Study on Training Strategies for Effective Peer Review

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Abstract

As a form of collaborative learning, peer review has gained increasing popularity in writing instruction and been wildly adopted in EFL writing classrooms. Preparing students for peer review are an essential part of training. Since 1990s, there has been a number of studies conducted in the application of this technique. However, there is surprisingly little training in college on how to develop this essential skill or discussion of best practices to ensure that reviewers at all levels efficiently provide the most useful review. This paper presents some strategies of training students before, during and after peer review and aims to help students become effective peer reviewers.

Key words: Peer review; Writing proficiency; Teaching writing

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, peer review has received much attention in teaching and learning of L2 writing. It is 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.I)

Few practices could promote students' writing as effectively as well-formed writing assignments paired with constructive feedback. Feedback, as the core of the process-oriented approach, plays a central role in writing teaching and learning. However, much of the feedback from the teachers simply isn't helpful because it might be delayed, not relevant or informative. Especially, in China, with the recruit enlargement in recent years, the class sizes are rising. In the university where the researcher teaches, the average number of students in each class is 45 and for non-English majors, four classes share one English teacher, which means each teacher teaches 180 students on average. Therefore, giving feedback can be a very much time-consuming task and it has limited value because of the delay. In order to solve these problems, the researcher adopted peer review in writing instruction. In peer review, students are expected to have opportunities to work collaboratively with peers and to improve their writing abilities individually. Furthermore, when students learn collaborative skills with which to work with one another, their peer feedback session can be more effective (Murphy & Jacobs, 2000). With appropriate training, guidance and practice, students can learn to be more specific and helpful in their peer review process.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is one of the most important theories supporting peer review, which puts emphasis on the cognitive development of individuals with roots in social interaction and collaboration in which individuals extend their current

competence through the guidance of a more experienced individual. He was known to believe that learning itself appears first socially, and later independently. He raised the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to describe the complicated cognitive process in social context. ZPD is defined as:

> …the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86)

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the level of learning where a student is not quite adequate to do something on their own, but needs guidance and some scaffolding from and adult. It is described as the gray area between the things the learner can do by himself or herself and the things the learner can do with the help of a more capable person or peer group. Although this theory was initially developed to promote children's learning with the guidance, it was further applied in the field of L2 learning by researchers such as Donato (1994) and Lantolf (1994). They explored how group members interact with each other in L2 writing classrooms.

Based on Vygotsky's theory, we may safely come to the conclusion that peer review which provides students with a learning environment to communicate both as readers and writers could enable them to improve their writing capability.

1.2 Bruffee's Cooperative Learning Theory

Another theoretical framework that supports peer review is Brufee's Cooperative Learning Theory, which is an educational approach that aims to organize classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences. Unlike individual learning, students are arranged into groups and they are expected to be responsible for one another's learning as well as their own. Through this method, students can capitalize on one another's resources and skills. What's more, in the process, teachers' role changes from simply providing information to facilitating students' learning.

Bruffee's Cooperative Learning Theory has been widely applied in every aspect of language teaching and learning. Nowadays, its impact on L2 writing instruction both theoretically and pedagogically has received more attention than ever. This is because in small groups, each one of the members could have the opportunities to make contributions and thus he or she is greatly motivated in the collective learning process. Peer review is exactly implemented under the guidance of this theory. In peer review, students are expected to have opportunities to work collaboratively with peers and to improve their writing abilities individually. Furthermore, when students learn collaborative skills while working with one another, the peer feedback session can be more effective (Murphy & Jacobs, 2000).

1.3 Researches on Peer Review

In recent years, peer review has gained much attention in English writing instruction. As the popularity of peer review in L2 learning is increasing, so are the number of studies conducted on the application of the technique. Up to now, many different aspects of peer review have been conducted which include the following three major ones: the effectiveness of peer feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), students' views of the peer review (Davies & Omberg, 1986; Li, 2002), and students' abilities to provide useful feedback that can lead to successful uptake (Hu, 2005; Min, 2006).

Stanley (1992) conducted a study titled "Coaching student writers to be more effective peer evaluators". The study explored what actually occurs during sessions involving "peer-evaluation groups" in order to find out whether extensive time spends on training students beforehand would lead to better communication strategies used during evaluative sessions. Two groups of students were involved in the study—one received 7 hours of extensive training, and the other received only 1 hour's. After training, students wrote 6 essays in all during the course and were asked to make comments on each other's work. Stanley stated in her finding that the group which received extensive training provided significantly more responses during peer evaluation than the group which received less training. Stanley concluded that the use of extensive training has real merits in improving students' abilities as peer evaluators.

Villamil and De Guerrero (1998) done a study on the impact of peer revision on L2 writing in 1998 at a university in Puerto Rico. 14 Spanish-speaking participants were chosen to determine how and whether peer review suggestions were incorporated into writers' final drafts. The study found out that not all suggestions were incorporated into students' final drafts, which indicate the effectiveness of peer review might determine how many revisions are adopted. Besides, researchers also found that peer review activities may benefit learners in both skills-oriented and social-psychological aspects of learning a second language.

In an empirical study on Taiwanese EFL college students, the researcher Min (2005) investigated the effect of peer review in foreign language context. He used both quantitative and qualitative methods in his analysis and discovered that extensive training leads to significant benefits on evaluating skills. In another study, Min (2006) studied the impact of trainning feedback and found that Chinese-speaking students were able to undertake peer review effectively if they are provided the proper amount of training.

Ting and Qian (2010) also studied the uptake of peer feedback in subsequent revisions of papers by their Chinese students. They investigated the types of feedback which were later incorporated into students' revisions, the types of revisions that were made, and whether

the revisions improved students' writing. Although no significant differences were found in the aspects of grammatical complexity, the overall accuracy of grammar was greatly improved. What's more, the scores of peer reviewed essays were much higher than the assignments which were not peer reviewed.

In spite of the benefits, there are some other studies treated peer review in a negative way, holding the view that peer review might not work well within certain groups of learners, especially Chinese-speaking learners. (Carson & Nelson, 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998). In Zhang's (1995) study of ESL students of two universities in the USA, as much as 94% of students preferred teacher feedback to peer feedback. This finding is consistent with the traditional view that teachers are authorities in teaching and learning context. Carson and Nelson (1994) also found that Chinese-speaking learners are like to maintain group harmony and mutual face-saving to maintain a state of cohesion. Therefore, due to their unwillingness to criticize their peers, the quality of peer review could not be satisfied.

However, there is surprisingly little training in college on how to develop this essential skill or discussion of best practices to ensure that reviewers at all levels efficiently provide the most useful review.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF PEER REVIEW TRAINING

Despite the fact that numerous researches have been carried out in the field of L2 peer review and the beneficial effects of peer review are obvious, the effectiveness of adopting it is being questioned. The author applied peer review in College English Course for one semester of the freshmen of non-English majors in a local university of Shanxi province. During that semester, students were asked to exchange their writing homework and give each other feedback twice in a month. The whole process went well, however, at the end of the semester, the author interviewed ten students on their views of peer review, the result of which were quite surprising and disappointing. None of them thought much of peer review because of various reasons. For example, they considered their peers incapable of giving authentic review and they did not know how to give specific comments to their peers. Some students even thought that they were doing a favor to the teacher due to the large size of the class. Thus, they did not treat peer review seriously, let alone incorporating the comments into sequent revisions. All of the phenomena fit with previous researches (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Nelson & Carson, 1998).

Facing these problems, researchers made great effort to find a way out. Berg (1999) drew a conclusion that preparing students to conduct peer feedback would help

a lot. He also mentioned that teachers tend to ignore the importance of training, which was an essential part in effective peer review. Byrd (2004) found that proper training and regular practice of peer editing leads to valuable rewards and increased proficiency. Specifically, students could learn better writing and editing skills, as well as develop greater confidence in writing. Just as Hansen and Liu (2005) claimed that effective peer review training not just benefit students' writing ability but also serves as an integral component of promoting language development in the EFL writing class.

Inspired by previous researches and the author's own teaching practice, the author realized that a systematic training would be crucial.

3. TRAINING STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE PEER REVIEW

3.1 Create an Environment for Useful Feedback
To make the peer review process as efficient and productive as possible, the effective strategies of peer review need to be considered.

One of the major reasons why students struggle with peer review is that they don't fully understand why they are doing it. If students don't understand the purposes of it, they will see peer review as simply a burden. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce to students the purpose of doing so. The instructor should tell students that peer review occurs in almost every aspect of our lives and it is a natural part of lifelong learning. In terms of writing, peer review can help since it gives writers more options to consider when they revise their papers. The purpose of peer review is "to help students revise their essays by receiving different points of view about their drafts" (Stanly, 1992). It is a powerful way for EFL students to improve their writing. The peers read each other's essays not to find fault and to point it out but to lead the writer in a process of rediscovery and reconceptualization of his own text. The reviewers read attentively to follow the line of thought which the writer has laid out. In doing this, they help the writer to discover his own meaning at successively deeper levels.

3.2 Four Forms of Response
There are basically four forms of response: a) written; b) spoken; c) written plus spoken; d) computer mediated. Each one of them has its strengths. Written feedback allows readers time to reflect on the paper and have an appropriate response to it. Receiving written responses allow writers to refer to them after the peer review session. As for the oral feedback, with its flexibility to give and take, is more likely to stimulate ideas. In addition, comments that may seem harsh or cold in writing may be made personal and warm when spoken. Written plus oral form is also wildly used in peer review. Lastly, computer-

mediated approach, reading papers on-line and giving feedbacks on-line, is becoming popular nowadays. Trying this way may increase students' participation and interest levels, and motivate them to spend more time and energy on the task (Hansen & Liu, 2005).

3.3 Model the Peer Review Process

One sure way to make peer review more efficient for learners is to model for them how to give feedback on their peer's writing. It can be done in many ways. For example, the instructor could have the whole class work on a sample paper from a previous writing assignment and offer improving suggestions in either oral discussion or written comments. The instructor could also present the sample of written feedback and have students to discuss about its strengths and weakness of that feedback and the ways to improve it. It is advisable to apply the former way at the beginning of the implementation of peer review approach, and the latter one later.

Before students perform first peer review, the instructor should introduce students to the four-step procedure, which are clarifying writer's intentions, identifying the source of problems, explaining the nature of problems, and making specific suggestions (Min, 2005). This four-step procedure is exemplified in the following table.

Table 1
Four-Step Procedure

	Procedure	Purpose	Examples
1	Clarifying	To elucidate writer's intentions	"Do you want to say…" "Could you explain why you think…" "Do you mean that…" "What is the purpose of this paragraph?" "Why did you put …in this paragraph?"
2	Identifying	To search for problematic areas	"Do you realize that…and…are incompatible?" "It sounds to me that this issue you presented is too subjective." "It seems to me that…and …should not be compared in this dimension."
3	Explaining	To describe the nature of problems	"You may be wrong here because…" "This example may not be suitable to illustrate the idea of the topic sentence." "This quote may not be relevant to what you are discussing. You should say…instead."
4	Giving suggestions	To provide workable suggestions for modifications	"Why don't you change the idea from…to…?" "I think you should give more information about…in the second-last paragraph?" "You might use the word…rather than…" "You need to add a phrase concerning the disadvantages of …here."

While modeling the feedback process is crucial to effective peer review, it is worth mentioning to the students that they should better avoid using overly general comments, such as "it's good." or "I cannot understand this." as well as some personal insults like "it is a stupid idea." These kinds of comment will not help their peers.

3.4 Monitor Each Group

Peer review is an opportunity for the writer to work directly with the reader to make the essay as excellent as possible. If the students are doing peer review for the first time, they will probably finish very soon and need to be encouraged to make more effort on each paper. They may also be "too nice," avoiding tough questions and honest responses. Therefore, during peer review, it can be helpful that the instructor "floating" among groups in order to ensure students are offering useful comments. The instructor can remind students to use specific feedbacks instead of general statements. It also be helpful for the instructor to "sit in" with each group for certain period of time in order to provide support.

3.5 Evaluate the Peer Review Process

By evaluating students' work in pairs or groups and encouraging careful listening and questioning, the instructor can coach them to become better reviewers and writers. Sharing with the whole class about good written reviews and using a skilled group as a model can help students improve as peer reviewers. After students finished their final drafts, the instructor could compare rough drafts with final ones to see how many comments are incorporated into final drafts. What's more, the instructor could also ask students to write a brief response to peer review, recording how they think it went, which advice they took, and which were useful ones and why.

CONCLUSION

Based on teaching experience and cooperative learning theory, and also based on classroom research, peer review is beneficial to write with appropriate training. Furthermore, a carefully managed peer review enables students to treat the process seriously, therefore, preparing

students for peer review is an essential part of training. Strategies for interaction and revision need to be taught before, during and after peer review. This paper has outlined strategies to help students become effective peer reviewers. By reading their peers' writing and giving feedback, students are encouraged to become more self-conscious about their own writing process and to begin to take control over that process. As a result, peer review teaches students to be critical readers. Last but not least, peer review does not preclude teacher feedback, but is meant to supplement it. With training, practice and guidance, students can learn to be more specific and helpful in their responses to a peer's essay.

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