Critical feedback on peer review research

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Abstract

The use of peer review in second language writing has been a quite popular topic in the writing research for the past two decades. However, the question posed here is: Does peer review impact the quality of student writing? The purpose of this paper is to review peer review research published in Journal of Second Language Writing between 1992 and 2009 and to offer a critical reflection of best current practices and desirable directions for future peer review research. I argue that, in the desire to conduct more research, much attention has been paid to the qualitative study of peer review without considering the training/qualification of the peer reviewers: whether they have been sufficiently trained or not in giving useful feedback. Such studies tend to focus on the use of peer feedback checklists, often provided on a very restricted range of items, and ignore students’ short term and long term goals and attitude to the writing assignment. In this paper, I highlight trends in peer review research. I conclude by reflecting on some of the challenges and directions for future research agenda on peer review research.

1. Introduction

The writing teachers tend to provide students with different kinds of feedback in writing lessons. Broadly speaking, we can find written feedback in three main forms: self-feedback, teacher corrective feedback, and peer feedback. In recent years, peer feedback research has been quite popular in the field of second language writing. For example, a quick review of the Journal of Second Language Writing indicates that in the past nine years (2000 – 2009) four articles relating to peer feedback were published. Compared with 1992 – 1999, ten published articles on peer feedback were identified.

In this paper, I give a summary of the studies pertinent to peer feedback and provide suggestions for future research. The paper consists of three main parts. The first part gives a brief overview of early studies from 1992 to 1999 on peer feedback, highlighting major problems in research design. The second part explores more recent research published from 2000 to 2009. I examine whether recent research is successful in addressing the weaknesses identified with the earlier studies in the 1990s. In the final part, I conclude by suggesting directions for future peer feedback research.

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This section reviews 10 published and often cited studies on peer feedback. In these studies, I first investigate whether revised drafts with peer feedback lead to an improvement in grammatical accuracy of the compositions. Besides, it seems that writing teachers have paid little attention to the training provided to the student peer reviewers. How are these two issues addressed in the studies conducted in the 1990s?

2.1. Did revised drafts with peer feedback lead to an improvement in grammatical accuracy of the compositions?

Of the studies that considered the quality of the final version of the composition, the reported results are somewhat disappointing. All the ten studies did not demonstrate an improvement in grammatical accuracy for the final draft. The main findings of the study were as follows. Stanley’s study (1992) found out the extent which students’ peer-group discussions motivated students to rework their writing. Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger (1992) discovered three stances in reviewing other students’ compositions, namely, an interpretative stance, a prescriptive stance, and a collaborative stance, and students’ peer review mainly reflected features of the collaborative stance. The main finding from Connor and Asenavage’s (1994) study was that students did make a large number of revisions in their final draft. However, relatively small number was identified as resulting from the peer reviews. In 1995 and 1999, instead of focusing on the quality of the final draft, Zhang emphasized the affective advantage of peer feedback. Villamil and De Guerrero’s (1996) results and implications were related to the activities, strategies, and behavior of conducting peer feedback. In the same year, Carson and Nelson (1996) gathered interesting results unrelated to the quality and the grammatical accuracy of the final draft. Their results indicated that Asian students showed their resistance in the following four areas: they were reluctant in criticizing their peers’ drafts, in disagreeing with peers, and in claiming authority. In particular, they exhibited feelings of vulnerability. This is to say, Chinese students sometimes said nothing to their peers because they believed that their comments would be ineffectual. In a study conducted by Nelson and Carson (1998), students showed their preference towards teachers’ comments, rather than peer feedback. In Paulus’s 1998 study, although the general results showed that students improved in the development and organization of ideas, individual results did not reflect the anticipated relations between revision and quality improvement. Specifically, two students’ writing scores dropped after incorporating the feedback from the peers and the teacher. Berg (1998) study depicted a positive effect of peer review on students’ revision types and the content of the compositions. To sum up, all these ten studies on peer feedback was not effective in enhancing the grammatical accuracy of the final drafts.

2.2. Training provided to the student peer reviewers

In order to yield positive and reliable results of the study, students peer reviewers should be extensively trained in giving written feedback. Of the ten studies listed, four studies showed that training was not provided to student peer reviewers (Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger, 1992; Stanley, 1992; Connor and Asenavage, 1994; Paulus, 1999). Thus, the results pertinent to peer feedback might not be trustworthy.

2.3. Research design flaws

Some criticisms have been put forward to the studies on peer feedback in the 1990s with regard to the research design. Some pertinent research design problems included a lack of control group, an absence of a revised piece of writing, and a lack of comparability in terms of the population.
2.4. The lack of a control group

Most of the early studies did not include a control group. In other words, the studies should have included a group without receiving peer feedback (Stanley, 1992; Connor and Asenavage, 1994; Zhang, 1995; Carson and Nelson, 1996; Villamil and De Guerrero, 1996; Nelson and Carson, 1998). These studies failed to compare the effects of peer feedback and no peer feedback, did not give evidence to explain the usefulness of peer feedback.

2.5. An absence of a revised piece of work

Only by examining students' revised piece of work, the researchers could then review the effectiveness of peer feedback. Students were not required to submit a revised composition in Stanley (1992), Zhang (1995), Carson and Nelson (1996), and Nelson and Carson (1998). In three studies (Villamil and De Guerrero, 1996; Berg; 1999; and Paulus, 1999), students did submit a final revised version. However, these pieces were done at home without any time constraints. Therefore, it was difficult to predict whether the improvement was related to the peer feedback or other factors.

2.6. The lack of comparability

In all of these early studies, the subjects were all university ESL undergraduates. However, the proficiency measures were not clearly defined (Carson and Nelson, 1996; Villamil and De Guerrero, 1996; and Nelson and Carson, 1998). The undefined terms ‘advanced’, ‘intermediate’ and ‘intermediate high’ could be quite confusing sometimes.

3. Discussion of Recent Studies (2000-2009)

In this section, I analyze four studies conducted in the last decade by Journal of Second Language Writing. The purpose was to find out whether recent studies have addressed some of the drawbacks mentioned in the earlier studies.

3.1. Did revised drafts with peer feedback lead to an improvement in grammatical accuracy of the compositions?

The reported results of the four studies (Tsui and Ng, 2000; Min, 2006; Jones et al, 2006; and Lundstrom and Baker, 2009) were not encouraging. In Tsui and Ng’s (2000) study, students did not show confidence in their peers’ comments and most of them preferred teacher comments. In Min’s (2006) study, although students showed improvement in the final draft, it was uncertain whether it was a result of teacher-writer conferences provided to the students for the second and the third drafts. The study conducted in 2006 by Jones et al indicated different modes of communication (face-to-face and online) facilitated the construction of different kind of relationship between peer tutor and student clients. In Lundstrom and Baker’s (2009) study, the main finding was that lower proficiency students gained more in terms of the organization of the text while the higher proficiency students just focused on how to incorporate the peer feedback in their final draft. To summarize, the four recent studies on peer feedback again was not effective in improving the grammatical accuracy of the final drafts.

3.2. Research design flaws

Again, criticisms have been leveled at the recent studies on peer feedback and the research design. Some pertinent research design problems, including a lack of control group, an absence of a revised piece of writing, and a
lack of comparability in terms of the population, again unfortunately, were not addressed in most of the recent studies.

4. Conclusion: Future Directions

With regard to future peer feedback research, I argue that, in order to conduct more effective research that would generate useful results, a valid research design is of utmost importance, which includes a control group, a revised piece of writing, trained peer reviewers, provision of appropriate writing tasks and conditions, and the issue of comparability of population.

References


