

Taiwanese Students' Perceptions of Writing Commentaries: Revisiting Culture

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Abstract

Carson and Nelson (1996) examined Chinese students' interactional styles in peer response groups, and they built up a link connecting Chinese students' reluctance to criticize or disagree with others to Asian collectivist cultures. Their study presented a partial picture of Chinese students' interaction style in peer response activity. Taking a socio-cultural perspective, this study responds to and further complements previous studies on Chinese students' interaction in peer response activities like Carson and Nelson's (1996). It investigated two Taiwanese students' participation in an English writing course, with the primary focus on what social factors influenced their process of giving and taking peer comments. Data were mainly collected from six semi-structured interviews amounting to over ninety minutes. Results demonstrated several social dynamic factors that influenced Taiwanese learners' participation during group interaction, including mutual status inequality, intervention of teacher commentary, problem with peers' aggressive and defensive manners, and self-directed evaluation of peers' language proficiency for trustworthiness. This study claimed that Carson and Nelson's study only presented a partial image of Chinese students' interaction styles. Our study, as a complement to theirs, revealed that social factors may override cultural generalisability.

Key words: Asian collectivism, culture, peer response activities, social factors

Introduction

Since Zamel's (1976) recognition of "writing as a process" arose, many researchers have been motivated to rate the value of process-oriented writing in second language pedagogies (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Min, 2006; Tsui & Ng, 2000). This process approach arouses their awareness that writing is a process moving from a writer selecting a topic to write about, organizing the ideas to convey, drafting and revising for content, and eventually to the final publication. Rather than being linear and non-interactive, the writing process is pictured as a "dynamic, nonlinear, and recursive" procedure encompassing back-and-forth peer and teacher intervention (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p. 3).

Peer response activity, a key component in the writing process, has attracted increasing attention in both L1 and L2 settings (Zhu, 2001). The term refers to a collaborative group intervention, which permits students to elicit their counterparts' comments on unpublished, semi-finished works. A central tenet of such an approach is that it highlights the process of multiple peer interaction, drafting and revising. Continuous group interaction lends a writer feedback on content, language, and organization from classmates. Peer comments motivate the writer to improve what he or she fails to do well. Negotiation of meaning among peers also enables writers to "reviewing their writing with the eyes of another" (Zamel, 1982, 206).

Peer response activity is a common classroom practice in Chinese EFL classrooms. It is often manipulated as a complement to teacher correction, and highly welcomed by Chinese students as a classroom activity. For instance, in one study on 112 Chinese students recruited from Hong Kong and Taiwan, Jacobs *et al.* (1998) found that 93 percent of them showed a strong interest in including peer response activity into their regular classroom activities. Any form of peer group collaboration earns a slightly lower rating than teacher-centered feedback activities, yet it is undeniable that a considerably high percentage of Chinese students favored the incorporation of peer response activities in writing classes. While intense implementation of peer response activity can be found in Chinese contexts, practice of such activities in these contexts has been considered difficult. One problem relates to Asian students often choosing to give indirect comments, avoid criticizing and disagreeing with their

peers for the purpose of group harmony. Passive interaction style is often considered a conventional phenomenon influenced by collectivist cultures widely spread in Asia.

When interacting with members of their groups, collectivists will generally work toward maintaining group harmony and mutual face-saving to maintain a state of cohesion. (Carson & Nelson, 1996, p. 2)

Under the influence of this unique Asian collectivist culture, group cohesion and harmony are often considered the primary goal of group interaction (Carson & Nelson, 1996). Carson and Nelson claimed Chinese students' inactive participation in peer response groups is strongly associated with their high value of group cohesion and harmony:

Chinese students would normally exhibit in groups are different from the behaviors that are frequently desired in writing groups. Although the students in this study perceived the goal of writing groups as criticizing each other's drafts, the Chinese students were reluctant to do so, recognizing, it seems, that making negative comments on a peer's draft leads to division, not cohesion, in a group. They were, for the most part, more concerned with the group's social dimension than with providing their peers with suggestions to improve their essays. (p. 18)

They stated that Chinese students exhibited strong reluctance to criticize their counterparts' writing, and to disagree with others in peer response groups. Also, they tended not to claim themselves as the authority or more knowledgeable people during the discussion, because of their perceived lack of expertise. They were more likely to consider any criticism as "writer problems" rather than readers' (p. 12). Owing to these culture-dominated factors, Chinese EFL students often find it difficult to speak their mind without reticence to point out peers' mistakes in writing.

As reported above, collectivist culture has a dominant influence over Chinese students' interaction in peer response groups. Still, according to my experience as both writing teacher and learner, interaction in peer response groups emerges a dynamic process that depends on various social factors: gender (Chavez, 2000), student roles (Amores, 1997; Jacobs, 1987), and participant manner (Nelson & Murphy, 1993). Amores's and Jacob's studies, for instance, showed that students felt uncomfortable when their counterparts acted like teachers in group interaction. Similarly, Nelson and Murphy (1993) suggested that a cooperative manner would encourage students to incorporate more peer comments into their revision, while a defensive manner would result in student's resistance to peer comments.

Given that social factors influence peer responses, the notion of social group dynamics lends a strong impetus to reexamine Chinese students' editing behaviors with group dynamics taken into consideration. Culture influences values and behaviors of its people, yet should not be pictured as a pre-conceived determinant framing a certain community's unique interaction styles in a writing class. Instead, social factors that interact with group dynamics should also be taken into consideration; their influences may override cultural generalisability. With this belief in mind, I embarked on a qualitative study to explore Chinese students' participation in peer review activity. From a socio-cultural perspective, this study probes in depth interaction of social factors and cultural influences on editing behaviors during peer response activities, addressing students' interaction style and changing perception of writing commentaries.

Methodology

This study followed the traditions of a qualitative research to obtain an in-depth understanding of two Taiwanese EFL learners' perceptions of their social interaction during peer review interaction. Data were from two key informants' interviews with the researcher. This study demonstrated the factors that influenced how EFL learners perceived feedback in writing classes and also their changing attitudes towards the use of writing feedback.

Context and Key Informants

This study was conducted in a university of Education in northern Taiwan, which is devoted to teacher training for kindergartens and primary schools. Most students in this school had a strong motivation to pursue a teaching career after graduation. The study was implemented in an elective course offered in the department of Education, and this course features an intensive training in students' reading and writing skills in English.

As class instructor, I doubled as teacher and researcher. I am a male teacher with an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) obtained in Taiwan. Though a novice teacher in the target university during the time of study, I had taught kindergarteners, elementary school students and high school students for six years before obtaining a teaching job in this university. As adjunct lecturer, I was offering this semester course for the second year. My classroom experiences during the previous year molded a strong belief in adopting “multiple-draft approach” and eliciting intense peer discussion in my second-year teaching. Prior experience in learning and teaching English motivated me to encourage teacher-student interaction and communication inside and outside classroom, so a harmonic classroom atmosphere can be found in this class.

This course, *Reading and Writing in English*, comprised reading and writing sessions totaling two class hours a week, the first usually allocated for discussion of a pre-assigned reading text. A second hour, the Writing Session, aimed to upgrade writing skills and strategy; primary objective was to compose focused and coherent paragraphs. Handouts and writing examples were provided as the major instructional materials. Classroom activities like teacher lectures, peer discussion, and teacher demonstration were often conducted with the technical assistance of Microsoft PowerPoint. Prior to this study, the writing session had lectured several writing components during the first 14 weeks: writing process (Weeks 1-4), structure of English writing (Week 5), writing topic sentences (Weeks 6-7), supporting sentences (Weeks 8-9), concluding sentences (Week 11), logical order (Week 12), expressing opinions in writing (Weeks 13-14).

The key informants were two female students in the Department of Education. During the time of this study, they were both enrolled in an elective English course containing 20 students. The two female students, Fan-yu and Pei-fen¹, were third-year undergraduates. Their interaction and my understanding of their backgrounds made them close friends since the first year. Their participation in peer discussion and reporting in teacher-student interview further supported my assumption that they maintained good and close friendship ever since their admission to this university. The Department of Education offered no specific English writing course before the third year, so both informants recognized that they would receive no intensive training in English writing before taking my class. These two were selected because of their good interaction with me. Fan-yu, as class representative, had frequent classroom interaction with me. Pei-fen, a diligent English learner, showed strong interest in improving her English. Of all the students, she was one of the few that often spent time asking questions after class. Thus, I had more interaction with them than with other students. My familiarity with them led me to believe they would qualify as trustworthy informants. Upon receiving my invitation, both agreed to participate in all the required activities. Complete anonymity for data confidentiality was also promised at the outset.

Instruments

Individual writing project

Students in this class were required to write a term project during the semester. As the most crucial assignment that also decided their passing or failure of this course, this project, conducted over a four-week span, demanded that all students unfold their English writing competence by writing an expository passage. Topic was “School Uniform”; each student had to argue viewpoints supporting or objecting to the dress code in Taiwanese high schools. This topic was selected because it was strongly associated with the students’ prior experiences in high schools and their future obligation as a teacher. A description of the writing assignment was also given to familiarize the class with the direction of writing (see Appendix).

Teacher-student interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each informant every week in order to update my understanding of their participation in peer discussion, and their perceptions of the revision process for the previous draft. Interview questions touched upon four dimensions: feelings about comments received, interaction with their counterparts, affective states during participation, and suggestions for the future work of peer response activity concerning EFL learners’ process of interacting in peer discussion. Six interviews (three with each informant for three writing drafts) totaling ninety minutes, were obtained for data analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

This study was conducted in an English class in a tertiary institute in Taiwan. Data were collected from two female key informants over four weeks. Prior to this study, the writing session had covered several essential writing components that students needed to know for this study, such as writing topic sentence, supporting sentence and concluding sentence. The writing instruction took up the first fourteen weeks, while this study was primarily conducted in the subsequent four weeks. In the first week, I first delivered a training session on how to edit writing, and our discussion mostly centered on what to comment (e.g., content, language, organization, and rhetoric). Through some student writings shown on Microsoft PowerPoint slides, their attention was directed toward some oft-claimed errors associated with language, organization, and content. As a regular writing assignment, students were assigned to write a passage supporting or objecting to the school policy of mandatory uniform wearing.

In the second week, every student (including Fan-yu and Pei-fen) brought two copies of his/her writing to class, one for submission and the other for peer discussion. During our regular weekly writing session, the twenty students were divided into groups of four; Fan-yu and Pei-fen were grouped with two other senior female students (hereafter, *xue-jie*²). Target groups were of like gender to avoid potential gender interference. Peer response activity lasted 20-40 minutes, such that group members at times failed to complete discussion of four drafts. The procedure was repeated in the third and fourth weeks. In the fourth week, students also handed in their final drafts. To collect additional data, I had one weekly interview with Fan-yu and Pei-fen, either immediately after a writing session or the next day. I also received their journals each week and constantly updated my understanding about the two key informants' process during the four-week project.

In Taiwan and some other Asian countries like Japan, a unique Big Brother/Sister (BB/S) system pervades in both high schools and tertiary schools. This BB/S system usually signals a certain power and age differences between senior years and junior years. Under the impact of the BB/S system, several address terms have been created to refer to students in senior or junior years, and they are *xue-jie*, *xue-zhang*, *xue-mei*, and *xue-di*. *Xue-jie* and *xue-zhang* mean senior female and male schoolmates respectively in Mandarin Chinese, and they are opposite to *xue-mei* and *xue-di*, which refer to a junior female or male student respectively. Owing to the relative age differences of students in different years, being called *xue-jie* or *xue-zhang* often empowers a senior student with a superordinate, worth-respecting identity that possesses power and knowledge. In contrast, the address terms *xue-mei* or *xue-di* mark a junior student's relatively lower status or less power in comparison to *xue-jie* and *xue-zhang*. In this study, we regard the BB/S system a unique group culture worth investigating, and this group culture may potentially influence how students interact with their peers in group discussions.

Data Analysis

A total of six semi-structured interviews amounting to ninety minutes provided essential foundation for our inspection of informants' interactions with their peers. Data were analyzed by coding features signifying students' perceptions of social interactions during the writing process. In the interest of trustworthiness, several precautionary steps were followed prior to undertaking this study. First, during selection of key informants, I invited the two key informants for participation, and clearly told them that they could decide whether to take part in this study at will, while their declination definitely would not influence my evaluation of any of their follow-up works. Upon being invited, both informants agreed to take part. As a second step, at the beginning of each interview, both were notified that their contribution would be promised with total confidentiality. Also, interview responses had no relation to their grade for the course. In case of any personal scruples, their writings could be evaluated by other writing teacher rather than at my hand. In this respect, I believe both key informants were more willing to contribute information with higher reliability. A back-check on the information value of the interviews confirmed that their reflections during the interview were reliable for our analysis in this study.

Results

For detailed representation of informants' process, we analyzed transcribed interview data in an attempt to investigate what social factors influenced the two informants' interaction with their peers. In the remainder of this study, we addressed some underlying factors that affected the learners' social interaction.

Mitigating their voice owing to power distance

One of the most important characteristics of peer group interaction is that both Fan-yu and Pei-fen tended to mitigate their voice and manner when they were talking to their *xue-jie* in the first group discussion. *Xue-jie* is an iconic address term that symbolizes the prevalent Big Brother/Sister (BB/S) culture in Taiwan secondary and tertiary schools. The BB/S culture draws a line between students from different years, and this abstract division often demands students from a lower year to regard those from a higher year as predecessors who deserve respect because of their age, life experiences and academic knowledge. In the first peer discussion, we discovered that the BB/S culture had a dominant influence over Fan-yu's and Pei-fan's participation. It was the first time for them to work with the other two *xue-jie*, so mutual unfamiliarity, coupled with the influence of the BB/S culture, made it a priority for them to reserve their comments, in order not to show any attempt to offend their *xue-jie*. For instance, in the following episode, Fan-yu explained that the two *xue-jie*'s status resulted in her anxiety when she was working with them.

- I: How did you feel when you were working with your *xue-jie*?
 Fan-yu: I felt kind of nervous.
 I: Why?
 Fan-yu: Because I was afraid if our *xue-jie* would feel...Because they were my *xue-jie*, they would say "*xue-mei*, why are you criticizing *xue-jie* like this?" [Interview 1]

Furthermore, based on Pei-fen's reflection as an observer in the first group interaction, Fan-yu was found to behave reservedly. This further supports that the BB/S culture is a significant factor that confines the two informants' expressiveness during group instruction. In the following interview episode, Pei-fen clearly expressed how differently Fan-yu acted in the discussion.

- Pei-fen: Fan-yu cares about the system of *xiu-jie* very much. For instance, when we were discussing as a group, I sometimes called one of the *xiu-jie* "Ting-fan" but Fan-yu called her "Ting-fan *xiu-jie*." Also, I felt that the way she talked today was not as direct as she is. In reality, she is even more direct to me, and she always talks to me without reticence. But, the way she talked to *xiu-jie* today sounded very indirect to me. [Interview 1]

Similarly, the BB/S system has also shown a significant influence on Pei-fan's participation as a critic that comments on the two seniors' writing in the first discussion. Talking to her close friend, Fan-yu, empowered her to talk more freely, while talking to *xue-jie* demands additional verbal varnish to make the comments sound more polite and indirect.

- I: When you were participating in group discussion, did you face any problems? Did your peers influence your participation?
 Pei-fen: Yes. Because Fan-yu is my classmate, I was more likely to speak without reticence. But, because the other two are *xue-jie*, I thought I should be polite to them, and thus I was more reserved, but this can not really express what I meant to say. For instance, when I was reading Mei-su's article, there was some part that I did not understand. I said to her, "*xue-jie*, what do you mean here" rather than "Is it okay to put it that way." So I usually began with 'What do this mean?' [Interview 1]

The above episodes all demonstrated that Fan-yu and Pei-fen tended to reserve their comments during their first interaction with their *xue-jie*. However, although the status inequality between both sides imposed many limitations on their participation, Fan-yu and Pei-fen's fear of verbal intrusion helped them develop a set of verbal face-saving strategies. One of the most salient strategy concerns the use of wh-questions. Both of Fan-yu and Pei-fen reported that they were inclined to use wh-questions instead of yes/no questions or other declarative statements to disguise their comments. This avoidance strategy can be explained that using wh-questions emphasizes the questioner's less-threatening role as an information-seeker, but giving declarative statements or using yes/no questions are usually more likely to construct the questioner's role as a superior knowledge-giver, which may challenge the two *xue-jie*'s superordinate identity particularly in the BB/S culture.

Fan-yu: I would pay more attention to my wording. I said “*xue-jie*, what does this mean?” I listened to her explanation first, rather than saying “I feel you should correct your mistake in this way.” [Interview 1]

Their changing editing behaviors

As reported above, the two informants' participation was largely confined by their self-perceptions of being *xue-mei*. Although the BB/S culture stopped them from expressing their ideas freely in the first group discussion, however, this obstruction seemed to be gradually de-composed over time. In the second and third group interaction, both informants recognized that they became more active to discuss their *xue-jie*'s writing. Pei-fen, for instance, reported that she as a critic was getting more confident to express her ideas when interacting with the *xue-jie*.

I: Did you encounter any problems when you were commenting on others' writing?
she (*xue-jie*) prefer not to delete *them* in her writing. Fan-yu also pointed out
Pei-fen: the problem with *them*. I don't know if she will correct this error, but I felt she did not really want to correct it, and this made me feel that she was a little unyielding. But I feel [our interaction] was better than last week. I was more brave to speak up, and I did not think about whether or not I should speak indirectly, such as 'I feel that you can' and 'what do you mean?' [Interview 2]

In the third discussion, Pei-fen even recognized that the division between *xue-jie* and *xue-mei* was cleared.

Pei-fen: ...the atmosphere during our discussion today was good. It's like the barrier between *xue-jie* and *xue-mei* has been removed. Maybe it is because I felt it was the last time for us to discuss our writing, I thus felt I had to speak up...When I was discussing with the two *xue-jie*, I told her that her ideas were too philosophical to be understood. So, I corrected her and she also told me that she would think about my suggestion. Right at that moment, I admired myself for telling her what was really in my mind. [Interview 3]

The episodes demonstrated above showed that peer review activities presented a dynamic social interaction. Even though the two key informants were reluctant to criticize their *xue-jie* in the first group interaction. They gradually laid down their concerns towards the BB/S mode over time. They were getting more confident to express their thoughts as time passed.

Problem with the peers' manners

Negative feeling about peer's manner during interaction is another problem that hindered the two key informants' participation in peer group interaction. When a writer tends to resent her insistence on her ideas and to ignore the value of peer comments, peers will show much reluctance to participate actively because of the challenge to get their comments taken seriously. For instance, in the following episodes, Fan-yu and Pei-fen both expressed their problem in interacting with one *xue-jie* who liked to refute their comments. According to Fan-yu and Pei-fen, the *xue-jie* went to a language school to study English, and her extracurricular exposure to learning English, coupled with the endorsement from another English teacher on her writing draft, downplayed the values of their comments and their roles as a critic. For Fan-yu, the *xue-jie*'s aggressive manner was sometimes so harsh to her ears that she chose to keep silent.

I: Were there any special occasions during your interactions [with your senior schoolmates]?
Fan-yu: I think one of the *xue-jie* showed a strong manner that made me feel that she was better than me. She said she went to cram school after school, and whenever I was discussing with Pei-fen, she would interrupt and say, “Come, *xue-mei*. I've got something to tell you.” Her manner made me feel that her English was the best.

- I:** Did this influence your participation?
Fan-yu: Yes! I didn't feel like talking anymore... That is, if she wanted to talk, then I would give her the floor. [Interview 3]

Similarly, Pei-fen's experiences in working with the same *xue-jie* also demonstrated that the *xue-jie*'s voice sometimes made her feel her editing skills were being questioned. This verbal challenge from the *xue-jie* resulted in her reluctance to speak.

- Pei-fen:** The *xue-jie* on the left, because she and I are also taking another class together, I am more familiar with her. But as for the other one, I learned from my last experience that she always slightly refuted any comment I gave, saying 'But I feel' or 'I have asked another English teacher in my cram school to proofread it'. She probably felt that her writing had been proofread by another teacher, and I was not competent enough to modify her writing. So, at that time her facial expressions and manner made me get reluctant to say anything. But as for the *xue-jie* on the left, maybe because you have returned our previous draft and we were also more familiar, I was more confident to say anything. [Interview 3]

In this vein, it is clear that a writer's manner and voice strongly influence peers' choice of being an active critic or a passive one.

Reluctance to comment on global structure

One problem found in ESL/EFL learners' editing skills is associated with their overemphasis on local, surface-level components and ignorance of global structures of the text. While empirical studies have attributed the low percentage of global comments to learners' undeveloped writing competence, our study showed that Pei-fen tended to avoid giving global comments in order not to cause the writer too much workload for editing. After the second and third group interaction, Pei-fen recognized that she avoided commenting on the content of others' writing. Rather than pointing out her incompetence in editing, she mainly highlighted the potential inconvenience a comment on content would cause to the writer, which thus prevented her from giving comments on content of writing.

- Pei-fen:** As for correcting content, in fact I am not brave enough to correct the content of their writing. When I see a grammar problem, I would tell them if I felt the use was weird. But, if the comment will demand the writer to modify an entire paragraph, or point out content problem, in fact I am not brave enough to say that. [Interview 2]

- Pei-fen:** I feel commenting on grammar use is more surface-level and it is easier. As for content of writing, if someone told me your writing was not persuasive, I would reply 'are you asking me to rewrite it?' and feel bad. Giving comments on content not only tell others to rewrite their article, but also make them feel the writing is poor...rewriting or feeling denied both cause too much inconvenience. [Interview 3]

Intervention of teacher comments

Aside from the two informants' consideration of both *xue-jie*'s superordinate status, the interview data also showed that teacher intervention significantly influenced Fan-yu and Pei-fen's participation in the group interaction. In the second group interaction, I as a teacher returned everyone's first writing draft with marginal and end comments. Instead of giving the class an answer to their mistake, I chose to simply pinpoint the errors, identifying each with different correction symbols. Each student got their first draft back in the midst of their discussion. After receiving their writing, each one was required to discuss their first draft with their peers.

In Fan-yu and Pei-fen's group, we found out that teacher commentaries empowered both of them to speak more confidently. For instance, in one episode, one *xue-jie* felt dubious about the teacher's comment that highlighted the ambiguous reference of a deictic pronoun 'that.' Although the student was arguing that 'that' related to a clear referent in the text, Pei-fen refuted the *xue-jie*'s argument. Pei-fen's direct response to the *xue-jie*'s argument may be elucidated by the fact that the teacher commentary provided her a strong standpoint to express her comments more frankly and confidently.

- I:** Did you encounter any problem when you were commenting on others' writing?
But I am not sure if we had any communication problems. I felt that she kind of insisted on her original ideas, but I didn't know what her arguments were...we were actually reading the teacher's comment that points out the ambiguous reference of 'that' [in *xue-jie's* writing]. But at that time, *xue-jie* argued that 'that' does have a clear referent. While she was explaining, I burst out saying 'But I can't find the referent.' [Interview 2]
- Pei-fen:**

Another example, which may sound challenging to the role of peer reviewing, also shows that teacher comments considerably influenced the peer group interaction mode. When a peer comment conflicts with any teacher commentary, the writer would ignore the former and rely on the latter. For example, one *xue-jie* criticized a sentence in Fan-yu's writing, "students wearing school uniforms can upgrade the bond of the whole school." She claimed that there had to be a relative pronoun after the antecedent 'students'. However, learning this grammatical rule from the teacher's lecture that the relative pronoun in a relative clause can be removed with the following verb changed into a gerund, Fan-yu was certain that this usage was appropriate and she thus ignored the *xue-jie's* suggestion.

- I:** When you were discussing with your partners, did you encounter any problem?
 Last time you mentioned that there should not be two main verbs in one sentence, and we can change the sentence into one that contains a [relative] clause. I corrected my sentence that way...but [when reading my correction today], *xue-jie* said my correction was weird. I told her that this was something you mentioned in class but she insisted on her suggestion...But I am not going to correct the sentence based on her suggestion because you have mentioned it is the right way for correction [Interview 3]
- Fan-yu:**

Evaluating the reliability of peer comments

Research has demonstrated that L2 writers' skepticism towards the accuracy and reliability of peer comments was one major factor that resulted in less preference for peer review activity. In our study, Fan-yu was indeed inclined to evaluate the trustworthiness of the *xue-jie's* comments by considering the two *xue-jie's* English proficiency levels. Comments from the *xue-jie* with poor English proficiency often caused Fan-yu's and Pei-fan's concern as to whether they should take her comments into serious consideration.

- I:** How did you feel when the comments you received from your *xue-jie* disagreed with what you wrote?
- Fan-yu:** Because one of the two *xue-jie* was poor in English, when she gave comments, I would doubt whether she was right. However, when the other *xue-jie* who was better in English jumped in, I then became certain that what they said was right. [Interview 1]

Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, we were able to observe the social dimensions of EFL writers' editing behaviors during group interaction in a particular writing class. Echoing the studies by Amores (1997), Jacobs (1987) and Nelson and Murphy (1993), our findings revealed that peer review activity in the Chinese context was largely influenced by various social factors. What's more, this study also helped us understand that social factors may override the influence of cultural factors in peer group interaction. Specifically, although research has shown that Chinese learners' editing behaviors were considerably influenced by the Asian collectivist culture (Carson & Nelson, 1996), the results of this study revealed several social dynamic factors that had a significant influence on the two students' participation as an active or passive member during interaction. These factors include: mutual status inequality, intervention of teacher commentaries, problem with peers' aggressive and defensive manners, and self-directed evaluation of peers' language proficiency for trustworthiness.



This study also shows findings which are consistent with Nelson and Murphy's (1993) study that interaction in an active manner would influence students' interaction in peer response groups. When students worked in a more cooperative manner, they were more likely to speak up without reticence. However, a more defensive tone by a writer would make the peers reluctant to contribute their ideas. In this vein, it is suggested that writing teachers should teach students the social strategies to work with their peers in peer response groups effectively, such as politeness strategies (Johnson, 1990; Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Nelson & Murphy, 1993). It is the teacher's responsibility to equip students with essential social skills that can help create effective peer interaction (Nelson & Murphy, 1993).

The findings also demonstrated the two learners' perceptions of peer group interaction changing over time. Their fear and anxiety associated with the power relationships in the first group discussion were overcome in the following two weeks, and they were getting more active to give comments on *xue-jie*'s drafts. In this vein, cultural tendency, as reported in Carson and Nelson's (1996) study, should not be used as a sole indicator that generalizes the interaction style by members in the same community. This is the reason why we claimed earlier that Carson and Nelson only presented a partial image of Chinese students' interaction style. Aside from the cultural aspect, social factors are pieces that complete the jigsaw puzzle. This study, as a complement to Carson and Nelson's, permitted us to reconstruct Chinese EFL learners' interaction style as a culturally-bound, socially-dominated interaction mode. In other words, a novel interpretation of Chinese learners' interaction style can be that, Chinese learners may show strong reluctance to disagree with others, but as time passes, they are getting more confident and active to criticize peers' ideas and drafts. Teacher intervention often provides learners a solid standpoint for them to express their comments confidently.

It would be premature to claim our interpretation as a well-fledged representation of how Chinese EFL learners interact with others in peer group interaction. Because of the limited sample size, it should be noted that the two key informants' editing behaviors might not be representative of learners in every Chinese context. Therefore, future studies are needed to take into account a larger group of learners so as to provide a more representative interpretation than the tendencies we noticed in our study. Also, research questions like *Can the patterns we noticed be also found in other Asian countries* and *How does individual proficiency level influence the interaction styles* are all potential directions that can help us further examine Chinese or Asian EFL learners' interaction styles.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for all characters mentioned throughout this study.
2. To highlight the power relation between informants and peers, *xue-jie* is used throughout this study to refer to the two senior female peers.

Appendix

In Taiwan, school uniforms are mandatory for primary school and high school students. Students have to wear school uniforms just like others in school. However, the practice of wearing school uniforms has long been a controversial issue. Some people believe that mandating school uniforms is helpful to students, while others propose that wearing school uniforms is not of much significance. At the end of this semester, you will be required to hand in a passage *arguing your point of view* about whether or not making school uniforms compulsory is beneficial for students. Note that you should use specific examples and reasons to support your position.

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