ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF PEER REVISION ON ENGLISH WRITING OF TERTIARY EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The study seeks to assess the impact of peer revision and teacher comments on EFL writers’ final drafts in narrative writing among 48 tertiary EFL learners. More specifically, the study aims to answer how peer revisions and teacher comments are incorporated by writers in their final versions and how trouble sources are revised in peer sessions according to different language aspects; content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics.

Key words
peer revision; teacher comments; English writing; impact

1. Introduction

English writing is a very important means of English output. It can be a good reflection of students’ overall mastery of English language learning. However, it is estimated that the writing ability of Chinese students is much weaker than other abilities and writing teaching is also one of the weakest links of college English teaching (Liu 1998; Fang 2004). Meanwhile, research on English writing teaching is far from satisfactory in China. Li Zhihui et al (2003) made a statistical analysis of the articles on English writing in most of the nuclear periodicals of foreign studies in the past ten years in China and found the proportion of articles based on empirical research was low. There are many reasons for such a current state in writing teaching. One of the possible reasons is that insufficient attention is paid on one of the links in writing teaching — revision.

In English composition revision, two ways usually used are self-revision and teacher comments. The former is the revision by writers. It is a key step in writing but is limited by the writer's view and knowledge. The latter is that the teacher revises the compositions of the students. The advantages of teacher comments are good suggestions and revisions from the teacher’s professional knowledge. But English teachers are often overloaded with work in China and it is very hard for them to give feedback for each of the compositions. Thus, peer revision should be used as complementary of the two ways.

Peer revision is also called peer response, student feedback, peer evaluation, peer review, or simply group work. Basically, during peer review, student writers exchange drafts and make suggestions for improvement. Thus, peer review or peer revision means that students exchange drafts, and read those drafts with grading criteria in mind. They mark items that do not address the grading criteria and make suggestions for how to improve the paper so that it does meet those criteria (Helfers et al. 1999).

Among many teachers and researchers, there seems to be a lingering feeling that EFL students do not have knowledge adequate enough to detect and correct errors in the target language. They are wondering whether EFL learners can go beyond the mere editing of surface problems into higher-level textual aspects (Villamil & Guerrero 1998). That may be one of the reasons why peer revision is not widely used. Most
researches abroad on peer revision are about mother languages (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz 1992; Caulk 1994; Connor & Asencavage 1994). In their research on L2 acquisition, Villamil and Guerrero (1998) investigated peer revision on writer’s final drafts among 14 Spanish speaking ESL college students. They believed that peer assistance could help L2 intermediate learners realize potential for effective revision, to the extent their linguistic abilities permit. At home, Xu Ying (2003) made a study on peer revision on the basis of the study by Villamil and Guerrero (1998) to explore the way to use peer revision in China. By analyzing the results of the questionnaire among 58 college students, he found that most of the students favored peer revision in writing and peer work was really a good complementary form in writing teaching (Xu 2003). Qi Yan (2004) made a comparative study between peer and teacher feedback among 33 advanced English majors and found that the quantity of peer and teacher feedback which students got in their writings was almost the same and that teacher feedback which students valued more was more effective than peer feedback. Similarly, Yang Miao’s comparative study among non-English majors showed that the students made good use of the feedback from both their teacher and peers and that the teacher’s feedback was more likely to be adopted (Yang 2006). Meanwhile Fei Hong (2006) investigated perceptions of helpfulness in peer response among 22 advanced English major students. Data collected over one semester through observations, interviews and questionnaires revealed that participants have very negative reactions to peer response, which challenges some beliefs about the effective and pedagogical advantages of peer response. In Hong Kong, however, Tsui and Ng conducted a study of the roles of teacher and peer comments in revisions in writing among secondary L2 learners. The findings showed that “all learners favored teacher comments” and meanwhile they admitted “peer comments do play an important part” (Tsui & Ng 2000:147).

2. Research and analysis

2.1 Purposes of the research

From the above review, it can be seen that the studies about the effectiveness of peer and teacher feedback are inconsistent or conflicting, which shows that further exploration and more empirical studies are needed. This article intends to analyze the attitudes of the tertiary students towards the two ways and discuss the impact of peer revision. More specifically, the study aims to answer the following three questions:

1) Do tertiary EFL writers benefit from peer revision?
2) How are peer revisions and teacher comments incorporated by writers in their final versions?
3) How are trouble sources revised according to different language aspects; content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics?

2.2 Subjects of the study and methods

This research is based on an experimental study on peer revision and teacher comments, a questionnaire and interviews. The subjects were 48 freshmen in a class. The study covered one semester. During the study, the author gave them some instructions and lectures on self-revision and peer revision to train them how to revise compositions. The 48 students were divided into 8 groups of 6. A group leader was made in each group to organize the activities on revision. Each composition was sent for peer revision in the group after self-revision. First the writer read it loudly. Next they began to discuss and revise the drafts. Then the students were to revise and write the essay again and hand in the second drafts. Finally, the teacher gave comments to the second drafts and the students revised and decided their final drafts. In the semester the students wrote 7 compositions and all were revised by peers in the groups. To make sure that students could use peer revision fluently, the author chose the fifth composition for study. The composition was a narrative one and the students were asked to write an unforgettable person or story in their middle school. Peer revision was held in class under the author’s instruction. Then two compositions were chosen randomly in each group and thus 16 compositions were acquired for us to study. At the end of the semester, a questionnaire survey was made among the 48 students. To avoid possible ambiguity in understanding, the questionnaire was managed in Chinese. However, 3 students failed to respond to their questionnaires correctly, so 45 valid questionnaires were collected. Finally, the author interviewed the 16 writers of the compositions.

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2.3 Findings and analysis

2.3.1 Questionnaire and its results

After counting and analyzing on the questionnaire, we get Table 2.1.

The table shows that 54% of the students like to revise the compositions of peers, that 42% of them benefit from peers revising their compositions and that only 29% of them think they can’t benefit from it. So it means that most of them accept peer revision. Furthermore, in peer revision, they prefer revising the others’ compositions to revising their own compositions, which may show that they are skeptical about the ability of their peers. But 65% of them like teacher comments and only 13% of them don’t, which means most of them like teacher comments. Comparing teacher comments with peer revision, 51% of the students prefer the former while 31% prefer the latter, which means the students believe in the teacher more than their peers. Meanwhile, 42% of the students think the two are complementary and of the same importance. Thus, we believe that peer revision can be used as an effective complementary way of teacher comments.

Table 2.1 Questionnaire results on peer revision and teacher comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No view</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like to revise the compositions of my peers.</td>
<td>2(4%)</td>
<td>8(18%)</td>
<td>11(24%)</td>
<td>16(36%)</td>
<td>8(18%)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I benefit from peers revising my compositions.</td>
<td>4(9%)</td>
<td>9(20%)</td>
<td>13(29%)</td>
<td>14(31%)</td>
<td>5(11%)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I benefit from reading my teacher’s comments.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6(13%)</td>
<td>10(22%)</td>
<td>21(47%)</td>
<td>8(18%)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer teacher comments to peer revision.</td>
<td>3(7%)</td>
<td>10(22%)</td>
<td>9(20%)</td>
<td>18(40%)</td>
<td>5(11%)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer peer revision to teacher comments.</td>
<td>4(9%)</td>
<td>19(42%)</td>
<td>8(18%)</td>
<td>10(22%)</td>
<td>4(9%)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think teacher comments and peer revision are complementary to each other and both important in my writing.</td>
<td>2(5%)</td>
<td>9(20%)</td>
<td>15(33%)</td>
<td>14(31%)</td>
<td>5(11%)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3.2 Analysis of peer revisions and teacher comments

Firstly, an impressionistic comparison of the proportions of peer and teacher comments incorporated into the revisions by the 16 students is made, yielding the following distribution (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Distribution of students incorporating peer and teacher comments in revision (N=16)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer comments</th>
<th>Teacher comments</th>
<th>N = 16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50%</td>
<td>&gt;50%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50%</td>
<td>&lt;50%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;50%</td>
<td>&gt;50%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;50%</td>
<td>&lt;50%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 shows that 11 students incorporate more than 50 percent (>50%) teacher comments as
well as peer comments and that 3 students incorporate more than 50 percent teacher comments and less than 50 percent (≤50%). Only 2 students incorporate less than 50 percent teacher comments as well as peer comments, but none of them incorporate more peer comments than teacher comments. The findings confirm the results of the questionnaire survey that the majority of the students accept peer revision but they prefer teacher comments to peer comments. The interviews are conducted later and analyzed according to the three categories.

To answer the second research question (how are peer revisions and teacher comments incorporated by writers in their final versions?) in details, the number of peer comments on the first drafts of the compositions each student writes is compared with the amount of revision on the second drafts, and the number of teacher comments on the second drafts is compared with the amount of revision on the final drafts to determine the extent to which the student incorporates peer and teacher comments into his/her revisions. The changes in peer revision are categorized as (a) incorporated (adopted in peer revision and incorporated without changes in the second version), (b) not incorporated (adopted in peer revision but not in the second version), (c) further revised (adopted in peer revision and further developed at home), and (d) self revised (performed at home, not discussed in peer revision). The results are shown in Table 2.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.3 How revisions are incorporated in second drafts and final versions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revisions 2nd drafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further revised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self revised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In analysis, we find that the total number of peer revision is 115 and 92 of them (80%) are incorporated by the researcher while 23 of them (20%) are not incorporated. The number of teacher comments is 78 and 69 of them (88%) are incorporated while 9 of them (12%) are not.

As we can see in Table 2.3, a higher percentage of revisions (84%) are incorporated after teacher comments in final versions than revisions made in peer sessions (67%) are incorporated into the second drafts. But the 67% peer revisions incorporated show peer revision is effective. Moreover, on the basis of peer revision and teacher comments, there are further revisions and self revisions. Here are some of the examples.

Example 1.
First draft: I felt excited but nervous.
Peer revision: I felt a bit excited but nervous.
Further revision: I felt very excited but a bit nervous.

Example 2.
First draft: I think I will love English forever and I will try my best to learn English well.
Self-revision: I think I will love English forever and try my best to learn it well.

To answer the third research questions (how are trouble sources revised in peer sessions according to different language aspects: content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics?), trouble sources in peer revision session are categorized according to five language aspects: content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, or mechanics. Then we get the results in Table 2.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.4 Revisions according to language aspect in 16 essays in peer revision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language aspect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table we find that grammar revisions (62%) predominate in the peer revision sessions and are closely followed by vocabulary revisions (17%). Mechanics rank third (11%). While organization is the least attended to (2%) and content follows it (8%). The results show in the course of writing students pay more attention to grammar and vocabulary and neglect organization of the composition.

Furthermore, there are a total of 11 false repairs constituted 9% of all revisions in peer revision. It should also be noted that other rhetorical and grammatical problems or errors remains unattended in the second drafts.

2.3.3 Findings in interviews
To find the reasons of the above-mentioned statistics, interviews were conducted on the 16 students in Chinese by the researcher. The 16 students were divided into 3 groups according to Table 2.2. A list of core questions was given to each student regarding peer and teacher comments. For peer comments, the questions were the following:

1. Were your peers' comments of any use to you when you revised your compositions? Why?
2. Would you like it if there were only peer comments but not teacher comments? Why?

For teacher comments, the questions were:

1. What types of teacher comments do you prefer?
2. Would you like it if there were only teacher comments but not peer comments? Why?

The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed. The results are as follows.

Category 1: Incorporating high percentages of teacher and peer comments
The 11 students all thought highly of peer and teacher comments. They valued teacher comments just because of the teacher’s experience and authority. They usually incorporated peer comments which gave concrete suggestions for improvement. They thought peer revisions provided them with chances to learn from each other, made them realize their own weaknesses, heightened their sense of audience and fostered the ownership of text.

Category 2: Incorporating much higher percentages of teacher comments than peer comments
There seemed to be a consensus about the value of teacher comments in the 3 students. They all regarded the teacher as the authority and usually incorporated almost all of the teacher’s comments no matter whether they agreed with the comments or not. They also benefited from collaborative learning in the peer response sessions. They felt it interesting and challenging to give peers comments and thought peer revision was a good complementary form to teacher comments.

Category 3: Incorporating lower percentages of teacher and peer comments
The 2 students were both good at English. They were not sure about their peers’ revisions and dissatisfied with the quality of peer comments. On one hand, they thought peer revision was time-consuming and not so effective. On the other, they thought peer work made them more self-confident and improved their English. They were more independent with their writing and they only incorporated those teacher comments they agreed upon though they admitted the teacher comments were of high quality.

3. Conclusion
In this study, it has been shown that peer revision is important and valuable in the English writing of tertiary learners though they favor and incorporate more teacher comments than peer comments in the revision of their writing. Why are teacher comments more favored than peer comments? Firstly, students have more confidence in teacher comments because the teacher is considered more experienced and more authoritative. Furthermore, teacher comments are considered to be of better quality. However, teacher comments do not substitute for peer comments. The former tends to induce more revisions to the macro-structures of a text whereas the latter has the specific roles of enhancing a sense of "real" audience in the students, raising the students' awareness of strengths and weaknesses of their own writings, encouraging collaborative learning and fostering an ownership of text.
In the study of peer revision, it is proved that 67% of peer revisions are incorporated in their writings and students focus especially on grammar whereas organization is the least attended to. Why will students make more revisions in grammar? According to Villamil and Guerrero (1998), there are three possible explanations. One explanation may be that ESL learners at the intermediate level are still quite unstable on their command of language structure and, consequently, feel the need to deal with aspects of form. Another explanation may be that students needed to “clean” the text first of linguistic problems that might have obscured the meaning of the text. A third explanation is that students simply followed their habitual tendency to focus on grammar, as probably learned throughout much of their previous language instruction. In the students’ emphasis on grammar, the historical effects of traditional form-oriented ESL training can be found.

Why did the participants have very negative reactions to peer response in the research (Fei Hong 2006)? If the participants pay little attention to peer response, the result of peer revision is surely of poor quality and the attitude of the writers to it is naturally negative. So in the process of peer response, effective organization and training students how to do peer revision are of much importance.

Meanwhile, student writers make many further revisions and self-revisions in their writings on the basis of previous peer revision, suggesting a pattern of behavior conducive to self-regulation. Finally, among the peer revisions, there are 11 false repairs constituting 9% of all revisions (115) in the second drafts. Thus, teacher comments after peer revision seem very necessary. They will further improve the quality of students’ compositions.

Despite the limitations in terms of the small sample size, the study has certain implications for the teaching of writing. Peer revision is a complementary form of teacher feedback in writing. It will be quite necessary to study how to combine peer revision and teacher feedback scientifically in writing teaching. Moreover, how to limit the possible negative effects of low quality repairs in peer revision to the greatest extent is also an issue meriting careful consideration.

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Appendix A Questionnaire

英语写作教学效果调查问卷

亲爱的同学，经过一个学期的写作教学，你的英语写作水平已经有了明显提高。为了在今后的写作教学中更大地调动同学们的积极性，收到更好的教学效果，我们想了解你在写作过程中的一些观点和看法。
请你如实回答以下问题。你不用担心什么，不需填写你的姓名，只要认真选择一个你认为符合你的情况的答案在表格里打勾就可以了(一个问题只能打一个勾)。

多谢合作！

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>问题</th>
<th>选项</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 我喜欢读我同学的作文。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 我发现读我同学的作文很有好处。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 读我同学的作文让我有了更多的灵感。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 读我同学的作文对我作文的结构有所帮助。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 读我同学的作文对我作文的语言(包括语法和词汇)质量有所帮助。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. 我从读我同学的作文中受益匪浅。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. 我喜欢同学评议同伴作文的过程。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. 我发现同学评议同伴作文的过程中的评语很有效。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. 同学评议同伴作文的过程中的评语帮助我丰富了自己作文的内容。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. 同学评议同伴作文的过程中的评语帮助我改善了自己作文的结构。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. 同学评议同伴作文的过程中的评语帮助我改善了自己作文中的语言(包括语法和词汇)。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. 同学评议同伴作文的过程中的评语使我受益匪浅。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. 我喜欢我的同学在我的作文上写书面评语的那种方式。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. 我发现同学对我的作文的书面评语很有用。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. 同学对我的作文的书面评语帮助我改善了自己作文的结构。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. 同学对我的作文的书面评语帮助我丰富了自己作文的内容。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. 同学对我的作文的书面评语帮助我改善了自己作文中的语言(包括语法和词汇)。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. 同学对我的作文的书面评语使我受益匪浅。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. 我喜欢老师在我的作文上写评语的那种方式。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. 我发现读老师对我的作文的书面评语很有用。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. 老师的评语帮助我丰富了自己作文的内容。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. 老师的评语帮助我改善了自己作文的结构。</td>
<td>非常同意 同意 没有意见 不同意 极不同意</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>问题</td>
<td>选项</td>
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<td>-----</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. 老师的评语帮助改善了自己作文中的语言（包括语法和词汇）。</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. 读老师的评语使我受益匪浅。</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. 当你修改自己的作文的时候，你经常考虑到你的同学给你的修改建议吗？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. 当你修改自己的作文的时候，你经常考虑到老师给你的修改建议吗？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(...continued from p. 35)

The Seventh Semester

First phase: Consecutive interpreting
Week 1  Public health
Week 2  Popular science
Week 3  Management
Week 4  Media

Second phase: Consecutive interpreting
Week 5  Environmental protection
Week 6  Energy
Week 7  Medicine
Week 8  Art (Mid-term test)

Third phase: Sight interpreting
Week 9  Technologies and applications
Week 10  Trade
Week 11  Marketing
Week 12  Auto Industry

Fourth phase: Simultaneous interpreting
Week 13  Shadowing or reverse counting
Week 14  Smart shadowing
Week 15  Simultaneous interpreting workshop 1
Week 16  Simultaneous interpreting workshop 2
数据驱动学习在大学英语教学中的应用研究

《数据驱动学习在大学英语教学中的应用研究》

基于《数据驱动学习在大学英语教学中的应用研究》的理论基础，本文提出了数据驱动学习在大学英语教学中的应用策略。通过具体案例分析，验证了数据驱动学习在提高大学英语教学质量方面的效果。此研究为未来大学英语教学提供了新的思路和方法。

关键词：数据驱动学习；大学英语教学；应用策略

高职院校英语自主学习中心建设个案研究

《高职院校英语自主学习中心建设个案研究》

本文以高职院校为例，探讨了在高职院校中建设英语自主学习中心的必要性和可行性。通过实施自主学习中心，不仅提高了学生的学习积极性，还促进了教学资源的有效利用。此研究对于其他高职院校英语教学改革具有一定的参考价值。

关键词：高职院校；英语自主学习中心；建设

非英语专业大学英语写作教学中学生自我监控

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本文以非英语专业大学为例，探讨了在非英语专业大学写作教学中如何引导学生进行自我监控，提高学生的写作能力。通过实施自我监控策略，学生在写作过程中更加注重反思和修正，有效提升了写作水平。

关键词：自我监控；写作教学；自我改进

大学英语写作教学中同伴合作的实证研究

《大学英语写作教学中同伴合作的实证研究》

本文以大学英语写作教学为研究对象，探讨了同伴合作教学策略在大学英语写作教学中的应用效果。研究结果表明，同伴合作教学策略能够有效提高学生的写作能力和团队合作能力。

关键词：同伴合作；大学英语；实证研究

任务型英语教学策略与准确策略比较研究

《任务型英语教学策略与准确策略比较研究》

本文以任务型英语教学策略和准确策略为研究对象，探讨了两者在英语教学中的应用效果。研究结果表明，任务型英语教学策略在提高学生英语语言运用能力方面具有显著优势，而准确策略则更注重学生语言知识的准确性。