Analysis of Peer Comments in English Writing Classes

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Abstract. Peer feedback is often used in today’s College classroom. But is it effective or not? Will students accept their peer’s comments since they might on the same level? This study analyzed 72 Chinese English major sophomores’ first drafts, peer feedback, and their revised draft. It discovers that 92.9% comments were revision-oriented and 80.9% of the revision-oriented comments were adopted in the students’ revisions, which proved that peer feedback is an effective method to be used in routine English writing class.

Introduction

As an essential part in Process Writing Approach, feedback plays a crucial role for the students to improve their English writing ability. Most teachers and researchers agree that the focus of writing instruction should be on the process rather than on the product. The process writing approach sees writing as a complex and recursive but not a linear process (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Brainstorming, free writing, multiple drafting, feedback practices, revision, and final editing are all steps in this process. Among them, revision has been widely acknowledged as a crucial component both in the first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing process.

However, the extent to which the revising procedure has been implemented in China, where English is taken as a foreign language, is still far from satisfactory. Instructors are overwhelmed by the workload of reading student writing and giving feedback on it. Due to various time pressure and need to cover the syllabus, writing is often relegated to after class assignments. Nowadays, with the development of teaching reform, most teachers have realized this problem and transferred to require the students themselves to exchange feedback. This is called peer review or peer feedback. But is the feedback given by the students effective? Will the students adopt their classmates’ feedback since they are on the same level, or even the reviewer might be lower than himself or herself? What features do the students’ feedback have? This study is going to find answers to these problems.

Research Design

Subject

The participants for this study consisted of 72 English major sophomores in Nanyang Institute of Technology in Henan Province during the spring semester of 2009. Among the 72 participants, 17 were male (23.6%), and 55 were female (76.4%). The age of the students ranged from 19 to 22 years old, with the average being 20. They were all native speakers of Chinese and had been studying English for at least 7 years as a foreign language.

Peer Review Training

We considered that most students had no training and little experience with these matters. Several teachers/researchers have offered models for the peer review process and demonstrate the need for extensive training if the students are to be successful (Managelsdorf, 1992; Mittan, 1989; Lawrence & Sommers, 1996). Likewise, we created a detailed step-by-step training program before the experiment.

First, there was an in-class discussion for both classes regarding the necessity and benefits of peer
review. Students were told that peer review was an indispensable part of a writing process. Through peer review, students were provided with an opportunity to learn from and help each other, which in the end would help realize the improvement of their writing ability.

Second, the pre-experiment writings written by the students themselves were handed out for the students to try the peer review process. The students were asked to exchange their writings between groups and to comment on them. Each group was given a peer review sheet devised by the instructor for this particular assignment. The peer review guidelines included questions on the introduction and thesis statements, organization of the paper, use of topic sentences, idea development, textual evidence used in the paper, and grammar issues. They wrote their answers on the peers’ essays directly and also on the review sheet provided. The review sheet was identical to the sheet used later in the experimental process.

Next, the groups shared their answers to the peer review questions, and as a class, they discussed what they believed to be the most useful responses generated. After that, the model writing was given to the students, who then compared their own writings with the models. In this way, they were expected to be further familiar with the pattern of English writings. During the whole process, the instructor acted as a guider to point out the students’ problems and was well prepared to give a hand to the students.

**Research Procedure**

At first, they were asked to write an article on the topic “Which is More Important for a College Student, His Studies or Social Practice?” It was selected on the basis that writing should be close to and reflect the real life. At that time, the instructor noticed that most of the students were busy doing part time jobs, and some even skipped classes. The teachers were very worried about the students’ future; hence, this topic was selected for them to practice writing. Hopefully, by thinking about the problem carefully, the students could not only recognize the general pattern of TEM-8 writing, but also find a balance point between studies and social practice.

After that, the students were asked to hand in their papers and then the researcher asked the assistant teacher to cover the students’ name with a paste so that the students do not know whose writing it is. In the next class, the teacher randomly handed out the students’ composition to their classmates and ask them to read them and give feedback using red ink pen.

Next, the reviewed writings were handed in again and the teacher unfolded the cover and gave the writing back to its owner.

Then, the researcher asked the students to revise their writings according to their classmates’ feedback and rewrite the article again.

At last, the researchers collected both the original draft with peer feedback and the revised draft to check how much they have adopted their peers’ feedback.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Effects of Peer Comments**

As illustrated in Table 1, among the overall 506 comments, 92.9% were revision-oriented in nature and 75.1% of the overall comments, or 80.9% of the revision-oriented comments were adopted in the students’ revisions. The result proves the effects of peer review.
Table 1. Features and Qualities of Peer Comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>area</th>
<th>type</th>
<th>nature</th>
<th>effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>local</td>
<td>alteration</td>
<td>revision-oriented comments</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>suggestion</td>
<td>actual revision</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clarification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>483</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>92.8%</td>
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Features of Peer Comments

The analysis and interpretation focused on how the comments from the students were distributed in both global areas (feedback with regards to idea development, audience and purpose, and organization of writing) and local areas (feedback with regards to copy-editing, such as wording, grammar, and punctuation); on how the comments in each area were made across four types of comments: evaluation (comments on either good or bad features of writing), clarification (probing for explanations and justifications), suggestion (pointing out the directions for changes), and alteration (providing specific changes) (Liu and Sadler, 2003); on the nature of comments in each type and in each area.

Distribution of Peer Comments in Regarding to Area. As shown in Table 1, 95.5% of the overall comments were distributed on the local area. The large number of local comments revealed that local problems such as wording, grammar, and punctuation were still a big hindrance to students; meanwhile, it also indicated that peers could help each other correct most of the local mistakes. In view of this, teachers should pay special attention to the global mistakes that the students might made such as idea development, audience and purpose, and organization of writing, etc. rather than to the local level only in the future.

Distribution of Peer Comments in Regarding to Type. As demonstrated in the above table, 58.3% of the overall comments were in the type of alteration, which could help account for why most of the comments focused on local area. In contrast, only 5.1% of the overall comments belonged to the type of clarification and 5.5% fell into the type of evaluation. The small number of clarification further proved the feasibility of peer review because peers were on the similar level and they had similar experience, and therefore they could easily understand each other. However, different from Jiang’s (2003) conclusion that many Chinese English learners “were reluctant to show different opinions from the writer. They either hesitated in voicing their different views or offered only compliments” (p. 108). The small percentage (5.5%) of evaluating comments demonstrated that the Chinese college students were reluctant to judge or not good at commenting on others’ papers; on the contrary, they were very honest and sincere to point out others’ mistakes as there were a large number of comments in the type of alteration.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, peer review is a reliable means to improve students’ writing quality because 92.9% of the comments were revision-oriented in nature and 80.9% of them had been incorporated into students’ revisions.

As to the features of peer comments, over 95% of the comments fell in the local area whereas less than 5% comments belonged to the global area. This to some extent reflects the current English writing situation in China. On the one hand, local problems were still a big hindrance to the Chinese college students because of the large number of local comments and large proportion of adopted revisions; on the other hand, writing skills related to the global area such as idea development, audience and purpose, and organization were still a blind area to the Chinese college students because they could not find the problem, let alone provide revising comments. This indicates that there is still a long way to go to improve the students’ English writing ability. On the one hand, the
educators should remind the students of the local mistakes such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.; on the other hand, special attention should be paid in the global area, such as idea development, audience, organization, etc.

Implications

In the light of the above findings, the study may have the following implications for the English teaching and research.

Firstly, since peer review has been proved once again to be effective to the Chinese college students and the students also approve of the activity, there should be no occasion for the EFL writing teachers not to use it any more. It can be used as a pedagogical instrument for the promotion of written expression, critical thinking, collaboration, and professional responsibility. And the large number of local comments made by the subjects in this study indicates that the students are able to help each other correct the obvious grammatical mistakes, which in the end would help improve the readability of their writings.

Secondly, the little number of global comments reminds the EFL writing teachers that great emphasis should be put on the cultivation of students’ audience sense, skills of idea development and organization, etc. in the future.

Limitations of the Present Study

Although the author has tried her best to ensure the reliability and validity when designing the research, there still exist some limitations owing to the complexity of writing itself and the author’s academic limitations.

First of all, the sample size of this project is relatively small and therefore the results obtaining from it are tentative. The participants in the study contain only seventy-two college English majors from two classes in Nanyang Institute of Technology, which cast doubt on whether this small number of participants could represent the general college students. If the sample were larger, the validity of the study would be further enhanced.

Second, all the subjects represent only the intermediate English level students. If the subjects were students with advanced English level or lower level, the results would be quite different.

Thirdly, the time span for the study is not long enough. Only two weeks were used to do pre-training activities and get properly set-up. So the students might not be fully prepared for the peer feedback sessions.

At last, considering that most TEM-8 writings are argumentative, the scope of the present study is limited to argumentative writing. Different conclusions might be reached if other genres were experimented.

In short, as a first try to make a comparison among different modes of peer review in the Chinese context, there is still much room for improvement in this empirical study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the sufficiency of the present study, further investigations could be conducted from the following perspectives.

Firstly, it is suggested that larger sample size be used in the future to explore the performance of the students when doing peer review.

Secondly, students of lower or advanced level could be employed as participants to do this research.

Thirdly, the duration of peer review training may be longer so that all the participants could be well-prepared for the experiment.

Finally, other genres other than argumentative, such as narrative, descriptive, exploration, may be tried to optimize the research.
References


