
Opinion and Perspective

Effective Peer Review in the University Writing Class

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A common lament of EFL writing teachers in Japan is that students do not seem either capable or willing to read their classmates' work to help improve content and clarify ambiguity. Neither do they seem adept at self-revision. Is it possible for peers to contribute towards improved second drafts? In my experience, I have found a method that has been successful for implementing peer review (PR) by focusing specifically on narrative essays, which have a high interest level for peers and are generally easy to understand, making them appropriate for PR activities.

Peer Review: What It Is and What It Is Not

Peer review (PR), or peer response, can be defined as a process by which students read their peers' essays and respond to "what the essay says as well as how it says it" (Mangelsdorf, 1992, p. 274). Response feedback does not mean assessing, editing or evaluating; rather it is "a process of carefully reading what a student has written within the rhetorical context the student has created and communicated. The response must be text-specific, understandable, clear in intent, and needs to provide strategies for revision" (Goldstein, 2005, p. 100). Student responses should focus on meaning changes rather than mechanical or surface changes, which they may not be capable of making. Faigley and Witte (1981) define meaning changes as involving "the adding of new content or the deletion of existing content" (p. 402). Surface changes include spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, and usually do not affect the overall intended gist of the text. After they read their peers' comments, students then revise their essays, which involves "both the mental process and the actual changes" (Suzuki, 2008, p.

209) in order to add content and clarify ideas. In this article, I will explain the potential problems of PR, review the benefits, and outline how written PR can be implemented in a writing classroom with a minimum of student training time.

Potential Problems of PR

There has been much research done in the area of PR. However, there are problems with how the research is conducted. For example, as Goldstein (2005) has noted, how students say they have responded to peers' comments is not necessarily the same as what they actually do. Also, much of the PR research with EFL/ESL students has been done with oral feedback (Mangelsdorf, 1992; Paulus, 1999). For example, Connor and Asenavage (1994) had EFL students read their essays aloud, with their peers offering spoken comments. Japanese students are often limited in their ability to discuss their peers' papers in a foreign language, or lack the confidence to present opinions. Students can be more precise with writing than speaking. Also, a written record is easier to review than the spoken word. Students forget comments or possibly do not understand them in the first place. On the other hand, even students with limited skills can provide useful written feedback on an essay.

One potential problem in using PR is the amount of time that must be spent training students to give feedback. Do the benefits justify the time required to utilize it effectively? For example, Berg (1999) used 11 steps of training from 5-45 minutes each in a year-long academic writing course, including learning appropriate vocabulary and expressions for feedback, reading examples of PR, and doing a class response to one piece of writing. Mangelsdorf (1992) took class time to model and practice suggestions, and made 10-15% of the class grade based on peer reviews. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) trained ESL English majors four times a semester on either how to give or how to receive PR. These instructors were training ESL students matriculating in, or with a goal of matriculating in, American universities. Most Japanese students of English are not as motivated or as skilled, so this time investment may not be worthwhile for a typical Japanese university class of non-English majors in their first (and possibly only) essay writing class.

Some researchers have found that students lack the skills to complete PR activities successfully. Silva (1993) notes that learners revise only at a superficial level, make few changes, and primarily focus on grammatical correction. Connor and Asenavage (1994) found that only 5% of revisions resulted from peer comments, while Paulus' study (1999) reveals that PR influenced only 13% of changes. Other researchers have found that student reviewers are sometimes excessively harsh in their comments to peers, or offer advice that is irrelevant or too vague (Min, 2003; Savic, 2010). These responses do not help their peers and can actually be demotivating. Although PR is done by students, it takes careful planning on the teacher's part as well (Nystrand, 1986). If teachers prepare carefully and students participate actively, the activity can be successful.

A final potential problem involves trust. Savic (2010) observed student resistance to PR due to the widespread belief that only teachers are reliable and qualified to review student writings. Paulus (1999) has noted that students prioritize teacher feedback, which causes a discounting or ignoring of peer comments. Nelson and Murphy (1993) also recognized that students rely more on teachers than peers for comments. One final issue concerning trust is that students feel a sense of "ownership" of their text and are reluctant to allow others to impact their writing (Min, 2003). Mittan (1989) has pointed out that students do not trust other students' criticisms. However, if students comment sincerely, consider their peers' advice, and are considerate in their comments, they can learn to critically evaluate their own work better and improve their essays (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

Benefits of PR

PR can be beneficial if students understand the purpose and procedure and show a little faith in their peers. Myles (2002) believes PR can be useful if it allows for adequate negotiation of meaning. Liao and Lo (2012) point out that PR is consistent with the learning theories of Vygotsky in that the PR process enables learners to operate within each others' zone of proximal development (ZPD). When learners are closer to each other in their ZPD, they use language that can be comprehended more easily than an explanation by a person with a higher level

of development, such as a teacher.

Hafernik (1984) posited that PR helps improve class atmosphere. Students take on a new role as decision-makers and evaluators, thus forcing them to consider multiple perspectives. In addition, the activity promotes self-confidence, improves class atmosphere through active student involvement, and establishes a classroom climate of trust. PR though can be a failure if students are mistrustful and feel their peers are unqualified to review their work (Makino, 1993). However, Ferris (2003) pointed out the mounting evidence that L2 writers enjoy peer feedback and find it valuable. She believed that PR offers students a more varied and authentic audience and that reading and evaluating peer texts builds critical thinking skills that can help students better assess their own writing.

An Effective PR Format and Procedure

I would now like to propose a simplified PR format that utilizes only written feedback and that requires a minimum of training time. The goal for my modest plan is that students read and comment on three to four essays in one 90-minute class, and then rewrite their own essay for the following class, implementing some of the suggestions that peers offered. Furthermore, this PR format is limited to the personal narrative essay. Other types of essays require higher level critical thinking skills that need to be taught and reinforced by the teacher before students can review and offer pertinent feedback.

Before assigning the narrative essay, I work students through a number of tasks and instructions. Students first do 10 minutes of freewriting, which provides an opportunity to brainstorm and generate ideas on paper. Then, in English, they explain the key ideas they have formulated in their freewriting with partners or in small groups. Students are familiar with the importance of a title through previous papers and teacher examples from earlier in the course. I reinforce awareness of the narrative form, chronological order, time markers, and the importance of detail and examples. Also touched upon are paragraph structuring and the importance of what makes a strong ending. Students are provided examples of descriptive language and are given a worksheet to practice developing the skill. Probably the most important element is the personalization

of the experience. For example, if they wrote about their English language learning history, students need to explain what their first experience or feelings about English were like, how their skills developed, what difficulties were encountered, how their progress developed, successes they had, what techniques were used to develop their skills, and who helped them learn. Students have to choose which key points to develop and explain from these general questions. Essays are assigned to be four to five paragraphs and between 350 and 500 words.

For the PR activity, in one 90-minute class period, students bring four copies of the narrative essay assigned. Examples of topics include: “Something I Have Learned”, “My English Language Learning History”, “My Schedule”, and “A Childhood Memory”. Any student who does not have a completed paper will still work as a reviewer, which means that everyone submitting an essay will have four of them reviewed, but some students may possibly review only three papers. The instructor randomly gives four essays to each student. All feedback is written, and no discussion of the feedback is required. I have found that Japanese students who are non-English majors are more capable of writing useful feedback than trying to discuss papers orally. Students need to be given concrete, manageable tasks to successfully do this activity (Hafernik, 1984). Furthermore, it is important that students are instructed to be supportive, helpful, and to overlook surface errors (Connor & Asenavage, 1994).

The following are the written instructions that I give to students for carrying out PR:

You are going to read and comment on your peers’ narrative essay. Your goal is to write comments and questions that can help add useful details and content to your partner’s paper. Do not try to correct grammar or spelling mistakes (except for obvious ones). Your focus should be on content and ideas that can make your peer’s paper better. Use a pencil or colored pen (other than red).

1. Read your partner’s essay.
 2. Does the paper have a good title? If you have a suggestion for a better title, write it next to the title.
 3. What is the best thing about the paper? Write this at the end of the paper.
- Every paper has some good points; you can find something. Also, write

hearts or stars next to passages you liked or found interesting.

1. If there are any parts of the paper you do not understand, underline them with a wavy line, or put question marks next to the section.
2. Ask at least five questions throughout the paper. Write these questions in the margins near the passage in question rather than at the end of the paper. Your questions should concern details, missing information, or what you would like to know more about. This is the most important part of doing a peer review activity. Five questions are the minimum; more is better.
3. How is the ending? Can you offer any suggestions or help?

In the aforementioned instructions, I suggest students avoid the use of red pen as they tend to associate its use with the teacher. Also, when using it themselves, they often start making mechanical corrections, which is not the purpose of the activity. Using different colors helps signify that this activity is different. The multi-colored comments will seem more like suggestions, rather than calls for correction. In point three, I encourage the use of symbols as they help contribute to the visual appeal. In point four, the use of underlining or question marks can be particularly useful to students if more than one reader does this by doubly reinforcing the need for clarity.

Another key point is that during the PR process, if the instructor is helping out by writing comments on papers, they should be anonymous. This will prevent “instructor bias” whereby students ignore all comments except those of the teacher (as mentioned in Mittan, 1989; Paulus, 1999; Yang, Badger, & Yu 2006). However, the instructor should make suggestions to slack editors and also assist students who are working slowly and will not be able to review three or four papers during the 90-minute class period.

After students receive their peer-reviewed papers, they rewrite their essay with improvements. They should respond to some of their classmates’ questions in the text and think about clarity and detail. The revised essay should be longer, clearer, and more detailed. The teacher can require a word count improvement such as a 50- or 100-word increase. I announce that 25% of the grade will be based on improvement from the first draft, which encourages students to add

content in a subtler way than requiring a set number of words. Students submit the four peer-reviewed papers and their revised essay (labeled ‘Rewrite’) in the following class. Although seemingly obvious, this step saves the instructor the trouble of sifting through multiple papers to find the rewrite.

Useful Feedback and Critical Thinking

By focusing on content, and deemphasizing grammar and mechanics, students can avoid revising at a superficial level with a primary focus on grammar, as Silva (1993) warns against. Question marks or underlines for unclear sections allow students to “activate their linguistic competence” by using these hints to make improvements (Makino, 1993). Peer reviews provide students with an authentic audience, which allows them to receive different views on their writing and critically read their own writing (Mittan, 1989).

I do not allow student reviewers to write their names on the papers they are reviewing. This can prevent the essay writers from being overly influenced by who makes the comment rather than what the comment is, especially if the teacher participates. Coomber and Silver (2010) found that anonymous feedback provided a safe environment in which students feel more comfortable giving honest feedback. On the other hand, it may be helpful for teachers to require students to sign their name in order to monitor their editing and help ensure conscientiousness.

N. Lee (2009) delineates three types of written feedback. One is praise, though false praise can discourage writers, and premature praise may confuse writers and discourage self-revision (I. Lee, 2012). Consequently, the teacher should discourage “rubber stamp” praise comments such as “very good”, or “interesting,” which provide little useful information and do not provide any hints or suggestions for improvement. The second type of feedback is criticism, which consists of negative comments used to express dissatisfaction with the text. Finally, there is suggestion, which has a positive orientation and includes clear and achievable action for writers. Ferris (1995) has observed that students remember encouraging remarks but also prefer constructive criticisms over false positive appraisals.

Unlike oral comments, the syntactic form of written comments does not matter to students. They often hedge or use mitigation to soften oral comments, which can result in confusion about the importance and necessity of making changes if the comments become too soft, and the suggestions seemingly become “optional” to the writer. There is less ambiguity in writing than with the spoken word, so students can be direct in their comments (Goldstein, 2005; N. Lee, 2009). Being honest yet direct becomes easier for students when comments can be anonymous.

Benefits of Varying Types of Feedback and Comments

Some teachers may worry that the quality of PR may vary greatly. Liao and Lo (2012) found that high performing writers tended to provide more details and explanation when describing the problems they have identified and offering suggestions for revision. Weaker writers naturally provided less detail and offered fewer suggestions. Of course, a diverse audience brings multiple perspectives. Berg (1999) thinks that PR requires the writer to consider more than just the actual comments written:

Students cannot just take the advice as given and make the change, as is likely when the expert (i.e., the teacher) provides feedback. Instead, the student will need to consider the advice from a peer, question its validity, weigh it against his or her own knowledge and ideas, and then make a decision about what, if any changes to make. (p. 232)

In a similar vein, Mangelsdorf (1992) believes it is good to get different responses, even if they are conflicting, because different responses make students revise more reflectively. On the other hand, if more than one peer asks the same question, it doubly validates the point raised. Not every suggestion needs to be taken or included. The reflection process enhances the writer’s judgment of what makes quality writing and heightens awareness of their own composition (Liao & Lo, 2012). Nystrand (1986) believes reflection and revision entail a “reconceptualization” of writing, which offers new points of view, opportunities for change, and a healthy rethinking.

Conclusion

The PR activity outlined in this article suggests that students can revise a paper without teacher assistance, increasing student autonomy and disproving the notion that the teacher is the only qualified reviewer. I have been using PR for the past 10 years, and student feedback on end-of-year surveys and portfolio cover sheets has shown that students deem the activity highly beneficial. Students find their classmates' comments and questions very helpful. They also mentioned that they enjoyed reading other students' essays. I have found that all skill levels improve their rewrites based on peer feedback. Students appreciate the variety of their peers' feedback and respect feedback coming from fellow classmates, in addition to that of the teacher.

By focusing on adding descriptive detail and content, written PR can be an effective activity and improve student awareness of the writing process. Doing PR helps reviewers as well as the writers. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) note that reviewers who did not receive PR feedback still made significant gains by transferring abilities they learned when reviewing peer texts. Hafernik (1984) found that good reviewers generally became good writers, and they looked at their papers differently and more carefully. Suzuki (2008) analyzed negotiation episodes from think-aloud protocols of self-revisions and transcription of discussion during peer revisions of Japanese EFL students, then noted changes made to student texts in both conditions of revisions. She found that more episodes of negotiation appeared in peer revision than self-revision.

One final option for making PR more effective is broached by N. Lee (2009), who suggested students using L1 to comment on papers. Since they are more comfortable writing in their L1, they can write more clearly than in the foreign language. However, writing in the L1 might hinder the instructors' monitoring of comments, especially those with a different L1 or a limited ability in Japanese.

Although many of the researchers cited in this article trained students extensively in PR procedures and techniques, it can be effective even if used only once or twice in a semester. When students organize their writing portfolios at the end of the semester, they put their essays in order from best to worst. More than 65% of students put their peer-reviewed essay first. The activity provides a

change of pace for both teacher and students, promotes student autonomy, and most importantly, helps make students better, more reflective writers.

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