# RALC

## Review of Applied Linguistics in China

*Issues in Language Learning and Teaching*

Volume 3

English Language Center

Shantou University
汕头大学英语语言中心

ISBN 978-7-04-022987-5

9 787040 229875 >

定价 16.00 元

Volume 3

*Supported by the Li Ka Shing Foundation*

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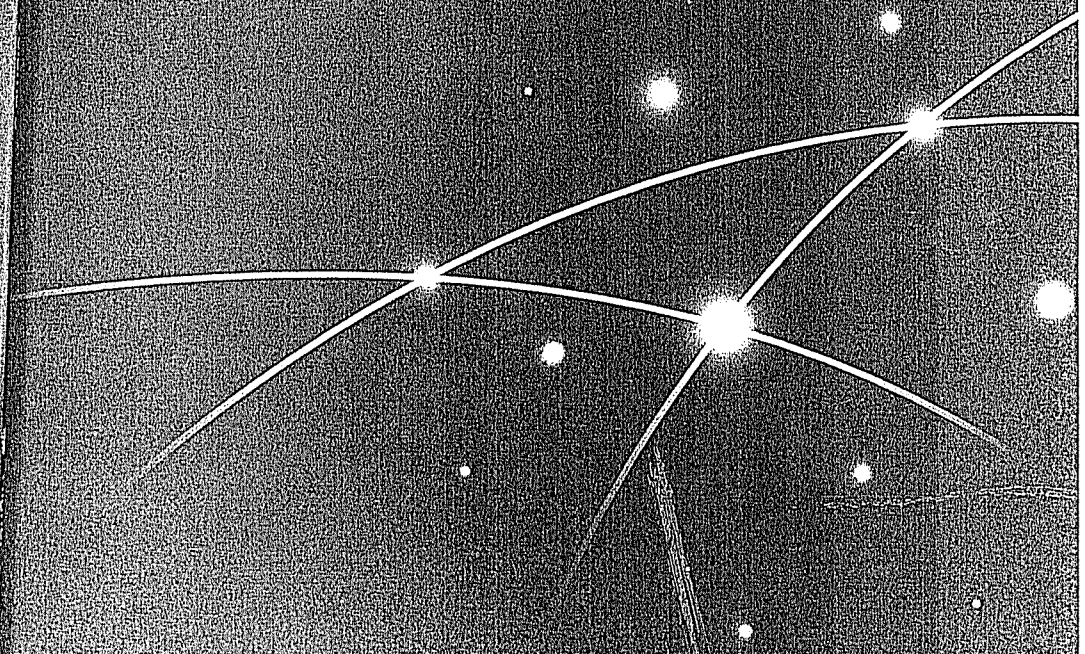

Higher Education Press

*Review of Applied Linguistics in China*

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Published by Higher Education Press
4 Dewai Dajie, Beijing 100011, China
http://www.hep.com.cn
http://www.hep.edu.cn

Printed in the People's Republic of China

ISBN 978-7-04-022987-5

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# Peer Feedback in Writing Classes: Teachers and Students Working Together

*Ruth Wong Liz England*
*Hong Kong Institute of Education*

**Ruth Wong's Question**

Context

I teach an English course at a teacher training institute in Hong Kong. The curriculum primarily focuses on writing skills and the course requires students to write expository essays and academic writing. Students are all 19-21 years of age and have never experienced nor been exposed to academic essay writing before. In our course, we usually complete a piece of writing every two weeks.

Problem

I have been teaching English for over seven years and must confess that marking student compositions is the most painful job in the profession because I feel the need to identify all language errors made by the students and correct them one by one. Because of the number of mistakes students made, I have been literally rewriting the whole piece of work for my students. No matter how carefully I mark the compositions, I am always, without failure, disappointed by the students' responses when they receive my comments. What disappoints me most is the fact that my students never seriously look at the mistakes they have made or how the mistakes should be corrected. The only thing they care about is the grade or the mark I give them. I feel that all my time and hard work are wasted. I always wonder why I need to spend so much time working so hard while students are not learning from their own mistakes.

Partial solution

Starting from this semester, I tried a new approach: peer editing. I asked students to pair up as "writing partners" and to provide feedback and support to each other. Meanwhile, grammatical and language items were introduced or revised. Whenever I had finished a couple of language or grammatical items, I asked the students to review their partner's work that had been completed for that week. They reviewed the structure of their partner's





work after I had finished teaching the organization skills of an expository essay. Afterwards, students were required to give feedback and write comments on their partner's work. I thought peer editing would increase students' sensitivity to English usage and writing, as well as reduce the heavy workload of marking every mistake. I assumed students would be more receptive to peer feedback than to teacher feedback. There was, after all, no power struggle between students. It was supposed to be a win-win teaching and learning approach.

However, peer review failed to meet my expectations. Perhaps because they were too polite or afraid to give negative feedback, students only gave each other positive feedback, such as, "I think you have done a good job," or "Well done!" or "Keep on." Students were reluctant to be frank and honest with their friends about their work. It seemed that they did not want to "hurt their friends' feelings" by giving negative feedback.

What is "constructive" to me is "negative" for students. I suspect that peer editing is a clash of cultures: East meets West. Youngsters need high levels of social acceptance and recognition from peers. By giving positive feedback to their friends, they expect that they in turn would get the same feedback from their friends on their papers. My colleagues confirmed my speculation when I revealed my difficulty in peer editing during a tea break. What should I do to demolish the Chinese cultural barrier and encourage them to give "genuine" feedback?

**Response from Liz England**

While wishing to address the real-world educational and writing needs of her students, Ruth also hopes to use her time efficiently, avoiding the long hours of marking that, for her, seem to be futile in their impact both on her students' learning and on their writing skill. Ruth identifies cultural differences as the source of this problem: In the West, where most of the research on peer feedback in writing has been done, students are expected to give and receive feedback in constructive ways. In Asia ( "The East" ), students are afraid to give negative feedback to their all-important peers. Still, her students cannot seem to use and implement the feedback that they receive, even following her grammar instruction.

To address Ruth's important comments on cultural differences in peer feedback, I turn to a few observations on Chinese education at the primary level in Hong Kong, where I have visited over thirty classrooms in the past year. While Ruth's students are nearly adults, they have all attended schools in Hong Kong similar to the ones I am describing.

East and West: Contexts of teaching

In the Chinese classrooms where I have observed, teachers are the unquestioned authority. "Good students" and "polite students" are those who rarely speak, never question, and never express any doubt about the words of the teacher. The teacher's role, in turn, is to be in full control of students' behavior in the classroom (Bond, 1991). This is slowly changing in Hong Kong. Still, the problem remains.

In many American classrooms, children are expected to be polite to their teachers and cooperate with him or her, as well as with each other. In contrast with Chinese children, most children in US schools are expected to work in a focused way on projects and in groups in which there is an expectation by the teacher, parents, and administrators that students will make mistakes, talk to each other and to their teacher, and, in general, take a great deal of responsibility for their own learning. When Chinese students, educated from early childhood onwards in a role and status similar to what I have described above, are asked to engage in a peer feedback activity, those students face many challenges and are likely to be confused or perhaps even angry: "Why doesn't the teacher provide feedback?" "How can I know how to tell my classmate what I like about his paper?" "What's the point of making me do this work?"

Parents will also wonder why their children, in a reputable school, are being asked to engage in what they consider to be the teacher's work: "Why is my child's teacher so lazy not to read and mark her paper?" "What is the principal thinking — hiring a teacher who doesn't even know how to grade my child's writing?"

When a decision is made to use peer feedback in Hong Kong schools, children must be provided necessary scaffolding, patience, and step-by-step training to learn how to give and receive





peer feedback. Parents too must understand the value of peer feedback as a teaching tool. Without careful support, students and parents are likely to be confused, angry or frustrated by a teacher who asks students to provide feedback on essays.

Here are two suggestions for teachers who want to help their students to learn to engage in effective peer feedback:

1. Prior to the peer feedback assignment, I would suggest engaging Hong Kong Chinese students in a carefully structured peer feedback training exercise containing the following possible parts:
    a. A teacher-led brainstorm activity about what makes a good essay, the role of group work, and the value of the steps in process writing. All of this is linked with the fact that students' grades are improved with the process writing approach;
    b. With the cooperation of one student (carefully chosen by the teacher), the teacher models how peer feedback is done. In the modeling stage, the teacher and her partner show the students how to talk, what to say, how to say it, and how to fill out a peer feedback form (prepared by the teacher).
2. Structuring of cooperative learning groups is a delicate and important process in classrooms (see Gao and Liu, 2006). The following steps might be helpful to Ruth and other teachers in this regard:
    a. Teacher structures groups, assigning students and roles, and asks them to sit so they can see and hear one another;
    b. Groups are asked to complete a peer feedback sheet (timed), with one student writing notes and the others providing information.

Peer feedback is very new and different from learning experiences students have had in the past and they need help with it. These first steps, or "baby steps," described above will yield

better results than one might find when those steps are omitted.

## Conclusion

In the teacher education classes I teach in Hong Kong, I have noticed many changes in the ways some teachers address student assessment. One teacher put it this way: "Assessment is for learning. Through peer feedback in language arts - reader's theater - students show enthusiasm for the learning by squeezing time out for writing drafts of scripts and giving each other effective peer feedback in their work.

Another teacher points out that parents, administrators and teachers must work together to deliver (what she calls) "a common message" to the students: "In order to promote the concept of process learning, all stakeholders should work together so as to teach and learn effectively."

To address unwarranted praise and often "thin" critical analysis in peer feedback activities, students might provide quantifiable feedback rather than evaluative comments. Peer feedback questions might include questions (or variations) of the following:

1. I found ____ errors in use of singular and plural.

(More effective than, "This paper contained many/few grammar errors." )

2. "What I wanted to know more about in this paper was _____."

(Better than one that is worded thus: "I noticed that something was missing from this paper: _____" )

Students giving feedback should always be encouraged to provide specific examples. Students who receive feedback should have clear understanding about what the feedback means and how to use it to revise their writing.

Peer feedback is one of many ways of providing students with input on their writing. Multiple assessment experiences - including peer feedback - can lead them to better learning and a more enjoyable time at school. Peer feedback, when a part of careful assessment, can provide information to parents concerned about effectiveness of instruction in schools where they send their children.





## The authors

Ruth Wong is a teaching fellow of The Hong Kong Institute of Education. Her research interests include ESL teaching methodology, learning motivation and its relations to culture.

Liz England has worked as a language teacher educator worldwide including undergraduates in Hong Kong and in-service programs in Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

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## *Understanding Phonology (2nd edition)*

Carlos Gussenhoven and Haike Jacobs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

*Understanding Phonology* belongs to the 'Understanding Language Series,' which is designed to offer linguistic information at an introductory level, including overviews of many theories. This book is an excellent choice for an introductory Phonology class at the college level, as well as an excellent introduction for other readers who are interested in an overview of phonology fundamentals.

The book is organized into fifteen chapters. The first two chapters are an introduction to phonology offering background information that is needed to understand the rest of the text. The first chapter, 'The production of speech,' provides an excellent foundation by introducing (or reviewing) phonetics and including a copy of the IPA chart and a discussion of speech production mechanisms. Chapter 2, 'Some typology: sameness and difference,' shows readers some of the cross-linguistic phonological similarities and differences and their implications, giving phonology the opportunity not only to describe the constituents of the sounds humans make, but also to describe the patterns of how those sounds are combined as 'variations on the same theme' across languages (p. 32).

The next several chapters are the core of phonological theory and its application to the study of languages. Chapter 3, 'Making the form fit,' examines loan words and how speakers adjust phonologically to be able to incorporate non-native words into their vocabulary. This chapter is also the introduction to the two main theories in phonology: the traditional derivational or rule-based approach, and the constraint-based approach Optimality Theory.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 - 'Underlying and surface representations,' 'Distinctive features,'

and 'Ordered rules' - go into more detail about the rule-based approach and the relationships between these rules. Chapter 7 is a case study applying the information from the previous chapter to 'the diminutive suffix in Dutch' (p. 95).

The rest of the book breaks away from the linear model moving into more nonlinear models of phonological representation. Chapter 8 begins discussing the different 'Levels of representation' both lexical and beyond. Chapter 9, 'Representing tone,' introduces the auto-segmental model which is useful for discussing features that appear on different levels or tiers of the phonological representation. Chapter 10, 'Between the segment and the syllable,' further illuminates this nonlinear model with CV tiers and segmental duration. These chapters also explain the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP), the Maximum Onset Principle (MOP), and moraic theory.

Chapters 11, 'Feature geometry,' and 12, 'Exploiting the feature tree,' extend auto-segmental phonology into a system that helps show the structure of the combinations of hierarchical patterns of features by using trees to illustrate 'many-to-one associations'± (p. 185). The authors foreshadow in chapter 12 that although feature geometry shows the patterns of the hierarchical features better than the linear listing of features, even this theory cannot account for 'transparent segments,' which is one of the arguments for OT (p. 185).

Chapters 13 and 14 discuss both linear and nonlinear stress patterns. Chapter 13 clarifies how stress is 'not a phonological feature...but a structural position' (p. 186). Chapter 14 offers an OT view of why the