

Chinese graduate students' perceptions of group size, efficiency and conflict in peer response

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ABSTRACT

"Negative" results regarding peer responders' behavior and attitudes reported in studies involving international ESL students have stimulated much discussion. In particular, studies conducted in Chinese settings have raised concerns about students' apathy and reluctance to give negative feedback to or disagree with peers. This paper examines Chinese graduate students' views on conflict and two other aspects which have not been addressed in ESL peer response research: efficiency (which is possibly an important factor in Chinese students' receptivity to peer response) and group size in the context of a shortened peer response procedure. Three surveys were administered (after the first peer response session, after the fourth session and at the end of the course) to elicit the views of 35 graduate ESL students from China regarding group size, efficiency and conflict. Overall, the level of the students' receptivity to the peer response activities was positive. The survey data suggest that efficiency was not a significant concern in the context of the shortened peer response procedure. Interestingly, students' self-reports indicated a willingness to explore different opinions and disagree with each other. The students expressed a clear preference for groups of threes, apparently because avoidance of conflict is more likely to occur in dyads than in three-member groups. Taken together, the data indicate that the students' views of group size, efficiency and conflict management were intertwined and raise the question of whether students' behaviors and attitudes may be influenced by contextual factors and not only by cultural factors as argued in previous studies.

KEYWORDS: *peer response, Chinese ESL graduate students, size of peer response group, conflict in peer response, efficiency in peer response*

Introduction

Research findings in support of peer response in the context of the process approach in L1 writing classes have fuelled research on the use of peer response among L2 learners. Most of these L2 studies were conducted in American universities among international undergraduates working in heterogeneous groups with members speaking different native languages (such as Berg, 1999; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Stanley, 1992; Tang & Tithcott, 1999; Zhang, 1995). ESL studies have, in general, highlighted benefits of peer response (such as Berg, 1999; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Mendoca & Johnson,

1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1992/1993; Stanley, 1992), but some studies have also produced mixed or negative results (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Tang & Tithcott, 1999, Zhang, 1995). Various pedagogical issues, in relation to such negative or mixed results, have been raised in the literature and the applicability of peer response in ESL contexts has been questioned.

One pedagogical issue is that of students taking a "prescriptive" stance and focusing on "correctness" (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996). For example, Nelson & Carson (1998) found, in their microethnographic study that the five international students focused on finding mistakes and concluded that the peer response activity was ineffective as the students' behavior reflected a product-oriented view of writing that runs contrary to the goal of process writing.

An issue that has been raised by researchers and students in the studies is inadequacy or limitations of students as critics. For example, this issue was a common complaint among the participants in Mangelsdorf's (1992) study, with student ignorance, and/or vagueness of comments as primary objections. This issue has been resolved partially by training, as demonstrated in studies highlighting the need to train students to make effective responses. In particular, since peer response is foreign to most ESL students, teachers have been urged to consider appropriate ways to prepare students for the role of being a peer evaluator (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Murphy, 1992). Generally, studies on peer response include some form of training such as modelling and/or peer response forms. Several studies have looked at the adequacy of such general training by studying the effects of more extensive and specific training. The studies by Stanley (1992) and Berg (1999) examined the effects of extensive training on peer response skills to prepare the students for the task of making effective responses. Stanley (1992) compared the interactions of L2 international ESL freshmen who received extensive training and those of students who only participated in a one-hour demonstration session. The results showed that the extensive training resulted in more productive conversations. Berg's (1999) study, involving a larger group of international ESL students, found that compared to untrained students, trained students made more meaningful revisions and their second drafts also showed greater improvement. While ESL teachers are probably supportive of providing training, they may have to contend with time constraints in relation to the institutional framework or resistance from ESL students who may find training sessions for peer response too time-consuming as compared to traditional ESL teaching activities. Students' frustration with inefficiency has been raised by Leki & Carson (1994) in the more general context of EAP writing courses for ESL undergraduates and by Porto (2001) in the context of cooperative peer response writing groups. This concern is understandable given that time-consuming writing activities do not seem to directly address their immediate needs in language learning.

Another issue raised by participants and researchers is students' anxiety over giving honest feedback to their peers. In Tang & Tithcott's study (1999), journal entries of 12 international ESL university students revealed feelings of anxiety over giving negative feedback. This reluctance to criticise, apparently related to a desire

to maintain harmony, seems to be more pronounced in cultural backgrounds with a large power distance, as suggested by Nelson & Carson (1998) in their discussion of the differences between the three Chinese students and two Spanish students. They found that for the Spanish students, maintaining positive social interactions was secondary to helping their peers improve their writing, while the Chinese participants were more concerned about maintaining group harmony and were reluctant to criticise their peers, disagree with their peers and claim authority as readers. Considering that one main aim of peer response is to generate feedback that helps student writers make revisions, Carson & Nelson (1996) questioned the usefulness of peer response if few suggestions are made or if students are more interested in maintaining positive group relations than in helping each other with their writing.

Surprisingly, anxiety over giving negative feedback on peers' writing and disagreeing with their peers do not seem to be critical issues in reported findings for homogeneous peer groups of Chinese tertiary students in EFL settings in Asia. Studies in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China have highlighted positive outcomes of peer response (such as Curtis, 2001; Huang, 1998; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Lockhart & Ng, 1995) while negative perceptions, such as feelings of inadequacy in assessing their peers' writing (Curtis, 2001) and confusion over differences in opinions (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998) seem to be problems for a minority. Nevertheless, such negative findings may require a more critical examination for two reasons. First, in the study by Curtis (2001), although a minority (30.1%) agreed that they did not know how to mark their peers' writing, a significantly high percentage (40.8%) chose to remain 'neutral'. Second, in the survey administered by Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang (1998), although problems were cited by only 7% of the students, it must be noted that the survey did not consider the possibility of ambivalence—students chose between two options ('I prefer to have feedback from other students as one type of feedback on my writing.' and 'I prefer not to have feedback from other students on my writing.') and were asked to write only a brief explanation for their preference. The reported data may provide a biased picture since the survey did not consider the fact that students holding a generally positive view of peer response may have valid concerns. Hence there is a need to obtain a more objective and accurate picture of Chinese students' reactions to peer response, that is, to examine both the positive and negative aspects perceived by all students, regardless of whether their overall view of the activity is favourable or not.

To address this need, the present study attempted to provide a more balanced picture of Chinese students' perceptions of peer response by taking into account both perceived positive and negative aspects. Positive outcomes of peer response, the general focus of other peer response studies involving homogeneous Chinese peer groups, are not the focus here, but are included so that students' concerns can be objectively interpreted in the context of the general level of receptivity or resistance to peer response. Another point to note is that variation exists in actual procedures used in peer response studies in the literature. In general, procedures used in peer response studies are quite time-consuming. Due to time constraints in course scheduling, this study used a shortened peer response procedure (key

features of this procedure including the rationale are discussed in the next section).

This paper examines Chinese students' views of three aspects of peer response in the context of the shortened procedure. The first aspect, in relation to the above point raised by Carson & Nelson (1996), is the extent to which students address differences in opinion and the extent to which they avoid conflict during the peer response activity. The second aspect is the extent to which students perceive inefficiency as a problem in peer response. As mentioned in the review, ESL students may understandably value efficiency and prefer learning activities that directly address their immediate needs in language learning. The third aspect is group size, which may be important from the learners' perspective since their preferences for group size may be motivated by valid concerns, as demonstrated in Peacock's (1998) study among Hong Kong university students in the more general context of ESL group work. Interestingly, peer response research in ESL contexts has not examined the factor of group size though the influence of group size on student interaction and time requirements is recognised to be important considerations (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p.186). In peer response studies, group size varies from two (such as Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mendoca & Johnson, 1994; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996) to groups of four or five (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Nelson & Murphy, 1993). In this paper, students' preferences for the peer response in pairs versus groups of three are examined; groups of threes were chosen because earlier attempts using dyads were unsuccessful¹.

The present study differs from earlier studies in two key aspects. Firstly, though the peer groups are homogeneous in that only Chinese students are involved, the context differs from the setting in the above studies conducted in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China. In the latter, learners are in an EFL setting and English is not the medium of instruction or the working language. In the present study, the participants are foreign students from the People's Republic of China at the National University of Singapore where English is the medium of instruction and the multi-racial context of Singapore also means that English is more widely used beyond the university since English is the working language. The second difference is that the participants are graduate students. Most studies on peer response were conducted in settings involving ESL undergraduates, and there is very little research on views of ESL graduate students on peer response. Compared to undergraduate ESL students who leave their home country at a younger age, older graduate students may face more difficulties when adjusting to language teaching practices that differ significantly from those in their home country which they are accustomed to. Their views of peer response, the way they handle differences in opinion, and their views on efficiency and group size cannot be generalised from results of peer response studies on undergraduate ESL students.

¹ My initial attempts to introduce peer response to my Chinese students in semesters prior to the study reported here involved students working in pairs. There was little interaction as partners were mostly reticent about giving feedback or suggestions.

Method

Context

The study was conducted in the context of a 12-week writing course for foreign graduate students (mostly from the People's Republic of China) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Foreign students admitted to graduate programmes had met the university's required threshold of 580 for TOEFL (paper-based). To ensure that the foreign graduate students are able to cope with the academic demands in the educational context at NUS where English is used for all aspects of teaching and learning, they are required to take a placement test² if their last degree was obtained from a non-English medium university. The placement test is conducted by the Centre for English Language Communication of NUS and those with test scores below the exemption level have to take Graduate English Courses³.

Participants

A total of 35 foreign graduate students (from the People's Republic of China) from the faculty of Engineering at the National University of Singapore (NUS) took part in this study. The participants were taking the Graduate English Course (Intermediate level) in the semester of January to April 2001 and belonged to three tutorial groups (out of 26) taught by the researcher. They were in the early stage of adjusting to the learning-teaching environment at NUS (since the majority arrived within the previous six months). In terms of language learning, they were also adjusting to a significantly different context—from the large College English classes in China (of 50 to 60 students) in which writing is allotted a limited amount of time (Wei & Chen, 2003) to the small language classes at NUS (of 12 on the average) focusing primarily on writing.

Course description

The 12-week Graduate English Course (Intermediate level) aimed to raise the proficiency level of the students' written English for academic writing. The participants attended two 2-hour tutorials each week.

In the first three weeks, the students completed two collaborative writing tasks:

- (1) a three-paragraph essay on a cause-effect topic and
- (2) a three-paragraph essay on a compare-contrast topic.

In weeks 4 to 8, the students completed the third and fourth collaborative writing tasks:

² Students write an expository essay which is assessed in terms of grammar, syntax, cohesion and organisation. Test results showed the need for significant improvement in grammatical accuracy and organisation of ideas at macro, paragraph and sentence levels.

³ Students pursuing master's degrees were required to take Graduate English Course (Intermediate level) which is primarily a writing course with oral tasks forming a minor component. Writing skills form the focus of the course because needs assessment in earlier semesters showed that the students generally had better oral than writing skills. Students pursuing doctoral degrees took Graduate English Course (Advanced level) after the Intermediate level course.

- (3) three Results-and-Discussion paragraphs based on given survey data and
- (4) three Analysis paragraphs in response to a news article presenting a position.

Peer response was incorporated into four writing tasks (refer to Table A1 of Appendix 1 for the description and schedule of the tasks).

The shortened peer response procedure

The shortened peer response procedure used in this study (shown in Tables 1a and 1b) can be completed in two 2-hour sessions in contrast to procedures used in previous studies requiring 4 sessions or more (Appendix 1 Table A3). The first three stages involve collaborative writing and a brief 'training' period. In Stages 4 and 5, students first discuss and then give feedback to another group's writing (in terms of organisation of ideas at the paragraph level and the adequacy of supporting ideas), seek clarification where necessary and/or offer suggestions for improvement. Group discussions in stages 4 and 5 were not recorded on audio or videotape as this would have hindered the discussions (observations indicated that the students were more self-conscious and group discussions were 'quieter' whenever the researcher listened in on the discussions).

As shown in Table 1a, the "preparation period" to train the learners on how to give feedback is short (because the course schedule did not permit more time for training). The briefing was not intended to provide the training or modeling recommended in previous research. As a partial solution, indirect 'training' or modeling was incorporated at stage 7 of the procedure (providing teacher feedback). The students, in the process of comparing their responses and the teacher's, may identify some "guidelines" on giving responses. It should also be noted that with the option of providing one or more sessions of training on pieces of writing selected by the teacher, there is probably an underlying assumption that learners are able to transfer what they learnt from the training session(s) to actual peer response situations they face subsequently. However, transfer of learning is usually the least predictable aspect in any learning context.

For stage 4 of the procedure, groups decided beforehand on the role that each member would take (chairperson, facilitator or secretary with responsibilities shown in Appendix 1 Table A2); the aim was to encourage each member to be actively involved in the discussion. To encourage more open discussion, 'anonymity' was ensured—each peer group discusses/evaluates a piece of writing without knowing the identities of the writers⁴. For this stage, 'reader' groups were instructed to explore any differences in opinion regarding the essay and that the aim was not to arrive at a group opinion, i.e., their comments and feedback as readers of the essay, whether there was agreement or differences in opinion, were to be presented later (in stage 5) to the writers.

In stage 5, readers give oral feedback to their peers based on the ideas discussed in stage 4. Verbal feedback was chosen because previous attempts

⁴ This was possible because the students sent the essays to the researcher and the names of writers were deleted before copies were made for the peer response activity. This feature of 'anonymity' is not a key element of the procedure; it was added to help student reviewers give feedback with a sense of objectivity.

Figure 1a

The shortened peer response procedure used in this study

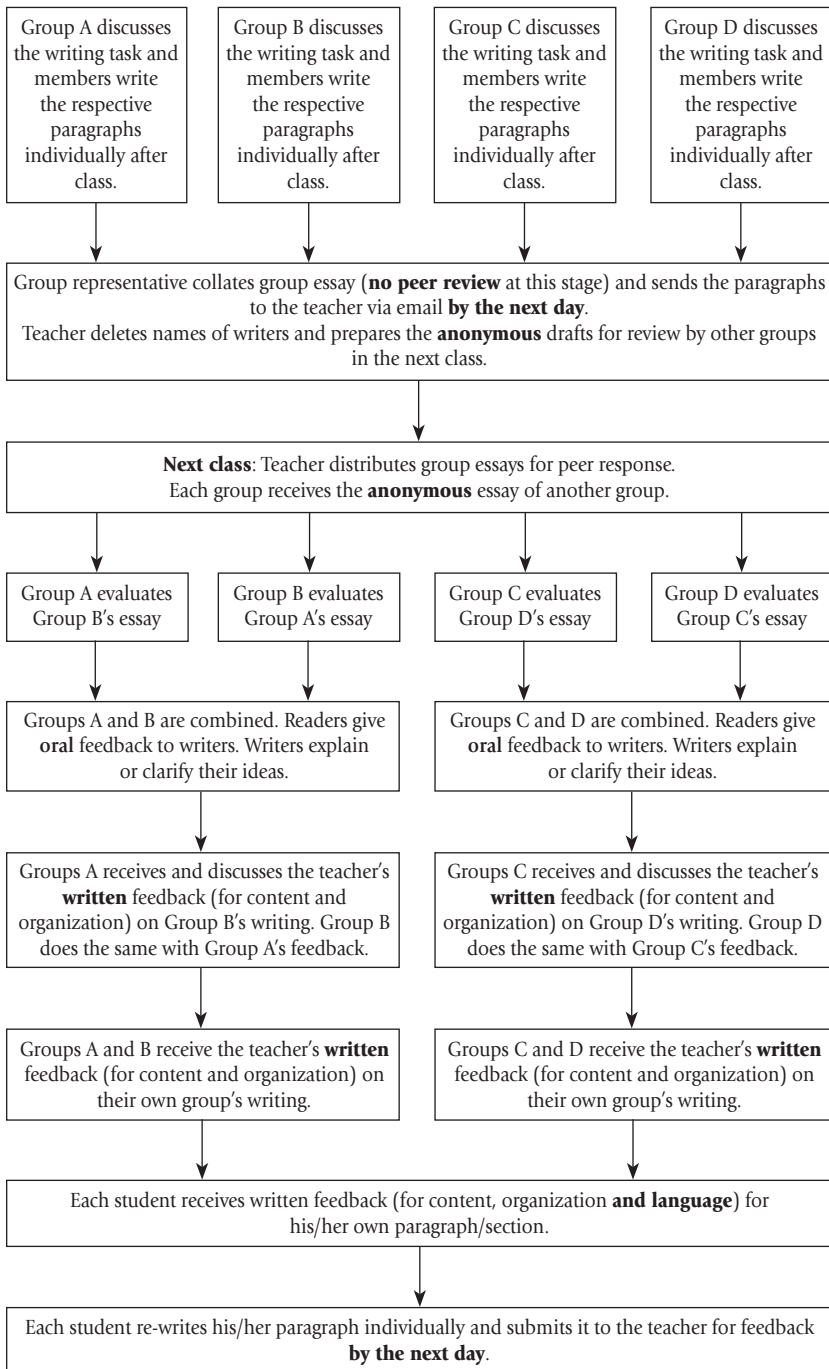
Stage	Focus of the activity	Time allocated
1	Students work cooperatively in groups (brainstorming, outlining, etc.) on a writing task.	30 minutes
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Each student completes part of the writing task (one paragraph of the main body of the essay) after class. ● Group member collates parts and sends the essay to the teacher via email. ● Teacher deletes names of writers (for anonymity) and prepares the drafts for peer response in the next class. 	30 minutes after class
3	Teacher briefs students on appropriate peer group interactions.	20 minutes
4	Each group discusses another group's writing. (Each group responds to one essay comprising of three paragraphs.)	30 minutes
5	The "reader" group meets the "writer" group to give oral feedback. (Groups are paired in such a way that the two groups give response to each other.)	30 minutes
6	Each group reads the teacher's written feedback (for content and organization) on another group's writing which they reviewed.	20 minutes
7	Each group reads the teacher's written feedback (for content and organization) on their group's writing.	
8	At the end of the session, each student receives the teacher's written feedback on language for his/her own paragraph.	
9	Each student re-writes his/her part and submits it to the teacher for feedback by the next day.	

(with earlier cohorts) to get students to provide written comments failed⁵. A concern in using verbal feedback is that readers may not remember specific ideas they discussed in stage 4 and writers receiving the feedback in stage 5 may not be able to remember the comments after the activity. While written feedback followed by face-to-face discussion has advantages in general, verbal feedback in the context of the peer response procedure used here is not as problematic as it seems. First, it is unlikely that all three members of the reader-group would forget the specific comments they arrived at in stage 4. Moreover, the writer (though he/she listens to the feedback given on each of the three paragraphs written by his group members), is likely to pay more attention to the paragraph he wrote than to the other two. Thus, the memory load for the writer is small compared to that in a setting where a participant receives feedback for an essay of three to five

⁵ According to observations made during my attempts at introducing peer response to an earlier cohort, the Chinese students were generally reluctant to write comments about their peers' writing, apparently because keeping track of the ongoing discussion (which involved evaluation of texts and the views of other members) in English was already an intimidating task for them. Another factor is that Chinese students generally have better reading skills than writing skills, [a similar point was made by Berger (1990)], that is, the task of evaluating a text is more manageable for them than the task of writing their comments about the text.

Figure 1b

Organisation for group work during the peer response activity



paragraphs. Moreover, participants in this study were asked to submit the revised draft (of the single paragraph they wrote) by the next day, and hence the extent of memory 'failure' is presumably small. It should be noted that while the use of written comments is a common feature in peer response studies, its advantage(s) may not be well grounded. Considering that the effectiveness of written feedback given by teachers in writing classes has been questioned because L1 students often do not understand the meaning of teachers' written comments on their papers (Boswood & Dwyer, 1995/6; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Ferris, 1995; Leki, 2003), the clarity of comments written by ESL writers at the 'intermediate' level is questionable.

In the shortened peer response procedure, the writers receive teacher feedback in stage 6 before they make revisions to their first drafts. This deviates from the recommendation of providing teacher's comments on the students' second drafts, followed by the subsequent revision to produce third drafts, on the basis that provision of teacher's comments for the same draft may minimise the importance of the peers' comments and reduce the students' confidence in peers' comments (Hansen & Liu, 2005). However, the recommendation could not be followed in this study because the participants, who were taking three or four content modules in English for the first time, could not spend as much time on the peer response tasks as desired, as more time had to be allocated to revision of drafts of the two main assignments (a 700-word research report based on a survey administered and a 350-word summary analysis).

Data collection and analysis

The participants' opinions about the peer response activity were elicited on three occasions and the data were collated as follows:

1. After the first peer response activity in week 2, the students were asked to submit their comments, positive and/or negative, via email about the peer response activity. Their responses (in Appendix 2) were first divided into 'positive', 'negative' and 'mixed' categories. Positive and negative comments were then described according to response categories where two or more pupils gave similar responses.
2. After the fourth peer response activity in week 8, a survey was administered in class. Students were instructed to indicate the extent (on a five-point scale: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree') to which they agreed or disagreed with 14 statements (Fig. 2) on the basis of their experiences in the four peer response activities. Students were asked to complete the survey without conferring with other students and the rationale for anonymity (to encourage objective feedback) was highlighted. For analysis, the number and percentages of responses for each item on the five-point scale were calculated (Appendix 3). In the discussion of the findings, as the focus was on overall trends, the data for 'strongly agree (disagree)' and 'agree (disagree) to some extent' were combined to obtain three categories: 'agree', 'neutral' and 'disagree' (Tables 1, 2 and 4).
3. At the end of the course in week 12, a survey was administered to elicit students' views about the usefulness of peer response and their preferences for

Figure 2Items in the first survey⁶**Part I: Your views related to your roles as readers**

1. It was helpful to discuss my classmates' writing assignments with my group members.
2. I have developed greater confidence in identifying the important features of a paragraph.
3. I have developed greater confidence in identifying the weaknesses or problem areas in a paragraph.
4. It was too confusing when we had different views of a writing assignment in our group discussion.
5. We were able to resolve differences in opinion during our discussions.
6. We avoided differences in opinion during our discussions.
7. The process of discussion was too time-consuming.

Part II: Your views related to your roles as writers

8. It was helpful to hear my classmates' comments on my writing assignments.
9. My classmates' feedback helped me to better organize my paragraphs/essay.
10. My classmates' feedback helped me to express my ideas more clearly.
11. My classmates' feedback helped me to recognize weaknesses in my writing.
12. After hearing my classmates' comments on my writing, I knew how to correct the points or areas of weaknesses.
13. I considered my classmates' feedback when I wrote the second draft.
14. I considered my teacher's feedback when I wrote the second draft.

group size (Appendix 4). For the open-ended questions, response categories were set up when two or more students gave similar responses (including a 'miscellaneous' category) and when a response contains several points, the response was scored in each relevant category (Tables 3, 5 and 6).

Findings**1. Students' overall level of receptivity to peer response**

After the first peer response activity, 13 of the 35 students had positive comments about the activity (while the other 22 did not respond though a reminder was sent). Two students gave very brief responses (without any elaboration), and five were "mixed", (positive and negative aspects)⁷. The specific benefits reported are that the activity facilitates exchange of ideas or helps them develop a broader perspective (mentioned by four students), helps them identify shortcomings, errors or mistakes (three students) and aids thinking or memory of important aspects (three students). The peer response activity was not new to one student; he mentioned that peer response had been used in his L1 classes (Chinese) and believed it was why his class had the highest average score in college entrance examination in the province. Five students gave negative comments about the activity, two of which were related to time and conflict (refer

⁶ Items 1 to 3 address benefits related to developing competency as an evaluator. Items 4 to 6 address the issue of conflict management related to differences in opinion. Item 7 addresses the issue of time pressure. Items 8 to 12 address benefits related to practical help received for making improvements to their writing. Items 13 and 14 address issues of the relative value of peers' and teacher's comments.

⁷ Refer to Appendix 2 for the actual responses.

to the next two segments of findings). The other three negative comments were expressions of the respondents' needs rather than evaluations of the activity: two students mentioned communication difficulties or limited opportunities to develop oral fluency, and the third was concerned that it was difficult to gain access to a computer to complete the writing after class.

It is noteworthy that 22 of the 35 students chose not to reveal their thoughts or reactions after their first peer response activity despite a reminder sent via email. The high level of non-response is unexpected since Chinese students generally do what teachers ask of them. As such, it is reasonable to deduce that the 22 students who did not respond via email were not simply taking a 'neutral' stand but had negative views or some reservations about the activity but were reluctant to appear critical about the learning activity chosen by the teacher.

In the second survey, the students' responses were generally positive. When asked to evaluate the activity from the perspective of their role as readers, a clear majority felt they had greater confidence in reviewing their classmates' writing (Table 1). About 80% felt they had developed greater confidence in identifying important features of a paragraph and the problem areas. Taking the stand as writers, about 3 in 4 felt that their classmates' feedback about their writing was helpful (Table 2). About 90% found it helpful to hear their peers' comments. About 80% felt that peer feedback helped them to recognise weaknesses in their writing while 60% felt that they knew how to correct the problem areas after hearing their peers' comments.

In the third survey, the students' responses to the open-ended question about what they found helpful were generally positive (Table 3). The main benefits cited are acquired skills in identifying, correcting or avoiding common flaws (cited by 13 students) and the opportunity to learn from peers and to obtain a broader perspective (for 11 students). The generally positive responses are consistent with the positive responses given for the close-ended items in the second survey. Among the aspects that students perceived to be unhelpful about the peer response activity (listed in Table 4), lack of confidence in the ability of peers as evaluators was the most common issue raised.

Table 1
Students' evaluations in their role as readers

Survey item	Number (Percentage) of students		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
It was helpful to discuss my classmates' writing assignments with my group members.	2 (5.7)	0	33 (94.3)
I have developed greater confidence in identifying the important features of a paragraph.	1 (2.9)	5 (14.3)	29 (82.9)
I have developed greater confidence in identifying the weaknesses or problem areas in a paragraph.	0	6 (17.1)	29 (82.9)

Note: The percentages for 'disagree' and 'agree' are summations of the percentages for two categories ('disagree' and 'strongly disagree' and 'agree' and 'strongly agree' respectively). The figures for each category are found in Appendix 3.

Table 2
Students' evaluations in their role as writers

Survey item	Number (Percentage) of students		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
It was helpful to hear my classmates' comments on my writing assignments.	2 (5.7)	1 (2.9)	32 (91.4)
My classmates' feedback helped me to better organize my paragraphs/essay.	1 (2.9)	9 (25.7)	25 (71.4)
My classmates' feedback helped me to express my ideas more clearly.	2 (5.7)	6 (17.1)	27 (77.1)
My classmates' feedback helped me to recognize weaknesses in my writing.	1 (2.9)	5 (14.3)	29 (82.9)
After hearing my classmates' comments on my writing, I knew how to correct the points or areas of weaknesses.	3 (8.6)	11 (31.4)	21 (60.0)

Note: The percentages for 'disagree' and 'agree' are summations of the percentages for two categories ('disagree' and 'strongly disagree' and 'agree' and 'strongly agree' respectively). The figures for each category are found in Appendix 3.

Table 3
What students found helpful regarding the peer response activity

Comment	Number of students (% of respondents)
Identifying, correcting or avoiding flaws or errors	13 (38.2%)
Learning from peers/broader perspective	11 (32.3%)
Remembering what is learnt	3 (8.8%)
Miscellaneous/general comments	7 (20.6%)

Table 4
What students found unhelpful regarding the peer response activity

Comment	Number of students
Lack of confidence in the ability of peers (e.g., ideas may not be right or peers are at the same level)	5
Conflict (insisting on certain views)	1
Time needed (e.g., rather time-consuming)	1
Miscellaneous (repetitive in that errors made by a writer are common errors made by others, evaluation is difficult)	2

Overall, the data from the three surveys indicate that the proportion of students who had a positive view of the peer response activity increased—from the initial 13 students to a clear majority in the second and third surveys.

2. Students' views about efficiency

After the first peer response activity, one student expressed his concern about time requirements rather cautiously with some hedging:

"I think it's beneficial for us to discuss other students' writings and hearing other's comments on our writings. But I think the time we spend are a little long. Maybe we could shorten the time period."

In the second survey, from the perspective of their role as readers giving feedback to the writers, only 4 students agreed that the process for the shortened peer response was too time-consuming in contrast to the 23 who disagreed with the statement (Table 5). In the latter group, 12 disagreed with the statement *to some extent* while 11 expressed strong disagreement (Appendix 3). In the last survey, only one respondent (of 34) was concerned that the peer response activity was time consuming.

3. Students' views about conflict

After the first peer response session, there was one comment indicating some concern over conflict:

"I think it's a useful method as long as the two sides won't quarrel. The most useful part is the face to face discussion. Maybe it'll cause some argument, it's a good way to for both sides to improve. And I think it'll be better after each member got used to this method."

A more accurate picture of the extent to which conflict was a concern can be obtained from the data for the second survey. In their role as readers giving feedback to the writers, it is noteworthy that a clear majority (57.1%) of the students thought that their groups had not avoided differences in contrast to 14.3% who felt that their groups had avoided differences (Table 5). A much higher percentage (48.6%) disagreed that different views led to too much confusion as compared to those who expressed agreement (28.6%).

4. Students' views on group size

When the students were asked to state their preference for the group size in the third survey, 55.9% indicated that they preferred working in peer groups with three members, 26.4% preferred pair work while 17.6% gave a neutral or "mixed" response. The most common explanation given by those who preferred groups of threes (among the reasons categorised in Table 6) was availability of more ideas, while efficiency in time use and more active participation were the more common reasons for those who preferred working in pairs (Table 7).

Table 5

Problems related to their roles as readers

Survey item	Number (Percentage) of students		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
It was too confusing when we had different views of a writing assignment in our group discussion.	17 (48.6)	8 (22.9)	10 (28.6)
We were able to resolve differences in opinion during our discussions.	6 (17.1)	12 (34.3)	17 (48.6)
We avoided differences in opinion during discussions.	20 (57.1)	10 (28.6)	5 (14.3)
The process of discussion was too time-consuming.	23 (65.7)	8 (22.9)	4 (11.4)

Note: The percentages for 'disagree' and 'agree' are summations of the percentages for two categories ('disagree' and 'strongly disagree' and 'agree' and 'strongly agree' respectively). The figures for each category are found in Appendix 3.

Table 6

Reasons for preferring group size of three for peer response

Reason	Number of students
More ideas/opinions/suggestions in groups of three	10
Discussion in pairs is limited or not active	4
Groups of three facilitates decision-making when opinions differ	4
Obtain more help/learn more in groups of three	4
Miscellaneous/no comments	4

Table 7

Reasons for preferring pairwork for peer response

Reason	Number of students
Efficient/saves time	3
Better participation/more active	2
Can concentrate better	1
Can communicate more effectively	1
Miscellaneous (more convenient, not relying on another)	4
No reason given	2

Note for Tables 6 and 7: For participants' responses that contain several points, each point was classified separately under the relevant category.

Discussion

The data indicate that the participants' views of group size, time requirements and the issue of conflict during discussions are intertwined. With regard to group size, a significantly large percentage preferred to work in groups of three. The common reason given for preferring groups of three (availability of more ideas or opinions) and for preferring pair work (efficiency) echo the sentiments expressed by undergraduates taking an ESL course in a Hong Kong university in the survey administered by Peacock (1998). An interesting perception of advantage associated with a group size of three, mentioned by 4 students in the present study as well as the teachers interviewed in Peacock's study, is that a group size of three is a better combination when there is conflict due to different opinions. In the subsequent discussion, the issue of conflict and its relationship with group size will be addressed first before the issue of time and its link to group size.

The finding that most students thought that their groups had not avoided differences suggests that differences in views were relatively common in the peer response group discussions. This is also consistent with my observations of the sessions, in which lively debates were frequent rather than rare. This picture of the Chinese students speaking up when there were differences in opinion is quite different from the description of Chinese students who tended to avoid conflicts, as reported in Nelson & Carson (1998) and Carson & Nelson (1996). One could explain that this arises from differences in interaction style when group members are all Chinese, as in the present study, and when the peer groups have members from different nationalities, as in the reports of the above study by Carson & Nelson. When group members come from different cultural backgrounds, members from High Context cultures may be more restrained and less vocal as they try to figure out "rules of the game". In such a context, timidity of the Chinese students, as observed by McClure (2001), may be more prevalent. In contrast, discussions among Chinese students, as in the setting of the present study, are probably less restrained because group members share a common set of "social" rules. This difference in behavior among Chinese when they are interacting with members of their 'primary' groups and those who are not members of their groups was highlighted in Carson & Nelson (1996).

While the above explanation is a plausible one, it is probably incomplete as the data obtained in this study suggests that the way Chinese students handle conflicts when all group members are Chinese is influenced by other factors. As discussed above, group size for the peer response activity is an important factor for the students. More specifically, as one participant commented:

"Three persons in a group is better. We need the third party as a disinterested judge."

Several comments provide interesting insights about their preference for groups of threes:

"... If just only 2 persons, I think it's hard to agree each other."

"Discussion in pairs always come to agreement, while in a group, there are always different ideas which would help us to think deeply."

"Two people may agree with each other easily. More people will hold more opinions to the same question and by discussion, can make sure what you think."

The first comment seems to contradict the last two, but this apparent conflict can be resolved. The difficulty mentioned in the first comment is probably a description of the common sentiments of the two parties when they discover that they have differing views while the easy agreement pointed out in the last two comments describe the "social norm" in handling such a situation—the first comment makes reference to negative sentiments that lead to the typical "positive" outcome of apparent harmony depicted in the other two comments. In other words, because the two parties think it is difficult to come to agreement, they settle for apparent agreement for the sake of harmony and each continues to hold to their own views instead of pursuing resolution. The concern for harmony and the tendency among Chinese students to withhold honest comments to minimise risk of disagreement has been highlighted in the literature (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Carson & Nelson, 1996, Littlewood, 1999).

However, if Chinese students tend to avoid honest discussion of differing opinions when they work in pairs, it is not immediately obvious why two parties are more likely to avoid conflicts for the sake of harmony and a group of three is less likely to do so. Admittedly, in the situation where two out of the three members express different views and the third member is able to consider both views objectively, it is understandable that the third member can help the group come to agreement. However, a group of three does not guarantee that there will be a disinterested member who can act as the judge or mediator, that is, the odd number of three does not necessarily provide a "magic formula". Consider the scenario in previous peer response studies where a group of three evaluates each member's writing. In that scenario, the evaluation of a piece of writing is primarily made by the other two members who did not write it. If these two members have differing views, the third member, who is the writer, is not a disinterested party, since his/her own writing is at stake. Avoidance of conflict could then take two forms—one of the two evaluators may give in to the other or one of them may choose to take a "positive" stance about the writing to maintain a harmonious relationship with the writer. In other words, a group of three Chinese students evaluating each other's writing may function like a dyad and the group may have a greater tendency to hold to the goal of conflict avoidance in their interactions.

Regarding the above comments of respondents that three-member groups encourage open discussion of different opinions, it should also be noted that they were made in the context of 'anonymity' features in the shortened procedure used. The element of anonymity deserves some consideration as two observations suggest that it may have been a factor in reducing the students' anxiety about differences in opinion and negative comments. Firstly, my observations of discussions in stage 4 of the peer response activities (when reader-groups explored their views of a peer group's writing and responded to the writing without knowing the identity of the writer-group) and in stage 5 (where there was 'partial anonymity', that is, the reader-group knew that the writer was present, but did not know which member of the writer-group was the writer of the specific portion they

were commenting on) indicated that differences in opinion were more prevalent in stage 4. It seems that participants found it easier to take an objective stance regarding negative comments and differences in opinions in stage 4 than in stage 5 when the 'level' of anonymity was lower. Secondly, based on my observations of the discussions in stage 5, the question of the identity of the reader or writer associated with a particular point or view was rarely raised during or after the exchange of feedback or opinions between the reader- and writer-groups. This is interesting since the procedure did not require the participants to keep identities veiled in stage 5. It seems that the participants were eager to maintain "partial anonymity", possibly because by not unveiling the identity of the specific reader or writer in question, there was some 'cushioning effect' which helped them to handle issues or differences in opinion more objectively.

On the issue of time requirements, the data from the surveys seem to indicate that efficiency is not a concern for the students in the context of the shortened peer response procedure, which is less time-consuming than procedures used in many previous peer response studies (Table A3 Appendix 1). However, when we examine some of the data carefully, it can be argued that time requirement may not be as insignificant as the data suggest. First, for the second survey (Table 4), we note that 8 students (22.9%) took a neutral stand and 4 students were concerned that the activity was too time-consuming. As highlighted in the previous section (about students' comments about the first peer response session), a non-response or a 'neutral' stand may reflect a level of uncertainty. In other words, the data suggest there was some uncertainty as to whether the time requirement for peer response was acceptable. Secondly, as mentioned in the previous section, two 'mixed' responses regarding the first peer response activity highlighted anxiety over communication difficulties faced and the limited opportunities to develop oral fluency. Though these two comments did not refer to efficiency directly, there seems to be an underlying concern that time used for peer response would be more efficiently used if it was devoted to development of oral proficiency instead⁸. This concern is probably similar to that reported of ESL students who expect English courses to "directly" address the pressing need of improving their language skills (Leki & Carson, 1994). For the graduate students in this study, the issue of efficiency in language learning was probably more critical, considering that the majority were pursuing a master's degree (on the average, less than 20% of the graduate students in the Intermediate level English course are PhD candidates) and were expected to develop the necessary language proficiency (oral and writing) within their two-year master's programmes, as compared to their undergraduate counterparts from China who could work at improving their language proficiency during their 4-year undergraduate programmes.

A point relating efficiency and group size should also be noted. In the third

⁸ Through my interactions with students who took the writing course in different semesters, I found that many of them were more concerned about improving their oral proficiency even though that they generally had much better oral skills than writing skills. One reason is that most of them, being in the first semester of their graduate programmes, were fulfilling coursework requirements and had not started on their research projects. As such, they had not encountered the challenges of writing up progress reports and journal articles and did not have a clear idea about the demands of research writing tasks which would be expected of them in subsequent semesters.

survey, the idea of pair work was suggested by six students with the reason that pair work would be more “efficient” or help to “save time”. However, when we consider the data as a whole, this ‘suggestion’ is probably not desirable when weighed against the issue discussed earlier—that pair work seems to encourage avoidance of conflict for Chinese students as highlighted earlier in the discussion on students’ preferences for group size.

Regarding the issue of ability to resolve differences in opinions, a cursory look at the data suggests that a sizeable proportion of the students were concerned that their groups were unable to resolve differences in opinion (considering that 17.1% felt that their groups were unable to resolve differences and 34.3% chose to remain “neutral”). This is rather surprising when compared to the clearly positive evaluation given by the overwhelming majority (82.9%) that they had developed greater confidence in identifying important features and weaknesses or problem areas in a paragraph. To find a possible explanation for this apparent discrepancy, we need to take a closer look at the issue of differences in opinion in relation to the different stages of the shortened peer response procedure. The problem of unresolved differences may arise at two points: within the reader-group when they are examining another group’s writing and at the later stage, between the reader-group and writer-group when they are exchanging views of each group’s writing. While questions may remain unanswered at the end of the former stage, there is a possibility of resolution in the latter stage when reader-groups and writer-groups compare their comments with the teacher’s on the same piece of writing. For differences that arose when the reader-group discussed their peer group’s writing, the last stage provided the opportunity to compare the group’s and the teacher’s comments. Where the writer-group had doubts over the validity of some aspects of feedback they received from the reader-group, similar comments from the peer group and the teacher may have helped to change the minds of ‘skeptical’ writers and built the confidence of the reader-group about the evaluation they had made. Partial support for this came from my observations of the last stage—there were spontaneous and rather jubilant “exclamations” (by some participants to group members) that their comments were similar to the teacher’s comments. In other words, the availability of the teacher’s comments provided some form of scaffolding for students to come to a satisfactory “conclusion” regarding some questions that were left open during the earlier round of discussion. As reported by Caulk (1994) in his comparison of comments made by peers and the teacher for the same draft of students’ writing, the two kinds of responses seem complementary and suggested that multiple comments from peers and the teacher may help lead the student to a better understanding of suggestions. A similar point about the value of comparing peer comments and the teacher’s comments was conveyed by a respondent after the first peer response session of the present study (Appendix 1 Student 2):

“I especially like the way of first letting the students comment the others’ assignments and then letting them compare their comments with the teacher’s. It is so efficient to help students remember what they have learned during this activity....”

Interestingly, the student also associated the provision of the teacher's comments with efficiency. This suggests that efficiency from the perspective of the Chinese students is not only about completing the peer response activity in the shortest possible time but also about maximizing their learning in the process. While the provision of teacher feedback is more akin to the product approach that is contrary to the principles of peer response, this step may be a necessary intermediate step for the Chinese students in this study who are accustomed to the apparent efficiency of the product approach used in English classes in their home country and expect teachers to take the role of a guide and exert some form of "control" in learning activities to ensure that students are on the right track (Hu, 2002; Lee, 1999). From a pedagogical viewpoint, "prescriptive" support provided by the teacher's comments is probably necessary for such learners who have limited experience in taking a critical attitude towards reading and writing and are thus unsure as to whether their instincts about a text are in line with those of the teacher and whether a peer's comment should be rejected or accepted (Leki 1990, 2003; Nelson & Murphy, 1992/93; Pennington & Cheung, 1995).

Conclusion

This paper examined Chinese graduate students' views of group size, efficiency and conflict in relation to a shortened peer response procedure. These aspects were examined in the context where the level of the students' receptivity to the peer response activities were more positive at the end of four peer response sessions (as shown in the second and third surveys) than after their first peer response session. Students' responses suggest that efficiency was not a significant concern (in the context of the shortened peer response procedure) but some data indirectly indicated that efficiency was a concern in that peer response did not address the greater need that the students perceived (to improve their language skills as quickly as possible). In addition, the provision of teacher feedback on the same draft in the final stage of the peer response procedure seems to have helped address the students' desire for efficient learning. The data also indicated that the students' views about differences in opinion and group size were intertwined. There was a clear preference to work in groups of three and the reasons given by respondents indicate that the three-member group arrangement (reader-groups and writer-groups) in the shortened peer response procedure is more likely to alleviate learners' concerns regarding differences and encourage open discussion and honest feedback as compared to a dyad arrangement. Interestingly, the students' self-reports indicated that they were willing to explore different opinions and disagree with each other, which differs from previous findings about Chinese students' behavior in peer response discussions. This raises the question of whether behaviors and attitudes may be influenced by context and not only by cultural factors as argued in Nelson & Carson (1998). As suggested by the results of this study, the more 'positive' behaviors of participants may be tied to contextual factors or features of the shortened peer response procedure used (such as homogeneity in group composition and group size).

Further research can also be carried out to address the following questions.

Audio taped discussions would be necessary to obtain direct evidence on how and to what extent groups deal with differences in opinion in stage 4 (within the reader-groups) and stage 5 (between the reader- and writer-groups) of the shortened peer response procedure. Recording of the discussions is best made when the students are more familiar with giving and receiving feedback (such as in the last peer response activity in this study) and group interaction is less likely to be inhibited.

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Appendix 1

Table A1: Schedule for collaborative writing tasks and peer response activities

Writing task	Timing
<p>Task 1: A three-paragraph essay (collaborative writing) on a cause and effect topic:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Why McDonalds' restaurants are very popular. Reasons for incorporating group work in tutorials Causes of stress among foreign graduate students Effects of improved educational opportunities for women Likely negative effects of the Internet Effects of brain drain <p>Peer response for three-paragraph essays. Each student wrote a second draft of his/her paragraph for the essay after the peer response session. The second draft was submitted and comments were given by the tutor.</p>	<p>Tutorial 1 Week 2</p> <p>Tutorial 2 Week 2</p>
<p>Task 2: A three paragraph essay (collaborative writing) on a given compare-contrast topic "Asian-American Students: Why do they excel?". The students were given three excerpts which examine various characteristics of Asian and American educational methods and accomplishments. The students were asked to read these 'input' passages to identify differences in characteristics of Asian and American educational systems that are relevant to the writing task on "Asian-American Students: Why do they excel?"</p> <p>Peer response for three-paragraph essays. Each student wrote a second draft of his/her paragraph for the essay after the peer response session. The second draft was submitted and comments were given by the tutor.</p>	<p>Tutorial 1 Week 3</p> <p>Tutorial 2 Week 3</p>
<p>Task 3: Three Findings-and-Discussion paragraphs (collaborative writing) based on given survey data</p> <p>Peer response for the three Findings-and-Discussion paragraphs Students were not required to write second drafts due to time constraints in the course schedule (each student wrote an individual assignment: a 700-word research report based on survey data collected by students working collaboratively in groups of three).</p>	<p>Tutorial 1 Week 4</p> <p>Tutorial 2 Week 4</p>
<p>Task 4: Three Analysis paragraphs (collaborative writing) in response to a news article conveying a position</p> <p>Peer response for the three Analysis paragraphs. Students were not required to write second drafts after the peer response session in view of time constraints (each student writes an individual assignment: a 350-word summary-analysis essay).</p>	<p>Tutorial 1 Week 8</p> <p>Tutorial 2 Week 8</p>

Note: For Tasks 3 and 4, the intention was that comments received from peers and the tutor would help students in their individual writing tasks (research report and summary-analysis essay). For the individual assignments, students wrote second drafts after discussing the first drafts with the researcher during one-to-one student-tutor conferencing sessions.

Training for peer response included:

- Explicit instruction to sensitize students to salient features (in terms of macrostructure and language structures) for the respective writing tasks.
- A review of these features before groups responded to other groups' writing
- Teacher's written response given immediately after the reviewers discuss their opinions with the writers. This served as a form of "modelling" on how constructive feedback can be given to writers.

Table A2: Roles during group reviews

Chairperson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ensures that the group stays on-task ● takes responsibility for time-management for the assigned task
Facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● checks that all group members contributes to the discussion ● directs questions to invite "quieter" members to participate
Secretary	takes notes to record comments (group members later used these notes and took turns to summarise the group's comments to writers of the other group)

Table A3: Comparison of peer response procedures

Stage	The longer peer response procedure used in peer response studies		The shortened peer response procedure in this study	
Preparation	Students work cooperatively in groups (brainstorming, outlining, etc) on a writing task.	30 min –1 hr	Students work cooperatively in groups (brainstorming, outlining, etc) on a writing task.	30 min
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Each student writes a first draft of the essay or the entire assignment after class. ● Students prints and prepares the drafts for peer response in the next class 	1–2 hr after class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Each student completes part of the writing task (one paragraph of the main body of the essay) after class. ● Group member collates parts and sends the essay to the teacher via email. ● Teacher deletes names of writers (for anonymity) and prepares the drafts for peer response in the next class. 	30 min after class
	[Training] Teacher instructs students on appropriate peer group interactions and models appropriate responses to students' drafts.	2–6 hr	Teacher briefs students on appropriate peer group interactions.	20 min
Responding to Draft 1	Students exchange drafts, read and write responses on other students' drafts (individual work).	1–1.5 hr	Each group discusses another group's writing (Each group <u>responds to one essay</u> comprising of 3 paragraphs)	30 min
	Students discuss peers' drafts (group work). Writers read the comments of their peers in the peer response group and discuss the comments and clarify where necessary. (Each group <u>responds to a few essays</u> depending on the group size.)	1–1.5 hr	The "reader" group meets the "writer group" to gives oral feedback. (Groups are paired in such a way that the 2 groups gives response to each other)	30 min
	(Optional) Students make notes on comments given orally by the peer group.	(20 min)	Each group reads the teacher's written feedback (for content & organization) on another group's writing which they reviewed.	20 min
			Each group reads the teacher's written feedback (for content & organization) on their group's writing.	
		At the end of the session, each student receives the teacher's written feedback on language for his/her own paragraph.		
Draft 2	Students use written and oral responses to write the second draft and submit it to the teacher for feedback.		Each student re-writes his/her part and submits it to the teacher for feedback by the next day	

Appendix 2: Students' comments given after the first peer response activity⁹

- Student 1: I think your method is good, In the group, we can discuss each other in English, and know more about our peers' thoughts. As you know, my coworkers in my lab are Chinese, I have a little chance to talk with somebody in English, I wish to have a more time to speak in English in our class.
- Student 2: I think you did very much for our lesson, and the result is good too. The atmosphere is very good, I think, and I like to take part in this lesson, therefore I should say "thanks" to you. The only thing I feel not perfect is about homework, I am not a lazy person; however I have to go to computer center to finish the work because i have no a lab now, if the time is too limited, it will be hard for me to find a computer to do my homework with enough time.
- Student 3: Generally speaking, the method is very impressive and effective. I especially like the way of first letting the students comment the others' assignments and then letting them compare their comments with the teacher's. It is so efficient to help students remember what they have learned during this activity. And also through discussion with the group members the students will find it important to consider a problem from different angles.
- Student 4: It is wonderful! I have experienced it in study Chinese. My class has the highest average score in college entrance examination in my province.
- Student 5: I think this new way is good. Because by discussion, I can have a more comprehensive and deep impression. It can train my thinking way more effectively. And it make the class more interesting. I like this method.
- Student 6: I think it's beneficial for us to discuss other students' writings and hearing other's comments on our writings. But I think the time we spend are a little long. Maybe we could shorten the time period.
- Student 7: I think it's a useful method as long as the two sides won't quarrel. The most useful part is the face to face discussion. Maybe it'll cause some argument, it's a good way to for both sides to improve. And I think it'll be better after each member got used to this method.
- Student 8: I think that the peer response is helpful to me. Because when I find other's error, I can learn something from it. And I think it is better that if I can discuss the paragraph which is the same title of mine. Thus, I can find out what I never think about or some sides I haven't cared enough for. It can expand my thought way. I think it is more helpful to me.
- Student 9: I like this kind of new method very much. The whole group could discuss the paragraphs written by other classmates. I think I have learned a lot from other persons. Some wrote very well. I could learn how to write the topic sentences and how to organize the whole paragraph. Some made the mistakes. When we checked out the mistakes, we also thought how to modify them. I was eager to hear other people's opinion. So I think peer response is very useful. The only thing I worried about is if our English using skills can improve a lot after the whole English classes are ending. You know, all of us have studied English for more than ten years in China. Some even got very high score in TOEFL and GRE. But we still can't speak English fluently, write English correctly. Sometime we even can't understand other English speakers' meaning. How can we improve our English?
- Student 10: I feel the way of response is very interesting. Moreover, I can learn much from this method, because I can know some shortcomings I cannot find by myself and I am very happy exchange my mind with other persons. I think the discussion with other colleagues is very useful for me to improve my english speaking and writing ability.
- Student 11: To the change for the class, I have no problem. It is so active and flexible. But I have not paid enough attention to listening and speaking in my old university. Sometimes I feel difficult and uncomfortable in communicate with others. I will do my best to overcome it. Perhaps I will get used to it after a period of time.
- Student 12: Thank you!
- Student 13: Sounds good to me.

⁹ Note: Concerns expressed are underlined.

Appendix 3: Data collected in the second survey (administered in Week 8)**Part 1: Students' views related to their role as readers**

Survey item	Number (percentage) of respondents				
	Strongly disagree (SD)	Disagree to some extent (D)	Neutral	Agree to some extent (A)	Strongly agree (SA)
It was helpful to discuss my classmates' writing assignments with my group members.	1 (2.9)	1 (2.9)	0	13 (37.1)	20 (57.1)
I have developed greater confidence in identifying the important features of a paragraph.	0	1 (2.9)	5 (14.3)	22 (62.9)	7 (20.0)
I have developed greater confidence in identifying the weaknesses or problem areas in a paragraph.	0	0	6 (17.1)	18 (51.4)	11 (31.4)
It was to confusing when we had different views of a writing assignment in our group discussion.	4 (11.4)	13 (37.1)	8 (22.9)	8 (22.9)	2 (5.7)
We were able to resolve differences in opinion during our discussions.	0	6 (17.1)	12 (34.3)	13 (37.1)	4 (11.4)
We avoided differences in opinion during our discussions	5 (14.3)	15 (42.9)	10 (28.6)	5 (14.3)	0
The process of discussion was too time-consuming.	11 (31.4)	12 (34.3)	8 (22.9)	4 (11.4)	0

Part 2: Students' views related to their role as writers

Survey item	Number (percentage) of respondents				
	Strongly disagree (SD)	Disagree to some extent (D)	Neutral	Agree to some extent (A)	Strongly agree (SA)
It was helpful to hear my classmates' comments on my writing assignments.	0	2 (5.7)	1 (2.9)	10 (28.6)	22 (62.9)
My classmates' feedback helped me to better organize my paragraphs/essay.	0	1 (2.9)	9 (25.7)	16 (45.7)	9 (25.7)
My classmates' feedback helped me to express my ideas more clearly.	0	2 (5.7)	6 (17.1)	22 (62.9)	5 (14.3)
My classmates' feedback helped me to recognize weaknesses in my writing.	0	1 (2.9)	5 (14.3)	22 (62.9)	7 (20.0)
After hearing my classmates' comments on my writing, I knew how to correct the points or areas of weaknesses.	0	3 (8.6)	11 (31.4)	19 (54.3)	2 (5.7)
I considered my classmates' feedback during our discussions	0	1 (2.9)	9 (25.7)	16 (45.7)	9 (25.7)
I considered my teacher's feedback when I wrote the second draft.	0	0	0	6 (17.1)	29 (82.9)

Note: The above figures are expressed as percentages (for a total of 35 respondents).

Appendix 4: Survey administered at the end of the course in Week 12

1. What do you think of the peer response activities? Was peer response helpful or unhelpful for improving your writing skills? Please elaborate.

2. You worked in groups of 3 for the peer response activities.

Would you prefer to work in pairs instead? Yes No

Do you think you would have learned more effectively if you had worked in pairs instead? Please explain.
