

Peer Feedback, Benefits and Drawbacks

Sumon Kunwongse

*Language Institute
Thammasat University*

leksumon@hotmail.com

Abstract

This article is to present about the effects of peer feedback when it is used in ESL or EFL writing class. Despite its problems, the article reveals the tremendous advantages of this technique if it is properly applied. It suggests that in order to make the best use of this technique, students must be trained how do peer feedback effectively, and how peer feedback should be implemented and incorporated in the writing class must be considered. The author believe that if students acquire better peer feedback skills, it would help them to improve their writing.

[Thammasat Review, Special Issue, 2013]

Keyword: Effects, Tremendous, Feedback

Introduction

Peer feedback has been widely adopted to teaching ESL / EFL writing since late 1980s (Berg,1999) as part of process-oriented instruction of which the focus is on the process: brainstorming or planning, drafting, reviewing, editing, and rewriting. The use of peer feedback ,as Hansen &Lui (2005) pointed out, is supported by teaching and learning theoretical frameworks such as collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1984), Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1987), Interaction and Second Language Acquisition (Long and Porter 1985), and cooperative learning (Oxford, 1997). Despite the positive reports from many researchers in term of its cognitive, social, and linguistic benefits (Ellis, 2009; Hyland,2000; Mendoca&Johnson,1994; Min, 2006; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui& Ng, 2000), some teachers as well as students would prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback. Therefore, this article is to present the advantages and disadvantages of peer feedback to ESL writing class. The suggestions of how it should be managed for affective benefits are included.

Peer feedback

Peer feedback, also referred to as peer review, peer response or peer editing has been defined as "the use of learners as sources of information, and interactants for each other in 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 & Hansen, 2002, p.1).

Role of peer feedback in ESL composition class

Peer feedback can be valued as an essential technique to teaching process writing. It allows students to play the role of the authors and reviewers whose task is to give comments to their peers' written work (Hansen&Liu,2005; Lam 2010). It provides students with opportunities to communicate and interact with their peers, and generate a source of information, negotiation of meaning, and a sense of group cohesion. Rollinson (2005) states that peer feedback creates a real audience as the reader will let the writer know if the message needs clarification. Moreover, it encourages collaborative dialogue, interactions and cooperation with peers, which is in line with what Vygotsky's (1987) suggestion on how learning happens through the guidance and response of others. The focus is on student-centered learning (Tang &

Tithecott,1999). Ellis (2009) views it as a mean of fostering learners' motivation and ensuring linguistic accuracy. It creates grammar teaching in that grammar is taught within a learning activity in which the focus is both on form and meaning. Grammar forms are addressed while errors are corrected.

Benefits of peer feedback

A number of studies have reported the affective benefits of peer feedback when properly implemented. It is beneficial not only on the development of second-language writing and the language-learning process as a whole but also cooperative and collaborative learning supports and social interactions.

Many research studies have confirmed the positive effects of peer feedback towards the development of ESL/FL writing and their language learning process. For example, research results appearing in Lee (1997), Mendonca & Johnson (1994), Min (2005), Rollinson (2005), Tsui & Ng (2000), Wakabashi (2013) show that peer readers can provide useful feedback, and that the student writers can revise more effectively by incorporating the peers' comments in their writing. Berg (1999) found that peers who were trained to comment on each other's L2 writing produced more meaning-based changes. Min (2005) also reported that learners improved their skills in providing peer feedback on global aspects of writing such as content and organization. Being able to focus on a global level of writing, only on the surface level, is a trait associated with skilled writers (Raimes, 1985). Furthermore, Wong, King-shan, and Ronica (1999) conducting a study to investigate the effectiveness of peer correction confirmed that peer correction led to fewer writing errors. The L2 students in Hyland's (2000) study commented that peer feedback on grammar enhanced their learning. Giving comments and revise allows learners to develop criteria for evaluation and to become a critical reader. This enhances their ability to evaluate their own work and be more critical revisers of their own writing and mistakes (Rollinson, 2005). The student in Tsui & Ng's (2000) study also pointed out that he is aware of his own mistakes through reading his peers' writings. Even though he made the same mistakes as his peers, he could not identify his own, but his peers' mistakes.

Peer feedback helps students to be aware of the audience (Tsui & Ng 2000). The writers need to write for audiences, preferably those that can give more or less immediate feedback (Rollinson, 2005). While the reviewers want to provide useful feedback, the writers eagerly receive the comments so that they can do better in their second draft. The writers also need to write to the demand of the readers since the reviewers will let the writers know if the message has come across effectively. Thus, the writing is for a real communicative purpose.

Peer feedback boosts confidence and allows students to become more independent and active learners. Tsui & Ngo (2000) mention that peers' feedback enhances the sense of ownership of text because the students did not see their peers' comments as authoritative (when comparing to a teacher's feedback). The students could make their own decision if they should take their peers' comments on board or not. Thus, in the long-term effect, the students become less reliant on the teacher and more confident in themselves as writers (p.167).

Peer feedback also enhances students' critical thinking and awareness of effective writing skills. By responding critically to their peers' writing, they exercise the critical thinking they must apply to their own work (Mittan, 1989 as cited in Mendoca and Johnson, 1994). Moreover, in order to give constructive and critical comments, the student-readers must put their effort and careful considerations to apply what they know. Thus their level of metacognitive awareness were activated (Wong and Storey, 2006 as cited in Chen & Lin, 2008)

Furthermore, peer feedback helps create cooperative and collaborative learning. Hirose (2008) claimed that the results of dynamic interactions between peers during peer feedback sessions covering multiple functions such as asking questions, giving additional related information, making suggestions, enhances students to work cooperatively, benefit from each other, improve their writing, and communication skills in English. Wakabayashi (2013) pointed out that through peer feedback, learners engage in critical evaluation of peer text for the purpose of exchanging help for revision. Besides, Hyland's (2000) study noted that allowing and encouraging students to have peer talk during the writing process is the effective strategy to create peer support mechanism. The interactions which may not involve audience response to completed drafts allow students to turn to one another for support. In fact, from my own observations, this support has extended beyond in

class session as students help tutoring each other before the examination. The socialization in small groups already trained to establish a collaborative atmosphere also prevents tension and fears and facilitates student involvement (Morra& Romano, 2008).

Lastly, The social dimension of working in groups can enhance the participant's attitudes towards writing (Caudron 1984 cited in Rollinson 2005). As seen in Chen & Lin's(2008) study, they found that after the peer feedback, students are found of working in groups and show more acceptance and interest of peer feedback. The sense of affiliation results in their better attitudes toward writing (Nelson&Murphy,1933 as cited in Chen& Lin,2008)

Drawbacks of peer feedback

Despite the perceived benefits, the value of peer feedback is skeptical to many English teachers and researchers with various reasons.

Firstly, such activity is so time consuming, especially when the learners are unfamiliar with the process. As Rollinson(2005) pointed out thatthe peer editing process is a lengthy one. Reading a draft, making notes, then either collaborating with another reader to reach a consensus and write comments or engaging orally with the writer in a feedback circle, will consume a significant amount of time (p.25).

Secondly, the students preferred teachers' feed back to their peers with various reasons such as the lack of confidence in their peer reviewers, being aware of their own linguistics limitations (Ferris, 2002; Hyland &Hyland,2006),the familiarity and belief that the teacher is the only audience who is more experienced and can give better quality feedback (Chen&Lin, 2008).Some students even had problems with the concept of peer feedback (Tang &Tithecott, 1999). They felt they did not know how to advice properly (Tang& Ththecott,1999 p.31).

Thirdly, the cultural factors, especially Asian students, who are known as collectivist type behaviors which hold high value of safeface (Chareonsuk,). The students may not want to give comments sincerely to their peers for fear that it might cause their friends to lose face. Therefore to keep face is to keep relationship and avoid the conflicts (Hyland,2000; Hugh and Grove, 1999 as cited in Chareonsuk; Carson ad Nelson, 1996 as cited in Rollinson, 2005)

Fourthly, the teacher's perception towards their roles and the peer feedback process when incorporating peer feedback in composition class are skeptical. Some teachers may not feel comfortable to hand over their responsibilities to the students and they may find it difficult not to interfere the student-readers during the feedback sessions, which might cause students' less confidence and commitment (Rollinson, 2005). Reid suggested that the teachers should think of their roles as 'cultural informants and as facilitators for creating the social discourse community (Reid, 1994 as cited in Hyland, 2000) and not as trainer or supervisor (Rollinson, 2005). Moreover, Chong's (2010) study reveals that the problems concerning the teachers' reluctance to apply peer feedback in their writing class derives from both external and internal factors. While the external problems are about the time constraints, large class-size, and unsupportive superior, the internal factors include the teacher's opinion on the benefits and feasibility of the approach.

Conclusion and Solutions

There is no denying that peer feedback has various benefits to the development of ESL students to improve their writing skills despite of all the drawbacks. To successfully apply peer feedback in ESL composition class, most researchers not only insisted that training students how to do peer feedback effectively is essential but also suggested how to implement peer feedback in a general writing class (Berg, 1999; Hansen & Lui, 2005; Min, 2006; Morra & Romano, 2008; Ricky Lam, 2010; Rollinson, 2005;), which can be concluded as follows:

Before peer feedback session

As Hansen & Lui (2003) suggested that the key to implement peer response in the writing class effectively lies in teacher planning and student training.

There are some aspects of peer feedback that requires teacher's considerations and planning. For example, the teacher has to decide when and how peer feedback should be used in the writing process. Although peer response is normally applied after students' first drafts, it can be introduced all stages of the process writing such as while writing an outline. The teacher should also think about the group size, and mode of doing peer feedback, whether it should be oral or written, or both (Hansen and Lui, 2003, Rollinson, 2005). The peer response checklist should be provided as a guideline for students. If students are alerted to what to look for and how to look for, they can be very helpful to each other (Raimes, 1983 p.148). The editing checklist can be gradually added along with new items taught in the lessons.

Peer feedback training

Students need to be trained how to do peer feedback effectively. The teacher can model the whole process, show examples, explain and provide guidelines for peer review and peer editing by highlighting good response strategies, explaining the purpose of peer feedback, showing students what to look for, how to give oral and written comments, and how to edit on the paper by using correction symbols. The students need to be trained how to give constructive and effective comments with respect such as asking questions for clarification and give positive suggestions and constructive comments to their peers' written work. Additionally, the teacher should also familiarize students with steps of peer editing and the checklist by showing samples and explaining its purpose to help them focus on important areas of the writing assignment (Hansen & Lui, 2005; Lee, 1997; Lim 2010; Min, 2006; Morra & Romano, 2009; Rollinson 2005; Tang and Tithecott, 1999; Tsui & Ng, 2000;).

Doing peer feedback

The teacher should allow students enough time to give both oral and written feedback, and encourage both readers and writers to discuss their peers' work. The teachers should be aware of their roles not to over control the students' interactions. The teachers can encourage students to take more responsibility for their own writing by allowing them to make their own decisions about their use and sources of feedback (Hyland, 2000).

With all these reviews and notions that if students acquire better peer feedback skills, it would help them to improve their writing, Kunwongse (2013) concludes in her study the teaching strategies that help improve students' peer editing skills as follows:

1. Conduct a cooperative and collaborative, and interaction learning through group work or pair work activities. Students' cooperation and participation should be built and reinforced constantly so that students can share information and their effort to achieve the task (Olsen&Kagan,1992; Oxford1997), to develop trust with their peers and to be responsible for their community. To do this, the teacher may assign students to write in groups or in pairs, and then exchange the written work for comments or editing with different groups.

2. Incorporate peer editing in a lesson as a regular activity. As Lee (1977) suggested, peer feedback can be used more frequently and can be incorporated into the classroom as a regular activity so that it may be less time spent but done more frequently.

3. Provide students with scaffolding tools such as mini lessons, peer editing training and checklist which should be cumulative with each new grammatical items taught in class. Due to the limit of language to express in writing, ESL students struggle when they need to write and edit their work. It is necessary to give students some essential instructions and focus on the specific area of the writing such as content, organization, grammar, syntax, word choice, mechanics etc. When considering the errors student-reader had done while editing their peers paper, they need to know what the correct use of the language before they look at their peers' paper.

4. Use different review cycles with specific focus for response and editing.

As Morra& Romano (2008) suggested, “Making students start the peer feedback by focusing on content and organization, leaving grammar and mechanics for a later stage, might eventually lead them to incorporate of the strategies when revising their own text, enlarging their repertoire of revision and empowering them as writers.” (p.26)

5. Motivate students by using active and various activities, and relevant content. Students would feel less engaged if the lesson was just a long lecture. The teacher should consider including other activities to allow students to physically and mentally involve in learning. Likewise, content that relevant to their lives can stimulate their interest. Both factors can intrinsic motivation (Frey and Fisher,2010; Palmer, 2007; Williams&Williams, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, although applying peer feedback in the writing class can be time-consuming and laborious processes, through this activity, students are able to sharpen their thinking skills, share experiences and knowledge, and use the target language to edit what they write so that they can improve their self-editing skills and become more independent learners in the future.

References

- Berg, E. (1999). Preparing ESL students for peer response. *TESOL Journal*, 8, 20-25.
- Chareonsuk, P. The relationship between an English writing classroom and Asian cultural issues when using peer feedback. *Executive Journal*. Retrieved from: www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/executive_journal/july_sep.../aw24.pdf
- Chen, P., & Lin, Y. (2008). The effect of peer-review and teacher-review in young NNS learners' guided writing instruction. Retrieved from <http://ord.npue.edu.tw/ezcatfiles/b008/img/img/1300/E32-10.pdf>
- Chong, K. (2010). Investigating the perception of student teachers in Hong Kong towards peer editing. *English Language Teaching* 3(1), 53-59
- Ellis, R. (2009). Corrective feedback and teacher development. *L2 Journal, UC Consortium for Language Learning & Teaching, UC Davis*, 1 (1). Retrieved from <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2504d6w3>
- Ferris, D. (2002). *Treatment of error in second language student writing*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press
- Frey, N. and Fisher, D. (2010). Motivation Requires a Meaningful Task. *English Journal*, 100(1), 30-36.
- Hansen, J. G. & Liu, J. (2005). Guiding Principles for Effective Peer Response. *ELT Journal*, 59 (1), 31-38.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching*. (4th Ed.), Essex: Pearson Education. DOI: www.Longman.com
- Hirose, K. (2008) Cooperative learning in English writing instruction through peer feedback. Retrieved from: jasce.jp/conf05/hirosepaper.doc
- Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (2006). Feedback on second language students' writing. *Lang. Teach.*, 39, 77-95. doi: [doi:10.1017/S0261444806003399](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444806003399)
- Hyland, F. (2000). ESL writers and feedback: Giving more autonomy to students. *Language Teaching Research*, 4(1), 33-54. doi: [1326-1688\(00\)LRO58.OA](https://doi.org/10.1017/S136168800LRO58.OA)

- Kunwongse, S. (2013) Teaching strategies that help improve students peer editing skills. Language Institute, Thammasat University
- Lee, I. (1997). Peer reviews in a Hong Kong tertiary classroom. *TESL CANADA JOURNAL*, 15(1,Winter 1997), 58-69.
- Mendonça, C. O., & Johnson, K. E. (1994). Peer review negotiations: Revision activities in ESL writing instruction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28 (4), 745–769. doi: 10.2307/3587558
- Min, H. T. (2006). The effects of trained per review on ESL students' revision.types and writing quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing*15 (2006), 118-141, doi:10.1016/j.jslw.2006.01.003
- Morra, A. M., & Romano, M. E. (2008). University students' reaction to guided peer feedback of EAP compositions. *JCLL*, 35 (2008-2009), 19-30.
- Olsen, R.&Kagan, s. (1992). About cooperative learning. In C. Kessler (Ed.), *Cooperative Language Learning: A teacher's Resource Book* (pp.1-30). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Oxford, R. L. (1997). Cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and interaction: Three communicative strands in the language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81(4), 443-456
- Lam, R. (2010). A peer review training workshop: Coaching students to give and evaluate peer feedback. *TESL CANADA JOURNAL/ REVUE TESL DU CANADA*, 27 (2, Spring 2001) 114-124
- Palmer, D. (2007). What Is the Best Way to Motivate Students in Science? *Teaching Science-The Journal of the Australian Science Teachers Association*, 53(1), 38-42
- Raimes, A. (1985). What unskilled ESL students do as they write: A classroom study of composing. *TESOL Quarterly* 19 (2), 229-258.
- Raimes, A. (1983). *Techniques in Teaching Writing*. Oxford: OXFORD university press
- Rollinson, P. (2005). Using Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Class. *ELT Journal* 59 (1), 23-30. DOI: 10.1093/elt/cci003
- Wakabashi, R. (2013) The effects of the peer feedback process on reviewer's own writing. *English Language Teaching* 6 (9, 2013) 117-187

- Williams, K., & Williams, C. (2012). Five key ingredients for improving student motivation *Research in Higher Education Journal*, Retrieved from <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/11834.pdf>
- Wong, King-shan, and Ronica (1999)The effectiveness of peer correction in reducing mistakes in English. *The university of Hong Kong* DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5353/th_b319611