

Practicing Teacher Organized Peer Review to Advance EFL Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract: *Peer review is considered as an important tool in enhancing the process of improving English writing skills. Peer review can be a way to open up new possibilities for both writer and reviewer. Peer review is increasingly conducted in writing classes since the prevalence of communicative approach in recent years, and it has been proved as an effective approach to improve the writing skill (Corbin, 2012), to increase motivation to writing, and to learn how to treat writing as a collaborative social activity. The present article illustrates the practicalities to improve the quality of peer review sessions.*

Peer review is meant to complement teacher feedback rather than to replace it. With appropriate training, guidance and practice, students can learn to be more specific and helpful in their responses to a peer's script. Identifying and practicing the skills required for peer review, by providing the atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, limiting the role of peer reviewer to that of a reader and leaving the freedom of modifying the suggestion to the writer would improve the quality of peer review. Thus, Peer review can be a way to open up new possibilities for both writer and reviewer.

Keywords: *English Writing Skills, Peer Review, Collaborative Learning, Autonomy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is thinking process that generates, organizes, and exchanges one's ideas to the reader. Effective writing needs prewriting, organizing, drafting, revising, editing and documenting the final draft. The process approach to writing claims that writing instruction includes "the entire process of writing - invention, drafting, feedback, and revision- and not just the product" (Sokolik, 2003). Teaching learning writing skills is a challenging task in EFL context as it is time as well as energy consuming. Jordan (1998) also opines that it is difficult to help students in this area. The teacher needs to behave like a facilitator, guide, supporter and evaluator to mentor the learners during various stages of the writing process. Simultaneously, the learner is expected to deal with the text at surface level (e.g. grammar, spelling, punctuation and word choice) and at the deep level (e.g. planning, adequate information and organization) during various phases of the process.

Seow (2002) points out that the teacher's guidance to students' writing is a significant technique in developing the writing process. Feedback on students' scripts on regular basis by the teacher is not practically possible due to lack of time during the semester. Peer review, on the other hand, can help because it gives students more options to consider when they revise their papers. Kroll (2001) defines peer revision as "simply putting students together in groups and then having each student read and react to the strengths and weaknesses of each other's papers". The purpose of peer review is to generate and receive different points of view and thus raise awareness of verbal means and the coalescing the ideas. Peer review is meant to complement teacher feedback rather than to replace it. With appropriate training, guidance and practice, students can learn to be more specific and helpful in their responses to a peer's essay. Peer reviewing of the scripts is a powerful way for EFL students to improve their writing (Min, 2006).

2. PEER REVIEW

Peer review, which is referred to under different names such as peer response, peer feedback, peer editing, or peer evaluation, can be defined as "use of learners as sources of information and

interactants for each other is such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing" (Liu and Hansen, 2002:1). The rationale of peer review is explained by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which states that mind develops through one's interaction with the world around him/her. He emphasizes that learning is not an individual activity; but rather a cognitive activity that the nature of learning shifts the focus on learning from individual to the interaction within a social context. Thereby, peer interaction is fundamental to the improvement of students' learning, because it allows students to construct knowledge through social sharing and interaction (Liu et al., 2001).

In the past two decades, feedback has been increasingly used in English as a foreign language (EFL) writing instruction (Zhao, 2010). Some researchers recognize that peer feedback has a pivotal role in improving student writing skills and learning achievement (Topping et al., 2000; Plutsky & Wilson, 2004). Several studies have focused on student roles, perceptions and affective benefits regarding peer review and successful strategies for peer revision (Stanley, 1992; Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger, 1992; Mendonca and Johnson, 1994; Hu, 2005; Min, 2006; Nelson and Schunn, 2009). Research also indicates that peer review training helps student writers to shift from a prescriptive attitude to a more collaborative one after training (Min, 2008). In their study comparing benefits of peer review to the reviewer and the receiver, Lundstrom and Baker (2009) reported that the reviewing partners improved their writing more than their receiving counterparts. Lin et al., (2001) in their study found that specific peer feedback and critical peer feedback may greatly facilitate students improving their writing skills. In addition, in their quasi-experimental study comparing three methods for teaching student writing, Plutsky and Wilson (2004) found that peer feedback helped students become proficient writers. More importantly, most students view peer feedback as effective as the instructors.

According to Wakabayashi (2013) through peer feedback, learners engage in critical evaluation of peer text for the purpose of exchanging help for revision. Because learners can learn more about writing and revision by reading other's drafts critically and their awareness of what makes writing successful and effective can be enhanced and, lastly learners eventually become more autonomous writers (Maarof et al., 2011).

Participating in peer review can help students to read carefully, with attention to the details of a piece of writing (whether their own or others). It also strengthens their writing by taking into account the responses of actual and anticipated readers. It also teaches the learners to gather and respond to feedback on their own work. Further, it enables the learners to formulate and communicate constructive feedback on peer's written text. To incorporate peer review into the course work, teachers need to strategically follow these practicalities before and during / after the peer review sessions.

3. GUIDELINES TO BE FOLLOWED BEFORE THE PEER REVIEW SESSIONS

3.1. Ambiance for Peer Review

It is best to assign three to five students to groups, rather than to have them define the groups themselves. Assigning students to the groups will allow the instructor to ensure that the groups are heterogeneous. Such heterogeneity can enhance student learning in groups (Millis 2002). Maintaining the same groups throughout the semester will help the students build the trust that is necessary for peer review to be successful.

The ideal time for peer review is after students have written a complete draft of a paper, but while there is still time for substantial revision. Each peer-review session will require at least one class period. While it is possible to complete a session in one hour, a two hour class period is preferable. The atmosphere of trust and mutual respect that is necessary for the success of peer-review sessions does not develop instantaneously. Ideally, the first peer-review session should focus on a short piece of writing, such as a paragraph or two, so that students develop comfort with giving and receiving feedback before taking on the task of reading longer papers.

3.2. Worksheets to Organize Students' Peer Review

Worksheets that include specific tasks that reviewers should complete during the session are to be prepared and facilitated to the peer reviewers. The guidance teacher provides on the worksheets

should help students stay "on task" during the session and should help them discern the amount of commenting that is desirable. The role of the peer reviewer should be that of a reader, not an evaluator or grader. Peer-review worksheets should ask the reviewer to begin by offering a positive comment about the paper. After that point, the peer reviewer role in commenting should be descriptive: each reviewer should describe his/her response to the paper. The worksheet should give students specific tasks to complete when recording their response to a paper (Nilson 2003). Where evaluation is required, it should be based on the reviewer's impressions as a reader.

3.3. Provide Rehearsals for Effective Peer Review

First, copy and distribute a brief sample paper for the review. Then, ask students to take five minutes to read the paper and ten minutes to write appropriate comments, using the peer-review worksheet. Allow students five to ten minutes to discuss about the comments among the group. Later, teacher encourage students to present their reviewing comments to the class and use these to write comments on the worksheet. It is helpful to direct students to give constructive comments that can be useful to improve the text. When necessary, follow-up with questions that help the students phrase their comments in more specific and constructive ways.

To help students resist the understandable temptation to become either discouraged or defensive during the peer-review session and to help they focus on listening carefully to their peers' comments. Just as the students will need to learn and practice the skills involved in providing constructive feedback on their peers' writing, they will also need to learn how to respond, as writers, to the feedback they receive. Students must learn how to approach a peer-review session with an open mind.

Teacher should encourage each writer to respond in writing to their peers' comments. This written response can be recorded directly on the peer review worksheet. The point of such writing exercises is to ask students to take their peers' comments seriously and to think carefully about how readers respond to the choices they have made in their writing. Freedom is to be given to the writers to decide to make or not to make the changes based on the comments by the peer reviewers.

4. GUIDELINES TO BE FOLLOWED DURING / AFTER THE PEER REVIEW SESSIONS

4.1. Mentor Each Peer Review Session

To start each session, distribute peer-review worksheets, explain how students should complete the worksheets, set time limits, and ask each group to designate one person as a time-keeper to make sure that the group stays on schedule. When papers are around three pages long, peer-reviewers should spend about 20-25 minutes reading and reviewing each paper. The group should then devote five to ten minutes to a "discussion" of each paper (spending a total of 15-30 minutes discussing four papers). During this discussion, the three reviewers should present spoken feedback to the writer. If reviewers feel uncomfortable with providing spoken feedback, they might start by reading their written comments out loud to the writer. Doing so students can produce the added benefit of helping the reviewers clarify their written comments.

4.2. Monitor Each Group for Effective Review

Even with clear instructions, peer-review sessions can go twisted. Circulate throughout the session to make sure that the groups stay focused. Listen carefully to the spoken feedback, and use questions to help students make their comments as specific and descriptive as possible. The teacher should guide the learners to comment the exact error / mistake rather than vague and hurting comments. Students are to be encouraged to supply particulars of errors / mistakes that help the writer to improve his/her communicative capacities.

Paying attention to how the groups are functioning overall can help the teacher determine whether they need additional guidance to the class as a whole. Teacher need to encourage the students not to present an overall judgment of the paper, but to try to say something specific that can help the writer revise the paper.

4.3. Facilitate Students to Write Final Drafts after Reviewing Worksheets

Whether or not the teacher is grading the responses that reviewers and writers write on the peer review worksheets, s/he should read the completed worksheets to get a sense of what students are actually doing during the peer-review sessions and how they are responding to one another's comments. Having the students turn in the worksheets also helps the teacher communicate to them that s/he is taking the peer-review process seriously.

Teacher should also give students feedback on their performance during peer review so that they know what they are doing well and what they should try to improve upon. The teacher should review completed peer-review worksheets when s/he grades papers not only to evaluate individual student performance, but also to gauge the success of the peer-review sessions and to determine what teacher might do to improve them. Teacher needs to provide an atmosphere conducive to make changes that incorporate students' observations and ideas in the final draft. It would be better to give an opportunity to the writers to make necessary changes based on the suggestions given during the peer review session. Teacher also needs to model the same open-mindedness to revision that the teacher wants them to display as writers during peer review.

5. CONCLUSION

Instructors who ask their students to review their peers' writing should recall how difficult it is to accomplish with efficiency the tasks involved in responding to written scripts. It can also be difficult, even for experienced writers, to respond effectively to the comments they receive from reviewers of their work. It is essential, then, that the teacher plans carefully the guidance s/he will give his/her students on how to conduct and utilize peer review, and that gives them a chance to reflect on the process. Keeping these issues in mind, instructors should approach peer review as an opportunity to teach these skills and for students to practice them. The following are effective strategies to orchestrate the learners during peer review:

- *Identify and Teach the Skills Required for Peer Review:* Teacher needs to identify the skills for peer review like reading skills (discerning a writer's main point, locating key points of support or relevant data, etc.), writing skills (writing clear, specific comments and questions), and collaboration skills (phrasing critiques in a descriptive, constructive way). Then s/he needs to develop a coherent plan by integrating peer review into the course. Then formulate clear and specific instructions that the students need to follow as they review a peer's paper and how to use the constructive comments they receive during peer review.
- *Teach Peer Review as an Essential Part of the Writing Process:* Teacher is expected to emphasize the need of peer review as an essential part of the writing process that all successful writers engage in at some point. The teacher needs to remind students that the process of academic/professional writing involves three steps: drafting, revising, and editing. Peer review is helpful to student writers when it is utilized between the drafting and revision stages, or after each student has produced a complete draft, but while there is still time to make substantial changes. The purpose of peer review as a prelude to revision is to help the writer determine which parts of the paper are effective as is, and which are unclear, incomplete, or unconvincing. A writer might learn to be more conscious after reviewing his / her peers.
- *Restricting the Role of the Peer Reviewer as a Reader:* The teacher is expected to develop guidelines for peer-reviewers that ask them to complete specific tasks to realize their role as a reviewer not as evaluator. However, those that are evaluative should put the emphasis on the reader's impressions and responses and should not require the peer reviewer to pronounce a judgment on the paper as a whole (Nilson 2003). This approach should help the teacher develop specific instructions to students that will clarify how they should respond to one another's writing and should also help the teacher to think practically what students can realistically accomplish during in-class peer-review sessions. The writer should be allowed to think about all of the reviewers' comments, but may decide to ignore some of the comments and to make changes in response to others.

Peer feedback on writing develops students to improve their knowledge through providing opportunities to think critically, and to improve autonomy in acquiring writing skills. It is notable that teacher directed peer review is an important measure in writing instruction because it provides a flexible platform to help students to improve writing skills.

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