Exploring tertiary EFL writing tutors' perceptions of the appropriateness of peer assessment for writing

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Abstract

Despite the increasing volume of research in peer assessment for writing, few studies have been conducted to explore teachers' perceptions of its appropriateness for local writing instruction. It is essential to understand teachers' perceptions of peer assessment as teachers play an important role in whether and how peer assessment would be implemented in their instruction. The current study investigated tertiary English writing tutors' perceptions of the appropriateness of peer assessment for EFL writing in China where peer assessment has been increasingly discussed and researched but only occasionally used in teaching. The current study scrutinised the reasons behind its limited use via in-depth exploratory interviews with 25 writing tutors with different teaching backgrounds.

The interview data showed tutors' limited knowledge of peer assessment and unanimous hesitation in using peer assessment. The former was explained with regard to the insufficient instruction and training in peer assessment. The latter was further elucidated with the incompatibility of peer assessment with the examinations-oriented education system, learners' low English language proficiency and learning motivation, and the conflict of peer assessment with the entrenched teacher-driven learning culture. Based on the findings, suggestions were made about training and engaging teachers to effectively use peer assessment in instruction.

*Key words***:** Teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness of peer assessment; resistance in using peer assessment; constraints of using peer assessment; cultural of learning in China

Introduction

Reviews of existing research on peer assessment have shown its predominant focus on the roles peer assessment in learning and learners' preference for peer assessment (Yu and Lee 2016). Few studies have been conducted to explore teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness of peer assessment for instruction (Ngar-Fun Liu and Carless 2006; Adachi,Tai and Dawson 2017). However, we should explore teachers' perceptions of peer assessment to understand what enables or hampers them to use peer assessment (Adachi *et al.* 2017). As has been substantiated in Panadero and Brown (2017), teachers' beliefs in peer assessment exert significant effects on their use of peer assessment.

Literature review

Existing studies primarily investigate peer assessment from the students' perspectives, leaving teachers' perceptions of peer assessment widely unexplored.

Studies on the roles of peer assessment, students' perceptions of peer assessment, and training in peer assessment

Existing studies have predominantly employed a comparative method to suggest the roles of peer assessment in writing, using teacher assessment as the comparison baseline. Three research lines were followed primarily, including the roles of peer assessment in revisions, students' perceptions of peer assessment and teacher assessment, and training in peer assessment.

Learners have been observed to use peer feedback to revise writing drafts, albeit less frequently than teacher feedback (Paulus 1999; Miao Yang,Badger and Yu 2006; Cho and MacArthur 2010; Gielen *et al.* 2010; Hu and Lam 2010). However, they have also been found to understand peer feedback better than teacher feedback mainly due to more interactive discussions of feedback with peers than tutors (Zhao 2010).

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Learners have expressed their willingness to have peer assessment alongside their preferred teacher assessment (Nelson and Carson 1998; Zhang 1999; Hu and Lam 2010; Lee 2015; Lei 2017). However, they have also casted their doubt on the reliability of peer feedback in view of learners' developing language proficiency (Ngar-Fun Liu and Carless 2006; Kaufman and Schunn 2011; Wang 2014).

To relieve learners' concern over peer assessment, training in conducting effective peer assessment has been suggested. Training has been observed to reduce the discrepancies between teacher and peer feedback (Xiongyi Liu and Li 2014) and improve both the quantity and quality of peer feedback (Hu 2005; Rahimi 2013; Y.-F Yang and Meng 2013). Dynamic and ongoing teacher support for peer assessment has also been observed to encourage and facilitate learners to provide focused and constructive peer feedback (Zhao 2014).

Limited studies on teachers' perceptions of peer assessment

In the large volume of literature on peer assessment, studies on teachers' perspectives on peer assessment have been few and far between, despite of their vital roles in the effective use of peer assessment (Adachi *et al.* 2017). Beach and Bridwell (1984, p. 312), for instance, suggest that:

> The attitudes that teachers have toward writing strongly influence their own teaching practices, particularly their evaluation of student writing. Their beliefs …serve as filters that train their attention to qualities (or lack thereof) in student writing.

As far as peer assessment is concerned, Falchikov (1998, p. 18) argues that:

> Teacher factors seem to involve traditional conceptions of student and teacher roles, in which teachers 'run the show' and students receive the benefits of teacher

experience rather than of their own. Involving students in an important process such as assessment requires a change in the traditional teacher (and student) role.

Changes of teacher and student roles required by peer assessment have concerned tutors and researchers for decades across different contexts. Freedman's survey with 560 writing tutors suggested that most tutors expressed a substantial level of doubt about the helpfulness of peer assessment for English writing (Freedman 1985). The five ESL writing tutors in Mangelsdorf (1992)'s study were worried about peer feedback being too vague and learners' incorporation of incorrect peer feedback into their revisions. Rollinson (2005) suggested that the time-consuming preparation of peer assessment could drive teachers away from using peer assessment considering the course or examination constraints. Similarly, Liu and Carless (2006) ascertained through interviewing eight teachers in Hong Kong that time constraints, unreliable peer grading, and developing student knowledge inhibited teachers from using peer assessment there. Similar challenges of using peer assessment were reported in the Australian context in Adachi and her colleagues (2017). They identified five challenges of implementing peer assessment, including time constraints, learners' and teachers' low motivation for getting involved in peer assessment, students' superficial engagement in peer assessment, insufficient feedback skills, and technical challenge posed by online assessment. In Spain, Panadero and Brown (2017), based on surveys with 751 teachers across education sectors and subjects, stipulated that unreliable peer feedback, negative learning climate generated by peer assessment, and students' distrusting in peer feedback led to the infrequent use of peer assessment there.

Studies above have generated valuable information of why peer assessment being frequently excluded from local instruction contexts, calling for more similar studies in other contexts as "there has not been factor invariance for this instrument in

every context (Baird 2014, p. 362)". This could be especially vital for Confucian heritage culture contexts including China. The Confucian discourse focuses on the study of classic texts, prioritises consequences to processes, and regards teachers as role models and students as bystanders or listeners (Scollon 2003). On the contrary, peer assessment utilises peer writing as the learning resource, emphasises process-approached learning, and encourages learners to get actively involved in learning.

Research questions

The current study explored teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness of peer assessment for tertiary EFL writing instruction in China wherein resistance to peer assessment has been found magnified compared to that from other parts of the world (Carson and Nelson 1994; Connor and Asenavage 1994; Carson and Nelson 1996; Chang 2016; Yu and Lee 2016). The following research question was asked:

> What were English writing tutors' perceptions of the appropriateness of peer assessment for tertiary EFL writing instruction in China?

Through answering this question, the current study attempted to reveal the underlying reasons for the underuse of peer assessment in China where the large class size, the staffing shortage and the urgent need of developing learning autonomy appeal for learner-centred teaching methods including peer assessment.

Research context

The Chinese educational context is well known for its prolonged examination-driven and teacher-centred pedagogy (Berry 2011). Classroom observation of the participating teachers' instruction resonated with the entrenched learning culture. The following features were observed:

(1) Instruction strictly aligned the assessment criteria of examination essays, focusing on grammatical accuracy and the variety of vocabulary and sentence structures;

(2) Students were asked to memorise and use the words and sentence structures extracted from 'model' articles from previous exams;

(3) Final examinations were carefully explained in class often alongside examination coping strategies;

(4) Few interactions occurred in class, teachers referring to textbooks and lecturing throughout the whole class whilst students copying notes from the whiteboard; and

(5) None of the tutors employed peer assessment in their writing classes.

The aforementioned characteristics indicate possible obstacles to use peer assessment in that instructional context. Because the existing examination-oriented and teacher-driven instruction seemed to be out of tune with peer assessment which emphasises process-orientation and learner-centredness. Therefore, understanding the writing tutors' perceptions of peer assessment is vital to introduce and use peer assessment in that local context.

Participants

Twenty-five Chinese English writing tutors (10 males and 15 females) from five Chinese colleges and universities in two big cities in southern China were invited to attend the interviews. Convenience and snowball sampling strategies were employed. The first batch of participants was the writing tutors in the host research institution (the large-scale university) who introduced their teacher friends for additional interviews. The backgrounds of participants were depicted in Table 1.

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Table 1 Background of interviewees

Interviewees	Institutions	Teaching experiences	Target students
4	Two vocational colleges	2: ten years	1: first year English majors
			1: second year non-English majors
		2: one and half a year	1: second year English major
			1: first year non-English majors
11	Two small–scale universities	4: seven years	1: second year non-English majors
			1: second year English majors
			2: first year English majors
		6: five years	2: second year English majors
			2: first year non-English majors
			2: second year non-English majors
		1: three years	1: first year English majors
10	One large-scale university	1: 15 years 7: four years; 2: one year	2: second English majors
			3: third year English majors
			5: freshman English majors
In total	4: vocational college 10: large-scale university 11: small-scale university	3: ten years or above 10: five-seven years 12: less than five years	3: third year English majors 3: first year non-English majors 4: second year non-English majors 6: second year English majors 9: first year English majors

Table 1 shows the varied teaching experience and instructed student groups among the 25 interviewees. The different scales of institutions required distinct entry requirements. The large-scale university required the highest score of the Entrance Examination to College and University, followed by the small-scale universities and vocational colleges. The different entry scores could indicate differed levels of students' English language proficiency and English learning motivation. The variety of the interviewees' backgrounds helped to generate a relatively full picture of English writing tutors' perceptions of peer assessment in the researched region.

Research methods

Considering the objective of this study as collecting original and exploratory data on EFL writing tutors' perceptions of peer assessment, semi-structured interviews were employed for three reasons. One, although questionnaires are appropriate to investigate opinions, attitudes, views, and beliefs (Denscombe 1998), the questionnaire data are necessarily thin and do not help to understand or explore answers; however, the overpowering feature of the interview is the richness and vividness of the material it turns up (Gillham 2000, p. 10). In other words, the interview data provide more details and depth than the questionnaire data (Ritchie 2003). Two, the interview data have relatively higher validity than the questionnaire data because they are collected through direct contact with participants, enabling the researcher to check for accuracy and relevance by probing and observing non-verbal communication during interviews (Denscombe 1998). Lastly but most importantly, semi-structured interviews would allow dialogic discussions about peer assessment between interviewees and the researcher. This was particularly essential for the current study considering the underuse of peer assessment in the local educational context. Semi-structured interviews helped to reach shared understanding of peer assessment among the researcher and the interviewees.

It was important to establish a shared understanding of peer assessment. Firstly, the ultimate purpose of the current project was to introduce peer assessment to the local context for the formative purpose, following Hu's (2005) definition of peer assessment as involving learners in reading, critiquing, and providing feedback on each other's writing to improve immediate textual and writing competence over time (pp. 321-22). Therefore, it was vital to understand if peer assessment was introduced for those objectives, what hurdles had to overcome from the teachers' perspectives. Secondly, the

alignment of interviewees' and the researcher's understanding of peer assessment was critical for valid interpretation of the interview data in the study. Finally, the teacher interviewees were keen to know about peer assessment because at the time of the research project was carried out, the Minister of Education in China was promoting the use of peer assessment for English language teaching in Higher Education but little instruction was provided.

Three broad questions were asked to guide the semi-structured interviews.

(1) What is your understanding of peer assessment?

(2) Would you consider using peer assessment in your writing classes?

(3) Do you think peer assessment is an appropriate writing pedagogy for your students? Why do you think so?

The first question was to elicit interviewees' understanding of peer assessment which led to discussions about different forms of peer assessment and potential steps of using peer assessment. Based on the discussions, interviewees were asked about possible (un)use of peer assessment in their writing classroom (Q2). Their reasons for using or not using peer assessment were elicited via Q3 to elucidate the appropriateness or inappropriateness of peer assessment for local instruction contexts.

The interviews were conducted in their L1 (i.e. Chinese) as requested by the interviewees. The use of mother tongue helped to enhance the depth of interview data. More importantly, it shortened the distance between the interviewer and interviewees as a shared language and encouraged interviewees to openly discuss pitfalls of the Chinese education system and their obstacles to the use of peer assessment.

Each interview lasted for approximately one and half an hour, allowing the generation of thick and rich data. The interview data were audio recorded and verbatim

transcribed. The data were then thematically analysed via NVivo10 until no more new themes emerged from the data.

Results

The results were reported in the order of interviewees' understanding of peer assessment (Q1), their potential (un)use of peer assessment (Q2), and their perceived appropriateness of peer assessment for their EFL writing instruction (Q3).

Teachers' narrow understanding of peer assessment

The interview data revealed teachers' limited understanding of peer assessment. Most of the teacher interviewees (18 of the 25) viewed peer assessment as a student grading each other's writing. One of the tutors in the large-scale university equalised peer assessment to peer grading by stating:

> The meaning of assessment, I am accustomed to meaning evaluation, or assigning a grade or grading a performance. (Interviewee1)

Their understanding of assessment as grading is not surprising in view of the existing teacher assessment practice. For all teacher interviewees, teacher assessment solely assigned a mark to student writing with few written comments mainly due to the large number of students per tutor had (at least 80 students) as explained by the interviewees. The rest seven tutors believed that apart from giving a mark, peer assessment could also be used for students to spot problematic areas in each other's writing such as spelling and grammatical errors. None of the teacher interviewees mentioned benefits arising from the process of peer assessment such as learning from each other's writing via reading and commenting (Lundstrom and Baker 2009) and developing higher thinking order and critical skills (van Zundert,Sluijsmans and van Merriënboer 2010).

Their narrow understanding of peer assessment was expected considering the limited instruction and training in peer assessment they had received. All the interviewees admitted that they knew little about peer assessment which had not been discussed as an alternative teaching method in their institutions. Most of them viewed peer assessment as a 'westernised' teaching method with autonomous learners in a small class. Limited instruction in peer assessment leading to narrow understanding of peer assessment echoed Harrisa and Brown's three case studies in New Zealand: Participants in their study showed limited understanding of various roles of peer (and self) assessment for learning due to insufficient instruction in understanding and using peer assessment (Harrisa and Brown 2013).

To expand their understanding of peer assessment as peer grading or spotting errors, the researcher introduced the four-step peer assessment (i.e. reading, commenting, discussing and revising) during interviews and invited interviewees to consider potential benefits of each step and their possible use in writing classes.

Hesitation in using peer assessment

Despite of various benefits of peer assessment perceived by the interviewees (e.g. learning via reading and commenting, practising spoken English, and improving writing quality if feedback was correct), unanimous hesitation in using peer assessment was expressed by all interviewees. Only five writing tutors expressed their possible employment of peer assessment only if requested by senior members of their institutions. All the rest of interviewees indicated low possibility of using peer assessment on account of their limited knowledge of how to use it and the potential negative impact on their current teaching practice. One writing tutor from one of the vocational colleges explained:

Introducing something new to the classroom asks for lots of preparation, let alone the change of my and students' roles in the classroom. It's safe and easy to just follow what I am doing at the moment. After all, my writing tutors taught me in this way when I was a student and I prefer to stay in my comfort zone. (Interviewee22)

Similar viewpoints were reiterated during interviews which suggested teachers' low motivation in engaging with peer assessment as reported in Adachi *et al.* (2017). Their reluctance to use peer assessment also indicated and was further explicated by their perceived inappropriateness of peer assessment for local writing instruction.

Inappropriateness of peer assessment for English writing instruction

Four salient reasons were presented by interviewees to explicate the inappropriateness of peer assessment for instruction, composing of (a) the incompatibility of peer assessment with the examination-oriented education system, (b) learners' developing language proficiency, (c) learners' low English learning motivation, and (d) the conflict of peer assessment with teacher-driven learning culture.

Incompatibility of peer assessment with the examination-oriented education system

All the teacher interviewees contended that the examination-oriented education system made it unlikely to use peer assessment in their instruction. During the interviews, the writing tutors restated the importance of preparing students for the diverse types of examinations (e.g. middle- and final-term examinations, English proficiency certificates and other national wide high-stake examinations). Considering exams were heavily syllabus-based, they emphasised the necessity of completing the syllabi before exams took place. However, they were worried that the time-consuming conduct of peer assessment would take up the class time and stop them from finishing the syllabus

before exams. Ms Cheng, an English writing tutor for over ten years in the large-scale university, explained:

> The curriculum makes it impossible to use peer assessment. We don't have enough time to involve students in it because we must finish the teaching tasks in the syllabus within the 90-minute class time so that students could be ready for their exams. (Interviewee2)

Likewise, Miss Yan, a second-year writing tutor in one of the vocational colleges, stated that:

> The curriculum designed by the department must be completed within the term time. Peer assessment as a time-consuming activity will lead to the failure of finishing the tasks covered in the heavy curriculum and later on tested in exams. In this sense, it is not surprising that peer assessment is not popular within Chinese English writing tutors. (Interviewee18)

In addition, all interviewees elucidated that peer assessment was more time-consuming yet less effective than teacher assessment for preparing students for exams. The existing teacher-fronted pedagogy allowed them to cover more content than peer assessment within the limited class time. They further stated that spending limited class time on peer assessment could result in students' low achievement in their exams. That would consequently hamper their reputation among students and risk their positions in institutions. Miss Zheng in the small-scale university made this point saliently by arguing that:

> The institution and students measure our teaching quality based on students' performance in exams. The higher marks they've obtained, the higher reputation for us as a teacher builds up. I think none of us could afford to spend time on peer assessment and risk students' exam performance. After all, no one would judge my teaching based on whether or not I use innovative teaching methods such as peer

assessment. They judge my teaching based on how well my students perform in their exams. (Interviewee11)

In addition to the examination-based evaluation of teaching performance, learners' examination-driven learning style was listed as another aspect of the incompatibility of peer assessment with the examination-oriented education system. Ms Cheng observed a dramatic change of her students' motivation to learn English writing prior to and after the Testing for English Majors – Band 4:

> I don't understand how this could happen. Before they sat in Testing for English Majors – Band 4, they were so diligent to learn how to write a good essay. However, after Testing for English Majors – Band 4, they seemed to lose their motivation and started to be absent from classes. Their learning styles are so pragmatic. I mean they seem to learn for passing examinations rather than learn for knowledge. Peer assessment would not contribute to the examination that much, so I think students might not take it seriously. (Interviewee8)

It is worthy of pointing it out that Testing for English Majors- Band 4 decided whether English majors could get their bachelor's degree or not. Cheng's views revealed that examination-driven learning could demotivate learners to get involved in peer assessment because of its limited role in exams.

Similarly, Ms Lu, a writing tutor for freshmen in the large-scale university complained about the "tedious and unrewarding chore" (Hyland 1990, p. 279) of commenting on students' writing:

> None of us are willing to take the writing module. I taught the module because I was on maternity leave last semester and left no choice but the writing module this semester. Teaching writing is a tedious and unrewarding job because you work hard but students don't feel in that way. We spend a lot of time commenting on students' work, but they pay little attention to it and don't make much progress in their writing. They keep making similar mistakes and they seem not to be interested in writing at all. Writing is not a one-day job. They are more willing to

spend time on other aspects such as reciting vocabulary to achieve high marks in examinations. Peer assessment is not valuable for examinations, so I doubt its popularity among students. (Interviewee4)

Lu's statement above shows the examination-oriented learning style shifted students' attention from learning to exams and the limited value of peer assessment for exams could make it unpopular among students.

The discussions above imply that the incompatibility of peer assessment with examination-oriented teaching and learning styles could bring about the limited use of peer assessment. The finding corroborated Panadero and Brown (2017)'s assertion about the constraints from systemic realities on the implementation of peer assessment. In the current study, the dominant role of exams in education seemed to constitute an essential part of systemic realities that impeded teachers from using peer assessment.

Constraint of students' developing English language proficiency

Students' developing English language proficiency was presented as the second most frequently cited reason for the underuse of peer assessment. All but two interviewees claimed that their students were not sufficiently proficient to provide correct peer feedback, despite of students at the large-scale university obtained an average 120 out of 150 the total score in entrance English exams. This had been made particularly salient by interviewees from the vocational colleges and the small-scale universities where students had a lower level of English language proficiency than those in the large-scale university. They highlighted that peer assessment was useful only if the students had sufficient English language knowledge to make correct judgment on peers' writing; unfortunately, their students did not have that level of language capability. For instance, Miss Li, who taught writing for tourism students in one of the vocation colleges explained:

> My students' English proficiency is too low. This makes it impossible to use peer assessment with them because it is hard for them to find mistakes for their peers; instead, they might provide wrong advices. (Interviewee25)

Teachers' worries about students' limited English knowledge to provide correct feedback aligned students' concerns about invalid peer feedback reported in other studies (Ngar-Fun Liu and Carless 2006; Kaufman and Schunn 2011; Wang 2014).

Developing English language proficiency was also believed to result in learners' ignorance of peer feedback. Ms Cai, the writing tutor who taught English for ten years in one of the vocational colleges elucidated:

> To use peer assessment, the pre-condition is to improve students' English level. But it is nearly impossible to improve their English proficiency within a brief period. Because their English is not good, they might mislead their peers by providing incorrect feedback. Their classmates may also not trust the feedback they've received from peers. In this case, they would think peer assessment as a waste of time. (Interviewee23)

Two messages can be derived from her assertion: students' low level of English proficiency could make (a) students incapable of providing correct peer feedback and (b) peers doubt the reliability of peer feedback and thus reject to use it in revisions. The latter has also been asserted by Nelson and Murphy (1993, p. 136) who argued:

> English is not the native language of L2 students. Because L2 students are still in the process of learning English, they may mistrust other learners' responses to their writings and, therefore, may not incorporate their suggestions while revising.

To avoid misleading students with invalid peer feedback, seven writing tutors suggested teachers checking peer feedback before students used it in revisions. However, this would result in extra assessment time and heavier workload and thereby made peer assessment more time-consuming. Ms Gao explained:

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> If we have to check on the correctness of peer feedback, why don't we spend that time providing teacher feedback which would be more helpful than peer feedback? Plus, it is embarrassing and discouraging for students whose feedback was marked as wrong comments. Their peers wouldn't trust their feedback in subsequent writing tasks. (Interviewee9)

Gao's assertion substantiated teachers' unawareness of the complementary role of peer to teacher feedback (Villamil and DE Guerrero 1998; Hyland and Hyland 2006; Miao Yang *et al.* 2006; Zhao 2010). His argument also indicated the complex social and cultural phenomenon underlying the use of peer assessment: the face-threatening issue related to incorrect feedback and students' low tolerance of mistakes in the learning process. As Harrisa and Brown (2013) asserted, without considering mistakes as learning opportunities, the implementation and effectiveness of peer assessment could not be viable.

Constraint of students' low English learning motivation

Interviewees reported students' low English learning motivation as another main aspect of the inappropriateness of peer assessment. They believed that low motivation would lead to students' lack of commitment to peer assessment. This was especially highlighted by tutors who taught non-English majors and senior English majors. For example, Miss Zhang, a writing tutor in one of the vocation colleges, suggested that students' high motivation for learning English as a key exam subject in their secondary schools "disappeared" after they entered colleges where English played a less decisive role in their academic performance; students' low motivation led to their lack of engagement with time-consuming learning tasks and peer assessment was one of those tasks. Similarly, Miss Wang, another writing tutor in the small-scale university, argued that:

Some students don't submit their assignments on time even though they were told the mark assigned to each assignment would be counted as a part of the final score. Some students even did not come to the class. If you let them to take responsibility for their own learning, I believe they would put their responsibility aside and do something unrelated to study at all. With such a learning attitude, it was not possible to ask these students to do peer assessment. It might work with students who are enthusiastic about learning English such as those in a high-ranked university, but it would not work with most of my students here. (Interviewee17)

The negative impacts of students' low learning motivation on teachers' use of peer assessment resonated with Jacobs and Ratmanida's (1996) finding. The Asian EFL teachers in their study believed that learners' lack of motivation to learn English made group work less appropriate in their contexts. This could be theoretically supported by Okada, Oxford and Abo (1996) who indicated that low learning motivation could decrease the impetus for language learners' involvement in and their effort to learn language. Their viewpoints have also been substantiated by Cheng and Warren's (2005) observation of peer assessment among 51 college ESL learners in Hong Kong: more highly motivated students made more realistic peer assessment.

Conflict with the existing teacher-driven culture of learning

The teacher interviewees postulated the conflict between learner-centred peer assessment and the existing teacher-dominated learning culture. All the interviewees articulated that their students had been exposed to teacher-led learning experience since their kindergarten. The prolonged teacher-driven learning culture would make students lack confidence and skills in providing peer feedback. Mr Zheng from the large-scale university illuminated it in a vivid way:

If I asked a student to write a paragraph and project it on the wall and said "Ok, he wrote this. What do you see is wrong with it?". Nobody will say anything because

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> students have not yet learned how to be thoughtfully critical of their peers and how
> to say "well, this is not the best sentence you ever written, let's work on and fix it"
> because they are afraid of hurting their peer's feelings. (Interviewee9)

Zheng's statement corroborated previous studies which asserted that students from the collectivist culture such as the Chinese students might refrain from giving critical comments to avoid tension and disagreement with peers and to maintain group harmony (Carson and Nelson 1994; 1996; Nelson and Carson 1998). However, similar results were reported in other cultural contexts. For instance, Harrisa and Brown (2013) reported peer feedback with sympathy and affection which worried peer learners and teachers in New Zealand.

On the other hand, Miss Wu, the teacher in the large-scale university, indicated that both students and teachers were unready for trusting students to assess each other's writing. She said:

> They were told to learn by themselves since primary school, because the large class
> size made teachers impossible to cater to each student's need. They had to find a
> way to suite themselves to become an efficient learner. To make them work in
> groups, they need time to adjust themselves to each other. Teachers also have been
> used to evaluating students' writing. They would worry how students would react
> to each other's writing and whether they would provide incorrect feedback for their
> peers. (Interviewee6)

The teachers' perceived incompatibility of teacher-driven learning with peer assessment seemed to corroborate students' self-explanation of their reluctance to participate in peer assessment owing to their long exposure to teacher-driven culture of learning (Nelson and Carson 2006).

Jin and Cortazzi (1998, p. 749) defined culture of learning as follows:

A culture of learning might be defined as socially transmitted expectations, beliefs, and values about what good learning is. The concept draws attention to the usually taken-for-granted cultural ideas about the roles and relations of teachers and learners, and about appropriate teaching and learning styles and methods, about the use of textbooks and materials, and about what constitutes good work in classrooms.

A vital aspect of the culture of learning in the researched context was the teachers being regarded as the legitimate agent with the expertise and social status to judge the quality of student work and learners as the ones lacking in knowledge and power to do so. Nelson and Murphy (1993, p. 136) explains:

In China, for example, the teacher is traditionally viewed as an authority figure, the possessors of knowledge, and the one who is responsible for responding to students' work (Hudson-Ross& Dong, 1990). L2 students who view the teacher as 'the one who knows' may ignore the responses of other students, not merely because English is the respondents' second language, but because of the perception that fellow students are not knowledgeable enough to make worthwhile comments about their work. If learners do not value other students' comments, they may not take them into consideration when revising.

Their viewpoints were later substantiated in their later study (Nelson and Carson 2006). They suggested that previous teacher-driven writing assessment made students hesitant about providing peer feedback or negotiate feedback with writers over its use in their revisions.

Furthermore, Mr Li, a writing tutor in the large-scale university, argued the use of peer assessment could possibly contaminate teacher images:

The Chinese students have been used to viewing their writing tutor as the one who should be responsible for assessing students' writing. If you asked them to assess each other's work, they might think the teacher was shirking his responsibility as a teacher. (Interviewee7)

Likewise, four interviewees from the vocational college and the small scale-university worried that the use of peer assessment could make their students consider them 'being lazy' in marking their work. The results echoed Liu and Carless' statement about the disruption of power relations between teachers and students caused by the use of peer assessment (Ngar-Fun Liu and Carless 2006). In other words, empowering students to judge peer writing could challenge the traditional viewpoint of the teachers as the sole legitimate assessment agent on student work. As students in Harrisa and Brown (2013) claimed, peer assessment transformed the classroom social relationship and changed the control and responsibility between teachers and students.

Discussions and implications

The current study interviewed 25 writing tutors across five universities and colleges in a region of southern China to elicit their perceptions of the appropriateness of peer assessment for local EFL writing instruction. The results showed their narrow understanding of peer assessment as peer grading and their hesitation in using peer assessment in their writing instruction. The former could be explained with their inexperience and lack of instruction in understanding and using peer assessment. The latter was largely elucidated by the perceived incompatibility of peer assessment with examination-oriented education system, learners' low English language proficiency and English learning motivation, and the conflict of learner-centred peer assessment with the entrenched teacher-driven cultural of learning in China.

It is worthy of noticing that these factors are intertwined with each other. The examination-driven education system generated an examination-oriented learning and teaching style; therefore, the use of peer assessment will be largely depended on its effectiveness for preparing students for their examinations. peer assessment has been

viewed by teachers to be more time-consuming yet less ineffective than teacher assessment in preparing students for exams. Consequently, its use in instruction has been restricted. The entrenched teacher-driven and examination-oriented learning culture also leads to high expectation of accuracy thus low tolerance of mistakes among Chinese students and teachers. As a result, worries about incorrect peer feedback pull back learners and teachers from accepting and conducting peer assessment.

The findings have exemplified and expanded Liu and Carless (2006)'s four barriers for teachers to use peer assessment in Hong Kong, namely: reliability of students' judgements on peer writing, teachers' expertise, the disruption of power relations between teachers and students, and time and resources constraints. The current study further added four other obstacles to introduce and use peer assessment: (a) teachers' reluctance to change their current practice, (b) the less effective of peer assessment than teacher assessment in preparing students for exams, (c) learners' previous teacher-driven learning experience, and (d) the systemic realities of judging learners' and teachers' performance by exam marks. The findings have provided qualitative evidence for Panadero and Brown (2017)'s survey result that teachers' positive attitudes increased the possible use of peer assessment. The current study ascertained through interviews that teachers' negative attitudes towards peer assessment led to infrequent use of peer assessment. The reasons for infrequent use of peer assessment in the current study have provided useful implications for teacher training in using peer assessment.

Implications for training in peer assessment

Firstly, writing tutors need to develop a full understanding of peer assessment including its diverse roles in facilitating learning. As Liu and Carless (2006) stipulates, understanding peer assessment as peer grading can severely undermine the potential of

peer feedback for improving student writing. Instead of equalising peer assessment as assigning a mark, the writing tutors need to understand that marking could be the precursor of peer assessment. It must follow or be followed by the process of thinking about the reasons for giving that mark and communicating the process with the writer and themselves (Ngar-Fun Liu and Carless 2006). In other words, the writing tutors need to regard peer assessment as a process of engaging learners to discuss writing and feedback on it.

Secondly, writing tutors need to underplay the inimical impact of examinations and teacher-driven culture of learning on peer assessment. Learners mistrusting peer feedback has been reported across different educational contexts which are not necessarily teacher-driven and examination-dominated (e.g. Villamil and Guerrero 1996 in the Puerto Rico context; Falchikov 1998 in the British context; Kaufman and Schunn 2011 in the United States context ; Planas Lladó *et al.* 2014 in the Spanish context). In particular, in New Zealand where assessment has given a relatively lower stake than other educational systems, students still prefer teacher feedback and cast suspicion on the usefulness and accuracy of peer feedback (Harrisa and Brown 2013). Teachers need to be advised that far more students regarded peer assessment as highly congruent pedagogy with Chinese learning culture than those questioning its appropriateness for Chinese learners (Hu and Lam 2010). Students' resistance to peer assessment would be dropped significantly following their participation in peer assessment (Kaufman and Schunn 2011). Moreover, their resistance to peer assessment does not stop them from using peer feedback in their revisions (Hu and Lam 2010; Kaufman and Schunn 2011).

Thirdly, teachers should be instructed in accommodating peer assessment to their local learning and teaching culture. peer assessment should be designed creatively and fluidly to cater to different pedagogical purposes. For instance, use peer assessment

to help learners internalise the exam assessment criteria in an examination-driven context. The effectiveness of peer assessment for helping learners understand assessment criteria has been noted by teachers in Harris and Brown (2013). Considering overloaded timetables, peer assessment could be carried out outside classroom or via computer-mediated communication channels. As far as learners' different levels of proficiency and motivation are concerned, the constitution of peer assessment groups could be varied from tasks and self-selected by learners.

Finally but also very importantly, address tutors' concerns over peer assessment and tackle their concerns in training sessions. Create opportunities for teachers to try out peer assessment and encourage them to express their worries about peer assessment based upon their experience. Invite solutions from fellow teacher trainees to expand their understanding of peer assessment. For instance, address constraint of learners' developing language proficiency via providing students with accessible assessment criteria, exemplar peer feedback and ongoing support from teachers and other resources. Increase students' motivation for conducting peer assessment via employing new technologies (e.g. online forums). Teachers' confidence and competence in utilising peer assessment will be increased with ongoing training in, discussions about, and reflection on peer assessment.

Conclusions

The current study has revealed that teachers' perceived appropriateness of peer assessment is substantially impacted by their understanding of peer assessment, the role of examinations and teachers in the existing culture of learning, as well as teachers' and learners' readiness for accepting and adopting peer assessment. The study has demonstrated the values of investigating writing tutors' perceptions of the

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appropriateness of peer assessment for their local instruction contexts. It sheds light on the underlying reasons for the low uptake of peer assessment and generates evidence for enacting appropriate strategies to support writing tutors to embark on peer assessment. More similar research should be carried out as the use of peer assessment is context dependant and distinct strategies need to be discussed within local and national systemic realities.

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