

## A Model of Critical Peer Feedback to Facilitate EFL Writing in Online Context

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### ABSTRACT

Peer feedback in EFL writing has been regarded as time-consuming, and inefficient. An approach is to study the mental process of feedback to improve its quality. It is believed that higher-order thinking can produce high-order peer feedback in higher-level writing. In this study, "critical thinking" is explored to facilitate peer feedback and writing with higher-order thinking skills. "Critical peer feedback" is conceptualized with the integration of critical thinking and feedback in order to improve the quality of feedback. This study aims to study the process of critical peer feedback through blogs and discuss the model of critical peer feedback. A qualitative case study is conducted with six junior students majoring Business English in a Chinese university. Three models of critical thinking are transferred to the participants in the workshops. Three kinds of data including semi-structured interviews, six writing assignments and the artifacts of critical peer feedback, are analyzed by Nivivo 10. The finding reveals that the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy is more acceptable for the beginners of critical peer feedback which provides a six-step model of critical thinking. The conclusion of critical peer feedback model in online context may be significant to its further practice in various courses.

**Keywords:** Critical peer feedback model, critical peer feedback, critical thinking, business English writing, online feedback, blog

Feedback needs to be specific, appropriate, high quality, timely, accurate, constructive, outcome-focused, encouraging, positive, understandable and focused on what is done correctly and what

needs to improve (Konold & Miller, 2005). Peer feedback is referred under different names such as peer response, peer review, peer editing, and peer evaluation (Bijami, 2013). Peer feedback emphasizes the activity of peers or students involvement in learning. Peer interaction is cardinal to the improvement of students' learning, because it allows students to construct knowledge through social sharing and interaction (Lin *et al.* 2001).

There are arguments on the positive and negative effects of peer feedback. Mory (2003) discusses four perspectives on how feedback supports learning:

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1) an incentive for increasing response rate and/or accuracy; 2) a reinforcer that automatically connects responses to prior stimuli (focused on correct responses); 3) Feedback can be considered as information that learners can use to validate or change a previous response; 4) Feedback can be regarded as the provision of scaffold to help students construct internal schemata and analyze their learning processes. Peer feedback can generate more comments on the content, organization, and vocabulary (Paulus, 1999). In addition, peer feedback has advantages such as developing critical thinking, learner autonomy and social interaction among students (Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006). The practice of peer feedback allows students to receive more individual comments as well as giving reviewers the opportunity to practice and develop different language skills (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). Lange (2011) believes that students are allowed to give feedback without constraints, and exploring their ideas without fear or criticism from the teacher. In details, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) articulate that peer feedback enhanced the students' sense of self-control over their learning.

The major criticism of peer feedback is that although students express positive attitudes toward the usage of peer feedback, they tend to significantly favor feedback by the teachers (Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006; Zhang, 1995). Saito and Fujita (2004) find that a number of studies indicate that there are a number of biases associated with peer feedback including friendship, reference, purpose (development vs. grading), feedback (effects of negative feedback on future performance), and collusive (lack of differentiation) bias. Another issue is that most peer responses focus on products rather than the processes of writing, and many students in L2 contexts focus on sentence-level errors rather than the content and ideas (Storch, 2005).

The main purpose of peer feedback is to improve writing with high quality feedback. A basic research question is how to produce high quality peer feedback in writing and what is the strategy to produce high order peer feedback. One of the research gap is how to improve the quality of peer

feedback and improve their ability of writing. In this study, critical thinking skills will be conducted in peer feedback to produce higher-quality peer feedback.

### **Writing, Critical Thinking and Peer Feedback**

The writing skills develop in line with the other basic language skills such as the individual's common sense, vocabulary, orthographic knowledge and social knowledge, etc. The ability to produce texts, language awareness, vocabulary knowledge and the thinking skill are the major components of writing (Bayat, 2014). The thinking skill is particularly important among these components. Among the thinking skills, critical thinking plays a significant role in enabling the writing put forward by the writer in the text to be well-grounded.

Critical thinking aims to evaluate the clarity of opposing situations or ideas as distinct from the other kinds of thinking. Critical thinking acts as a result of a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, recognizing the problem, finding evidence for the arguments, and acquiring knowledge regarding the accuracy of evidence, turning this process into an attitude and using it comprise the content of critical thinking (Bayat, 2014). Critical thinking is divided into five dimensions as inference, recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation, and evaluation of arguments (Watson & Glaser, 1964). Writing is also a process of critical thinking and creating.

After the study of the previous literature, many scholars mention the use of "critical thinking" to facilitate the quality of feedback from the perspective of constructivism and cognition in education. According to the empirical study of peer feedback, many students note that, if they develop the capacity of feedback for critical thinking, this will help them to make more helpful reviews to their peer's writing and more objective judgment on their won work (Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014).

However, the critical thinking study in peer feedback is limited without a list of scientific studies on the disciplines and skills. According to

the literature review, Li (2007) mentions the critical features of formative peer feedback, but she does not further explore the content of “the critical features”. Ruggiero (2012) studies the strategy of critical reading and critical listening, but he also does not study how to be “critical”. Yu, Wu, Nie and Yuan (2015) argue to use critical thinking to increase the cognitive ability of peer feedback, but their research focuses on the quantitative research on the predictive effect of online peer feedback. Krueger (2010) articulates stressing levels of critical thinking and using writing as a mechanism to develop writing qualification.

Feedback is a post-response of analyzing and evaluating to the writers’ writing. Critical thinking also has close relationship with feedback. Many researches believe that feedback and critical thinking have the similar thinking process in analyzing and evaluating. In education, feedback can improve the ability of critical thinking (Duron, Limbach & Waugh, 2006; Ertmer *et al.* 2007 ). While critical thinking can offer the mechanism of mental process in feedback. However, there is limited study on the critical thinking and feedback in education.

### **Critical Peer Feedback and Writing**

According to the previous literature, Pearlman (2007), based on the critical pedagogy, studies to transcend peer feedback through critical collaborative assessment, and articulated the importance of critical peer collaborative learning process. Li (2007) realizes the “effects of critical assessment training on quality of peer feedback and quality of students’ final projects in peer assessment”, but “critical assessment” is not further discussed. Cox *et al.* (2013) review the “ideal preceptor qualities” in peer assessment, one of which is to encourage critical thinking and problem solving. Ruggiero (2012) makes an empirical study of critical reading and critical writing, but he does not define what is “critical” in reading and writing. Forster (2007) studies using critical feedback to improve research writing. However, he does not further even define “critical feedback” and the mechanism of “critical feedback”. “Critical feedback” is still a

vague definition in his writing. Therefore, there are few researchers definitely defining “critical” and “critical feedback” in education.

Most of the studies concerning with “critical” are based on the individual experiences - the perspective of empiricism. Zhao (1996) studies “the effects of anonymity on critical feedback in computer-mediated collaborative learning” and gave a definition of “critical feedback” based on the foundation of “evolutionary epistemology”. He defines critical feedback as “an essential mechanism in the process of learning, which helps the learner to realize the inadequacies of his present knowledge” (Zhao, 1996, p. 13). This is the rarely definite definition of critical feedback, which emphasizes the mechanism is essential to knowledge growth, and the existed knowledge needs reconsideration to construct better theories. Zhao (1996) emphasizes the construction process of knowledge growth and individual role in learning, and anonymous assessment to reduce the influenced factors of peer feedback in computer-mediated platform.

In summary, critical feedback is different from the term “feedback” in “critical”. “Critical” refers to a deep and comprehensive judgment which comes from the concept of “critical thinking” in education. Based on the previous explanation of critical thinking in education, critical feedback is constructed as a constructive learning method, based on the purposes of: (1) emphasize the constructive process of language acquisition; (2) highlight the individual mental and psychometrical development in higher education; (3) summarize the effectiveness study of peer feedback and advocate a systematical and comprehensive process of feedback; (4) explore the effective methods to improve the quality of peer feedback.

### **Research Question**

The two research questions addressed in this study are:

1. What is the process of critical peer feedback to facilitate EFL writing through blogs?

2. What is the model of critical peer feedback to facilitate EFL writing through blogs?

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

This study is carried out in two phases. The first phase focused on the two workshops about the introduction of critical peer feedback and Qzone weblog for online peer feedback in Business English writing. Three kinds of critical thinking model are introduced to the participants including Paul-Elder Model (2012), Reichenbach’s Six-step Model (Reichenbach, 2001), and the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of critical thinking (Forehand, 2005). The Qzone weblog is explored to the participants to conduct online feedback and comments. The objective of the two workshop is made the participants grasp the knowledge and skills of critical peer feedback and the online peer feedback on Qzone weblog. The second phase focused on the collection of data, and the data analysis. Each of the workshops was conducted for two times with three hours. This study is conducted for one semester duration at the first semester of 2015-2016.

### Participants

A large class of 42 students is selected for the research population who are divided into 7 groups for online critical peer feedback in their Business English Writing course in a Chinese university. Business English is a discipline in this university for 15 years. A group of 6 students is chosen as the case group. The six case participants (CP) are coded as CP1 to CP6 for anonymous online peer feedback.

They have no knowledge of critical thinking and critical peer feedback in English learning. This is their first time to have the course of Business English writing based on the syllabus. The lecturer will conduct the course and critical peer feedback among groups on Qzone weblog, and the researcher is only the observer.

### Data Collection and Data Analysis

During the second phase, the semi-structured interviews were conducted three times among the six case participants, which were based on the interview protocols. Each of the interviews was lasted for 30 to 45 minutes. The six Business English writing assignments were written by the case participants based on the syllabus and uploaded on their Qzone for critical peer feedback. The three times of interviews for each case participants were recorded and transcribed. Three kinds of data are collected including semi-structured interviews, artifacts of Business English writing, and artifacts of critical peer feedback. These qualitative data are analyzed by QSR Nvivo 10 with free nodes, tree nodes, and the models.

## Findings

### 1. CP1

From the interview transcripts of CP1, he presents that for critical peer feedback, he chooses the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy Model of critical thinking to “analyze” and “evaluate” his peers’ writings and then gave some suggestions on “creating”. He argues when he gives a critical peer feedback, he will read the writing for two or three times, think

**Table 1:** Demographic Information of the Participants and their Code Names

Participants	Code Name	Gender	Major	Grade/Degree	Work Experience related to BEW
Li	CP1	Male	Business English	Junior	1 month
Lu	CP2	Male	Business English	Junior	2 month
Wan	CP3	Female	Business English	Junior	No
Sun	CP4	Female	Business English	Junior	No
Shen	CP5	Female	Business English	Junior	No
Yu	CP6	Female	Business English	Junior	2 month

comprehensively about the writing, analyze the language and writing tasks, give his assessment, try to find some suggestion for “creating”, and then persuade to rewrite it. When he gives a written critical peer feedback on Qzone, he will firstly praise the writing, make error correction, and then analyze the writing in the view of comprehensive way, and finally give suggestions on creativity to make it more attractive to the readers and more logical.

I will praise his writing firstly[...]. Then I will give my analysis, evaluation and suggestion of creating[...]. I try to give my special views and comments. I will try to reanalyze it and recompose it. I pay much attention on creativity and try to study whether it can reach the writing purposes and can generate business profit.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP1/23 Oct., 2015)

## 2. CP2

From the interview transcript of CP2, he insists that he applies the three step of “analyzing, evaluating and creating” which is based on the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of critical thinking skills. At the first interview, he insists his critical peer feedback ability is still developing and at a low level of applying and analyzing. He cannot reach a higher level at the beginning stage of the study.

I adopt the six steps of Bloom’s model. As my understanding, critical peer feedback has a step-by-step process. My critical peer feedback is at the low level from “remembering, understanding and applying”. I still can not reach the higher level of “analyzing, evaluating and creating”.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP2/23 Oct., 2015)

At the second interview, CP2 presents that he follows the three steps of Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy for critical thinking. First, he will read the Business English writing for several times. Second, he will assess the grammar and sentence errors. Third step is to study the relationship between writing themes and logic to figure out whether there are logic problems, whether the writing content fulfills the requirement of writing tasks, and to study the logic of sentences, the expressiveness of the sentences.

I will read a writing several times before feedback.

The basic is to assess its errors on grammar and sentences. Then I will check his writing theme and its logic, to study whether there are logic problems which means the logic of writing tasks and writing content. At last, I will give a comprehensive study, to study the logic of sentences, the expressiveness of the sentences. It is my general steps of critical peer feedback. At first, I focus on the grammar error, and then attempt to reach a higher level.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP2/08 Dec., 2015)

At the third interview, CP2 insists that he will comment the “strength” of the writing and then point out the “weakness”. However, he used to directly point out the “weakness” without comments of the “strength” (a praise). He argues that they are the adult learners and do not need the praise of compliment. He used to read the writing by smart phone as soon as he got the synchronous notice of writing upload, and then think about it. After he comes back to his dorm, he will open his computer and make his feedback. He also hopes that he can get reply for his feedback whether it is negative or positive, which is helpful for his further feedback and writing.

I will talk about his “strength”, and then his “weakness”. But now, I will directly go to his “weakness”[...]. About the steps, I use my phone, read one time and think about it when I go back my dorm after opening my computer. Then I will make a comment on the computer[...]. I give my feedback, I wish to get reply whether is negative or positive.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP2/04 Jan., 2016)

## 3. CP3

Based on the interview transcripts of CP3, she adopts the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of critical thinking skills. At the first interview, she conducts her peer feedback in the aspect of error correction on grammar, stylistics and rhetoric features. She does not grasp the skills of critical peer feedback by critical thinking.

When I get an article, I will first check the grammar problems, second the style, and third the wording and rhetoric features like parallelism, and to

evaluate whether they are your special features, or your own writing but no the pattern sentences.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP3/09 Oct., 2015)

At the second interview, CP3 has grasp the steps of critical peer feedback from the three aspects of “analyzing, evaluating and creating”. She argues that she will try to find out the errors firstly, then study the cohesion, finally the creation of the writing. She pays much attention on the creation, the difference with other peers’ writings. In the time of giving critical peer feedback, she will write “first, second...” and “I think you’d better...”. If other peers have make a feedback on an aspect, she will try not to make feedback on that aspect again.

First, I will check if there are errors, second is the cohesion, and third is creation whether there is some special writing. The simple way is to check the grammar errors [...]. You need to analyze, evaluate comprehensively, and to create something [...]. In written Language logic, I used “First, second”, or “I think you’d better...”. [...] I tried to assess on a whole, cohesion, expressiveness, and the attractive points, the special writing. If all the writings are similarly, I will not read anymore, read the different points.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP3/08 Dec., 2015)

#### 4. CP4

Based on the interview transcripts, CP4 has a simple cognition on critical peer feedback while pays much attention to the creation. Most of her understanding of critical peer feedback is to check the errors and to find the creation parts of the writing. She argues to assess the content of the writing, the sentence patterns, the structure and the language uses, however, she does not present how to assess and what parts shall be assessed in details.

I will have a comprehensive check of the structure; then to study the content, which this is main aspect; finally, it is the sentences [...]. I pay much attention to “creating” [...]. I am not sure. Maybe, I will notice the weakness of the article, and the attractiveness of the every aspects, the feeling of freshness. I think there shall be a feeling of authenticity if the language is concise and understandable.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP4/09 Oct., 2015)

CP4 furthers that she will read the writing carefully, assess the sentences line by line, and try to give some suggestions on creating.

I will read the article, have a look at the structure, and then check the sentences. I will check the sentences line by line and try to study whether there is a better way to write.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP4/08 Dec., 2015)

According to the data analysis from CP4, she acquires the concept of critical thinking and critical peer feedback in a manner of slow way. She cannot conceptualize critical thinking and critical peer feedback clearly with her own language in the first interview. She has the difficulty to conduct critical peer feedback. In her point of view, critical peer feedback is to read the peer’s writing carefully and feedback concretely. However, at the second interview, she accepts the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy Model of critical thinking for critical peer feedback.

#### 5. CP5

Based on the interview transcripts of CP5, she adopts the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of critical thinking skills to conduct the critical peer feedback. She emphasized the “creative” parts of the writing. However, she still pays much attention to the error correction in her process of peer feedback. The primitive cognition of error correction is deeply rooted at her process of peer feedback.

Sometimes I will read once, then I check the basic knowledge such as grammar and cohesion. After I checked the basics, I would check the expressions, and their affection. I will read other peers’ feedback. I will try to find some omits from others’ feedback.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP5/23 Oct., 2015)

In this example, CP5 directs her process of critical peer feedback as checking the errors, then the cohesion and affection of writing. She would like to read others’ feedback firstly, then try to find some omits from others’ feedback.

I will say something good, either one sentence of compliment or directly say all of the weakness-piles of “weakness”. The praise is only few words, except that there are no errors. The first is grammar errors, the affection, and then from the affection to check whether it has completed all of the writing tasks. I found that there was no creation. All of us have a similar writing.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP5/05 Dec., 2015)

CP5 indicates that she will praise the peer writing firstly before coming to the “weakness” of the writing. She will comment the errors, affection, and check the writing tasks, and finally try to give some suggestion on creation.

## 6. CP6

According to the interview data of CP6, she adopts the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of critical thinking skills for critical peer feedback. She has grasped the skills of critical peer feedback and applied it at her peer feedback. She also offers the error correction as the first cognition of the peer feedback. She pays attention to the logic of writing structure, the creation of expressions and language communication skills. She attempts to reason the logic among the sentences and the article structure. She argues that Business English writing has many pattern expressions and model structures which will constrain the students’ creation in writing practice.

I will not only assess the grammar errors, but the article logic like whether there are repetitions, and whether the writing task had been completed. However, the creation is not enough. There are so many constrain in Business writing. If the sentences are concrete and precise, I will follow the writing thread of thought to give my feedback. But it is difficult to give feedback about creation.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP6/23 Oct., 2015)

Sometimes I read others’ feedback. After carefully thinking, I will try to comment their advantages and disadvantages, and then integrate the two parts.

(Cited from Interview Transcript/CP6/11 Dec., 2015)

CP6 indicates that she will feedback on the grammar errors firstly, then come to the logic of the writing, the creation, the concreteness and precision of the sentences. In the second example, she indicates that she likes to learn from other peers’ feedback, and then make an integrated comment on the advantages and disadvantages of the writing.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the data analysis of interviews and CPF artifacts, it could be concluded that the case participants have adopted the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy as their skills of critical peer feedback. They follow the model to conduct their critical peer feedback. The mental process of critical peer feedback is more complicated. Based on the data analysis and the input and output hypothesis in second language acquisition, the mental process of critical peer feedback can be categorized as the following four steps.

First, when they begin to read a peer’s writing artifacts, they will intake the peers’ writings of the writing tasks, language, and organization, etc. This is the lower-order thinking stage (LOTs) in Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of “remembering, understanding, and applying” in Business English writing. At the “intake” stage of critical peer feedback, these three activities are not a linear way of thinking. “Intake” refers to the actual internal understanding of the input by an individual in second language leaning (Rast, 2008; Pawlak, 2011). In this study, the peer’s “intake” in critical peer feedback refers to the actual ability of understanding and applying Business English writing. They maybe intake in one aspect, two aspects, or three aspects together. They may be leaping to or from one to another.

Second, after the “intake” stage, it comes to the stage of critical thinking with the activities of “analyzing”, “evaluating” and “creating”. The case participants adopt the three-step model of critical thinking which has the advantage of concrete, clear and easy to understand and grasp. These three steps are not always whole conducted during their critical peer feedback. However, they all highlighted

the importance of “creating” in Business English writing.

The third stage of critical peer feedback is the stage of output. The peers will be based on their “intake” of knowledge to assess their peers’ writing with critical thinking, and then “output” their feedback. “Output” refers to the language produced by a language learner (Zhang, 2009). In this study of critical peer feedback, the “output” refers to the written feedback language by peers for their peer writings. This stage will be expressed as their artifacts of critical peer feedback in this study.

Based on the codes of critical peer feedback process in Nvivo 10, the output of critical peer feedback usually includes the following five processes: praising, error correcting, analyzing the writing tasks (WT), evaluating and creating. The five parts may not be all presented at each time, which is depended on the peers’ performance.

During the step of “CPF Output”, the first step of “praising” refers to the compliments that the peers will give some praising languages to compliment the writer and try to obtain the agreement and acceptance, and diminish the embarrassment for the further criticism. Praise is regarded as an important function in motivating, rewarding and enhancing self-esteem in feedback (Askew, 2000, p.7). The next step is to correct errors which is not very important for higher-level Business English writing, but it is a meta-cognitive habit for the Chinese students. The third step is to analyze the Business English writing tasks and requirements, and to check the items of each writing requirement. The fourth step is to evaluate and assess the fulfillment of the writing tasks, and conciseness and completeness of the syntax, pragmatic and rhetorical features, etc. The last is to study the creativity of the writing which is not only on the writing of wording, sentence patterns, and discourse; but also the attraction for a successful business communication such as affective languages, logic and rhetoric, etc. The five steps are the basic mental process of critical peer feedback. However, they may be presented partly in a process of critical peer feedback.

According to data analysis, the case participants insist that it is necessary for the writers to re-edit their writing after proof-reading and self-reflection. This activity shall be conducted depending on the writer’s self-reflection and judgment. The activities of proofreading and re-editing are also activity of rewriting. The case participants argue that rewriting is advisable for the improvement of Business English writing. For further critical peer feedback, the case participants believe that it is necessary to upload their rewritten writings to their Qzone weblog. These activities will not be ceased until they believe that their writing is more acceptable as an efficient and qualified business writing. After re-uploading the rewriting assignment, the other turn of critical peer feedback can be started among the peer to give their critical peer feedback again. In this way, the cycling of critical peer feedback is a new turn of facilitating and improving Business English writing, which may reach an even higher level of critical peer feedback.

## Recommendation

The models of peer feedback in EFL writing shall be furthered. According to the literature, Nelson and Schunn (2009) discuss the five feedback features in a proposed model of peer feedback. The five features are divided into two parts: 1) cognitive feature including summarization, specificity, explanation, and scope; and 2) affective feature with affective languages such as praise, and criticism. Timms *et al.* (2015) study the feedback model at the intelligent learning environment, which represents how learners notice, process, and understand feedback in the processing of feedback from cognitive psychology and neuroscience perspective.

In this study of critical peer feedback in EFL writing, critical skills are explored in the process of peer feedback. The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy is accepted in critical peer feedback, which emphasizes the six steps of critical thinking. The critical peer feedback model is concluded as the five steps including “intake”, “critical thinking”, “critical peer feedback output” and the “post-output”. Although this model is concluded in this qualitative case study



and not for generalization. It is meaningful for the further study of critical peer feedback. The model is suitable for large class instruction and online peer feedback environment. In the further study, this “critical peer feedback model” can be conducted in the practice of peer feedback to assess its efficiency. More critical thinking models could be explored in peer feedback. The researchers could also study their model of critical peer feedback in other cases.

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