

Peer Commenting on Written Assignments for a Japanese University Online English Course

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With developments in technology and the problems of face-to-face teaching during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers have found new ways and opportunities for learning in the courses that they teach. In this article, the main innovation that we focus on is students' meaning-based feedback on each other's written homework assignments for writing courses. Both the assignments and the comments were posted using the blog tool of our university's learning management system (LMS). We describe the organization of the writing courses, which involved a textbook, tasks on the LMS, and videoconferencing sessions to prepare for writing, and then explore the effects of student feedback, teacher feedback, and automated feedback via a grammar-checking software application.

The classes and materials described in this article were taught to first-year students as a mandatory part of their curriculum. They were taught once a week over a period of 16 weeks in the second half of the academic year (October 2021 to February 2022). Student data were gathered through a questionnaire survey along with analyses of students' writing and comments. Teacher reflection on the courses has been added to this. In the final sections of the article, implications for the judicious use of comments by peers on written work are considered and avenues for further research are laid out.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing as a Communicative Act

Writing is an essential form of communication and an important productive skill for language learners to acquire. Uso-Juan et al. (2006) describe three pedagogical approaches to it: environmentalist, innatist, and interactionist. In the environmentalist approach, writing was seen merely as learning grammar and vocabulary to accomplish accuracy, and the focus was on formal correctness, forming appropriate sentences, and preventing errors. However, the approach was challenged by several academics, who placed emphasis on composing a written text instead of simply producing grammatically correct sentences demonstrating a knowledge of vocabulary. In Chomsky's (1957, 1965) theory, it was posited that children are innately active in learning a language. Consequently, researchers began to focus on the internal processes related to writing. In the innatist approach, students should be writers who produce ideas and thoughts actively in the composing process; the process approach to writing involves generating ideas, drafting, revising and editing, rather than simply focusing on form. However, researchers' focus shifted to the sociocultural context and its impact on writing. Goals and communicative intentions were not previously considered, but in the interactionist approach, they gained attention. Halliday (1978) states that language should be described in terms of its

function within social contexts. In this interactionist theory, the writer is perceived as a communicative individual and texts have a social purpose with a specific genre. Swales' (1990) work on genre stresses the point that communicative purpose influences a writer's choices. Thus, genres are "socially accepted ways of using the language for communicative purposes" (Uso-Juan et al., 2006, p. 388). The understanding of genre promoted an interactive aspect of writing, embedding it in situation and culture. This approach shows that writing is contextualized, dynamic, and interactive. Also, it helps us understand that writing is a social process (Hyland, 2002), and lays the foundation for teaching writing as a communicative act.

Recent research trends (e.g., Nation, 2009) have followed this communicative writing approach, in which interaction is important and can be achieved when receiving a response, such as in email communication. Writing includes a dynamic interaction between the writer, the reader, and the text, and the writer needs to consider the factors involved in this while writing. Consequently, social and contextual factors play a major role in producing written discourse (Silva & Matsuda, 2002). Communicative writing has a purpose and an audience to reach. Communicating with the reader can be achieved in various ways. In language classes, the interaction can occur in the form of feedback or comments. When writing discourse and then receiving comments, the communicative interaction makes it evident that the writing is produced for an audience, who will seek its meaning and communicate in return. This may also lead to motivation to write well.

Types of Feedback

Feedback can be an effective tool for improving writing performance. For instance, feedback can help students to bridge the gap between what they know and what they need to know. It can be classified as corrective or non-corrective, depending on the intention of the respondent. Also, one can make a distinction between sources of feedback such as (1) student comments, (2) traditional feedback by a teacher, and (3) automated feedback by software.

In this research we make a distinction between *student commenting* and *peer review*. We define peer review as being an in-depth process of detailed examination of writing, often involving coaching in developing the review skills. For example, Lee's (2010) study involved regular 30-minute sessions of class time, in which students examined the content, language, and format of writing in relation to academic writing. In contrast, we define student commenting as students reading their peers' writing and commenting on what interests them.

Traditional feedback involves constructive comments given by a teacher based on grammar, spelling, structure, and content. It includes all aspects of writing, encompassing both lower-order and higher-order concerns. However, this type of feedback imposes a heavy workload on teachers, who often work under severe time constraints, particularly where large classes make it challenging to give detailed and comprehensive feedback to each student.

Automated feedback given by software applications has emerged as a potential solution to some of the feedback challenges for teachers. If a software program is reliable, its integration into writing classes can complement traditional teacher feedback and help to promote learner autonomy. Often, the software analyzes the text and suggests ways to improve the writing. With the combination of error detection and scoring systems, automated feedback tools can cover a great variety of lexical, syntactic, and semantic structures,

providing good-quality feedback on the linguistic aspects of writing (Heift & Hegelheimer, 2017). Usually, the software locates errors and provides possible corrections. Students can click on their mistakes and pop-up comments will appear, offering suggestions on how to edit their work. This type of immediate feedback focuses on problems such as spelling errors, subject-verb agreement, articles, quantifiers, and run-on sentences, and a number of studies have evaluated how it has been used in English language courses.

Empirical Studies on Automated Feedback

Previous studies investigating feedback on students' writing have dealt with (1) evaluation of feedback with automated feedback tools and focused on its reliability, (2) the impact of automated feedback on L2 learning, and (3) students' perception of automated feedback (Heift & Hegelheimer, 2017). Research results show that the accuracy of the feedback given by software varies considerably based on error types (Feng et al., 2016). Chapelle et al. (2015) investigated the impact of automated feedback on learners' writing and found improvement in terms of surface grammatical errors at the word and sentence level, although half of the students did not revise their writing based on automated feedback, a finding that was also noted by Thi and Nikolov (2021). Phakiti et al. (2013) suggest that automated feedback has a positive impact on L2 writing. Also, research on learners' perception of automated feedback indicates that students generally appreciate the usefulness of such feedback (Chen & Cheng, 2008; Huffman, 2015; Sharber, Dexter, & Riedel, 2008), but they more greatly value teacher feedback or peer feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lai, 2010). This might be because the focus of feedback by teachers and students is often on meaning while automated feedback is more focused on form.

Grammarly "is an automated grammar-checking application that offers specific suggestions to help improve writing — and it goes way beyond grammar" since it also focuses on making writing clear and concise (Grammarly, 2022). Previous research (Thi & Nikolov, 2021) investigated the effectiveness of Grammarly in writing classes in Myanmar. The paper looked at how Grammarly supports students' writing skills. The results indicate that, compared to other types of feedback, Grammarly feedback led to correct revision because the program gives concrete suggestions for editing, making it easier for students to revise their drafts. However, the results also revealed that even though many students made successful revisions with Grammarly combined with teacher feedback, students ignored feedback on various errors (Thi & Nikolov, 2021). According to the study, after receiving feedback over a semester, learners made progress in their writing performance in terms of task achievement as well as coherence and cohesion. Likewise, in connection with grammatical range and accuracy, the students demonstrated improvement. Also, the students perceived the feedback from both the teacher and Grammarly to be effective and useful for improving their writing. The majority of students felt that Grammarly feedback helped them improve their grammar and vocabulary, but none reported improvements in content or organization. Here, the teacher's feedback was considered more valuable.

A study by O'Neill and Russell (2019) found that the participants in a Grammarly group responded more positively and were more satisfied with grammar advice than those in a non-Grammarly group. Another study by Qassemzadeh and Soleimani (2016) found that both the teacher's feedback and Grammarly feedback positively influenced students' study of passive structures.

Relevance to Our Study

As the studies detailed above reflect, automated feedback focuses primarily on grammatical and spelling issues in writing. Consequently, it has the potential to lift some of the feedback pressure off teachers, who can then focus on the content and structure of students' writing, making it more feasible to cope with the workload. In our study, we are interested in how ideas relating to interaction that is based on meaning can be combined with feedback that is oriented towards discourse structure and form. For this reason, it is important to make a distinction between "meaning-focused commenting," in which the focus is on content and meaning, and feedback on discourse structure and accuracy.

There are three sources of feedback in our study: student comments, automated feedback, and teacher feedback. As previously noted, the study examines the impact of peers reading each other's work and commenting on the content and meaning, instead of focusing on grammatical accuracy, which is often the aim of a peer review. The aim of meaning-focused commenting is to motivate students to share their work and write their texts for reading by an audience. Automated feedback is mainly oriented towards form in terms of grammar and vocabulary. Teacher feedback can encompass both meaning-focused commenting, discourse structure, and a focus on form, but it is dependent on the decisions of individual teachers.

BACKGROUND

Students who took part in this study were enrolled in weekly online classes at a Japanese national university. For the student groups described here, productive skills-oriented classes (writing and speaking) are paired up with receptive skills-oriented classes (listening and reading). The two skills are taught separately by two different teachers within the course. These courses are mandatory for first-year students. Each week, students have both a productive and a receptive skills-oriented class; the writing class is the focus of our current research. All three authors of this article were responsible for the writing component of their respective courses. Grammarly was recommended to the students as a grammar checker.

The three authors of this paper based their courses around a book that had been specifically written for teaching writing skills to first-year university students in Japan: *Effective Writing for Global Communication: Email, Paragraph, and Essay*. The book contains twelve main units (Appendix 1), each involving preparatory tasks building up to a final writing task.

A flipped-learning approach was used for the classes. Several preparatory tasks from the textbook were converted and placed in folders on the university's LMS (Blackboard Learn 9.1, hereafter Bb9), so that students could do them autonomously. The Bb9 work was combined with videoconferencing sessions, in which the teachers instructed students and organized discussion tasks both on the topic of the lesson and on the writing task preparation. The LMS was set up with blogs for each unit's writing task. These blogs were created to motivate students to write and post their work in a format that could be read by all members of the class. Students read each other's work and wrote comments. The Grammarly app was introduced at the beginning of the course, and students were strongly encouraged to use it to improve their writing. During the course, teachers also commented on the students' writing.

METHODS

Aim of the Study and Pedagogical Approach

While there has been plenty of research on feedback in writing instruction concerning written corrective peer feedback, teacher feedback, and automated feedback, a less explored area is non-corrective feedback. Our paper intends to address this gap by exploring students' responses to sharing and commenting on their written work through their course's blogs on the LMS. We also investigate the effect of Grammarly, and we consider our own corrective and non-corrective feedback as teachers.

Research Questions

The main aim of the research is to evaluate how peer commenting on written tasks affects a writing course. The innovation took place in a process approach used by the authors. Our first two research questions are used to gather student opinions on such an approach and to gain insight on students' perceptions of different forms of feedback in the course. The third question is used to explore the perceptions of the authors as teachers of the groups involved in this study.

1. What were students' attitudes towards the process (communicative) approach to writing?
2. What were students' opinions on posting blogs and feedback by students, teachers, and Grammarly?
3. What were teachers' perceptions of posting blogs and commenting on them?

Participants

The student participants were first-year Japanese university students majoring in fields including Education, Engineering, Science, and Medicine. Their English proficiency varied based on the class but was judged by the authors to range from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate.

The three authors were involved in teaching 22 groups of students in total. The first author taught 10 of those groups and data were collected via a survey, as well as through an examination of their written assignments and comments. In addition, questionnaire data were collected from six groups taught by another author. All three authors reviewed their classes to address research question 3.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected in three ways: (1) a course feedback questionnaire to identify students' attitudes towards the writing course and various feedback types, (2) students' coursework writing on the Bb9 blog, and (3) the comments by students and teachers. These could be triangulated to build an in-depth picture.

The course feedback questionnaire (Appendix 2) was based on one used in previous writing courses. It was administered online at the end of the course in the case of two instructors. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items in total, including both Likert items and open-ended questions.

The first author examined students' writing on the blog, which served as additional data for analysis. The writing tasks were practice emails, paragraphs, and essays that were posted weekly. In order to compare data about students' attitudes towards getting and writing feedback with the actual comments that they received and wrote for their peers, the first author examined feedback comments on the blog.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative research that included descriptive statistics. In the case of the Likert items, mean scores were calculated. Items for the open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively. This was also done both with students' written homework assignments and comments. In the qualitative content analysis, repeated patterns were identified and selected as well as salient themes. In addition to content analysis, frequency analysis was carried out in terms of the student comments to shed light on how actively they commented every week.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The writing courses followed a process approach, in which students had discussions and writing preparation on Zoom videoconferencing software before writing and posting their actual written work on the blog. Posting was followed by students reading their peers' work and writing comments for them as well as receiving comments from peers and teachers. Table 1 shows the average feedback scores for Likert items.

TABLE 1. Average Feedback Scores for the Writing Course in Term 2 on the Scale of 4(++) very good 3(+) good 2(-) not so good 1(--) not good

	Teacher A	Teacher B
Number of students	145/200 (72% response rate)	112/118 (94% response rate)
4 (++) 3(+) 2(-) 1(--)	Rating	Rating
Opinion: writing tasks	3.53	3.61
Opinion: commenting on the blogs	3.28	3.06
Opinion: comments received	3.48	3.49
Usefulness of Grammarly	3.45	3.48
Opinion about the Zoom session	3.44	3.53

Students' Attitudes Towards the Process (Communicative) Approach to Writing

In the case of both instructors' courses, students were positive overall about writing emails, paragraphs, and essays. The mean scores were also very similar between the two groups (3.53, 3.61).

The Practical Nature of the Writing Tasks

Students enjoyed writing in various genres and thinking about topics connected to their daily lives. The level of tasks was described as appropriate by many; some students experienced difficulties, but these were countered by the opportunity to *"think deeply and put one's opinion coherently together."* One student emphasized the usefulness and practicality of the tasks: *"I was able to learn practically how to write e-mail in English. Also, it became an opportunity to think about various things."* Email writing is an important skill for university students to acquire in English for their future, and many took advantage of the practice that the course offered. Another student made a similar observation: *"It was a task with contents that could be applied to daily life, so I thought I could learn English well."* Feedback helped them to *"write more correctly"* but it was unclear from the data whether they referred to automated or non-automated feedback. Motivation to write and post their writing on the blog was expressed by another student: *"I enjoy writing*

blogs, and I spent a lot of time for writing blogs.” Further, the course provided them “*many opportunities where one could express his or her opinion and experience.*”

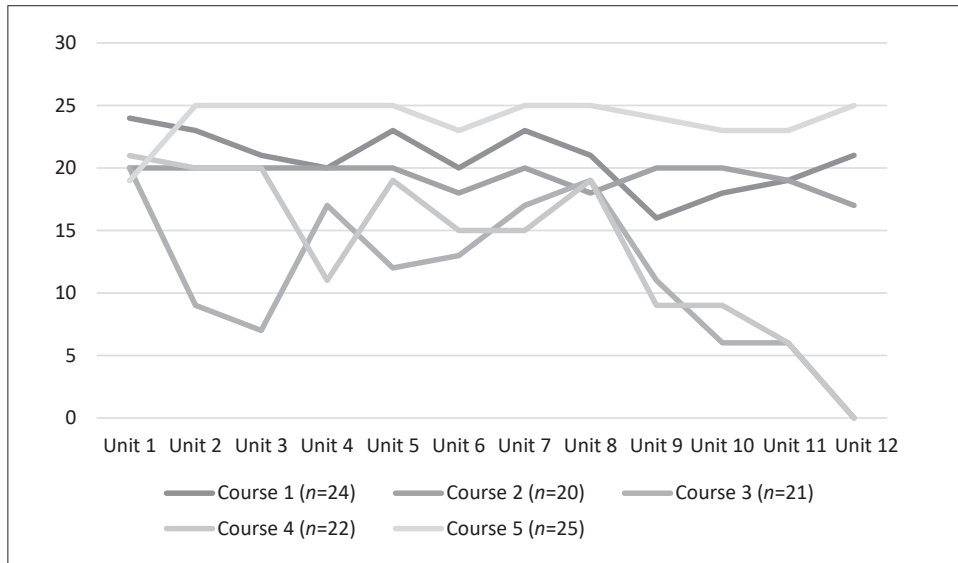
Videoconferencing on Zoom

Quantitative data in Table 1 show that the Zoom session was perceived well by the majority of students in both teachers’ courses (3.44, 3.53). Qualitative answers emphasized the advantages of the online aspect of Zoom and its convenience. In particular, one student enjoyed collaborative work on Zoom with peers in the breakout room “*because there were things, I could do by using a computer, such as sharing screens.*” The flipped learning approach was mentioned by some students because they felt that it prepared them for the writing tasks. It also gave them a chance to understand the tasks and ask questions to clarify some points which helped them to gain a better understanding of what they were expected to do. This was especially important during online lessons because students did not have the chance to meet the teacher or each other in the same way as a face-to-face class. For instance, two students wrote that the “*question-and-answer session was important*” because “*it was easy to ask questions,*” and another student favored the clarity of instruction on Zoom because the student could “*immediately understand what to do.*” Participants also stated that they learned from their peers’ opinion by sharing experiences in Zoom’s breakout rooms. It was a good opportunity for them to get some ideas for writing when discussing tasks with one another. These points were echoed by some students in the following excerpts: “*I was able to know other people’s thoughts through communication,*” and “*It was a great way to come up with ideas about writing.*” Another student expressed the same idea in other words: “*I was able to think about what I should write for the assignment.*”

Students’ Opinions of Commenting on Blogs and Other Feedback

Table 2 shows the frequency of commenting for five of the ten groups taught by the first author. The number of students commenting weekly on the blog fluctuated, depending on the topic of writing. For instance, the task of Unit 8, a descriptive essay about one’s hometown, seemed to be popular for comments in all the groups. Also, while students in some courses (Course 1, 2, 5) were consistently active on the blog and motivated to interact, in other courses (Course 3, 4) students became less active by the end of the semester. This might be due to lack of time because of the upcoming exam period or the repetitive and monotonous nature of some comments which led to decreased motivation at the end. Also, towards the end of the semester, they were required to write longer texts in the form of essays, which might be a reason for less time to comment in Courses 3 and 4. Another possibility is that less proficient students found commenting more of a challenge and more tiring, tending to reduce the number of comments as the semester progressed.

TABLE 2. Number of Students Commenting Weekly in 5 Courses



Becoming Reader-Conscious

The highest number of student responses indicated that they learnt how to be reader conscious in their writing: *“I became to think about my readers.”* As another student put it, *“I started to keep in mind that the text should be easily understood by the reader.”* This finding is salient because it reflects Silva and Matsuda’s (2002) communicative writing approach where the dynamic interaction between writer and reader is very important, and it is all about the writer’s awareness of such interaction to accomplish successful communication and convey meaning. Also, the second most frequent category of responses referred to improvement in grammar, which can be confirmed by the data of their posted tasks as well, with more accurate texts in the second half of the course. This development can be related to both Grammarly and traditional teacher feedback, and students’ motivation to edit and revise their text for an audience. The latter was echoed in the following excerpt: *“I tried to pay more attention to grammar and sentence structure than before.”* Chapelle et al. (2015) also found improvement in students’ writing in terms of grammar on the word and sentence level due to automated feedback. Also, the blog motivated them to write better, and it gave them a sense of facilitative anxiety (or pressure) to produce diligent work, since it was going to be shared with an audience and they had to pay extra attention to their writing to avoid embarrassment. This idea was expressed in the following: *“I spent a lot of time writing because I had to show others.”*

Developing Writing Skills

Students also felt improvement in the amount of writing they did. They learnt to produce longer texts—*“can write longer paragraphs than before”*—and to write essays instead of paragraphs, which was one of the aims of the course. Some mentioned faster typing speed due to getting into the habit of writing in English regularly. It also motivated them to produce better texts because they knew their peers would read them: *“By thinking about that my essay will be read, I wrote carefully.”* They could compare their work to

others and use it as guidance in terms of how to proceed with their own writing. This point was expressed by the following comment: *"When I saw the great blog, I felt I want to write a great blog like him or his."* At the same time, they felt the pressure of writing for an audience and putting their written work on display. This encouraged them to think more and write better, as revealed by a student response: *"My writing skill improved because I'm embarrassed to be read by my friends so I thought a lot."*

Their writing also changed in terms of vocabulary, a point mentioned by many students. They were exposed to a large amount of text on the blogs and received many comments from their peers which helped them to expand their vocabulary and use new words and expressions in their own writing. For instance, one student *"learned a lot of expression to compliment people."* Meaning-focused peer review (or commenting) was always very polite and positive on the blog since students did their best to highlight good points and encourage each other. This was important to help them put extra effort into writing due to their positive feeling towards it.

Students' Comments on Others' Writing

As Table 1 reveals, students rated commenting on blogs slightly lower than other components of the course (3.28, 3.06). This can partly be explained by time constraints and the challenges of writing comments. Qualitative data reveal that some students felt that *"it was difficult to write a comment because of the lack of time."* Also, many students expressed their struggle to produce a comment for their peers' writing, reflected by one student's comment: *"I could not come up with good reply."* Another student noted that it was *"difficult to write my reaction in English."*

It is also important to note that in Table 1, the difference between the two teachers was largest for this item, indicating that the way of organizing the commenting may have had some effect, a point which is explored for research question 3.

On the positive side, many students shared thoughts on the benefits of commenting. One student noted: *"It is important to convey my opinion to others."* Another student could express a sense of empathy in commenting on someone's work: *"I was able to empathize with other people's writing."* Establishing a weekly routine to write in English and post on the blogs helped them to form a habit of using English regularly outside classes, which was expressed by the following response: *"It was good that I had a chance to write English sentences every week."* Generally, the positive responses were related to reading their peers' writing before posting a comment. Due to the writing challenges, prior reading of posts turned out to be the most valuable for almost all students. Through reading, they claimed to *"learn grammar from other students' blogs"* and it *"gave them new vocabulary."* They also felt that their reading skills developed through the task and many students enjoyed learning about their peers' opinions and experiences: *"it was interesting to know about school customs, hobbies, opinions of other students. Also, it was fun to think about how to comment."* This finding implies that reading a comment was more valuable for them than actually writing a comment: *"I was glad to gain comments from friends. However, it is difficult to comment on other students."* Based on the descriptive statistics, almost all students in both teachers' courses read the comments they received from teachers and students, which validates the previous remark that they were truly interested in the comments but it was difficult to actually produce them.

As Table 1 shows, students were positive about the comments they received, with both teachers getting

similar results from their students (3.48, 3.49). Students clearly enjoyed reading the comments. These opinions were related to both traditional teacher feedback, which included feedback on form and peer feedback. As one student put it, *“I could notice my errors thanks to teacher’s comment.”* Interestingly, automated feedback was not mentioned here in this regard, which is a similar finding to Thi and Nikolov (2021), who found that peer and teacher feedback was valued more than Grammarly, and that students often did not revise various errors suggested by the automated feedback tool as opposed to student and teacher feedback. Another student’s response was related to vocabulary development: *“I could learn new expressions from other student’s comment.”*

Students also enjoyed being complimented by their peers as it boosted their self-confidence and motivation. They were glad that their writing was being read and that they were able to receive others’ opinions. Empathy was a repeated pattern in many responses: *“It makes me happy if they sympathize with me.”* The comments they received on the blog were positive and kind which contributed to their positive feeling about them. High ratings for receiving comments were also related to pleasure that their written work was praised by others (Figure 1).

Unit 6 (Studying English Effectively)

I think that it is a very good way to read English words so I’ll try it.

I don’t have much knowledge about unique English expressions, so I want to read English novels and research papers!

I think it is good way that to read many kinds of books, so I want to try it!

I think your one-stone two-bird method is very nice. I will try it from now on.

Unit 9 (High School Days)

I was surprised that you enjoyed the 10 km race! I want to know the fun.

Your experience in high school is wonderful! I think that moving trains in Tokyo is very difficult too!

FIGURE 1. Showing Agreement, Praise, and Understanding through the Posting of Blog Comments

One example response expressed how students enjoyed being read and able to interact outside classes: *“It was nice to have people read my writing and then write questions and comments.”* Comments were also beneficial for students to check whether their written work was comprehensible, and they were seeking confirmation and validation about their writing: *“I could see if they understood my sentence.”* Another student shared the same idea: *“I was happy to know that the content I wrote was transmitted.”* Students became more reader-conscious in their writing and it bore fruit in the comments they received from the readers.

Students in general were pleased to get many positive reactions on the blog; the activity gave them a chance to get to know their peers more and share experiences through reading and commenting (Figure 2). This social aspect is in line with Hyland’s (2002) view of writing as a communicative act. However, comments that were too short and repetitive were mentioned as a problem.

Unit 8 (My Hometown/Prefecture)

I've moved to Hiroshima and I still don't know much about it. It's interesting.

I have been to Itsukushima Shrine once when I was an elementary school student!

This was my first time to go sightseeing in Hiroshima since I entered university. It's a shame it's currently under construction, but Itsukushima was always a great place to visit! Kure City and Onomichi City also have a very nice atmosphere, and I fell in love with Hiroshima all over again!

FIGURE 2. Sharing Experiences Through the Posting of Blog Comments

Usefulness of student comments (meaning-focused peer reviewing) was mentioned most frequently in the qualitative responses. Through the comments of their peers, students reportedly gained more vocabulary to express themselves, as the following response illustrates: *"Knowing the expressions of other people made me more expressive."* The main benefit of student comments was that they could learn from each other and improve their writing and at the same time they were genuinely interested in the opinion of their classmates. One student reflected on this point: *"I learned about my classmates' opinions and was able to reflect them in my own opinions."*

Also, peer comments added extra pressure on some students to focus on the quality of their writing and it contributed to their development. The following excerpt confirms that point: *"I was feeling a little nervous when I thought it would be read by people."*

Grammarly and Teacher Comments

Students demonstrated a positive attitude towards Grammarly (see Table 1). They found automated feedback useful for their writing, a similar outcome to other studies (Chen & Cheng, 2008; Huffman, 2015; Sharber, Dexter & Riedel, 2008). It helped them to revise their grammar and post more confidently on the blog after having checked their writing with the software. The majority liked Grammarly because it is easy to use, and they could learn how to use conjunctions and link sentences and clauses due to the grammar checker.

As for traditional teacher feedback, it was considered useful in terms of better-quality writing, mainly related to structure, vocabulary, clarity, and content. As a student pointed out: *"The teacher's comments helped me write the text better."* It was found that teacher and peer comments motivated students out of class as well and it gave them a chance to engage in English communication at any time of the day on the blog. The comments were in line with the communicative approach, ensuring meaningful interactions among students. For instance, one student noted that *"it was fun to interact with teachers and students out of class."*

Teachers' Perceptions of Posting and Commenting on Blogs

This section forms the main author discussion of the course and the blogs, with a variety of themes emerging that cover both positive and negative aspects of commenting.

For all three authors, the use of a blog on the LMS, which was accessible and open to all, was a very effective way of collecting students' work. It gave students the opportunity to read each other's work and often see teachers' examples, and at the same time made it easier for teachers to solve problems for students. Depending on a teacher's attitude to task completion, students had the opportunity to post assignments that they had missed, although in such cases they would miss out on comments.

As we have noted in the article, teacher feedback is the hardest to define because it can encompass so much, including feedback on comments, discourse structure, grammar, and vocabulary. Within the author group, there was variation, so that teacher feedback ranged from primarily responding to meaning in the same way as the students' comments to combining this with advice on aspects of discourse, such as structure.

There was also variation in the way that teachers organized the commenting, and this may explain the difference in mean scores between the two teachers on students' writing of comments in Table 1 (3.28, 3.06). Teacher A required students to write comments as one of their homework tasks. In contrast, Teacher B organized commenting within the Zoom session, allocating students to small groups whose participants commented on each other's writing. Although we have no data on commenting frequency for Teacher B's groups, it seems likely that the frequency of commenting was more consistent than for Teacher A's groups but that students found commenting less enjoyable because it was more enforced. It may also relate to the problem of repetitiveness. The course required regular writing, involving 12 pieces of written work over a 16-week period with students commenting on each piece, and teachers themselves sometimes found it hard to find new ways to comment meaningfully.

Some writing assignments seemed to be much more suitable for comments than others. The authors have noted in previous research (Davies et al., 2021) that writing can be a rehearsal, and it can be actual communication. Ironically, in the classes described here, email writing was often more of a rehearsal than paragraph writing and essay writing. For example, writing a paragraph on studying English effectively involved the genuine sharing of ideas, while writing an imaginary request email to a teacher in order to borrow a book, while useful, was not conducive to commenting. In relation to this, Teacher C adopted a selective approach to commenting by students, identifying writing tasks which offered the best opportunity for commenting on content, and asking the students to comment only on those.

IMPLICATIONS

A number of implications arise from this study relating to the affective nature of commenting, the organization of commenting, the judicious use of commenting, and the value of Grammarly.

What stands out from many of the student comments is the emotional connection between the writer and the commenter. Students clearly liked to receive comments in what was a safe environment of their peers and teacher. Knowing that their peers would read their writing, many students started thinking about how to make their ideas clear to a reader. This is in contrast to writing for a teacher, who may be perceived as more of an adviser on improving their writing than someone engaging with the ideas contained within the writing.

A major issue for a teacher is how to organize commenting. In our study, students had a more positive response to being allowed to do it in their own time. The implication from some of the feedback is that commenting offered an opportunity to interact outside class time, and intuitively seems a more natural way

of communicating through writing. One possibility would be for teachers to use some class time in the early stages of the course to illustrate commenting to students and get them into the habit, but then give the responsibility to the students to comment in their own time.

One risk that became apparent is the overuse of commenting. The course described in this study involved a lot of student writing. A student complaint was that commenting became repetitive. Targeting a smaller section of tasks that are conducive to commenting can avoid this problem. For example, descriptions of hometowns, movie reviews, and advice paragraphs provided a lot of opportunity to comment. In contrast, email tasks on requesting and inviting, while valuable, did not provide such great opportunities.

In this study, it has been difficult to evaluate the effect of Grammarly. While it is rated highly by the students, it is difficult to know how many students use it diligently. It seems likely that there is a wide range of its use, but students like to know that they can get automated feedback. Unsurprisingly, students have no affective response to an automated system.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have primarily explored the effect of students writing texts that are read for meaning and commented on by the other participants in their class, with small errors being dealt with by the Grammarly software app. The results indicate that the effect on students is positive and helps them to think about communicating their message to others. The flipped learning approach used by the teachers in the study allows students to discuss and think through what they want to write and to get the satisfaction of their work being read by others. One issue that has emerged is the extent to which commenting should be used. While data in the study show that some student groups maintain their level of commenting throughout a course, for others this tends to tail off.

It is important to note that this study has taken place in the years of the coronavirus pandemic, meaning that the classes described here have not been taught face-to-face but have been delivered through an LMS and videoconferencing software. A return to classrooms will entail further change, with teachers and students having much more awareness and competence in online teaching. It seems likely that many teachers will continue to use an LMS as part of their teaching. An advantage of using blogs in a writing course, for example, is that it gives students the opportunity to use and develop their English skills outside of class time.

Finally, it is worth noting the issue of sustainability. Although the problems caused by COVID-19 have been greatly reduced, particularly due to vaccination programs, students and teachers still face disruptions due to COVID and influenza, as well as other environmental problems such as extreme weather events (Tanabe, 2021). While the focus of the study presented here has been on feedback, the use of an LMS for posting and commenting allows students and teachers to overcome sudden events that impact face-to-face teaching and learning. Ways in which technology can be integrated with a communicative approach will be the focus of future research.

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APPENDIX 1. Writing Syllabus

- Class 1: Introduction
- Class 2: Studying Abroad (Self-introduction email) pp. 1–6
- Class 3: Festivals (Descriptive paragraph) pp. 7–12
- Class 4: Movies (Review paragraph) pp. 13–18
- Class 5: Campus Life (Request email) pp. 19–24
- Class 6: Environment (Problem-solution paragraph) pp. 25–30
- Class 7: Lifestyle (Advice paragraph) pp. 31–36
- Class 8: Timed End-of-term Evaluation Task (Bb9)
- Class 9: Sport (Invitation email) pp. 39–44
- Class 10: Culture (Descriptive essay) pp. 45–50
- Class 11: Memory (Reflective essay) pp. 51–56
- Class 12: Technology (Feedback email) pp. 57–62
- Class 13: Work (Opinion essay) pp. 63–68
- Class 14: Famous Figures (Biographical essay) pp. 69–74
- Class 15: Countries and Travel
- Class 16: Timed End-of-term Evaluation Task (Bb9)

APPENDIX 2. Feedback Questionnaire

1. What was your overall opinion of *English Writing for Global Communication* and the Bb9 folders?

4: very good (++) 3: good (+) 2: not so good (-) 1: not good (--)

2. What was your overall opinion about the writing tasks (emails, paragraphs, and essays)?

4: very good (++) 3: good (+) 2: not so good (-) 1: not good (--)

3. Why?

4. What was your overall opinion about commenting on other students' blogs?

4: very good (++) 3: good (+) 2: not so good (-) 1: not good (--)

5. Why?

6. Did you read your classmates' and teacher's comments on your writing?

Yes/No

7. What was your overall opinion about the comments you received?

4: very good (++) 3: good (+) 2: not so good (-) 1: not good (--)

8. Why?

9. How useful was Grammarly to you?

4: very good (++) 3: good (+) 2: not so good (-) 1: not good (--)

10. What was your opinion about the Zoom session?

4: very good (++) 3: good (+) 2: not so good (-) 1: not good (--)

11. Why?

12. What was your opinion of the 'Preparing to Write' part of the Zoom session?

4: very good (++) 3: good (+) 2: not so good (-) 1: not good (--)

13. How has your writing changed by posting it on the blogs and commenting on other students' emails, paragraphs, and essays?

14. Did you have any problems or challenges with writing on the Bb9 blog? If so, what were they?

15. Do you have any final comments about the writing classes?

ABSTRACT

Peer Commenting on Written Assignments for a Japanese University Online English Course

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In the study presented here, the researchers used a learning management system (LMS) and videoconferencing software to deliver a first-year general writing course, taught using a process approach. The innovation at the heart of the research was the introduction of students commenting on regular homework assignments posted on the blog tool of the LMS. This peer commenting was combined with more traditional teacher feedback and automated feedback via the Grammarly software application.

The three authors were involved in teaching 22 groups of students in total, with the first author taking charge of 10 of those groups. Data were collected by two of the authors, covering 16 of the groups via an online survey involving both Likert scale answers and open-ended answers. The first author triangulated the survey data with assignments and peer comments. The three authors also discussed how they incorporated student commenting into their classes and their perceptions of the innovation.

The data indicate that peer commenting was generally viewed positively by both teachers and students. Many students became much more reader-conscious, formed connections with each other through writing and commenting, and communicated outside taught sessions. In addition, students learned from well-written assignments, as well as finding ways to encourage each other. However, data from the LMS, students, and teachers indicate that commenting can become repetitive, with the implication that commenting should be targeted at assignments most likely to stimulate students' interest to respond.

要 約

日本の大学のオンライン英語コースにおける課題文のピア・コメント化

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本研究では、学習管理システムとビデオ会議システムを用いて、1年次の一般教養科目「ライティング」をプロセス・アプローチで学習しました。研究の中心となったのは、学習管理システムのブログツールに掲載される通常の宿題に学生がコメントする仕組みを導入したことです。このピア・コメントは、より伝統的な教師からのフィードバックや Grammarly ソフトウェアアプリケーションによる自動化されたフィードバックと組み合わせられました。

3人の著者は、合計22グループの学生の指導に携わり、そのうち10グループを第一著者が担当しました。データ収集は、著者のうち2名が16のグループに対して、リッカート尺度による回答と自由形式の回答の両方を含むオンライン調査によって行いました。第一著者は、調査データを課題およびピア・コメントと三角測量しました。また、3人の著者は、学生のコメントをどのように授業に取り入れたか、またその革新性についての認識について議論しました。

データによると、ピア・コメントは教員と学生の双方から概ね肯定的に受け止められていることが分かりました。多くの生徒が読者を意識するようになり、文章やコメントを通じて互いにつながりを持ち、授業以外の時間にもコミュニケーションをとるようになりました。さらに、学生はよくできた課題から学び、互いに励まし合う方法を見つけることができました。しかし、LMS、学生、教師からのデータは、コメントが繰り返しになる可能性があることを示しており、コメントは、学生の反応を刺激する可能性が最も高い課題に的を絞る必要があることを示唆しています。