback, the researcher found that students used more teacher feedback (74%) than peer feedback (46%) in their revisions.

One possible explanation of this finding might be that the learners were in doubt about the quality of peer feedback provided. Another finding was that 83% peer feedback instances, in contrast to 58% teacher feedback instances, were fully understood by Chinese learners and were incorporated into the subsequent revision. A low percentage of understanding of teacher feedback revealed that students might not have learned much from the feedback provided by teachers. The possible reason for this phenomenon was that students, accustomed to the teacher-as-authority classroom culture, did not question comments given by teachers even though they did not comprehend them at all. Since students used their L1 to discuss their peer feedback points, they could better understand each other and therefore learn more from this activity. The author suggests that simply counting the use frequency of peer and teacher feedback in student redrafts could not be taken equally as learners' understanding feedback and thus helping language development. Therefore, use and understanding of feedback instances should be two equally important factors in language development. The finding that understanding of feedback is important for improving writing performance is in line with that of Nelson and Schunn (2009).

While the above-mentioned studies focused the attention on student perceptions and experiences of self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback in ESL/EFL writing classes, no research has been conducted to examine the responses writing instructors give to these three types of feedback in EFL writing classes. This study investigates how three EFL writing teachers perceived and experienced the multiple interaction activities in large multilevel EFL writing classes. In view of the preceding research purpose, the five research questions to be addressed in this study are as follows:

1. How do instructors describe their experiences in teaching large multilevel EFL writing classes?
2. What do instructors think of the practice of self-directed feedback activity?
3. What are instructors' perceptions about peer feedback activity?
4. How do instructors respond to the modified teacher feedback?
5. How do instructors take these three types of feedback as a series of activities in the multilevel EFL writing classes?

Methods

This study wants to understand how three EFL writing teachers responded to the multiple interaction activities in large multilevel writing classes after they had implemented these activities in their classes. Because this study was to examine the experience and perception of the participants, certain factors, such as teachers' attitudes and beliefs, goals and workloads, major concerns, practices, interactions among peers and teachers, were not easily to be probed in depth by means of quantitative methods and presented in a statistical way. According to Creswell (1998), qualitative research is an

inquiry tool to explore a social problem or human behavior. The researcher wanted to build a holistic picture of the teacher responses to three types of feedback in EFL writing classes and to conduct the study in a natural setting. Therefore, this study was suitable for a qualitative design.

Three EFL writing teachers from a university of technology in the southern part of Taiwan were involved in this study. The purposeful sample population focuses on teachers who had training, practice, and experience in self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback. In other words, the criteria of sampling were to select the teachers that were knowledgeable in peer feedback training, tutoring, and selective, coded teacher feedback, and additionally in skills to demonstrate how a self-directed feedback was conducted. The three instructors majored in TESOL or related fields, earned their degrees either in the United States or in the United Kingdom, had more than eight years of teaching experience in English, and were familiar with the rationale of peer interaction and collaborative learning. They had at least four years of experience in the implementation of multiple interaction activities in large multilevel EFL writing classes. The number of students in each writing class was 48, 43, and 35 respectively. Most students had learned English for at least 7 years, and they were English majors in a university of technology in the southern part of Taiwan.

The major instrument of data collection was a semi-constructed interview protocol (see Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Teachers). The interview data were obtained by the use of audiotaping. After having been transcribed and then translated into English, the data were checked and revised by the participants to enhance credibility. Then, the researcher developed a code list covering major and minor themes for the purpose of data analysis and presentation as a result of perusal of the content of the interview data, as well as theories and empirical studies from other scholars. The Code List for the Interview with the Instructors of Large EFL Writing Classes (Appendix B) was developed for the purpose of processing the data analysis. By means of the software ATLAS.ti 5.6, which has been designed for qualitative data analysis based on the grounded theory approach originally developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s and further advanced by Strauss and Corbin in 1990 (Muhr & Friese, 2004) to explore the textual data inductively and interpret phenomena based on analyzed data, the researcher conducted the coding process for individual transcripts through coding, axial coding, and categorizing based on the code list.

Results

With the help of ATLAS.ti 5.6, the interviewed data were analyzed. The findings for each interview question and sub-question can be presented as follows:

Q 1: What is it like being an instructor in a large EFL writing class?

The interviewed teachers stated that teaching a large EFL writing class was “tiresome and unpleasant” or “under high pressure” because of the necessity to give error corrections or feedback. In addition, it is hard to achieve the objectives of learning and meet the needs of individual students.

Q1.1: How do you see your students’ writing performance?

Two interviewees argued that multiple interaction activities worked well in their classes, whereas one teacher declared that the students did not remarkably improve their writing performance. Their responses are quoted as follows:

D: ...they *made a lot of improvement* and that kind of progress is great as far as the new learners are concerned. (Doris, para. 11¹; emphasis added)

A: In this semester, the students in two cyclic interactive activities have performed impressively; *they have made great improvements in both learning attitudes and writing performance*. (Albert, para. 12; emphasis added)

R: *My students often make some basic errors* such as wrong verb tense, a third person singular present tense without s, and so on. They have something to say *but are unable to express it understandable in English*. Sometimes they test the teacher’s comprehension by *using Chinese logic* to compose certain English sentences though sentence structures are still recognizable. (Ruth, para.13; emphasis added)

It is worthy of noting that high absenteeism and poor writing proficiency in Ruth’s class might explain her students’ slow progress in writing skills and Ruth’s serious concern about learners’ attitude.

Q1.2: What concerns do you have as a writing teacher in terms of working with different types of students?

As a whole, all three teachers are concerned with students’ learning attitude toward writing activities—active participation, thinking, and continual practice. They described their concerns as follows:

R: In terms of attitude, some of my students, *with high absenteeism*, became the source of trouble for their partners because no pair work could be done without collaborators. *I am quite concerned with students’ attitude toward writing activities*. (Ruth, para. 15; emphasis added)

A: I recognize that *the degree of effort or active participation* made by individual students also *affects the outcome of learning*...Besides, thinking, um, plays an essential role in learning. Thinking is an indispensable part for students in a writing class; *without thinking, one will soon forget what has been learned*.

¹ Atlas.ti uses paragraph, instead of line number, to indicate the passages cited.

Therefore, I believe, um, that the role of thinking cannot be overstated. (Albert, para. 14; emphasis added)

D: My major concern is “*keep writing and be interested in it.*” Students should learn how to write with the *proper format* and how to *make good communication*. (Doris, para. 13; emphasis added)

Q1.3: What strategies did you use to help students with different levels of language proficiency?

The strategies used by the teachers to help student writers can be divided into two categories: collaborative learning and tutorial. In terms of collaborative learning, students were grouped into parties of different sizes— two, three, or four members in a group. Each member has a distinct level of language proficiency, so that he/she could learn from the others. As for tutorials, the teacher plays the role of a tutor to help individual students to deal with their problems. The following is a description of how Ruth helped her students.

R: *Pair work* is one of the classroom activities to handle the issue of feedback, and I expect it to be able *to raise students’ awareness about writing*. (Ruth, para. 11; emphasis added)

R: *I gave a lot of tutorials to every student for every composed essay*. Sometimes, *the students did not know how to revise some complicate sentences, even though they knew what my coding symbols meant*. They would ask me for help instead of classmates with almost the same-level language proficiency. (Ruth, para. 20; emphasis added)

In a similar fashion, peers in Albert’s class could learn from one another in a four-member group, which was composed of superior, good, intermediate, and poor writers. However, the students were guided to different goals according to their writing skills.

A: The superior and good students are guided to *make correct sentences, apply rhetorical techniques to make sentences concise, and produce profound paragraphs* instead of superficial narration...To the intermediate students, *writing structure, syntax concept, diction, and even the use of punctuation symbols must be explained*. The poor students must be guided to *know more about grammar rules, sentence structure, and the organization of passages*. (Albert, para. 16; emphasis added)

Likewise, Doris adopted group work as one of the activities in her class, which was divided into three-member groups, each writer with a distinct level of language competence. Doris gave lectures on the elements and structure of a model essay first, and asked each group to do timed-writing assignments inside class. Doris stated the way how

she asked student writers to engage in collaborative learning as follows:

D: Students were required *to check carefully the group members' works according to the points I suggested*. This became a kind of review to make sure the feedback for their partners was sound. (Doris, para. 15; emphasis added)

From what has been described above, one may notice that the strategies used by these three teachers are quite different from traditional direct comprehensive or selective error corrections which don't require students to learn from the errors they have committed.

Q1.4: What differences (advantages and disadvantages) do you perceive between a traditional teacher feedback activity and these multiple interaction activities?

The three interviewees agreed that students could not learn a lot from traditional teacher feedback for certain reasons. First, the students cared more about the given grades than about teachers' corrections. Second, even though the students read teacher feedback, all they got was vague impression because they did not think over or ask about the errors they had made. Third, in a product-oriented process, traditional teacher feedback was often adopted and the follow-up action to revise or correct essays was not necessarily required of the students. Finally, no student-teacher conference was held to negotiate between the intended meanings the students conveyed and the perceived meanings a teacher got; therefore, the students could learn only one way of expression based on the teacher's perspective, instead of their intended ones. The following passages can represent the above-mentioned viewpoints:

A: Traditional teacher feedback is *product-oriented*. In this activity, students get teacher feedback directly, and they save time to find the answers to their errors. This is the major strength of this approach. A teacher *gives every student a score* to indicate how well he/she did for the individual writing performance. However, the traditional one has its weaknesses: *students are not encouraged to revise their writings, and are less likely to think over the mistakes they have made*. Furthermore, the impression they have from teacher feedback is *vague*. The teacher corrects students' writings just based *on personal perspective*. In other words, students may know *only one way of communication*, and may not know they can express themselves *in other ways*. This may *dampen their motivation in writing*. (Albert, para. 18; emphasis added)

D: One disadvantage of the traditional teacher feedback was that most students *just cared about the grades* they got and then *put their papers away without looking at the teacher's correction or asking why*. (Doris, para. 21; emphasis added)

In marked contrast to traditional teacher feedback, multiple interaction activities (self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback) are more demanding of students and instructors

in terms of time and energy. Two of the interviewed teachers held that most students learned a lot and were actively involved in the student-centered activities whereas one of the teachers stated that the results were limited due to the students' attitude and poor writing abilities. The opinions from the interviewed teachers are cited as follows:

D: ... the multiple interaction activities kept both the students and the teacher *busy and dog-tired but the students learned a lot*. (Doris, para. 21; emphasis added)

R: I would *offer neither direction nor correction*. The philosophy of my teaching is that students should have awareness about writing skills or grammatical structure. *I intend to raise students' awareness, not to instruct them how to correct sentences for short-term effect*. However, this is difficult and *the results are limited*. (Ruth, para. 22; emphasis added)

A: ... in the multiple interaction activities, writing is *process-oriented*. ... There are five advantages of this approach. First, students can *learn through different stages of writing*: from self-directed feedback to peer feedback, and finally to teacher feedback... Second... it takes more time than the traditional writing procedure. However, students are going to benefit from this because of their *spending more time on thinking over their writings*. Third, a teacher can examine the process of learning, and *take students' comments* on these three types of feedback *to improve his/her teaching techniques*. Fourth, the modified teacher feedback normally refers to the situation in which a teacher *marks errors with codes as hints on the students' drafts*. Teacher feedback usually also includes a *student-teacher conference, i.e. a tutorial*. Finally... students are encouraged and allowed *to actively participate in peer response activities* from which they will get different opinions and ideas. These are its advantages, but there are also weaknesses. A major disadvantage is that *more time is needed*, and *less capable students may not be able to learn something significant*. They may go through every stage *without understanding what each activity means or learning key points effectively*. Therefore, it may be more difficult for them to follow from one feedback activity to the next. (Albert, para. 18; emphasis added)

It is noticeable in Albert's responses to this approach that instructors can improve the practice by referring to students' comments on it. In other words, this approach is learner-centered, regenerative, and process-oriented. Another issue arising from the comment of Albert and Ruth is that classroom practitioners should pay more attention to the weak learners in a multilevel large writing class because this group of students has difficulty to catch up with other peers in their learning.

Q2: How do you describe your perception of self-directed feedback?

The viewpoints from the interviewees made it clear that self-directed feedback was

an activity that might be more beneficial for advanced writers than for intermediate ones, who, in turn, received more benefit than weak writers. The weak writers could neither detect nor correct most errors due to their limited language competence. The representative opinions are listed as follows:

R: I asked my students to do self-directed feedback twice in the classroom by following a worksheet you provided me. They felt all right about this activity; nevertheless, *they did not realize some blind spots they had had*. At the same level of language proficiency, *they felt nothing wrong about the feedback provided by themselves or by peers*. (Ruth, para. 40; emphasis added)

A: Um, my perception about self-directed feedback is that *this activity may benefit the weak students less*. Usually, they experience a stronger sense of frustration and, limited by their language skills, *don't know how to deal with their problems*. They may come up with many ideas but fail to describe them in their writings. On the contrary, the *high achievers* make a double check when involved in the self-directed feedback activity, and *it is easy for them to identify their weaknesses*. *For the intermediate students, self-directed feedback can decrease the errors they have made*. Nevertheless, they are less capable of doing the correction job by themselves *in the aspects of diction and sentence structure*. Generally speaking, self-directed feedback can benefit students more or less in spite of their different language proficiency. (Albert, para. 26; emphasis added)

It is interesting to note that the less capable writers seem to have more blind spots than the competent writers, who have proved to have more sense of the targeted language when outputting their ideas in a written essay.

Q2.1: What can be done to improve the activity of self-directed feedback?

The suggestions from the interviewees to improve this activity seem to be quite diversified. For Albert, some feasible ways to increase the effectiveness of this activity include making use of reference books, spelling check function, searching for example sentences, and doing the same activity again after a couple of days. By contrast, Doris gives students sufficient time to think over their writing while Ruth proposes to upgrade students' language proficiency as a solution to having an effective self-directed feedback. Their statements are presented as follows:

A: Um, after the self-directed feedback activity, students could *make use of references such as grammar books, or have a check on the computer* by using spelling check function, or *search for example sentences* on the Internet to revise their writings more effectively. One more thing could be done. *Two or three days later, when students did the same thing, they probably would have fresh ideas about what was said in their essays*. (Albert, para. 30; emphasis added)

D: I asked my students to do self-directed feedback after class for two reasons. First, they had *more time to ruminate over their papers*. Second, I should respect students for *the individual differences in speed for self-editing essays*. (Doris, para. 27; emphasis added)

R: From my experience of learning English, I think *students should improve their language proficiency first before any effective self-directed feedback can be done*. Language proficiency is the root of all problems. (Ruth, para. 42; emphasis added)

Q3: Please tell me what you feel about peer response activities in general.

Two salient points— students' involvement in and familiarity with the procedure of activities— were drawn from the responses of the interviewed teachers about whether students benefited from peer response activities. As a whole, students needed time and practice before they could smoothly carry out all peer response activities and the degree of their commitment decided whether the activities could be helpful or not. The statements of Ruth and Doris about students' involvement can be cited as follows:

R: *Successive cases could be found in peer response activities*. One could learn something from his/her partner *when sometimes the targeted essay was well composed or when they discussed what they identified as problematic*. (Ruth, para. 30; emphasis added)

R: Attitude is the key as I mentioned at the beginning. *If a student was willing to accept this way of learning and totally involved in activities, he/she would make it*. (Ruth, para. 32; emphasis added)

D: Students were required *to carefully check group members' works according to the points I suggested*. This became a kind of review to make sure their feedback for partners was sound. (Doris, para.15; emphasis added)

As for the necessity of students' familiarity with the procedure, Albert's opinion serves as good evidence of this argument.

A: *In the beginning, some students felt this approach was too complicated and boring ...Nevertheless, in the second cycle of the peer response sessions, they gradually understood that peers' ideas could be absorbed through oral feedback, and that the comments they gave to their peers would also be helpful for their future writings. .. Some group members could even identify certain mistakes they as writers easily ignored*. This approach is learner- centered, in which *the learners "actively" participate in all kinds of activities*. They don't simply and "passively" accept the instruction. (Albert, para. 20; emphasis added)

Q3.1: What do you usually do during the period of peer response sessions?

The interviewed teachers stated that they tried to offer help and monitor the students' progression during peer response sessions. Even though the focus of their attention might be different, they walked around to maintain classroom management so that each group was engaging in peer response activities.

D: During peer response sessions, I walked around to *play the role of a facilitator and supervisor* at the same time to *offer help and monitor their progression*. Like a communicative teacher, I assisted students to solve any problem they encountered. *If any group completed their work, I would share it with them immediately*. ...Students were required to *carefully check group members' works according to the points I suggested*. This became a kind of review to make sure their feedback for partners was sound. (Doris, para. 15; emphasis added)

R: During peer review sessions, I would ask them *what their arguments and sentence structures were*. My macro concern was about *genre and idea development*; my micro concern, *grammar*. (Ruth, para. 34; emphasis added)

A: Most of the time *I would observe the interactions going on in a group* so as to understand *whether someone has deviated from the topic*, or remind them of *how to use some words properly during the sessions*. (Albert, para. 22; emphasis added)

Q4: What is your opinion of the modified teacher feedback?

The statements from the interviewed teachers indicate that the modified teacher feedback, implemented in a large multilevel writing class, is time-consuming and workload-increasing no matter whether a teacher is giving selective coded error feedback or specific comments on content and form because this approach includes not only providing teacher feedback but holding a student-teacher conference (a tutorial) as well. It takes time and energy for a teacher to conduct the activities of feedback and tutorial in a large writing class. The following passages are cited to support the above opinion.

A: *In a large writing class* such as this one, even if I only provide students with *some clues as my feedback* for the errors in their essays, *it takes me a lot of time and my workload doesn't decrease*. Second, the time spent on giving a student feedback depends on the level of the student's language proficiency. *Competent students learn quickly*; all they need is only a couple of suggestions, and then they know how to revise their essays. As a result, *I spend relatively less time on their writings*. In contrast, *I must spend more time to help the less capable students*. However, *spending more time doesn't necessarily mean more progress these students can make....* Since this writing class is large, under the time pressure, I may write down my feedback somewhat not so neat and clean, and this leads to difficulties for students to read. (Albert, para. 32; emphasis added)

R: In my case, I gave students feedback twice—first to *single out global errors for students to revise*, then to *offer comments and grades in the second time*. It took me double time and energy to provide feedback. After that, I spent more time on tutorials than on feedback. (Ruth, para. 22; emphasis added)

D: When the topics were related to *personal privacy about one student's past experience*, I would offer my own feedback. This kind of homework was not suitable for group activities. I must confess that teaching seven different classes was a *heavy workload and I did not have time and energy to do what I should*. (Doris, para. 33; emphasis added)

Q4.1: How did your students respond to the modified teacher feedback?

Even though the workload of the instructors is heavy, most students respond positively to this type of feedback because each instructor places great emphasis upon what students need. For Doris, the focus of a student-teacher conference is on grammar and sentence patterns. In contrast, Ruth provides feedback on structure and grammar. In the case of Albert, the advanced learners in his class desire content feedback (organization and idea development); the intermediate students welcome proper guide; and the weak writers invite form feedback (grammar and word choice).

D: Generally speaking, *their response was quite positive*. I was told that *more student-teacher conferences were what they needed*. It seemed to me that *the focus of a student-teacher conference was on grammar and sentence patterns instead of on content or idea development*. (Doris, para. 35; emphasis added)

R: Two levels could be found in my feedback—*one was about the whole structure of the writing; another, about grammar*. Only one student in my class I gave him feedback on structure *more than three times*. I thought his reasoning was problematic for he could not state things in order. (Ruth, para. 46; emphasis added)

A: Overall, *this activity is helpful*. The competent students *...are more concerned about content feedback, more in-depth and profound feedback*. The intermediate students can be *given an appropriate guide*. The less competent students usually focus their attention on *form feedback*. In this part, it is normally about whether the *grammatical rules* are correctly used or not, and whether the *word choice* is appropriately made or not. The students can think over how to make necessary revisions on the basis of the symbols or clues given by the teacher. (Albert, para. 34; emphasis added)

Q4.2: What can be done to increase students' learning from teacher feedback?

The interviewees agreed that holding a student-teacher conference could be one of

the effective ways to enhance learning results from teacher feedback. Generally speaking, in a student-teacher conference, a student is able to ask, clarify, and negotiate with an instructor the problems related to grammatical rules, sentence patterns, structures, or word choices. The opinion that students are likely to get benefits from this practice can be exemplified by the following statements:

R: I think *having a tutorial*, if time permitted, *was one way very helpful and essential for students to learn more from teacher feedback*. (Ruth, para. 48; emphasis added)

D: Theoretically speaking, teachers should offer detailed feedback and then *hold a student-teacher conference to discuss the related issues*. However, in reality we needed to cover 12 units in one semester and *it was difficult for me to do so every chapter*. All I could do was *to single out those poor writers and tutor them*. (Doris, para. 31; emphasis added)

A: In my opinion, a one-on-one advice, i.e. *a student-teacher conference*, can *achieve a better effect than the feedback given in written form*, because in a face-to-face conference, students can *understand more thoroughly the implications of some of the errors marked by the teacher*. They can also understand why revisions need to be made. (Albert, para. 36; emphasis added)

Apart from holding a student-teacher conference, the interviewees suggest that there are some feasible ways of instructional activities, such as treating common errors from student writings, sharing good sentences composed by the advanced writers, or having lectures on those easy-confused expressions, to enhance students' learning from teacher feedback. The statements of the interviewed teachers are listed as follows:

A: For example, in the second writing assignment we just did, *many students didn't know how to use noun phrases in writing*. So I categorized the stuff related to noun phrases, and *explained it on the blackboard to improve their skills in this aspect*. In addition, I selected *some good sentences from students' essays*, and wrote on the blackboard *for the sake of future reference* for other students. *I consider this a positive reinforcement for students*.

D: To deal with common grammatical problems, I usually *put those incorrect sentences composed by students on the blackboard* and *asked them to single out errors or to improve them instead of giving them direct answers*. (Doris, para. 15; emphasis added)

R: In a large class, *a teacher can sort out common errors or sentence patterns from students' writings and give lectures on them*. Another strategy is *to put some easy-confused sentences on the blackboard and ask students to identify the wrong ones and revise them*. (Ruth, para. 50; emphasis added)

Q5: What would you like to share with me about your teaching experience in these three types of feedback (self-directed, peer, and teacher)?

It is interesting to note that these three types of feedback, for the interviewees, were indispensable because they made individual contribution to facilitating student writers' acquiring writing skills even though self-directed feedback might not be as beneficial as teacher and peer feedback for certain writers. Apart from insufficient language proficiency, some writers didn't check their essays from the perspectives of the readers. These two factors might explain the low effectiveness of self-directed feedback. As for peer feedback, students could learn from each other due to the synergy, a sense of authentic reader, and common goal created through interactive activities. For most of the students, teacher feedback is essential and trustworthy for them to revise their essays.

D: To my students, *teacher feedback is most trustworthy and also represents a teacher's loving care and attention for students...A good writer does not necessarily need teacher feedback for revision* because he can engage in self-directed feedback activity. *Peer response activity becomes a premium instructional technique due to practical constraints and an inherent laziness in human nature.* Peer response may solve the problem of *teacher's constraints and inadequacy in time and energy* as well as the possibility of individual idleness. *With the help of peer pressure and work pressure, students will become active and engaged in writing procedures because they share with each other the common purpose and synergy.* ...peer response becomes indispensable in a large multilevel writing class for *its advantages in assisting instruction, facilitating learning, and overcoming human indolence* even though it is imperfect. (Doris, para. 41; emphasis added)

R: *Our final goal is that students would be able to engage in self-directed feedback.* With classmates as readers, students *get an inner dynamic to write—to compose something comprehensible for target readers in a careful way.* Therefore, peer review is also important. Teacher feedback is indispensable *owing to our student incapable of doing self-directed feedback.* Students need someone to *remand them about the errors in their writing* and this is probably the function of teacher feedback. (Ruth, para. 54; emphasis added)

A: I think all these three are great. The first type, self-directed feedback, may cause problems for *some students* because *they aren't quite sure whether what they have written is appropriate or not.* Under this situation, they may not be able to make correct revision... Of course, this may also involve *their general language proficiency.* Another issue is that *they could not leave the author's role behind them.* That is, they should examine their essays from the perspectives of the reader. *Assuming the role of the reader, they could more readily find their*

weaknesses. In the second type, peer feedback activities, I think students should be provided with *a quiet place in which they can discuss*. This would enable them to concentrate their minds to clearly exchange their ideas without being interrupted...As for the last type, teacher feedback, in this large writing class, I can only give *some whole-picture clues* and make my best effort to *enhance the function of peer feedback* and to decrease the time spent on teacher feedback. (Albert, para. 38; emphasis added)

Discussion and Conclusions

This section is organized into five parts according to the five research questions of this study. The major findings are discussed and compared with prior related research studies if available; if not, explanations are given for the findings.

The instructors' experiences in teaching a large EFL writing class (Q1)

The three interviewed instructors agree that teaching a large multilevel EFL writing class is unpleasant, time-consuming, and stressful due to the amount of oral and written feedback on student writings and classroom management. This finding is consistent with the statement that responding to student texts is a challenging and time-consuming job for writing instructors (Ferris, 2007). It also echoes the findings such as frustrating (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997), tiresome and thankless (Hyland, 1990), grueling and anxiety-ridden (Stern & Solomon, 2006) even though these studies were not conducted in the context of large multilevel EFL writing classrooms.

As regards student performance, two of the instructors think that multiple interaction activities work pretty well in improving students' writing performance but one of the instructors maintains that this approach does not substantially help her students much. This phenomenon could be accounted for by the difference between active engagement in learning and a high absenteeism and low writing proficiency. A high correlation between motivation and achievement has been firmly confirmed in many studies (e.g., Dornyei, 1998; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Low learning motivation makes many instructional methods work not so well. This probably is the reason why the major concern of the three teachers in dealing with multilevel students is learners' positive attitude toward activities—active participation, thinking, and practice.

As for the strategies used to help students with different levels of writing proficiency, collaborative learning and tutoring are most common employed by the interviewed instructors in large writing classes. The three teachers group their classes into different-sized parties with not more than four members so that the students can learn from each other when they are engaging in discussion, peer feedback, and meaning negotiation. Tutoring is another strategy utilized to help students to improve their writing

performance. The advantage of tutoring is that students can negotiate with a teacher about teacher feedback on their writings.

It is generally agreed among the three instructors that traditional teacher feedback does not work well in improving students' writing abilities due to lack of required revisions to think over errors and lack of student-teacher conferences. The importance of a one-to-one student-teacher conference is urged by many researchers (e.g., Atwell, 1998; Carnicelli, 1980; Zamel, 1985) and the account given by the three instructors echoes this viewpoint. In addition, the report on the necessity of thinking over errors is supported by the argument of Leki (1992), "feedback on student writing also falls short of its goal when the changes suggested or requested in the feedback are too readily accepted by student writers" (p. 123). The feedback too readily taken by student writers is more likely to be understood only partially or vaguely.

By contrast, multiple interaction activities can work more effectively than traditional teacher feedback if students are actively involved in activities. This finding supports the above-mentioned research on the effect of peer and teacher feedback in improving overall quality of student writing (Paulus, 1999; Saito & Fujita, 2004; Yang et al., 2006).

The instructors' opinions about self-directed feedback activity (Q2)

It is interesting to note that students benefit from self-directed feedback activity in accord with their individual language proficiency. In other words, the high achievers may benefit most while the weak writers seem to learn the least. A possible explanation for this might be that the competent writers are more likely to detect errors or weaknesses in their writings and, most importantly, know how to address the problems whereas the poor writers are less likely to ferret out what goes wrong with their essays and do not have ideas how to deal with them.

With regard to the suggestions for improving the efficiency of self-directed feedback, the three interviewed teachers provide diverse opinions, such as making good use of reference books, consulting internet resources, having sufficient time to perform the activity, and improving language proficiency first. At first glance, these suggestions are difficult to be subsumed into one single factor that can be addressed to improve the efficiency of self-directed feedback, but, upon a second thought, all of these are closely related to self-efficacy. Students' perceptions of their writing competence are correlated with their actual writing performance. To enhance the efficiency of self-directed feedback, teachers must first help students with guidance to improve their writing skills and knowledge, in addition to strengthening students' efficacy expectations about their writing ability (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985). In general, self-directed feedback activity is less beneficial than those of peer and teacher feedback to increase student

writing proficiency, especially for EFL learners due to the fact that they are still in the process of acquiring the target language.

The instructors' perceptions of peer feedback activity (Q3)

Two findings are obtained from the interviewed instructors concerning their responses to peer feedback activity. First, the degree of student commitment in peer feedback activity influences the level of benefit they may get from this activity. In other words, the more one student is involved in the peer feedback activity, the more he/she can learn from it. This finding is consistent with that of Yeung and Yeung (2008) about the positive correlation between effort and achievement. Second, students need time and practice to get familiar with the procedure of peer feedback activity. This finding supports the frequent urge for the necessity of preparing students for peer feedback activity through training, modeling, and practicing (e.g., Berg, 1999; Min, 2005, 2006).

Even though the focus of the three instructors during the peer feedback sessions may be different, they manage to be facilitators and supervisors to offer help and monitor the progression in various groups. They try to get students involved in the activity by asking questions, helping to solve the encountered problems, sharing the completed essay with group members, or ascertaining the discussion staying on task. The reports from the interviewees are in general agreement with the account given by Ferris (2003) that, to better the effectiveness of peer feedback activity, an instructor should present, not intrude, in the classroom to “listen in on peer review sessions so that students stay on task” and to “respond to any questions that might arise or deal with any interaction problem” (p. 173). The reports also correspond with the suggestions made by Connor and Asenavage (1994) that teachers should supervise and help various peer groups during the peer feedback sessions.

The instructors' responses to the modified teacher feedback (Q4)

It is noticeable from the statements of the interviewees that implementing modified teacher feedback activity does not decrease the workload and time of writing teachers if compared with carrying out traditional one. An instructor, in the traditional teacher feedback, usually gives students either selective or comprehensive written error correction and does not require subsequent revisions of students whereas a teacher, in the modified teacher feedback, offers global error feedback first, specific comments next, and a student-teacher conference last. In spite of the heavy workload, the three interviewees report a positive student writers' response to the modified teacher feedback. This result could be explained by the fact that the instructors are able to cater to student needs according to the levels of their language proficiency. For example, a competent writer is provided with content feedback (idea development and organization) whereas a weak

learner is given form feedback (grammatical errors, mechanical devices, and word usage), in addition to a one-on-one student-teacher conference to clarify the difference between the intended meaning and the perceived meaning.

As regards the suggestions to increase students' learning from the modified teacher feedback, the interviewed teachers consider a one-on-one student-teacher conference as one effective way because of the opportunity for students to understand more fully teacher feedback and to clarify their intended meanings. This viewpoint echoes the suggestions made in Zhao's (2010) study as well as in Nelson and Schunn's (2009) study that understanding of feedback is essential for improving writing performance. Apart from holding a student-teacher conference, the interviewees also make some suggestions to improve student learning from teacher feedback such as treating common errors from student essays, sharing good sentences composed by high achievers, and lecturing on easy-confusing expressions. Generally speaking, common errors and easy-confusing expressions found in student essays can be categorized as global errors, which need to be treated first because these errors may hinder the message from being comprehended (Brown, 2000). The suggestion to share good sentences from competent writers in the class may encourage other learners because these capable writers have set a good example for them to follow.

The instructors' experiences in three types of feedback as a series of activities (Q5)

There is no disagreement among the interviewed instructors on this point that self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback are indispensable as a series of instructional activities in a large multilevel EFL writing class, in spite of the fact that self-directed feedback, for certain students, may not be as beneficial as those of peer and teacher feedback in improving student writing performance. However, if the ultimate goal of any writing class is to cultivate independent writers, peer and teacher feedback may facilitate student writers learning from other people to enhance their writing skills so that they can gradually make revisions on their own with self-confidence and effectiveness. It is not too much to say that in the process of improving student writing proficiency, peer and teacher feedback must be offered at the earlier stage to help students developing their ability to increase the efficiency of self-directed feedback.

As for the low effectiveness of self-directed feedback, some writers, besides insufficient language proficiency, do not engage in the activity with reader-oriented approach. In other words, they do not revise their essays from the perspectives of a reader. It is interesting to note that the instructors' opinions about the low effectiveness of self-directed feedback are in line with those of students' (ranking self-directed feedback as last in the relative value) in the studies by Zhang (1995) and by Saito & Fujita (2004).

As regards peer feedback, the interviewed instructors hold that students can learn

from each other due to the synergy, a sense of authentic reader, and common goal created through the interactive activities. It is generally agreed that peer feedback activity can create a sense of authentic reader for student writers in the process of composing and revising essays. With the expectation of group members to be the readers, the writers usually try their best to compose comprehensible essays for target readers. In the process of responding to their peers, the writers gain a clearer understanding of what remains to be unclear and need to revise from authentic readers (Mittan, 1989). It is also agreed that the synergy and common goal created through collaborative group production enable group members to draw on the strengths and resources of their peers (Hirvela, 1999) in the ongoing community atmosphere, in addition to solving the problem posed for a large size class in which a teacher is incapable of catering to all students' individual needs.

The function of teacher feedback, based on the statements of interviewed instructors, is to compensate or improve the function of either self-directed feedback or peer feedback in a large multilevel EFL writing class. As a whole, a teacher in a large writing class has recourse to peer response to maximize students' learning opportunity through interaction activities and hold students accountable for their own learning. Therefore, teacher feedback plays the role of scrutinizing the results of peer feedback. If students cannot address the writing problems after having had self-directed and peer feedback, teacher feedback can be counted on for support.

Limitations and recommendations

Several limitations may have impacted this study. First, the findings of this research, based on the experiences and perceptions of the three teacher participants in a private university, may not be generalized to other practitioners in other contexts due to the limited number of participants, the length of study period, and teachers' individual differences in motivation, attitude, goal, and personal experiences and knowledge. Second, due to the human and subjective nature of qualitative research, the findings and data may be subject to other interpretations. Finally, the results of the study are drawn only from the statements of the interviewees without other data (e.g., classroom observation, students' writing portfolios, and records of student-teacher conferences) to triangulate the findings. The results presented, as is so often the case, are only possibilities or tendencies.

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations are suggested for future research. First, the time period of this study lasted for one semester. Therefore, a longitudinal study is recommended to examine the changes in instructors' perceptions and experiences about the implementation of self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback in large multilevel ESL/EFL writing classes. Second, the delimitation of this study is constrained to three instructors in large multilevel EFL writing classes in one private university. The findings of the research study cannot be generalized to other cases. Therefore, a multiple-case study from

various universities is needed to explore the perceptions and experiences of instructors after the implementation of multiple interaction activities in large writing classes. Generally speaking, cross-case analysis can enhance generalizability and deepen understanding and explanation of the topic under study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, future investigation might include quantitative studies to examine issues such as amount of time, major principles, instructional strategies, ways of improvement, trainings, and worksheets used by instructors in each type of feedback so that the results may shed light on classroom practitioners' perspectives, practices, and problems regarding multiple interaction activities carried out in a large multilevel EFL writing class.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Teachers

Research topic: EFL writing teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding multiple interaction activities

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Hsien-Chuan Lin

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee: The purpose of this study aims to examine how teachers perceive and experience a combination of self-directed, peer, and teacher feedback activities carried out in EFL large multilevel writing classes. The participants will be three instructors interviewed by the researcher. The audiotape and the transcript will be used only for this research and educational purposes with no name shown on either of them. The interview for each participant is scheduled to be lasted for 40 minutes.

Questions:

1. What is it like being a writing instructor in an EFL school setting?
 - a. How do you see students' writing performance?
 - b. What are concerns you have as a writing teacher in terms of working with different types of students?
 - c. What strategies did you use to help students with different levels of language proficiency?
 - d. What differences (advantages and disadvantages) do you perceive between a traditional teacher feedback activity and the multiple interaction activities?
2. How do you describe your perception about self-directed feedback?
 - a. What can be done to increase the effect of self-directed feedback?
3. Please tell me what you feel about the peer response activities in general.
 - a. What did you usually do during the period of peer response sessions?
4. What is your opinion of the modified teacher feedback?
 - a. How did your students respond to this feedback?
 - b. What should be done to increase students' learning from the teacher feedback?
5. What would you like to share with me about your teaching experience in these three types of feedback (self-directed, peer, and teacher)?

(Adapted from *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*, by J. W. Creswell, 1998, p. 127)

Appendix B: Code List for the Interview with the Instructors of Large EFL Writing Classes

Research questions	Major themes	Minor themes
Experience as a teacher of a large EFL writing class (ET)	Large class (ET-LARG)	Common practice in Taiwan Error feedback as heavy workload
	Traditional method of instruction (ET-TM)	Difficult to achieve learning objective
		Hard to meet individual needs
	Multiple interaction activities (ET-MIA)	Inspire students to learn with inner drive
		Enhance independent thinking ability
		Improve communication ability
Have better idea of problem-solution		
Students' writing performance (SWP)	General situation (SWP-GEN)	Hard to have immediate effect
		Writing as a comprehensive and integrated skill
	Students in a class with multiple interaction activities (SWP-MIA)	Greatly improved in learning attitudes and writing performance
Concerns about working with different types of students (CDTS)	Multiple interaction activities (CDTS-MIA)	Benefit students by matching to their abilities
	Individual efforts (CDTS-EFFORT)	Affect learning outcome
	Thinking indispensable (CDTS-THINK)	Interactive learning activities conducive to thinking
Strategies for helping different learners (STRAT)	High achievers (STRAT-H)	Produce concise sentences and profound paragraphs
	Intermediate learners (STRAT-I)	Know syntax concept, diction, and punctuation usage
	Low proficient learners (STRAT-L)	Learn more about grammar, structure, and organization
Differences	Strength (TTF-STRG)	Students save time to find answers

between traditional teacher feedback (TTF) and multiple interaction activities (MIA)	Weakness (TTF-WEAK)	No motivation to think over errors
		Vague impression about TF
		Limit possible answers to single one
	Strength (MIA-STRG)	Spend more time on thinking
		Students' feedback helps improve instruction
		Marked hints and T-S conference
		Encourage to actively engage in PR activities
Weakness (MIA-WEAK)	Time-consuming	
	Difficult to follow and learn for less capable students	
Perception of self-directed feedback (SF)	High achievers (SF-H)	Easy to identify weaknesses
	Intermediate learners (SF-I)	Partially revise errors
	Low proficient learners (SF-L)	Less beneficial due to deficiency in writing skills
Improvement for self-directed feedback activity (IMPR/SF)	Suggestions (IMPR/SF-SUGST)	Use resources available to double-check and revise the drafts
		Do a second SF after the first one completed a couple of days later
General perception of peer response activities (PR)	Interactive communication (PR-INT/COM)	Beneficial from a give and take relationship
	Learner-centered (PR-LEAR/CEN)	Actively engage in activities
		Able to identify errors ignored by writers
	Low effectiveness (PR-LOW/EFFECT)	A few students unsatisfied with the outcome
During the PR sessions (DURN/PR)	Observe interaction between group members (DURN/PR-OBSERV)	Whether some students go off the topic
		Remind students to use proper words in exchanging ideas
Opinion of the	Weaknesses	Time-consuming and workload not

modified teacher feedback (OPIN/MTF)	(OPIN/MTF-WEAK)	decreased
		Comments written not so neat and clean due to time pressure
		Student's writing competence decides time spent for feedback
	Strengths (OPIN/MTF-STRG)	Able to categorize common errors and explain them to the class
		Explicate students' good works in class
Students' response to the modified teacher feedback (RESP/MTF)	High achievers (RESP/MTF-H)	Concern about in-depth and profound content feedback
	Intermediate learners (RESP/MTF-I)	Can be given an appropriate guide
	Low proficient learners (RESP/MTF-L)	Pay more attention to form feedback
Improvement for the modified teacher feedback (IMPR/MTF)	Suggestions (IMPR/MTF-SUGST)	Teacher-student conference is more helpful than written feedback
		Students should try to find answers to errors marked
		Make the best of Feedback Revision Sheet for future reference
Teaching experiences in the three types of feedback (TE/3F)	Self-directed feedback (TE/3F-SF)	Students unsure of their writings and unable to make revision
		Unable to read their essays as readers
	Peer feedback (TE/3F-PF)	In need of a quiet place for PF
		Students can collect information before pre-writing discussion
Modified Teacher feedback (TE/3F-MTF)		Give only some selective marked hints and comments