

# A Case Study of Developing Chinese EFL College Writers' Peer Feedback Literacy

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In response to the challenges faced by the peer feedback, this research is to investigate how to develop peer feedback literacy, a much less discussed area from the previous research. In the new literacy approach to analyze a case study in a Chinese college, the framework of peer feedback literacy for Chinese learners is developed in three dimensions: affect, knowledge, and communicative skills. Among them, knowledge on peer feedback includes understanding rubrics, making judgements, giving advice, and using resources. The research was conducted among 25 first-year English majors in a semester-long writing course, where the peer feedback was done five times. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and in-text peer comments in learners' assignments were collected for analysis and discussion. It is found that the introduction of well-designed rubrics and the teacher's modelling helped develop peer feedback literacy, and largely solved some problems arising in peer feedback, such as learners' ignorance of content feedback, their distrust of peers' comments, and Chinese learners' unwillingness to point out the problems due to face-threatening.

*Keywords:* peer feedback literacy, new literacy studies, affect, knowledge, communicative skills

## Introduction

Peer feedback, other than teacher's and self feedback, has been applied to enhance EFL writing ability for a long time. Both merits and demerits have been under discussion in the two-decade-long investigation (Chang, 2016). Maximizing the merits and minimizing the demerits calls for the development of learners' peer feedback literacy. For this much less covered area, this study, based on questionnaires on learners' perception, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of students' in-text peer feedback, is to work out a feasible framework for Chinese EFL college writers to develop their peer feedback literacy, where designing appropriate rubrics and necessary teachers' modeling facilitate this development.

## New Literacy Studies and Peer Feedback Literacy

### Strengths and Drawbacks of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is utilized as an instructional method which requires learner to specify the quality of a product (or project) or to evaluate the performance of other similar-status learners (Topping, 1998). The terms peer assessment, peer editing, peer critique, peer feedback, and peer review are often used interchangeably (Karegianes, Pascarella, & Pflaum, 1980).

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The beneficial effects of peer response have been investigated by a number of researchers in L2 writing since the 1990s: (1) to bring a genuine sense of audience into the writing classroom (Mittan, 1989), (2) to help students develop their reading and analysis skills (Keh, 1990), (3) to promote more at the learner's level of development and interests by providing more informative messages than teacher feedback (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992). At the same time, negative findings were found for peer feedback, such as the effectiveness of peer response activities to improve students' overall writing ability being questioned, students' possibility to mistrust the peers and not incorporate peer suggestions. Ferris and Hedgecock (2005) continued to discuss the benefits and criticism in Chapter 6 "Building a Community of Writers: Principles of Peer Response".

Liu and Hansen (2002) detailed the benefits and constraints in the cognitive, social, linguistic, and practical aspects: cognitive (benefits: exercise thinking, take active role in learning, engage in exploratory talk, build critical skills, demonstrate and reinforce knowledge and build audience awareness; constraints: uncertainty concerning peers' comments, lack of learner investment), social (benefits: enhance communicative power, receive authentic feedback, gain confidence and reduce apprehension, establish collegial ties and friendship, and influence learners' affective state; constraints: discomfort and uneasiness, lack of security in negotiating meaning, and commentary may be overly critical), linguistic (benefits: enhance metalinguistic knowledge, explore linguistic knowledge, gain additional language skill practice, enhance participation and improve discourse and find right words to express ideas; constraints: too much focus on surface structure, lack of L2 formal schema, and difficulty in understanding foreign accent); practical (benefits: applicable across student proficiency levels, flexible across different stages in the writing process, time-efficient in some cases, and reinforce process writing; constraints: time constraints, counter-productive and lack of student preparation).

From the above-mentioned discussion, it can be found that writing does not merely concern linguistic, cognitive aspects, but also covers the sociocultural domain. Carson and Nelson (1996, p. 2) stated that "Chinese students will generally work towards maintaining group harmony and mutual face-saving to maintain a state of cohesion". The Asian learners are always stereotyped as unwilling to give criticism, therefore enhancing their interaction counts. This leads to the thought about what should be particularly included in developing Chinese learners' peer feedback literacy and how to deal with the prominent problems in over-emphasis on surface errors, mistrust of peers' comments and Chinese learners' avoidance of giving criticism.

### **New Literacy Approach and Peer Feedback Literacy**

Literacy is traditionally defined by dictionaries as "the ability to read and write". It is extended, usually with modifying words, to mean "competence or knowledge in a particular area", such as musical literacy, economic literacy, emotional literacy etc.

For the New Literacy Studies starting in the 1980s, Gee (1990) questioned the idea that general literacy is a simple technical skill: the ability to read and write. Rather, literacy is primarily regarded as a sociocultural phenomenon. Social literacies (Street, 1995) are argued as a social act even from the outset. Gee (2015, p.36) stated that "people do not just read and write in general. They read and write specific sorts of 'texts' in specific ways. And these ways are determined by the values and practices of different social and cultural groups".

Peer feedback has undergone two-decade exploration, but peer feedback literacy is a much less discussed area. A few articles on feedback literacy are put here for some enlightenment. In "Conceptualizing Feedback Literacy: Knowing, Being, and Acting", Sutton (2012) discussed three interrelated dimensions of feedback literacy: epistemological (acquiring academic knowledge), the ontological (investment of identity in academic

work), and the practical (reading, thinking about, and feeding forward feedback). In “The Development of Student Feedback Literacy: Enabling Uptake of Feedback”, Carless and Boud (2018) have proposed the framework of underpinning feedback literacy: appreciating feedback, making judgements, managing affect, and taking action.

In accordance with the common constraints in peer feedback and the problems faced by Chinese learners in their peer feedback experience, from the perspective of New Literacy Studies, three dimensions will be proposed here in the following research to develop the Chinese learners' peer feedback literacy: affect, knowledge and communicative skills.

## **Research Design**

### **Research Questions**

This study has three research questions:

Q1: What is the suitable framework for Chinese EFL learners to develop their peer feedback literacy?

Q2: How do they develop their peer feedback literacy under this framework?

Q3: How does this framework solve the problems of over-emphasis on surface errors, mistrust of peers' comments and Chinese learners' avoidance of giving criticism?

### **Participants**

Twenty-five first-year English majors in a Chinese college in Guangzhou participated in the research. They received peer-feedback training twice and conducted peer review five times. For each peer review, a clear rubric was provided.

### **Procedure and Data Collection**

In this semester the participants wrote five narrative stories and they followed these steps to do peer review: First, according to the writing instruction, the first draft was done after class. Second, in class the teacher explained the peer feedback procedure and the rubrics. Third, in class the teacher demonstrated how to conduct the peer feedback. Fourth, due to the limited time, students were asked to focus on writing content feedback in class. If there was time left, students were encouraged to exchange ideas on the feedback. Fifth, students were asked to finish feedback on language after class. Finally, the second draft was to be submitted one week later.

The participants had substantial experience in peer feedback. At the end of semester, a 6-point Likert scale online questionnaire was co-designed and distributed by the teacher and her colleague. The questionnaire had 3 factors, altogether 50 items (after eliciting 6 unsuitable items), concerning peer feedback literacy, like affect, knowledge (understanding rubrics, making judgements, giving advice, and finding resources), and communicative skills. Twenty-five answers to the questionnaire were collected through the online platform ([www.wjx.cn](http://www.wjx.cn)). Five students (two high-level, two intermediate-level, and one low-level) were later chosen to do the semi-structured interview. The in-text peer feedback of the last writing project was used for text analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

In the thematic analysis of the questionnaire and results, a possible framework for peer feedback literacy is proposed here: affect, knowledge, and communicative skills.

### Learners' Positive Affect on Peer Feedback

In Krashen's Monitor Model (2009), the fifth hypothesis, the Affective Filter one, means that a number of "affective variables" (like motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety) play a facilitative, but non-causal, role in second language acquisition. Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. In other words, when the filter is "low", it helps language acquisition. The questions about the affective aspect are designed based on the following three general questions:

Do they like peer feedback?

Do they find it beneficial to do peer feedback?

Do they want to take initiative in doing peer feedback automatically (even if it is not required by the teacher)?

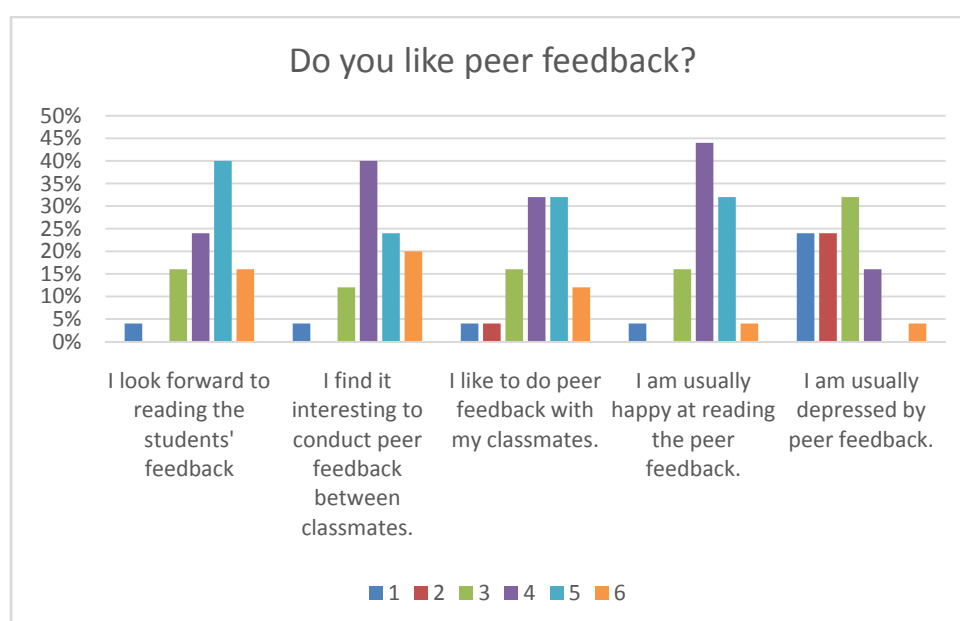


Figure 1. Do you like peer feedback? (1 = totally inapplicable, 2 = not applicable, 3 = not very applicable, 4 = quite applicable, 5 = applicable, 6 = totally applicable).

From Figure 1, different from some findings that students held a negative attitude toward peer review, these participants were found to like peer review from the five statements. Four similar statements were put forward to make sure about the reliability, "I look forward to reading the students' feedback", "I find it interesting to conduct peer feedback between classmates", "I like to do peer feedback with my classmates", "I am usually happy at reading the peer feedback", with quite high percentages of 80%, 84%, 76%, 80% to choose the positive scales of 4 and above. The reverse statement "I am usually depressed by peer feedback" had low percentage at 20% above 4. Figure 1 implies that despite a small number of learners not feeling happy at the feedback, most of them wanted to read or do the feedback for the benefits brought to them. These benefits are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Do You Find It Beneficial to Do Peer Feedback?*

	Receiving feedback M (SD)	Giving feedback M (SD)
Improving my English ability	4.2 (1.04)	4.52 (0.96)
Improving my language quality	4.52 (1.19)	4.68 (1.06)
Improving my essay content	4.48 (0.92)	4.44 (1.26)
Consolidating the writing skills learnt in class	4.12 (1.13)	4.48 (1.04)
Total	4.33	4.53

(Notes: M=mean score, SD=standard deviation; 1 =totally inapplicable, 2 =not applicable, 3 =not very applicable, 4 =quite applicable, 5 =applicable, 6=totally applicable).

For the question whether they find it beneficial to do peer review, 8 items were designed concerning the benefits in giving and receiving feedback. The mean scores of the benefits of giving feedback and receiving feedback were both over 4, that is, the learners felt quite positive about the benefits. The score of giving feedback was very close to or even little higher than that of receiving feedback, 4.53 and 4.33 respectively. What sheds a new light here is that in the past focus was always put on how much peer's feedback was taken and how effective the peer feedback was to the writers' essays. Little attention has been put to the fact that giving feedback is also beneficial to the writers themselves. The scores of giving feedback were somewhat higher in the three aspects of "improving the language quality", "consolidating the writing skills", and "improving my writing ability", except "improving my essay content". The standard deviation was about 1, which means most of data were close to the mean score and quite stable.

Table 2

*Do You Want to Take Initiative in Doing Peer Feedback (Even If It Is Not Required by the Teachers)?*

Items	M (SD)
Without the teachers' requirement, I hope to have peer feedback with my fellow classmates.	4.4 (1.19)
Without the teachers' requirements, I will try to do peer feedback with my fellow classmates.	3.96 (1.09)
Without the teachers' requirements, I will not do peer feedback with my fellow classmates.	3.36 (1.03)
Even the peer feedback occupies part of my spare time, I will insist on it.	4.2 (1.04)

(Notes: 1 =totally inapplicable, 2 =not applicable, 3 =not very applicable, 4 =quite applicable, 5 =applicable, 6=totally applicable).

From Table 2, the positive affect is also shown in their expected actions. Though score was a bit low (M=3.96) in the statement "Without the teachers' requirements, I will try to do peer feedback with my fellow classmates", the participants still expected the peer review to be done, even it would take up part of the time. That is to say, the willingness to do peer review is comparatively strong even without the teachers' supervision. The stereotype of Chinese learners' reluctance to communicate is changed.

### **Learners' Knowledge About Peer Feedback—Understanding Rubrics, Making Judgements, Giving Advice, and Using Resources**

The learners' willingness to do peer review is motivated by the benefits they find in the process. Some criticism on the over-stress of surface errors rather than content problems (Leki, 1990) can be largely dealt by the introduction of the well-designed rubric and teachers' modelling.

Rubrics are guidelines telling students what and how to do the peer feedback. Ours have three main features: First, focused feedback, rather than the unfocused ones, is required in the guidelines, which are set in

accordance with learning objectives. Second, content feedback is better emphasized than the linguistic one. The content goes before the linguistic aspect, as shown in the sample rubric below. In doing so, students' attention is first drawn to the content and organization of the story rather than the language. In this way students are expected to be better trained in making a good story as a whole and developing their cognitive ability. Third, grading and commentary are combined to give a more holistic picture of the peer feedback. The grading outlines a straightforward idea about the whole story and the comments give further explanation of the grading. In order to equip students with a better idea on how to do peer review, modelling is done by the teacher in class and good examples are shared.

Table 3

*Student A's Sample Feedback on Student B's Story*

Standard	Evaluation scale	Focused comments
Content (30%)		
The message of story is well-delivered, either explicitly or implicitly.	1 2 3 4 5√	Some detailed descriptions are delicate, such as the bus and the light on the face, and they have everything to do with the mood
The details used to reveal the message are relevant.	1 2 3 4 5√	
The details are shown from different perspectives (e.g., actions, facial expressions, setting...).	1 2 3 4 5√	
Organization and style (30%)		
Plot points are skillfully arranged.	1 2 3 4 5√	Well done with the suspense. Arouse the reader's interest
Suspense is successfully created if any. (Leave it blank if suspense is not used.)	1 2 3 4 5√	
Flashback is used appropriately if there is one. (Leave it blank if flashback is not used.)	1 2 3 4√ 5	
Language (30%)		
The writing is free of misspellings; words are capitalized correctly; grammar is correct; sentences are punctuated correctly without run-ons or fragments. (If more than three mistakes are found, the author can only get 1 or 2.)	1 2 3√ 4 5	Several past tense mistakes
The tenses are used correctly. (If more than three mistakes are found, the author can only get 1 or 2.)	1 2√ 3 4 5	
The language flows naturally with effective wording.	1 2 3 4 5√	
Length and succinctness (10%)		
The writing is neat, legible, and presented in an appropriate format.	1 2 3 4√ 5	None
The writing is appropriately long and without redundancy.	1 2 3 4 5√	None

*Notes.* Explanation of scale: 1 = fail, 2 = unsatisfactory, 3 = pass, 4 = good, 5 = excellent.

Table 4 below shows how the Chinese learners perceived their knowledge of peer feedback in certain genre—narrative writing. They demonstrated relatively high confidence both in content and linguistic feedbacks. In terms of content, the average score was 4.68, with confidence in giving feedback in vivid details (M=4.84), appropriate setting (M=4.8), good coherence and cohesion (M=4.68), and twists and turns in the plot (M=4.6). The linguistic feedback averaged 4.62, with high evaluation above 4.5 in correct spellings (M=4.96), no run-ons (M=4.84), correct parts of speech (M=4.72), consistency between subject and predicate (M=4.72), and correct tenses (M=4.64). For these items, 92%-100% chose above 4, with larger percentage for 5. The standard deviation of these items was just between 0.55 and 0.85, with the data points quite close to the mean, showing stability. Through teachers' scaffolding, unsurprisingly the learners valued content feedback a bit more than the linguistic one (Figure 2).

Table 4

*Knowledge of Peer Feedback in Narrative Writing**Content Feedback*

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	M (SD)
Vivid details	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (24%)	17 (68%)	2 (8%)	4.84(0.55)
Appropriate setting	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (28%)	16 (64%)	2 (8%)	4.8 (0.58)
Vivid characterization	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	6 (24%)	16 (64%)	2 (8%)	4.76 (0.66)
Good coherence and cohesion	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	7 (28%)	13 (52%)	3 (12%)	4.68 (0.80)
Twists and turns of the plot	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (40%)	15 (60%)	0 (0%)	4.6 (0.58)
Profound themes	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (12%)	10 (40%)	11 (44%)	1 (4%)	4.4 (0.76)
Total mean score							4.68

*Linguistic Feedback*

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	M (SD)
Correct spelling	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (24%)	14 (56%)	5 (20%)	4.96 (0.68)
No run-ons	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	13 (52%)	5 (20%)	4.84 (0.85)
Correct parts of speech	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	11 (44%)	10 (40%)	4 (16%)	4.72 (0.74)
Consistency between subject and predicate	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	7 (28%)	15 (60%)	2 (8%)	4.72 (0.68)
Correct tenses	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	9 (36%)	13 (52%)	2 (8%)	4.64 (0.7)
Varieties of expressions	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	12 (48%)	10 (40%)	1 (4%)	4.4 (0.71)
Correct collocations	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (24%)	12 (48%)	6 (24%)	1 (4%)	4.08 (0.81)
Total mean score							4.62

Notes. 1 = totally unsure, 2 = not sure, 3 = not very sure, 4 = quite sure, 5 = sure, 6 = very sure.

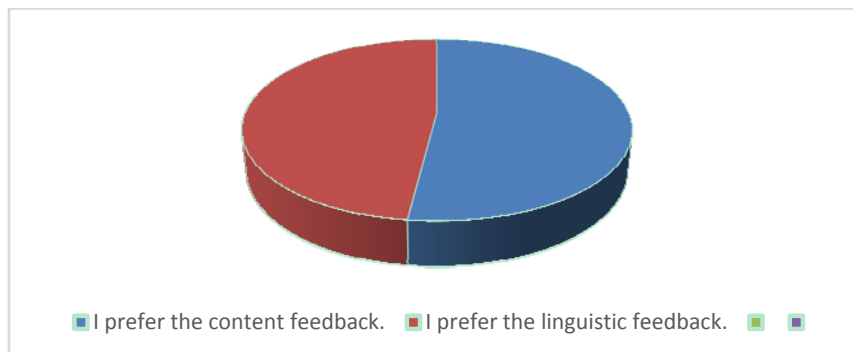


Figure 2. Do you prefer content feedback or linguistic feedback?

The pedagogical implication in content and linguistic feedbacks lies in that some aspects, though scoring above 4, still deserve more effort, such as the profundity in themes ( $M=4.4$ ), varieties of expressions ( $M=4.4$ ), and correct collocation ( $M=4.08$ ). These all conform to the problems pointed out in teacher's feedback in the assignments. For themes, in the 25 final project essays, in teacher's comments, there were 2 great themes (8%), 10 good themes (40%), 9 relatively clear but ordinary themes (36%), and 4 relatively unclear themes (16%), which largely consists with the findings in the questionnaire. Advice was given, like "What message do you want to deliver other than being suspenseful?", "You can further investigate the theme on love. What is real love?" For grammar, with training, students can make fast progress, but variety of expressions and correct collocations may take a relatively long term for them to have advancement. In dealing with these, the ways of

using sources play an important role. Thesaurus would provide abundant choices for variety and corpora can guide people on the choice of collocations.

Through the appropriate design of rubrics and teacher's modelling, students conceived positively their knowledge on peer feedback in these four aspects in Table 5: understanding rubrics ( $M=4.4$ ), making judgement ( $M=4.39$ ), giving advice ( $M=4.28$ ), and using resources ( $M=4.32$ ). For the sake of convenience, the results were rearranged in a descending order. (Most of the standard deviation fell within 1, with data points close to the mean.)

Different from the previous research about the mistrust of peers' comments in the process, the findings point out the learners' improved ability to make judgements in incorporating the advice selectively in the revision ( $M=4.64$ ) and judging the suitability of peers' comments ( $M=4.24$ ).

In analyzing the in-text peer comments in the final 25 writing assignments, the number of pieces of advice was close to that of criticism, 548 to 590. This implies that learners were aware of the importance of offering advice. Meanwhile, as the lowest scoring section here, giving advice deserves more effort.

The two particularly high scores came from using sources—"I will consult the materials if I encounter the unfamiliar vocabulary" and "I will consciously learn those good expressions from my peers' essays and later use them in mine". Using resources is an essential ability to improve one's capacity of learning. It is not just a necessary part of peer feedback, more importantly, a tool for self-regulation in the future. Further attention could be devoted to the items inadequately managed, like "I will read similar stories or essays before giving feedback to my peers' essays".

Table 5

*Knowledge About Peer Feedback*

Items	M (SD)
Understanding rubrics	
I will familiarize myself with the rubrics before giving feedback.	4.48 (0.77)
I understand the peer feedback rubrics.	4.36 (1.04)
I am able to accurately grade the essay in accordance with the rubrics.	4.36 (0.90)
(Total mean score)	4.4
Making judgements	
I will incorporate the advice selectively in my revision.	4.64 (1.11)
I understand what makes a good story.	4.4 (0.87)
I am able to point out the problems in students' essays.	4.28 (0.79)
I am able to judge whether the peers' comments are suitable.	4.24 (0.86)
(Total mean score)	4.39
Giving advice	
I will incorporate all peers' advice in my revision.	3.12 (1.24)
I am able to give advice to deal with the identified problems.	4.28 (0.74)
I am able to correct the mistake in peers' essays.	4.28 (0.68)
(Total mean score)	4.28
Using resources	
I will consult the materials if I encounter the unfamiliar vocabulary.	5.04 (0.73)
I will consciously learn those good expressions from my peers' essays and use them in mine.	4.88 (0.78)
I will read similar stories or essays before giving feedback.	3.04 (0.84)
(Total mean score)	4.32

(Notes: 1 =totally inapplicable, 2 =not applicable, 3 =not very applicable, 4 =quite applicable, 5 =applicable, 6=totally applicable).



### Learners' Communicative Skills in Peer Feedback

According to New Literacy Studies, literacy is not just study skills, but also refers to the set of social practices. Learners are put in a study community. The better ability to communicate helps facilitate the peer feedback process. In response to some researchers' negative findings on Chinese learners' unwillingness to discuss or futile effort in peer response (Carson & Nelson, 1996), the results of this questionnaires demystified the image of Chinese students unwilling to communicate: their positioning themselves as the readers (M=4.64), trying to think from the writer's perspective (M=4.16), giving both positive and negative feedback (M=4.96), and giving varied feedbacks like compliments, criticism and advice (M=4.36). (In accordance with the standard deviation, the data points were close to the mean.) This demonstrates the learners' having developed a good sense of readers' awareness, and attaching great importance to their peers' feelings, which in turn partly explains why learners have positive affect on reading peers' comments. The students were generous in their compliments, like "great description of the facial expressions, which is in a close connection with the original story", "I like this sentence, which is in contrast with the flattery of the table talk. This shows the hypocrisy of the guests", "Vivid description of feelings", "Varieties of sentence structures are achieved".

In giving criticism and advice, the students were able to use modal verbs, hedging, and modifiers, such as "might", "had better", "could" or "seems", "whether"... A few examples are listed here:

"Considering the subsequent part, this part might be redundant". (Student A)

"You can further develop this by two sentences. The transition could be a bit smoother". (Student B)

"A bit abrupt. I suggest you clarify their relationship". (Student C)

"You'd better introduce Emma from Mr. White's perspective". (Student D)

"I don't think it will evoke others' disgust. It would be better if you could describe their snobbery". (Student E)

In the semi-structured interview, all interviewees agreed to the positive communicative function of peer feedback. It did not only improve linguistic and cognitive abilities, but also enhanced collegial ties. Peer feedback, as an effective way to change learners' passive roles in class performance, in some way encouraged them to voice their opinions boldly.

Table 6

#### *Do You Communicative Well?*

Items	M (SD)
I will regard myself as a reader in giving feedback to my peers.	4.64 (0.95)
In giving feedback, I will try to revise the essay from the writer's perspective.	4.16 (0.94)
I will give both positive and negative feedback.	4.96 (0.84)
I know how to give compliments, criticism, and advice.	4.36 (0.76)

(Notes: 1 =totally inapplicable, 2 =not applicable, 3 =not very applicable, 4 =quite applicable, 5 =applicable, 6=totally applicable).

### Conclusion

Due to the small sample size of this project, the findings and implications are not meant to be generalized beyond the scope of this case study. This case study reveals that peer feedback, a collaborative learning, is linguistically, cognitively, and socially embedded. Affect, knowledge, and communicative skills composed the three basic dimensions of the peer feedback literacy framework for Chinese EFL learners. Lowering the

affective filter to engage the learners was particularly important for Chinese learners to break the ice. Then the well-designed rubrics and teacher's modelling navigated learners to be able to give the content feedback beyond the linguistic ones and helped them make sound judgements on peers' comments. Necessary communicative skills were fostered during the process. This case study demonstrates learners' positive perception of their peer feedback literacy. According to the research results, further training could be done in strategies of using resources and giving more concrete and useful advice. For the narrative genre, more effort can be devoted to the profundity of themes, varieties of expressions, and appropriate collocation. The advice from semi-structured interviews will be taken into consideration, like two reviewers instead of one to give more objective views the flexibility of rubrics to give more freedom to writers' ideas. Further research could be done on a larger scale, a more balanced number of items for different factors in the questionnaire could be adjusted, and the peer feedback literacy framework could be developed or changed in different situated contexts or groups.

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