

# SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE PEER RESPONSE IN LEARNING JAPANESE WRITING SKILLS: A COMPARISON OF FACE-TO-FACE AND NON-FACE-TO-FACE ONLINE INTERACTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the way we live. Various activities are carried out online to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, including Japanese Language Writing Classes. One of the language learning activities to improve writing skills is peer response. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, peer response is performed online instead of offline. Online peer response can be carried out in two ways: face-to-face and non-face-to-face. To determine the more effective online peer response, it is necessary to compare the interactions between the two activities. This qualitative, descriptive study focused on the interactions in synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer responses. The respondents of this study were students of the Department of Japanese Language and Culture, Al Azhar University Indonesia, with intermediate-level Japanese language skills. The findings reveal that synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer response have their own characteristics and various types of interactions. However, online, face-to-face peer response has more variations of interactions and activities than online non-face-to-face peer response, indicating that the first tends to be more active than the later.

Keywords: Online peer response, synchrony, writing skills

## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the life of the community. Numerous activities have to be conducted online to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Teaching and learning activities are carried out remotely using internet technology both synchronously and asynchronously. It encourages teachers and students to be able to use technology effectively. In addition, it is a challenge for teachers to provide effective learning and achieve the targeted learning outcomes.

In line with the ICT development, language learning techniques have developed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, language learning using ICT prior to the Covid-19 pandemic was mostly carried out as supporting activities or materials. Following the pandemic, learning activities must be carried out entirely using ICT, including learning writing skills.

One of the activities in learning writing skills is providing feedback or correcting the writing of students, either by the teacher or fellow students. The activity of correcting the writing of fellow students is also called peer response. Ikeda & Tateoka, (2007) define peer response as an activity to correct the articles written by fellow students, where students exchange roles as readers and writers(L.-A. K. Breuch, 2004).

Peer response can be carried out face to face (hereinafter referred to as offline peer response) or online. During the Covid-19 pandemic, peer response for learning writing skills has been performed online. Studies on both online and offline peer response, both synchronously and asynchronously, have been frequently carried out. Previous studies on

online peer response employ the available media in Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Moodle, Google Classroom, etc., or SNS such as Facebook, etc., with written comments (hereinafter referred to as online non-face-to-face peer response). Utilizing the development of technology, peer response can be performed face-to-face and online using applications such as Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Team, etc. To discover the effectiveness of synchronous online face-to-face peer response (via Zoom) compared to that of synchronous online non-face-to-face peer response (via Google Docs), it is necessary to conduct a study on interactions between students during both online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer response.

### **The Questions of the Study**

This study focuses on the learning processes of synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer responses. The questions discussed are as follows:

- 1) What interactions occur between students during synchronous online, face-to-face peer responses?
- 2) What interactions occur between students during synchronous online non-face-to-face peer responses?
- 3) What is the difference in interactions between students during synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer responses?

### **The Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of synchronous online, face-to-face peer response (via Zoom) compared to that of synchronous online non-face-to-face peer response (via Google Docs) to provide an overview of proper learning through peer response during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

L. A. K. Breuch (2004) defines peer review as responding to the writing of one another for the purpose of improving the writing. Peer review is also known as peer response, particularly when referring to writing skills activities. This study uses the term peer response to emphasize the focus of the study, namely on writing skills activities. Ikeda & Tateoka, (2007) states that peer response is an activity to correct the articles written by fellow students where students exchange roles as readers and writers. According to Hirose (2000), peer response is an activity to provide feedback on articles through discussions among fellow students. Meanwhile, (Harata, 2005) defines peer response as an activity to correct the writing of a student together with fellow students.

Referring to the aforementioned definitions, it can be concluded that peer response is an activity to provide a response or feedback to the writing or articles of other students or to correct the articles written by themselves through discussions with other students.

Observed from the results of previous studies, peer response offers various benefits from a social perspective, including allowing audiences to be in a relaxed state, learning broad writing skills, reducing tension or stress, practising positive attitudes towards writing activities, increasing motivation to improve writing, increasing the length of writing, improving cooperation and interpersonal skills, etc.

More specifically, Revers (1984) in Reiko Ikeda (1999) states the advantages of peer response as follows:

- 1) Improving writing skills as the writers are aware of the existence of the readers, rendering the purpose of writing clear, and encouraging the analytical power and criticism of the students.
- 2) Developing social skills. By working together to correct articles with fellow students, social and creative interactions will occur and support integrative learning.

In addition, Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) in R Ikeda & Tateoka (2007) also reveal the benefits of peer response as follows:

- 1) Students can actively follow the lesson.
- 2) Students can evaluate their opinions through input from fellow students.
- 3) Enabling discussions between fellow students or teachers in which students with a low level of nervousness can produce something exceeding their abilities.
- 4) The writers receive direct responses in the form of questions, opinions, etc., from the readers.
- 5) Students obtain feedback from various points of view.
- 6) The writers can discover parts that are understood and not understood by the readers.
- 7) Improving the skills required to correct and analyze the articles of fellow students.
- 8) Increasing mutual trust between fellow students by understanding the weaknesses and strengths of each other.

Previous studies on peer response include those conducted by Reiko Ikeda (1999), Hirose (2000), Harata (2005), and Tokuma (2007). Reiko Ikeda (1999) reveals that instead of the content of the articles, vocabulary and grammar are frequent topics in peer response. Hirose (2000) discovers not only surface changes, such as improvements in grammar and vocabulary, but also text-based changes, such as improvements in content, etc., as the outcomes and effectiveness of peer response using the mother tongue. Harata (2005) focuses more on the process of peer response. This study shows more varied changes in interactions when peers discuss, not merely give and receive, suggestions. Meanwhile, Tokuma (2007) finds seven sources of corrections observed from the interaction during peer response and the writing of the students, namely criticism from readers, questions from readers, explanations from writers, explanations from readers, the first writing of readers, teachers, and undecided factors (improvements whose sources are uncertain).

Utilizing the development of technology, peer response does not only develop into face-to-face peer response (FTFPR) but also transpires virtually through internet media. This virtual peer response is termed virtual review by L. A. K. Breuch (2004). Breuch (2004). L. A. K. Breuch (2004) defines this virtual review as the activity of using computer technology to exchange and respond to the writing of one another for the purpose of improving writing skills. The activities of both peer review (peer response) and virtual review are basically similar; the difference lies in the presence of computer technology media during activities. In virtual review, the activities of sending, reading, and responding to the writing are all carried out in a virtual room (L. A. K. Breuch, 2004). This virtual review can also be referred to as online peer response (OLPR).

Based on a study by Digiovanni & Nagaswami (2001), the benefits of online peer response include that students can focus and continue to do the assigned tasks, and teachers can monitor the occurring interactions more closely and provide directions, supposing a group

is not working well since all interactions are documented. It is difficult to achieve a face-to-face peer response since teachers monitor the course of activities by going around groups, thus capturing only small parts of the interaction. Another benefit of online peer response is that students do not need to rely solely on memory to remember input from their fellow students when correcting their articles, as everything has been documented.

There have been numerous studies comparing face-to-face peer response and online peer response, such as Digiovanni & Nagaswami (2001), Hine (2017), Pritchard & Morrow (2017), and Awada & Diab (2021). Digiovanni & Nagaswami (2001) show that students prefer face-to-face peer responses as negotiations (asking, explaining, suggesting, inferring/paraphrasing, and correcting grammar) are more common in face-to-face peer responses than in online peer responses [7]. The quantitative studies conducted by Hine, (2017) and Awada & Diab, (2021), show the effectiveness of online peer response in writing class activities. Meanwhile, Pritchard & Morrow, (2017) reveals the similarities in terms of rules and processes in face-to-face peer response and online peer response .

Online peer response can be implemented in two ways, namely synchronously (real-time) or asynchronously (delayed time). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, synchronous means "happening or done at the same time or speed" [11]. Therefore, it can be said that interactions between students in synchronous online peer responses are carried out at the same time through online media. The synchronous online peer response can be implemented face-to-face using online video conference applications (Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, etc.) and non-face-to-face using email, Google Docs, chat applications, social media, etc. Furthermore, asynchronous means "not happening or done at the same time or speed" [11]. Asynchronous online peer response is an online peer response activity where interactions between students do not occur at the same time. In contrast to synchronous online peer response, asynchronous online peer response is usually executed using email, etc.

Liu & Sadler (2003) compare synchronous peer response and asynchronous peer response, both with technology media (using MOO, an online chatroom application, and Word editing) and traditional (offline) face-to-face peer response and paper and stationery. The finding shows that the peer response using technology media is more effectively carried out asynchronously than synchronously. Meanwhile, traditional peer response is more effectively conducted synchronously than asynchronously. Observed from comments, the peer response using technology media obtains a greater percentage of revision-oriented comments, thus indicating more improvements to the writing.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Japanese language learning at universities in Indonesia has been carried out online. It affects activities in Japanese writing classes, including peer response. Traditional face-to-face activities in class are not allowed, yet face-to-face peer response has benefits for learning Japanese, as observed by Hirose (2000), Harata (2005), Digiovanni & Nagaswami (2001). Thus, online peer response becomes the solution. Online peer response also provides benefits for students and teachers, as examined by Digiovanni & Nagaswami (2001) and effectiveness in learning, as analyzed by Hine (2017) and Awada & Diab (2021). Online peer response can be made synchronously and asynchronously. Asynchronous online peer response has a weakness, in which students sometimes do not always open the online media used, and thus do not respond to comments from fellow students, as revealed in Pritchard & Morrow (2017). Synchronous online peer response can be carried out in two ways, namely face-to-face using online video conferencing media or non-face-to-face using online chat application media, email, Google Docs, etc. One of the ways to learn more about the effectiveness of these two online peer response activities is by examining the interactions

that occur during the activities. Liu and Liu & Sadler (2003) compare peer response using technology media with traditional peer response, both synchronously and asynchronously. However, the media technology used is MOO and Word editing (not-face-to-face). Studies comparing synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer responses, particularly on Japanese language learners (JFL) in Indonesia, are nonexistent. In addition, technological development has facilitated online learning, such as the development of online video conferencing applications such as Zoom, Google Meet, etc., and media with online comments and collaborative editing facilities such as Google Docs, etc. In this study, the online media used are Zoom and Google Docs for synchronous online face-to-face peer response and Google Docs for synchronous online non-face-to-face peer response.

The focus of this study is the interaction process in synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer responses. The level of ability of the respondents selected in this study is the intermediate level. Meanwhile, the language used in the conversation during the online peer response is the Indonesian language.

This study is important to discover the effective methods of teaching writing skills during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly related to online peer response, considering that studies on online peer response are scarce in Indonesia. The respondents of this study are intermediate-level Indonesian Japanese language learners (JFL), using their mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

## **THE METHOD OF THE STUDY**

This study employed a qualitative method. The data were collected through documentation, namely transcripts of conversations during synchronous online, face-to-face peer responses and comments provided by students in Google Docs during synchronous online non-face-to-face peer responses. The data were processed using Microsoft Excel and analyzed using descriptive analysis.

The data sources in this study were eight students in the third year (5<sup>th</sup> semester) of the Department of Japanese Language and Culture at the Al Azhar University of Indonesia with intermediate-level Japanese language skills.

The data collection was conducted as follows:

To examine the topics of conversations and interactions occurring during online face-to-face peer response, conversations via Zoom in each break room were recorded. The data were then transcribed and classified according to the categories of interaction proposed by Harata (2005) and then processed using excel prior to being analyzed.

For online non-face-to-face peer response, the data were obtained from the comments written by the students on the articles of their fellow students in the column provided on Google Docs. The data were then categorized based on the types of interaction suggested by Harata (2005) and then processed using Excel prior to being analyzed.

The data were categorized by authors independently. Afterwards, the authors met to discuss their respective findings and compare the interactions of the two activities to discover which online peer response activity is more effective.

This study was expected to generate the characteristics of the interactions of both online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer responses as well as discover which activity is more efficient to further improve the writing skills of the students.

### Activity Procedures

Both synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer responses are carried out in the following sequence of activities:

Explanation and discussion of the themes, examples, structures, and grammar for the articles.

The articles were written using Google Docs according to the predetermined themes. The finished articles were uploaded to the e-learning.

Explanation of peer response.

Explanation of points to be considered when providing comments on the articles written by fellow students.

Explanation of how to use Google Docs comment feature/record video via Zoom.

Examples of providing comments from articles that have never been corrected.

Peer response.

Synchronous online non-face-to-face peer response was conducted twice as follows:

TM	Date	Theme
1	March 19, 2021	Friend Introduction Email
2	April 9, 2021	Email to Recommend Tourist Destinations

Meanwhile, synchronous online, face-to-face peer response was conducted twice as follows:

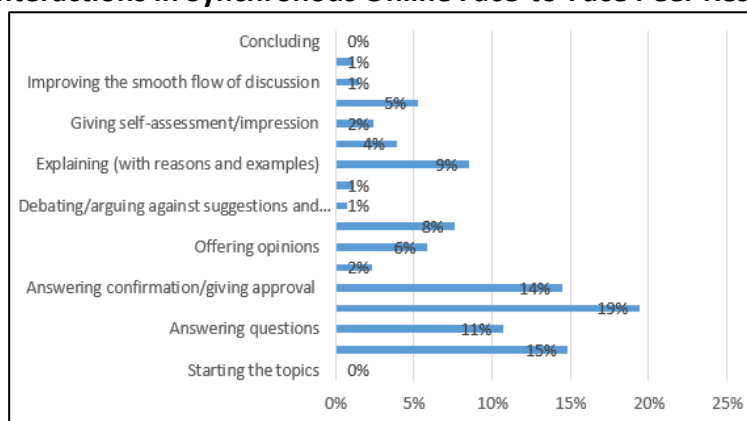
TM	Date	Theme
1	June 1, 2021	News Content on SNS
2	July 9, 2021	Reviews on Favorite Films

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Interactions in Synchronous Online Face-to-Face Peer Response

By sorting the transcript data from Zoom into the categories of interaction by Harata (2005), the interactions in synchronous online, face-to-face peer response are categorized as follows:

**Table 1. Interactions in Synchronous Online Face-to-Face Peer Response**



As presented in Table 1, the interactions in synchronous online peer response vary. The most notable interaction is confirming/asking for approval (19%), followed by asking/showing things that are unclear (15%). Readers mostly confirm or ask about the meaning of the vocabulary or the way kanji is written in the articles. The use of ICT in Japanese writing activities facilitates the writers to use kanji in their writing without having to depend on memory. In addition, teachers allow them to use vocabulary or kanji that have not been studied. It leads to readers frequently being unable to read or understand the written kanji, hence the necessity to confirm or ask the writers.

The interactions initiated are quite diverse. Nearly all categories of interaction by Harata (2005) are observed in the data. One of the categories, namely concluding, is possible to find since students have been accustomed to offline, face-to-face peer responses. It is in accordance with Harata (2005) that interactions will be more varied, supposing students are accustomed to peer response activities. As stated by L. A. K. Breuch (2004), the difference between synchronous offline peer response and synchronous online peer response is the utilization of ICT. In this face-to-face peer response, the media used are Zoom for conducting the activity and Google Docs to write the articles. The findings of this study indicate that both readers and writers can edit the articles written by the writers, provide comments in the available column, mark the parts that require improvement, etc. Moreover, both readers and writers can search for the meaning of the words they want to ascertain online.

(1) Providing comments in the available column.

- F : Di... Let me type the comment first...  
AL : Ohh, it hasn't been typed yet?  
F : It should be added with "na", right?  
AL : Yes.

In data (1), F as the reader, confirms to write a comment for AL in the provided column.

(2) Searching for meaning in online dictionaries

- RI : I think so... Try to suggest... karantina giu... kuaranti no imi... weblio...  
quarantine... quarantine...  
MY : Nah, there it is... quarantine no imi wa...

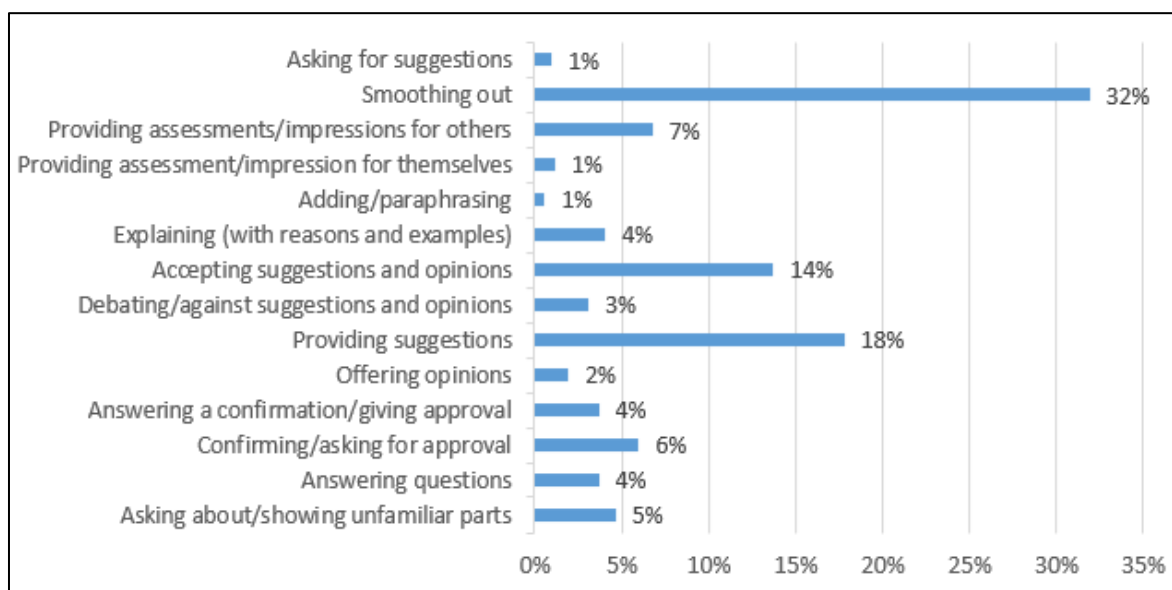
In data (2), RI, as the reader, suggests MY for using a more appropriate word for quarantine and helps MY find it using an online dictionary.

Harata (2005) also discovers the type of interaction where students ask for assistance from the teacher, which is absent in this study. It implies the independence and trust of the students in their fellow students paired with them to correct their articles.

### **Interactions in Synchronous Online Non-Face-to-Face Peer Response**

Referring to the categories of interaction proposed by Harata (2005), interactions in synchronous online non-face-to-face peer response are shown as follows.

**Table 2.** Interactions in Synchronous Online Non-Face-to-Face Peer Response



As shown in table 2, the most prominent interaction is smoothing out, covering 32% of all interactions. During the activity, students only rely on writing to express their minds. Smoothing out in this regard ensures the smooth flow of conversation to maintain good relationships among students. The written language is rigid in nature due to the absence of expression or movement, and thus frequently generates different interpretations between writers and readers that can lead to misunderstandings, particularly when providing advice. The readers have to be careful not to offend the writers when giving advice. To prevent misunderstandings, many students smooth out the interaction by writing jokes, using laughing icons or emojis, and saying thank you. Emojis are the typical characteristic of this category of interaction.

The next prominent interaction is providing suggestions, namely 18%, followed by receiving suggestions and opinions, amounting to 14%. It is obvious that the interactions in online, face-to-face peer responses are emphasized by providing suggestions, whereas the writers focus on receiving suggestions from the readers.

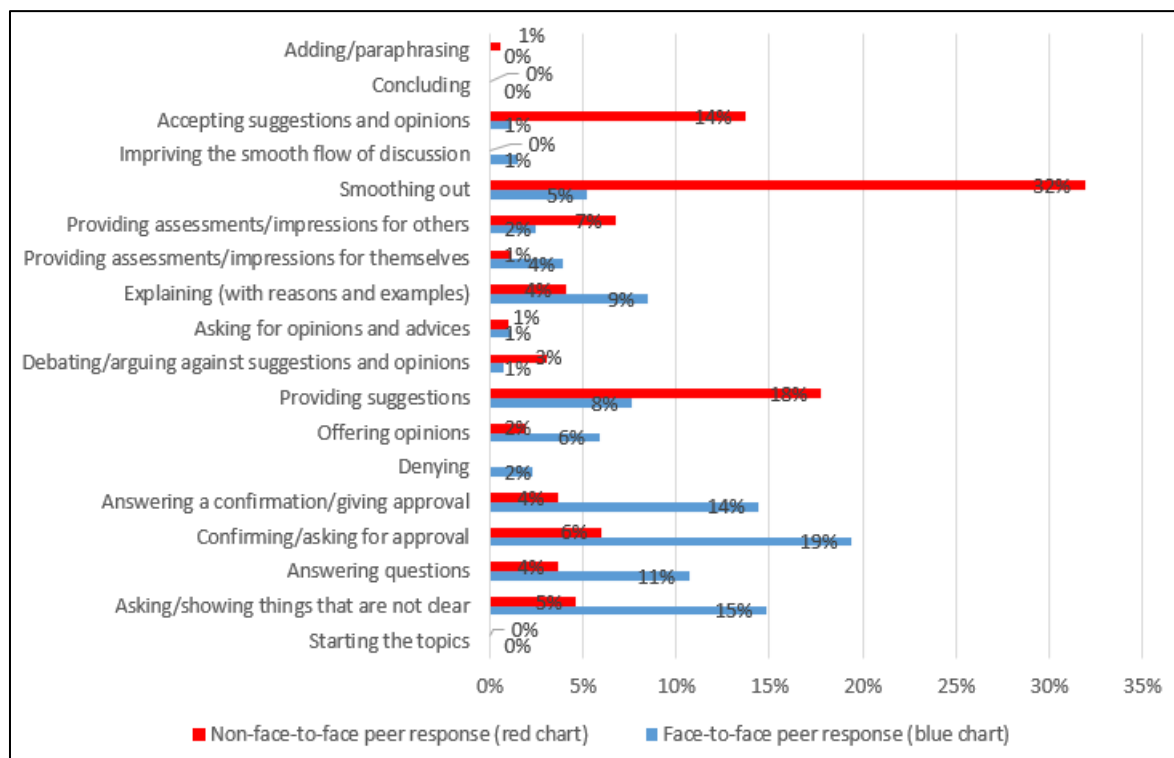
Interactions that occurred in online non-face-to-face peer response also vary. In addition to providing and receiving suggestions and opinions, students also provide assessments/impressions regarding the writing of fellow students, give opinions, debate, etc.

The data also show no unanswered comments and completed activities, confirming the advantages of synchronous compared to asynchronous online non-face-to-face peer response. It is corroborated by Pritchard (2017) who finds several comments that are not responded to in asynchronous online non-face-to-face peer response. It is presumably caused by students who only respond once and then overlook the comments or students who do not check the responses uploaded in the provided column.

### **Differences in Interactions between Synchronous Online Face-to-Face and Non-Face-to-Face Peer Response**

Differences in interactions between synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer responses are presented in the following table.

**Table 3.** Interactions between Synchronous Online Face-to-Face and Non-Face-to-Face Peer Response



As illustrated in Table 3, the significant difference between the two activities is the large percentage of smoothing out in online non-face-to-face peer response. As previously explained, this interaction aims to avoid misunderstandings due to the rigidity of written language compared to spoken language.

Another difference is online face-to-face peer response highlights confirming/asking for approval and asking about/showing unfamiliar parts, while online non-face-to-face peer response focuses on providing and receiving suggestions. When online, face-to-face peer response takes place, the readers will read the articles for the first time. The articles also involve words or kanji that have not been studied because the teacher does not limit the use of words and kanji to those that have been studied. Therefore, the readers frequently ask or confirm the words and kanji they have just learned in the activity. This type of interaction is insignificant in non-face-to-face peer responses. The teacher allows each group/pair to determine the time to carry out their respective synchronous online peer response. Therefore, students have adequate time to read the articles, including searching for unfamiliar kanji, words, etc., prior to attending non-face-to-face online peer response. It also implies that this activity focuses more on writing improvements.

In terms of the number of interactions, online, face-to-face peer response has more interactions (1,468 interactions) than online non-face-to-face peer response (517 interactions). Meanwhile, examined from the number of variations in the types of interactions, online, face-to-face peer response also has more variations (17) than online non-face-to-face peer response (14). It indicates that online, face-to-face peer response is more active than online non-face-to-face peer response.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the aforementioned discussion, it is concluded that both synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer response have their distinctive characteristics and involve different types of interactions. Online, face-to-face peer response includes more interactions and activities than online non-face-to-face peer response. However, some interactions are not directly related to writing improvements, unlike online non-face-to-face peer responses in which the interactions are more likely about kanji, vocabulary, and other relevant topics to improve writing skills.

The purpose of conducting this study is not to determine the better activity between synchronous online face-to-face and non-face-to-face peer response. Rather, this study aims to observe the characteristics of these two types of activities that are expected to provide a deeper understanding and information regarding their implementation. The findings show that each activity has its individual characteristics. Students tend to be more active during online, face-to-face peer responses. However, the activity is time-consuming and relying on lecture hours will not be sufficient. Therefore, the authors suggest that teachers implement both activities to cover the lack of time required in online, face-to-face peer response with online non-face-to-face peer response.

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