

**Can learners with high English proficiency learn from peer feedback?**

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Review

# Can learners with high English proficiency learn from peer feedback?

This case study investigates the benefits of peer feedback for students with high second language proficiency and the factors that may influence their learning in the Chinese EFL context. Specifically, it examines whether, what, and how HP students can learn from this activity when they collaborate with students with low L2 proficiency. The analysis of multiple sources of data including video-recordings of peer feedback sessions, interviews, stimulated recalls, and drafts of student texts, indicates that although group peer feedback can provide learning opportunities for HP students, they may not necessarily learn from this activity. Several factors are found to influence the learning of HP students during peer feedback in the writing class, including the beliefs of HP students on peer feedback, their motives and goals for peer feedback, as well as the medium of group discussion. This paper concludes with implications for peer feedback practice and research in L2 writing.

## Introduction

Peer feedback in pair and small group work is extensively used in second language (L2) writing contexts. Although research has revealed that peer feedback can provide learning opportunities for L2 writers (Rollinson 2005; Zhao 2014), L2 proficiency may be an important factor in determining student learning from peer feedback. In small group work, in which students typically have diverse language abilities, a problem with peer feedback is that students with high L2 proficiency (HP students) may not considerably learn from students with lower L2 proficiency (LP students) because the limited English language proficiency of students may prevent them from providing constructive comments (Hyland and Hyland 2006; Leaser 2004). In heterogeneous groups, therefore, HP students may not be motivated to attend peer feedback because they may doubt the comments provided by LP students.

The limited research on how L2 proficiency affects peer feedback indicates that L2 proficiency plays a role in peer feedback (Hu and Lam 2010; Lundstrom and Baker 2009; Allen and Mills in press). For example, Allen and Mills (in press) argued that HP students provide more suggestions on peer writing than LP students, and LP students can benefit from peer feedback by receiving feedback from HP students. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) examined whether proficiency level affected the degree to which reviewing peer papers improved the writing ability of an individual. Their study indicated that givers at a lower proficiency level obtained more gains in writing than those at higher proficiency levels.

Although existing literature suggests that LP students can benefit from group peer feedback, scarce information is provided regarding whether, what, and how HP students can learn from this activity when they collaborate with LP students. To fill this research gap, this study explores the benefits of peer feedback for HP students and the factors that may

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3 influence their learning. This study is significant because it can provide insights into the  
4 learning process of peer feedback for HP students in a heterogeneous small group work in  
5 L2 writing and offer pedagogical implications about how to motivate HP students to attend  
6 peer feedback.  
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## 9 10 **The study**

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12 A case study approach was adopted for this study, which is guided by the following two  
13 research questions:

- 14 1) To what extent and in what ways can HP students learn from peer feedback in small  
15 groups?
- 16 2) What are the factors that may influence the learning of HP students from group peer  
17 feedback?  
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## 20 21 **Research context and participants**

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23 As part of a large study on peer feedback in EFL writing classrooms, this study was  
24 conducted in an EFL reading and writing class at a university in Mainland China. In large  
25 class sizes typical of EFL contexts such as China (Jin and Cortazzi 2006), students typically  
26 have diverse language abilities. Given the large class size, small groups were frequently  
27 used in all of the English courses in the university. Group peer feedback was regularly  
28 implemented in the class, which consisted of 41 first-year non-English majors. The  
29 students were asked to draft five essays and conduct group peer feedback activities over  
30 the semester. At the beginning of the semester, the instructor (not the researcher)  
31 provided peer feedback training (two hours in total) to the students, during which the  
32 teacher explained to the students the procedure of peer feedback, its advantages for their  
33 learning (e.g., text revision, peer support reader awareness, and critical thinking ability),  
34 and the different aspects of good writing (e.g., coherence, idea development, and  
35 vocabulary use). The instructor used a sample essay to model the peer feedback process  
36 and guided the students to review the essay in terms of vocabulary use, grammar,  
37 organization, and content.  
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43 Three heterogeneous groups (Groups A, B, and C) of 12 students with significant diversity  
44 in English language proficiency were selected. Three HP students (Helen, Tam, and Felix—  
45 all pseudonyms), one from each group, were selected for the in-depth case study. Helen is a  
46 female, and Tam and Felix are males. They were defined as HP students on the basis of  
47 their scores in the National Matriculation English Test (above 135 out of 150), as well as  
48 the general observation of the language instructor over the semester. Compared with their  
49 peers in the same group (who were intermediate or low English learners), these three  
50 students have the highest English proficiency.  
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## 53 **Data collection and analysis**

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55 Data sources included video-recordings of peer feedback sessions, interviews, stimulated  
56 recalls, and drafts of student texts. To answer research question 1 (RQ1), video-recording  
57 data were gathered from four peer feedback sessions, each lasting 30 minutes to 45  
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3 minutes, and the first and second drafts of student essays and peer comments on the drafts  
4 were collected after the students had finished their revisions. The video-recordings were  
5 fully transcribed. The peer feedback transcripts were analyzed to determine the number  
6 and focus of the comments received by the three participants. The comment analysis was  
7 based on meaningful units. The focus of peer comments was examined to ascertain  
8 whether the feedback focused on form, content, organization, or others (e.g., style and  
9 genre). The first and second drafts of the essays written by the three students (A1–A3, B1–  
10 B3, and C1–C3) were examined and compared to verify the extent to which they  
11 incorporated the comments of their group members and the effects of the comments on the  
12 quality of revisions. The quality of revisions was analyzed according to the approach  
13 proposed by Min (2006), that is, original better, revision better, or no change. The coding  
14 task was independently conducted by the first author and another language instructor with  
15 a master's degree in Applied Linguistics. In case of problematic coding, the two coders  
16 negotiated with each other until agreement was reached.

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21 To answer RQ1 and RQ2, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and stimulated recalls  
22 with the three participants and their group members were conducted. The interviews and  
23 stimulated recalls aimed to elicit student learning from peer feedback and the factors that  
24 influenced their learning. Each interview and stimulated recall was audio-recorded and  
25 lasted for approximately 30 minutes. All of the interview transcripts were analyzed  
26 according to the qualitative data analysis scheme developed by Miles and Huberman  
27 (1994). Open coding (identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing phenomena found  
28 in the transcripts) and axial coding (relating codes such as categories and properties to  
29 each other via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking) were used to analyze the  
30 qualitative data.

## 31 32 33 34 35 **Findings**

### 36 37 38 **RQ1: To what extent and in what ways can HP students learn from peer** 39 **feedback in small groups?**

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41 The data analysis indicates that the three HP students received a range of peer comments  
42 that focused on different aspects of writing, such as language form, content, text structure,  
43 and others (e.g., punctuation and writing style), and improved their text quality. However,  
44 while Helen and Tam believed that they had learnt considerably from group peer feedback,  
45 Felix did not think that peer feedback was a useful learning activity.

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48 Specifically, **Helen** received 18 comments (rounds of discussions) for her essay (370  
49 words). Further analysis shows that these comments focused on all of the aspects of  
50 writing, including language form (11 comments-61.1%), content (6 comments-33.3%), and  
51 organization (1 comment-5.5%). Fifteen comments were incorporated in the revision, of  
52 which 8 (53.3%) were about language form (e.g., attribute clause, preposition, and subject-  
53 verb agreement), 6 (40%) were about content (e.g., adding explanations), and 1 (6.7%) was  
54 about organization (e.g., adding sentences to connect paragraphs). The raters deemed 86.7%  
55 of the revisions as better, and 13.3% of the revisions unchanged. **Tam** received 12  
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3 comments (rounds of discussions) for his essay (246 words)—5 (41.7%) about content and  
4 text structure and 7 (58.3%) about sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary. 8 (66.7%)  
5 comments were incorporated in the revision, of which 4 were about content and text  
6 structure (e.g., adding examples and analysis to support the topic sentence; changing a  
7 simple sentence to a complex sentence), and 4 were about language forms (e.g.,  
8 prepositions). Tam also made 12 other revisions, which focused on language forms (40%)  
9 (e.g., tense) and content and structure (60 %) (e.g., adding the ending sentence in each  
10 paragraph). The raters deemed approximately 90% of the revisions as better, 5% of the  
11 revisions inferior to the original, and 5% unchanged.  
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15 Both Helen and Tam believed that most of the comments, particularly those about the  
16 content and idea development of their writing, from their group members were useful for  
17 their revisions. For example, they said,  
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20 Our group work was successful. ... They [A1, A2, and A3] discussed the theme of my essay to see if my writing  
21 can really respond to “what makes a role?” This is a good comment, I think. It made me reflect on the content  
22 of my writing. (Helen, stimulated recall)  
23

24 His [B2’s] comments were useful although he did not give many comments. Some comments were related to  
25 the content of writing. I remember that he mentioned something about the beginning sentences in my essay....  
26 I think I should have written an introductory sentence in the beginning of my essay. It’s my problem. I think  
27 his comments were good. (Tam, Stimulated recall)  
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30 In addition, Helen mentioned other learning opportunities (e.g., learning from reviewing,  
31 raising awareness of grammatical mistakes and group cooperation) in group peer feedback  
32 in the interviews and stimulated recalls.  
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35 It’s a good learning experience. By attending this activity, I can know **how others write English essays**.... I can  
36 also try to **avoid making mistakes that are made by my study buddies**. ... They can be **readers of my**  
37 **writing** and give me some objective comments, which **help me identify the problems with my writing**.  
38 (Helen, Interview)  
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40 Cooperation is quite crucial for successful peer feedback. I think this activity can raise our **awareness of**  
41 **cooperation**. (Helen, Stimulated recall)  
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44 Tam stated that being a reviewer helped his own writing and revisions. He emphasized  
45 that the peer feedback experience stimulated his reflection on his writing and self-revisions  
46 in the stimulated recalls. In his revisions, he focused on reader awareness. He mentioned  
47 “reader” several times in the stimulated recall, in which he was asked about his revising  
48 decisions and behavior. For instance, he added another two sentences in the introductory  
49 paragraph of the new draft and used “you” in the revisions.  
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52 Original: *All the role models have their own prominent features. There are about three main qualities you have*  
53 *to know.*  
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55 Revised: *Everyone respects role models, and many people want to be a role model. All the role models have their*  
56 *own prominent features. So if you want to be a role model, there are about three main qualities you have to*  
57 *know.*  
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3 For the revisions, he responded as follows:  
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5 Here, it was not suitable and now I think it's better to add a short introduction which may be attractive to  
6 readers. ... Otherwise, the whole essay seems to have nothing to do with the readers. ... It reads more fluent  
7 now. (Stimulated recall)  
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10 By contrast, **Felix** did not think that group peer feedback was helpful for his learning,  
11 although he received some peer comments that enhanced his text quality to some extent.  
12 Felix received 11 comments (rounds of discussions) for his essay (206 words)—1 (9.1%)  
13 about content, and 10 (90.9%) about grammar and vocabulary. Felix made 10 revisions in  
14 total, among which 80% (8 revisions) were peer-triggered revisions, and 20% (2 revisions)  
15 were self-revisions. Up to 80% (8 revisions) were focused on language form (e.g., tense,  
16 phrases, articles, and verbs) and 20% (2 revisions) were about the content (e.g., adding one  
17 sentence to summarize the essay). Among the 10 revisions, 6 (60%) were considered  
18 superior to the original, and 4 (40%) remained unchanged.  
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22 Despite the comments and revisions, Felix did not believe that peer feedback had a role in  
23 improving his writing:  
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25 In the classroom, we sometimes did peer feedback activities in pairs and groups. I think it's a waste of time.  
26 With the time, it would have been better if the teacher could explain the difficult language rules to us. I have  
27 so many exercises to do, but for many items, I cannot understand and would like to ask my teacher.  
28 (Interview)  
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32 Although Felix had been involved in different types of peer feedback activities in the  
33 university, he did not regard them as useful. He said:  
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35 Some students are quite serious and help me correct the errors and provide some suggestions. However,  
36 some students just wrote "very good" and a score and signed their names in the end. Quite a lot of students  
37 did so, and they only write comments like very good. We've been in the university for a short time. Most of  
38 students are not accustomed to the peer feedback activity. I don't think it's suitable for students in Mainland  
39 China. It is fine for students in Hong Kong or other western countries, I think. (Interview)  
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### 43 **RQ2: What are the factors that may influence the learning of HP students** 44 **from group peer feedback?** 45

46 The examination of the three HP students in the study indicates that several factors may  
47 influence their learning in group peer feedback. First, the beliefs of HP students on peer  
48 feedback and the role of L2 proficiency in peer feedback could influence their engagement  
49 and learning in peer feedback. When deciding whether to incorporate peer comments into  
50 text revisions, Helen and Tam focused on the quality of peer comments rather than the  
51 English proficiency of reviewers. For instance, although Tam preferred to work with HP  
52 students, he did not have any bias toward the comments from LP students. He said:  
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3 I prefer to work with students with higher English proficiency and writing skills. ... However, I value all  
4 comments from my group members, whether their English is good or not. I think about their comments  
5 carefully before I make revisions. (Tam, Interview)  
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8 Although Helen thought that L2 proficiency might influence their peer feedback activity,  
9 she would consider comments from all of her group members during text revision.  
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12 Our English proficiency may influence the group discussion to some extent. You know, we have different  
13 linguistic and cognitive abilities. So our understanding of those writing issues may be different. ... I don't think  
14 the difference in our language proficiency may impact my acceptance of these comments. In revising my essay,  
15 I usually focus on the comments rather than the providers of these comments. I will make revisions  
16 accordingly if I think the comments are good and useful. (Helen, Interview)  
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19 However, Felix did not believe in the value of group peer feedback. He stated that even HP  
20 students may not provide constructive comments.  
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22 To be honest, I am not interested in peer feedback at all. ...I did this mainly because this was a task required  
23 by the writing teacher. I don't have any expectation. You know, it's quite difficult for students to provide  
24 really meaningful and useful comments and suggestions. Most of the feedback focuses on grammar. Always  
25 grammar... Peer feedback is unlike teacher feedback. There is a big gap in English level between me and my  
26 teachers. But students even with a higher level of English proficiency cannot provide impressive suggestions,  
27 I think. (Interview)  
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30 Felix believed that it was difficult for Chinese students to conduct collaborative tasks. He  
31 said in the interview:  
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34 It's very difficult for us to work toward the same goal. After all, everybody has his/her own goal. ... It's no easy  
35 for Chinese students to collaborate well... I reserve my opinion about the group work in English learning... I  
36 think most of the students are not positive about peer feedback as a learning task, though some are still quite  
37 active. (Interview)  
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41 Second, the motives and goals of HP students were the other factors that influenced  
42 student learning in group peer feedback. Data analysis shows that HP students could learn  
43 from this activity when their motives and goals focused more on feedback-giving than  
44 feedback-receiving. Helen and Tam viewed peer feedback as a learning-oriented activity  
45 with the reader (i.e., the giver of feedback) and as the primary beneficiary. For example,  
46 with regard to the benefits of participating in peer feedback as a reader and a writer, Tam  
47 preferred to be a reader and emphasized the benefits as a reviewer.  
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50 I think I learn a lot, especially when I read others' essays as a reviewer. I have some feelings or opinions when  
51 I read the essays written by my classmates and then reflect on my own writing. So, you see, the key is that the  
52 reading of others' texts could influence my writing. The influence is even far greater than that caused by the  
53 peer's comments on my writing. (Interview)  
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56 By contrast, Felix viewed peer feedback as a feedback-oriented activity with the recipient  
57 of the feedback. As he thought that the peer comments he received were not constructive  
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3 or useful, he was not motivated to attend the activity, except to fulfill teacher requirement.  
4 As shown in the video-recordings, Felix remained silent in most of the peer feedback  
5 sessions and seldom offered feedback on the essays of others. Although he sometimes  
6 answered questions from his partners, he did not seek explanations or clarifications from  
7 them. The videos also showed that he rarely had eye contact with other group members  
8 and did not use other gestures such as headshaking and nodding, and facial expressions to  
9 interact with his partners. Compared with Helen and Tam, Felix's motive to attend peer  
10 feedback was focused on the product (i.e., to finish the task; to receive positive feedback)  
11 rather than on the learning process, which exerted negative influences on his learning in  
12 peer feedback.  
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17 Finally, the use of first language (L1) was found to be an important facilitative factor.  
18 Approximately 90% of the peer interactions in the three groups were in Chinese, and all the  
19 three participants and their group members delivered their comments in Chinese. As  
20 shown in the videos, Chinese was primarily used to maintain the dialogue, point out  
21 mistakes and problems in the essays, express ideas, request and confirm meanings, and  
22 sometimes argue with the peers. For LP students, L1 could be used to fully and clearly  
23 express their opinions and comments, and thus contributed to their discussions with HP  
24 students and their roles as reviewers in the peer feedback activity. Therefore, L1 could  
25 enhance the engagement and performance of LP students, which was conducive to the  
26 learning of HP students in this activity.  
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## 31 **Discussion and implications**

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33 This study provides knowledge about the learning of HP students in group peer feedback in  
34 L2 writing. Although previous research has indicated that HP students can contribute to  
35 group peer feedback (Lundstrom and Baker 2009; Allen and Mills in press), the present  
36 study indicates that HP students, such as Helen and Tam, can learn from this activity by  
37 receiving constructive peer comments to improve their essays, enhancing their reader  
38 awareness of L2 writing, learning from providing feedback to their peer writing, and  
39 stimulating self-reflection and regulation. The findings suggest that peer feedback can be a  
40 learning activity for HP and LP students in a heterogeneous small group work.  
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44 Although group peer feedback provides learning opportunities for HP students, they may  
45 not necessarily learn from this activity. The in-depth examination of the three cases—Helen,  
46 Tam, and Felix—indicates that several factors can influence the learning of HP students in  
47 group peer feedback, including their beliefs on peer feedback and the role of L2 proficiency  
48 in peer feedback, their motives and goals for peer feedback, as well as the medium of group  
49 discussion. The beliefs of HP students on peer feedback and the role of L2 proficiency in  
50 peer feedback can significantly influence their learning in the activity. The disbelief of HP  
51 students in the value of peer feedback and the ability of their peers to provide a scaffolding  
52 role may prevent them from learning in group peer feedback (such as the case of Felix). By  
53 contrast, when HP students hold positive attitudes toward peer feedback and focus on the  
54 feedback task itself rather than the L2 proficiency of their peers, they tend to engage in and  
55 benefit from this activity in various aspects (such as the cases of Helen and Tam).  
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5 The findings also suggest that group peer feedback may not be necessarily a learning  
6 activity for HP students when their motives and goals solely focus on receiving feedback.  
7 Research has indicated that giving feedback seems to be beneficial to the writing  
8 development of L2 students (Lundstrom and Baker 2009; Author and A 2015 in press). The  
9 findings of the current study imply that there is a need to raise HP students' awareness of  
10 the benefits of peer feedback for both peer reviewers and writers in order for them to learn  
11 from this activity. The findings also reveal that the medium of group discussion (i.e., L1)  
12 may facilitate the engagement and contribution of LP students, thus contributing to the  
13 learning of HP students in group peer feedback. This finding suggests the facilitating role of  
14 the L1 of students in enhancing the effectiveness of peer feedback, particularly in a  
15 heterogeneous small group work (Zhao 2010; Author and A 2014).  
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19 The current study has several other pedagogical implications for the use of peer feedback  
20 in L2 writing classes. L2 writing teachers need to particularly focus on the needs and  
21 motives of HP students when they use peer feedback in heterogeneous small groups.  
22 Despite their high language proficiency, HP students may not be motivated to attend group  
23 peer feedback when they do not believe in its value and benefits for HP students, thus  
24 preventing them from learning in the activity. The findings of this study are useful in terms  
25 of motivating HP students to engage in group peer feedback and other forms of small group  
26 work in L2 learning. In peer feedback training, L2 writing teachers can highlight the  
27 benefits of peer feedback for both HP and LP students. Peer feedback may provide different  
28 learning opportunities for HP and LP students. For HP students, they can still receive  
29 constructive comments on various aspects of writing from LP students. HP students can  
30 also learn from giving feedback and reviewing the writing of others. In implementing group  
31 peer feedback, L2 writing teachers also need to increase the awareness of HP students  
32 regarding the benefits of peer feedback for feedback-givers and motivate them to engage in  
33 peer feedback by providing comments, engaging in meaningful negotiation, and other  
34 relevant social activities involved in group peer feedback.  
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39 In conclusion, this study illustrates whether, what, and how HP students can learn from  
40 group peer feedback and contributes to research on peer feedback in L2 writing. While this  
41 study focuses on the benefits of peer feedback for HP students, future research can explore  
42 how HP students interact with other students in group peer feedback and how the  
43 interaction patterns affect their learning and text revisions and those of their group  
44 members. Considering that this study focuses on university L2 writers, future research can  
45 examine the issue in school settings.  
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