

Writing on Zhihu(知乎) - An Action Research on Feedback in Asynchronous Online Community

I. Purpose

Many studies have investigated how the online community has informed language acquisition and teaching. In the scholarship of Computer Mediated Communication Theory (CMC), most of the studies have emphasized L2 English writing using CMC framework, evidence is shown to support CMC in foreign language instruction. However, there is a lack of research on how feedback from native speakers of Chinese influences Chinese learners' writing in a web environment, especially for advanced Chinese learners. Besides, when it comes to Chinese writing tasks, most of the activities, especially in college, focus on teacher-to-student feedback. Therefore, the feedback that learners receive is one-way to a large extent. Furthermore, there are very few opportunities for learners to reflect, revise and improve their writings after the feedback is provided. Thus, new online platform is needed where students could write, receive feedback from native speakers other than teachers. In response to the research and pedagogical gap, drawing on sociocultural and computer-mediated communication theories, the current exploratory study probes the nature of feedback on Zhihu(知乎), the largest Chinese social question-and-answer (hereafter, Q&A) website, and how the feedback affects advanced Chinese learners' writing performance. New writing platform, classroom practices and pedagogical implication will be suggested.

II. Research questions

This investigation derives from the observation of students' writing and their treatment towards teachers' feedback. From the researcher's observation, the feedback from their Chinese teachers are mostly glanced at or even ignored by learners. Thus, the design of writing tasks in advanced Chinese course needs reform and revision. Three aspects of writing tasks will be evaluation: 1) nature of feedback 2) learners' response to the feedback 3) influence on learners' writing performance. The research questions are:

- 1) What is the nature of native speakers' feedback in CMC with L2 writers of Chinese through a purposefully meaning-embedded online tool, Zhihu?
- 2) How do learners react to users' feedback in CMC through a purposefully meaning-embedded online tool, Zhihu?
- 3) Compared to learners' original drafts on Zhihu, how does the writing change for second drafts, potentially including but not limited to content, organization, grammar, lexicon and culturally-related issues?

III. Procedure

Writing task design in foreign language instruction should emphasize meaningfulness (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners posting on Zhihu answer the questions raised by other users, thus the writing tasks serve a purpose. Heneda (2007) also pointed out the writing should serve as a social

activity so that learners learn within a social paradigm through interaction. The task design follows this argument by having students receive and respond to feedback from users of the website. Two questions will be selected as assignments for the study on the website *Zhihu* based on what learners recently learn in class.

Ten American university students will participate by completing writing tasks on *Zhihu*. After posting their essays on the website, participants will be asked to read and respond to online feedback over a period of two weeks, followed by a revision of their first drafts. Tokens of feedback, revised language items and learners' response to feedback are coded by the researcher. Findings elaborate the types of feedback from *Zhihu* users, exchanges between participants and feedback providers, and correlation between first and second drafts.

In order to investigate how feedback affects learners' writing performance, two major steps will be included in the project. The first step refers to the completion of tasks, while the second is the data collection and analysis. Data collection procedures are:

Three sets of data will be collected, including 30 pre-treatment and 30 post-treatment essays. Exchanges on *Zhihu*, both the feedback by other users as well as the response from the participants will be extracted with screenshots and stored to build a corpus of online, website posts in L2 Chinese writing. The following depicts the detailed procedure for data collection in response to each research question:

1) RQ1: nature of feedback

All the feedback exchanges will be coded for further classification. Total feedback tokens, which refer to both the feedback received and response from the subjects, will be coded first. Based on Ur's (1996) classification, Specific feedback tokens will be categorized into two overarching classifications: corrective feedback and commentary feedback before they are counted respectively.

2) RQ2: learners' reaction

As for exchange between users and participants, first time responses from the learners to the feedback provider will be coded as "first time exchange". If the feedback provider follows up with another round of exchanges, each thread will be coded as "follow-up".

3) RQ3: influence on writing performance

After the final submission, 30 post-treatment essays will be collected. Counts of revised items based on the corrective correction classification (character, content, lexicon, etc.) and revised items that are not mentioned in the feedback will be coded coded respectively.

IV. Timeline

Table 1: Task completion schedule

Task 1: food culture	weekend of week 1	Task 1: compose first draft on Zhihu
	week 2 & 3	read and respond to feedback for one hour a week
	week 4	update the original essay and hand in to teacher
Task 2: Confucianism	weekend of week 4	Task 2: compose first draft on Zhihu
	week 5 & 6	read and respond to feedback for one hour a week
	week 7	update the original essay and hand in to teacher

Table 2: Data collection and analysis

Week 8 & 9	Collect data (i.e. first and second drafts, feedback from native speakers)
Week 10 & 11	Analyze data
Week 12 & 13	Repeat the cycle of Task 3: Chinese architecture
Week 14	Collect data and analyze data
Week 15	Report results in CLTA Conference

V. Estimated Budget

1. Compensation for two research assistants who help collecting data on students' errors and feedback: $\$20 \times 5 \text{ hours} \times 2 \text{ people} = \200
2. Compensation for research assistant who help count revised errors: $\$30 \times 10 \text{ hours} = \300

Selected References

- Haneda, M. (2007). Modes of engagement in foreign language writing: An activity theoretical perspective. *Canadian modern language review*, 64(2), 297-327.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind and society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.