Types of Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback (WAPF) in Developing Writing Skills among Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT: *Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback (WAPF) is a learner-centered approach that encourages dynamic learning via online communication to yield better writing products. It allows learners the opportunity to write for authentic audience in a less threatening environment engaging collaborative critical analysis of essays. However, little is known about the types of Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedbacks that are suitable to ascertain the success of the approach to enhance writing skill. Hence, the objective of this study is to identify the different types of Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback using weblog. The respondents consisted of 10 undergraduate students from three institutions, participating in a web-based process writing for the period of two months. The data was collected from 2 web-based feedback transcripts. The findings revealed that there were three types of Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedbacks: social, affective, and cognitive. The feedbacks attained appeared to be useful for the respondents to improve their writing skills. The cognitive feedbacks were critical enough to make the authors reflect on their work and later make the necessary changes or improvements in their essays. Meanwhile, the social and affective feedbacks coupled with the appropriate strategy and language use were seen to have also contributed to the success in the WAPF.*

KEY WORDS: *Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback, analysis of essays, enhance writing skill, and social, affective and cognitive feedbacks.*

Introduction

Web-based asynchronous learning environment has expanded the possibilities of collaborative learning, particularly for writing development. It can be practiced by having peers provide online feedbacks to their friends' essays in dyads or groups.

The teaching of writing in Malaysia is often teacher-centered and exam-oriented (Chisholm, 1991; and Noor Hanim, 2000). Classroom writing is very much predicted and unnatural as it is taught not for an authentic purpose. It is, on the other hand, taught in line with "*examimitation genres that comply with the teacher's instruction*" (Cadle, 2005). Besides that, teachers often opt for Product Approach to teach writing. In this approach, teachers tend to give directive feedback to the students' essays; spelling out precisely how to unravel ambiguities of accuracy and

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fluency (Hyland, 2000; and Coit, 2004). This is considered to be detrimental as this would mean that student's revisions are made based on the teacher's preoccupation, not on their own discretion. In other words, the students do not have the freedom or autonomy to shape their own writing. In such circumstance, the authorship of the written product is also dismissed. It is upsetting that the loss of control over their writing would produce learners who are receptive, killing the potentials that they originally possess. Nonetheless, this predicament could be remedied through the practice of web-based peer feedback.

The Need for Web-based Peer Feedback

With web-based peer review, students will be able to experience to write for real life audience as their work is viewed by peers who are of the same status and interests. The writer could discover any mismatch between the writer's contention and the reader's perception of the text. In other words, is meaning- making taking place? The author is also able to gain different perspectives of opinions from various sources; seeing things that are initially possible or vice versa (Hui, 2005). Any misinterpretation or ambiguity can be remedied in the negotiation process during peer feedback sessions. To add, by incorporating suggestions from peers would accuante the sense of audience, eventually advancing one's communication efficiency (Sengupta, 2001).

Web-based learning has been proven to facilitate learning in peer feedback practices as it has many advantages. In view of its virtual reality, this type of learning environment is less threatening (Ertmer, 2007). The allowance for anonymity in cyberspace lowers learners' affective filter, thus stimulating more constructive and sincere feedbacks as compared to face-to-face responses (Paulus, 1999). Furthermore, text-based online feedback rather than oral-based feedback also saves high-anxiety learners or low achievers from embarrassment to speak in English. What's more, the text-based and delayed time enable the authors a substantial period of time to reflect on the feedbacks in order for them to revise their drafts.

However, to date, there are still not many empirical studies that have been carried out to investigate the effect of Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback (WAPF) to enhance writing proficiency in Malaysia. Hence, this study is hoped to provide some insights on this issue. The present study was undertaken as a preliminary phase of a larger study, to gauge the types of Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedback among undergraduates, in order to see the effectiveness of such learning approach. The questions posed were: (1) What were the types of Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedbacks?; and (2) How were the Web-based Asynchronous Peer Feedbacks given?

Methodology

This study was carried out in a qualitative manner. The respondents consisted of 10 undergraduates from three institutions. They participated in a web-based

asynchronous (weblog) process writing for two months, engaging in three essay drafts (1st, 2nd and final draft) and 2 online peer feedbacks on weblogs. The respondents functioned both as feedback receivers and readers.

The main data collection for this study was the online peer feedbacks given. The data was then analyzed and interpreted accordingly. Data from 2 respondents were extracted to demonstrate the findings.

Findings

The data revealed that the respondents or authors in this study received supportive, constructive, and global WAPFs from their peers. The WAPFs can be divided into 3: social, affective, and cognitive.

First, **on the Social Feedback**. Social feedbacks refer to the social responses given to the authors in order to establish a good rapport among them which would in turn build a trustworthy community. Since not all the respondents were from the same location, and the learning environment was virtual, there was a need for them to establish a certain degree of relationship that would enhance the flow of interactions between them. It was necessary to set a learning environment that was conducive for everyone to learn in if learning were to take place. These social interactions, according to L.S. Vygotsky (1978:86), are subsequently vital for learners' cognitive development.

Second, **on the Affective Feedback**. Affective feedbacks relate to the psychological impact that the feedbacks brought; supporting the learning process. Psychological impact is believed to be vital for peer response to take effect (Liu & Hansen, 2005). The affective WAPFs unequivocally functioned as external motivators to kindle the author's intrinsic motivation. As a result, better drafts were produced each time as proven in Draft 2 and 3 respectively.

Third, **on the Cognitive Feedback**. Cognitive feedbacks are the feedbacks that provoke thinking, reflection of thoughts of areas that might have been overlooked. The feedbacks were divided into 3 sections: content, rhetoric, and grammar. All of these sections play significant roles in scaffolding the author's drafts. This type of feedback is also termed as global feedbacks (Liu & Hansen, 2005).

Case Study

A case study is presented to provide a description of the WAPFs received paying attention to the social, affective, and cognitive feedbacks for the two phases of feedbacks offered in Draft 1 and 2.

The case study was Ann, a 24 years girl who wrote about her life account of the Past, Present, and Future. Although the title seems to bring the readers to three different phases of life, Ann's main focus was actually about her past. The story about her being an advanced learner and winning a logo competition were highlights of her good memories. Meanwhile, the abdominal pain that she suffered for ten years was an illustration about her bad experience. She talked a bit about

her present life as a teacher trainee and ended the essay by a contemplating issue about her future career.

The case study will explicate the 3 types of WAPFs: social, affective, and cognitive descriptively. All descriptions will begin with WAPFs in Draft 1, followed by WAPFs in Draft 2.

A. Case Study: Ann

Social WAPFs (Draft 1). The social feedbacks came in many forms namely giving opinion, agreeing to opinion, advice, and sharing of experience and knowledge.

Many readers gave their opinions on the issue that Ann raised about her life experiences. Some said that experience is the best teacher; another noted that it is parts and parcels of life. These responses displayed that they shared common understandings which in turn enhanced the social bonds among themselves:

> There are many things that we can learn from our past. Experience can be our best teacher. From your story, I would to say this is life. Everyone will go through bitter sweet of their life.

Another reader did not correspond to Ann directly but rather agreed with the opinion given by other readers to Ann's text. This reader, Asiah, later gave her own point of view. This kind of interaction escalated the relationship not only between Ann and this particular reader, but with other readers as well, establishing the sense of community:

> *Yup,* I agree that life is like a wheel, sometimes U r on top of success, and sometimes U would fall down. Experience is the best teacher, so don't worry they would teach U everything (Asiah).

The readers also responded to Ann's text in a form of advice. Tulip advised Ann not to repeat what the teacher who had neglected her needs has done to her, on the contrary, this lesson could shape her into a more alert educator in due time. Meanwhile, Nan wrote from a religious perspective advising Ann to take her experience as a test from the Al-Mighty Allah and that she should endure whatever challenges with patience:

> About the teacher, maybe it's a good lesson for you to not repeat the same thing as what she/he had done (Tulip).
> So as human with good thinking, we should take that as experience to improve ourselves. As a Muslim, we also will be testing by our God. So what ever happen we should go through with the patient and always remember Allah SWT (Nan).

Through sharing of experiences that were alike, the reader and Ann were able to connect with one another. Tulip shared a similar school experience of boredom that made her lose her attention in class, supporting what Ann had to go through during her schooling life when her needs were not fulfilled, thus further establishing the relationship between Ann and her online community:

> I experienced the same thing too when I was in primary school, I became bored and ended up drawing doodles on a blank paper (Tulip).

Not only did the readers share similar experience but also knowledge on the issue of advanced learners. Dian opined that it would be of great advantage if the education system in this country could implement a system for advanced learners as being executed abroad. She emphasized that ignorance about the matter only contributes to the nation's loss:

> It is good if the teacher know how to cater their students who was advanced from the other students like what the education system abroad have been practice [...] it is such as waste when we neglect and don't know how to handle this matter (Dian).

In the Draft 2, Ann did not obtain any form of social feedback at this phase.

Affective WAPFs (Draft1). Ann obtained two types of affective feedbacks that supported the learning process which were praises and confidence uplift. Ann received two praises for her essay at this stage. Tini said it was an interesting story of a life experience, whilst Yati thought that Ann was able to highlight the important points in her life:

> Ur story is interesting n I like it (Tini).
> Your essay is clear and you have pointed out some important points in your life (Yati).

Another type of affective feedback related to uplifting Ann's confidence by acknowledging that Ann was capable of improving her text by elaborating her story well. This reader, Wafa, knew Ann in person and therefore believed in Ann's capability:

> I know you can elaborate your story well (Wafa).

In the Draft 2, Ann received two types of affective feedbacks for this phase, which were praises and well wish.

After making the necessary revisions to Draft 2, evidently, Ann received more praises. Her readers were satisfied with the elaboration and organization of the draft, which clarified her arguments. Tini particularly adored Ann's story about her primary school life, Salina could then enjoy her story, and Dian understood what she was trying to convey. Meanwhile, Tulip complimented on the flow of Ann's essay which appeared better:

> It was obvious to me that u had elaborated your point. That was very good. I like to read your story during your primary school. I can see that you are bright girl (Tini).
> Your essay looks better than the previous one. I enjoy reading your story the way you explained the situations and experiences are good. Making me enjoy for reading them (Salina).
> This draft is better than the 1ˢᵗ ones. You have developed your essay by adding more elaboration on each event that had happened. Now I can really understand the story (Dian).
> The organization of your essay seemed to become smoother (Tulip).

A few readers wished Ann for her Final draft. Apparently, the readers were influenced with each other when giving this feedback since all of them corresponded in sequence. Nevertheless, these well wishes played considerable roles in the accomplishment of Ann's Draft 3 or Final draft.

> Keep up the good work for the final draft (Yati).
> Good luck for your final draft (Salina).

Cognitive WAPFs, (1) Content Section (Draft 1). Ann's peers raised three main issues in the content section. First, Tulip was intrigued by the type of sickness that Ann suffered for ten years but this issue was not clearly explicated. Tulip wanted to know what really happened to Ann as she merely mentioned the sickness as "abdominal pain" in the text leaving the reader in a state of perplexity. To unravel the bewilderment, Tulip suggested that Ann elaborate on the pain:

> Maybe you can [*explain*] more on you [*sickness and how it gives effect*] on you (Tulip).

The second issue raised was justification on the claim that Ann's teacher could not cater to her needs as an advanced learner when she was in primary school. The readers wanted Ann to further clarify in what way did the teacher neglected her needs. Although Ann has implied it as "a little bit bored to learn something I already knew" in her text, these particular readers apparently could not see it as the justification:

> I [*want to know more*] on [*how your teacher can't cater your need*]? I what way? (Tini).
> I think the essay could be more [*interesting*] if you describe more about [*the paint that you have suffered*] (Dian).

The third issue was on the focus of content of Ann's essay. The reader, Yati, thought that Ann has written too many points, describing her life experiences in three different phases with different experiences. This has made the text lose its focus. Thus, the reader suggested that Ann narrow down her scope to one significant event that gave great impact in her life:

> I can see that you have lots of things to tell. I would be [*interesting*] if you can [*focus*] on one side or significant event that gives the most meaningful experience in your life (Yati).

(Draft 2). There was only one content feedback that Ann obtained for Draft 2. This feedback touched on the focus of her essay content for the second time. Since Ann did not alter the focus of content as suggested by Yati, Yati once again voiced out her concern. This time she justified her argument by suggesting how Ann could focus. Yati thought that Ann could either concentrate on her *Hari Raya* celebrations or her studies which could also be presented in the form of Past, Present, and Future, or mark on the most interesting memories in her life:

But I just one to give an idea that you can tell Ur past, present and future about Ur *Hari Raya* celebration or your studies […]. Perhaps u can cut down some unnecessary points and stick to the most interesting things that happen like Ur experience in school during childhood (Yati).

(2) Rhetoric section (Draft 1). Ann's readers reviewed two areas of the rhetoric section. First, they commented on Ann's paragraph. It was found that Ann's introduction was completely irrelevant to her topic. Apparently, Ann talked about some other issue in the first paragraph, which really seemed odd. It was in the second paragraph that she actually introduced her essay. Therefore, Wafa asked Ann to remove it from the text:

First, it would be [*nice*] if you can [*separate the first paragraph*] with the others. I [*does not related with your topic after all*] (Wafa).
I was quite confused why on earth U r complaining about the blog and all of sudden U r talking about the EID [*Aidil Fitri*] celebration (Rose).

The other comment on rhetoric was on Ann's organization. Dian found that her text needed to be organized as not only her paragraphs were not in sequence but she also had the tendency to jump from one issue to another. One reader found this "distracting". However, the readers did not suggest how Ann could reorganize her essay:

And I think that you [*might want to reorganize*] your story in of the paragraph so that there will be [*a smooth flow*] (Dian).
U [*may arrange the point better*] (Asiah).

(Draft 2). In Draft 2, Ann received comments on paragraphing. Three readers were of the same view even though Ann refuted when the first comment was given.

Tini started off the feedback on Ann's paragraph. She highlighted that there was an imbalance in the length of Ann's paragraphs as some were too long whilst others were short:

Well, I think you should balance your paragraph in good manner. Some of your paragraph was too long and it was odd to me (Tini).

Ann ensued with a rebuttal claiming that Tini was wrong. She claimed the length of paragraph depends on the elaboration made by the individual author. If there were substantial needs to support certain statements, then the author has the autonomy to write as much as he would like to:

But in my opinion, the length of a paragraph would not effect the flow of the essay. Actually, paragraph is made to differentiate points. The elaboration under each point is up to the writer (Ann).

Ann's refute was however counter-argued by another reader, Rose. Rose who provided a more concrete justification was in favor of Tini's viewpoint. In her opinion, Ann has one too many main points in one paragraph that needed to be separated. By doing so, Rose believed the flow of Ann's story will be improved:

> I'm in the same shoes with Tini, some of the paragraphs are too long. I agree paragraphs are made to separate the points but even in one big paragraph U still have many points that can be separated. I don't think separating Ur paragraph into 3 main points of past, present, and future are good enough as u have lots to say in every main points separating paragraph won't really affect Ur story's flow actually and readers still now that U r talking about. U can use the linking verbs. It is just to ease readers in reading Ur story (Rose).

Another feedback on paragraphing came from Salina who thought that paragraphs 5 and 6 dealt with the same main point, therefore suggested them to be joint:

> I think that it would be interesting if paragraph 5 & 6 are combined. It is just that I think that it comes from the same point and separating seems odd. It is just my opinion (Salina).

(3) Grammar section (Draft 1). In the feedback for Draft 1, Ann received two types of grammar feedbacks, which were specific and general. For general, the reader only mentioned that Ann has a few grammatical mistakes. Ann would have to reflect on her text and search for the mistakes herself. In the specific feedback, the reader commented on Ann's spelling error:

> There are a few grammatical mistakes. Maybe you can review it back and correct it for your second draft (Wafa).
> Spelling error: I always taught should I always thought (Tulip).

(Draft 2). Meanwhile in the feedback for Draft 2, Ann obtained specific feedback for her grammar. This time, the reader corrected on other grammar errors. Tulip pointed out specifically which parts were wrong and gave the correct forms:

> "I really like to participate in [...]".
> Should be "*I really liked to participate in [...]*".
> "I was easily get bored to learn something".
> There were two verbs there you put which are was and get it should be
> "*I got easily bored to learn something*" (Tulip)

Discussion

It was evident that the respondents in this study were able to provide constructive WAPFs which were divided into three types: social, affective, and cognitive.

Social and affective WAPFs acquired were essential to support learning. As propagated by L.S. Vygotsky (1978), the author was able to develop her/his writing skill with the collaboration of the readers. Each played a role in scaffolding and

supporting novel knowledge or refining existing concepts through the socialization process. The inviting negotiation in the meaning-making process has wooed the authors to perceive the online feedbacks optimistically.

Cognitive WAPFs were necessary to provide "global feedback" which according to J. Liu and J.G. Hansen (2005) is significant for text development. On the contrary to surface feedback, global feedback is comprehensive as it does not only focus on trivial errors like grammar but also on more crucial elements in a text which are content and rhetoric. It was proven that the readers in this study did comply with this condition. They were able to comment on the content by providing different views, agreeing to issues raised, raising awareness and suggesting solutions to problems. With the genuine intention of helping their peer improve writing, it was believed that all the drafts were read thoroughly producing deep level reviews where "*they make connections among ideas and able to follow the writer's logic, implicit meaning, and intent*" (Liu & Hansen, 2005). As for rhetoric, the readers could make judgments on the suitability of organization and paragraphing, two aspects which are rudimentary in writing composition. Grammar errors were not marginalized either. The readers provided general as well as specific grammar feedbacks to the author.

All the essay drafts obtained critical analysis. Both negative and positive aspects were evaluated fairly. Although many of the feedbacks were negative, where authors weaknesses was brought under the spotlight, they were not destructive. In other words, the feedbacks were not condemnations or criticisms which could paralyze the author's mental faculty, instead they were pure enrichments. The text weaknesses were not merely underscored but also clarified and remedied for the sake of improvement. Being in a culture that upholds communal harmony, readers were fully aware that offending one's feelings must as much as possible be evaded. Hence, they were very tactful at conveying their feedbacks, although at certain times the words used may appear stern.

The positive feedbacks attained further reinforced the impact of WAPF by providing the necessary support to the author in the process of developing a better writing performance. The positive support provided by the readers operated as external motivation that drove the author's internal motivation. Words of advice, praises, agreement to issue and sharing experience were invaluable catalysts to encourage the author to continue her/his attempt to produce a much convincing composition.

The WAPFs were also strategized in ways that were acceptable by the recipient. Most of the WAPFs commenced with positive, enlightening remarks where advice and praises were amongst the favorite medium of communication. This was later pursued by comments that dealt with the author's flaws. Lastly, in some comments well wishes were utilized to end the feedback. By using this technique, even if the author was taken aback by the negative comments, she/he would recover from the depressions eventually by the positive feedbacks. This psychological approach which is also famous amongst eastern society was approved by the author.

When feedbacks were made they were rather suggestive than directive. Sometimes, they were also persuasive. In the feedback for draft 1 particularly, where

the readers were at the stage of making acquaintance with each other, the language use was carefully structured to sustain harmony in the relationship. Approving phrases like "*how about, maybe, I think, it will be interesting […]*" were often used to deliver the readers' messages. Hence, author was not forced to take the feedbacks into account. But if the author decided to adopt the feedbacks, she/he was not disheartened as the language use was filled with gentleness.

Conclusion

To conclude, the respondents in this study were able to provide meaningful WAPFs to the author touching on social, affective, and cognitive domains. The cognitive feedbacks were critical enough to make the author reflect on her/his work and later make the necessary changes or improvements in her essays. Meanwhile, the social and affective feedbacks coupled with the appropriate strategy and language use were seen to have also contributed to the success in the WAPF. Thus, WAPF is wise to be practiced to develop writing skills amongst L2 learners.

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