The Role of Peer Feedback in the EFL Writing Classroom

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Abstract

The present study examines the role of peer responses in learners' writing process. It focuses on what kind of peer responses the students produced, how they revised their first draft according to those responses, and what they learned through such peer responses. The students received comments from their peers about their first draft, after which they produced a second draft, using the comments they received as guidance. Then they were asked to record their reflections. The results of analysis of students' original and revised texts and peer comments are consistent with the students' reflections. The peer comments were mainly about specific content. They helped the students to realize that they needed to include more explanation or information in their text. As a result, adding sentences to the text was the most popular way of revising for the students. This research revealed that they were able to understand what was needed to improve their writing without an instructor's direct input. Although there were some limitations, this type of writing activity with peer response seemed to promote autonomous learning.

1. Introduction

The use of the peer response approach in a writing exercise enables learners to understand their own writing process, to think of what they really want to say as they write and to be more aware of their audience. It leads to a learner-centered classroom in which feedback from the teacher and peers played a crucial role throughout the writing process. This approach seems to have some definite advantages over more traditional, teacher-centered writing lessons which only include teacher feedback. Among the advantages of utilizing peer feedback is the fact that peer feedback could raise learners' motivation for writing and encourage them to expand what they want to write, because the audience is made up of other learners, namely, their classmates. Keh (1990) says that peer feedback is known by many names, including peer response, peer editing, peer critiquing, and
peer evaluation. The focus of this paper is on peer response, which comes in the earlier stage of the process, or after the first draft. Incorporating peer response activities into a writing class could help the teacher to provide learners with different writing opportunities. Both writing and receiving responses at the first draft stage could help the learners to become aware of the needs of their readers, and to think of their own writing as a means of communication. To make a writing activity with peer response more effective, the teacher should have a good grasp of what specific roles peer responses plays in the writing process. Therefore, the present study focuses on what types of peer response are produced by the learners, how the learners revise their first draft by using those responses, and what they learn from peer responses based on the students' own comments, their first and second draft, and their final reflection.

2. Theoretical Background

The process-oriented approach to writing has increased popularity since the 1980s. A large amount of researches on the writing process has been carried out in recent years.

Brown (1994) claimed that writing techniques for the process approach should be interactive as well as learner centered, and a great deal of what makes a good writer can be most effectively learned within a community of learners. A community of learners would emerge in the process of working in groups and the feedback given by exchanging ideas as a part group work would help writers improve their products.

Concerning comments by the teacher and students, Zamel (1985) found that ESL writing teachers made similar types of comments and were more concerned with language specific errors and problems. Her study showed the marks and comments written by the teacher were often confusing, arbitrary and inaccessible and needed to be improved. Caulk (1994), who compared teacher with peer responses revealed that each served complementary functions in developing writing abilities. According to him, the students' comments, guided by a set of questions, tended to be very specific and rarely contained suggestions for the whole piece of writing. On the contrary, Masaki (1997) found that students' written comments for open-ended questions mainly concerned linguistic items.

In addition, Keh (1990) who focused on three types of feedback (peer feedback, conferencing and written comments by the teacher) discussed several advantages of peer feedback. She asserted that one of the advantages of using peer feedback was that learners could gain a greater sense of audience if their text was seen by several readers, instead of just by the teacher. Another paper by Rinnert & Kobayashi (2001) pointed out that peer feedback could make L2 writers become more aware of their own writing style, and help them understand why the readers might have a problem with their writing. There has been comparatively little interest in the extent to which learners can revise their text solely through
peer response (i.e. without teacher feedback). Accordingly, this study attempted to explore a revision activity that involved peer response in the writing process.

3. The Study

3.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine what role peer responses played in learners’ writing process. The following three research questions are presented to accomplish this:
1. What characteristics are seen in peer responses?
2. In what way do the students revise their original text after receiving peer responses?
3. What do the students learn on their own through a writing activity with peer responses?

3.2 Participants

The participants for this research were 26 first-year undergraduate students majoring in engineering at a Japanese national university. In the spring semester, 2004, they took a basic English writing course which is a required subject.

3.3 Procedure

The research procedures consisted of presenting three ninety-minute lessons, whose focus was the process of writing a paragraph. Before the experimental lessons, the participants studied both steps of writing process and the various concepts of paragraph writing such as a topic sentence and main idea.

In the first lesson, the students first wrote their names and then brainstormed to write some personal information by either clustering or listing. Then they made an outline and wrote a first draft. In the second lesson, the students worked in groups of five or six. Each student read out his/her own first draft and received comments from the other members of his/her group. The group members gave the reader written comments about the following two items in either English or Japanese: Comment 1. Things I like about this composition, Comment 2. This composition would be better if it gave more details about. In the last lesson, the students produced the second draft, considering the written comments they received from the other members. They proofread their draft in pairs and turned them in to receive the teacher’s feedback. After that, they responded to the following questions as a way of reflecting upon this writing activity:
1. What did you think of the comments you received about your first draft?
2. What did you find or learn through this writing process?

3.4 Analysis

The peer comments were analyzed to find an answer to the first research question. For
the analysis of the comments, a combination of Rineert & Kobayashi’s (2001) categorization system and Caulk’s (1994) method were used with some modification. First, comment 1. and 2. were categorized into two types of general and specific responses. Then the general responses of comment 1. and 2. were divided into four categories (with an example of each in parentheses): overall essay (“easy to read it”); content (“you should include some more topics.”); organization (“it has a good organization.”); language (“her spoken English is perfect.”). The specific responses of comment 1. and 2. were divided into two categories: content (“why do you like tennis?”) and language (“guts is a good word.”). The responses for comment 2. took the form of questions and suggestions. These specific questions and suggestions about the content were further divided into two subcategories: clarity of meaning (suggesting the word or the sentence be made clearer) and more information (a request for more details).

As for the second research question, the total number of words and the length of each T-unit of the first and the second drafts were measured from a quantitative perspective. As a qualitative analysis, the types of the students’ revisions were analyzed. The students’ revisions were found to include four types of addition, deletion, substitution and permutation. In addition, the frequency and type of word, phrase, clause and sentence modifications were compared.

For Research Question 3, the students’ reflections about peer comments were mainly categorized into six groups to clarify what they thought and discovered by themselves through this activity.

3.5 Results

3.5.1 Research Question 1

Figure 1 and 2 show the comment types identified in both Comment 1 and Comment 2 along with the percentages. As shown, there are six types of comments in Comment 1 and five types in Comment 2, despite the fact that the students were asked to make guided comments, not free comments. The total number of comments was 80 in Comment 1 and 91 in Comment 2. The largest proportion of comments was specific responses about content (79%) in Comment 1. In Comment 2, most remarks consisted of specific questions and suggestions about content which, in the context of this study, constitute requests for more detailed information (84%). Furthermore, from another point of view, the researcher counted the types of comments the students received. Similar results were observed. For Comment 1, 81% of the students (21 out of 26) got specific comments about content and 46% of the students (12 out of 26) got general comments about content. 35% of the students (9 out of 26) got general comments about overall essay. About 8% of the students (2 out of 26) got general comments about organization and 4% of the student (1 out of 26) got specific comments about language. With regard to Comment 2, 81% of the students (21 out of 26)
got specific questions and suggestions about content. Around 8% of the students (2 out of 26) got specific suggestions about language. Approximately 15% of the students (4 out of 26) got general suggestions about language.

To sum up, the majority of students gave specific responses on content as readers, and also received them as writers.

3.5.2 Research Question 2

Changes in the word count and the length of the T-unit are shown in Table 1 and Table 2. As the mean of ‘\(\text{difference}\)’ shows, the second draft contained more words than the first draft on the whole. There was a 25% increase in the mean of the second draft. But in reality, there were four students who made the total number of words decrease in the second draft. A remarkable increase in the length of T-unit failed to appear in Table 2.

### Table 1 Word Count & Length of T-unit (n=26)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Word count</th>
<th>Length of T-unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st draft</td>
<td>2nd draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>65.46</td>
<td>82.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>21.07</td>
<td>18.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>98.00</td>
<td>107.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>43.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 indicates the types of revision to the original text after receiving written comments from peers, and the amount of each type. The students revised the words, phrases,
clauses and sentences in their text by means of four types of addition, deletion, substitution and permutation. It was observed that adding sentences to the text was the most popular form of revision among the students (See Appendix). Additional analysis revealed that 43% of the students (11 out of 26) changed the title and 12% (3 out of 26) changed the topic in their writing.

Another goal of this study was to examine to what extent their second draft reflected the peer comments they received in order to clarify how important such comments were for the students. The result show that 69% of the students (18 out of 26) used at least one comment in their writing: 19% of the students used one comment, 27% students used two, 15% students used three and 8% students used four. About 19% of the students (5 out of 26) didn’t use any comments. Around 12% of the students (3 out of 26) got only responses about comment 1. and failed to receive any suggestions and questions.

![Figure 3: Comparison of Types of Student Revisions](image)

### 3.5.3 Research Question 3.

The students reflections about peer comments after the activity was completed fell mainly into the following six categories (starting with a highest percentage): 1) comments asking me for more information (34%), 2) comments telling me what I had not noticed (34%), 3) comments were useful when writing (10%), 4) making comments is difficult (10%), 5) comments helped me to write a paragraph more easily (7%), and 6) comments confused me (3%). The samples are as follows.

1) Comments asking me for more information
   - I should have added more explanation to the text because my classmates did not know what I take for granted.
   - I should give some examples to my text to make others understand. Giving reasons is persuasive.
   - It is a good way to give a presentation and exchange ideas one another because I can see what I should explain more when my classmates listen to my text.

2) Comments telling me what I had not noticed
I was surprised to get a lot of comments because I thought my draft was perfect. I thought it good that I could review my draft through the comments from my classmates.

Getting some opinions from others helped me find what points were not enough and what points were impressive. It was difficult for me to find those things by myself. Because I found that I could notice them through seeing my draft objectively, I felt I moved on to the next step easily and that I could write more and more.

3) Comments were useful when writing

- I can't write about the most important thing, which is what the readers want to know because I focus on what I want to write when I think and write alone. Receiving comments about the first draft from my classmates was important and the best way to produce good writing.

4) Making comments was difficult

- It was difficult to make comments on others' writing in my poor English.

5) Comments helped me to write a paragraph more easily

- When I write alone, I focus on just one idea and fail to make my writing interesting. I found that adding what I learned from others' ideas helped my composition more interesting. These steps of writing made writing easier than I had thought.

6) Comments confused me

- I was confused about which I should write about: general self-introduction or one special thing in detail.

Note: • indicates examples of the student reflections.

4. Discussion

For Research Question 1, qualitative analysis of peer responses showed that the students tended to make specific comments about content rather than general ones. Regarding Comment 2 in particular, the students gave the writer specific questions and suggestions about content, which mostly took the form of requests for more detailed information. This might be because they were asked to use guided comments, that is, This composition would be better if it gave more details about: ... They paid more attention to the specific information that they wished to express in their texts rather than to their texts as a whole. Zhu (1995) pointed out that good responders focused on the global features of writing (i.e., content, organization, audience, purpose, etc.) to provide specific feedback. Similarly, Keh (1990) mentioned that students should be instructed to focus on 'higher order concerns' (HOCs) such as the development of ideas, organization, and the overall focus of what they are writing. In this respect, students' tendency to focus on specific information about content was favorable. For future writing classes, it would be necessary for the teacher to help peer response groups to provide writers with
specific response about the other elements of global features and HOCs. Furthermore, regarding the comments, the researcher made following four observations: 1) The comments were written in the style of a frank conversation among students, 2) Sometimes the same questions were given by the readers, 3) Some comments showed that the readers were not understanding the texts, and 4) Some comments included personal messages unrelated to the compositions (e.g., Please lend me CD). These observations may demonstrate some characteristics of peer responses. Such characteristics of the responses they received would encourage the students to think harder and to try to revise their text more eagerly as a means of communication.

The results of the quantitative analysis for the second research question showed an increase in the word count in the second draft. This could have resulted from the fact that peer comments help to raise students’ awareness of making their readers understand more information. Regarding the four students who reduced the word count in the revised text, it was observed that they paid more attention to what the readers really wanted to know, and changed their text by deleting some redundant information. In this respect, peer comments seem to have raised their awareness of writing for an audience. No marked change was found in the length of the T-unit, which could be related to sentence complexity. The researcher observation related to this result was that the students gave information through the use of coordinating conjunctions such as and and but, rather than by modifying their sentence structures with clauses.

Analysis of students’ revisions showed that they used four types of revision, as well as changes to the title and topic. It also showed that most of the students’ revisions took the form of additions to the text.

Some 69% of the students used peer comments to enhance their writing. They chose the comments they thought would be useful for their text. According to the comments they received, some students explained their ideas better and some became better to focus upon topics that they really wanted the audience to understand. The problem was that some students used no comments, and some didn’t receive any suggestions and questions about their text. This indicates that they were unaware of which suggestions and questions about writing could be useful, and how to use comments to improve their compositions. One of the students failed to respond to any comments, although he received some which clearly showed his readers’ lack of understanding of what he had written. He should have tried to clarify what he meant in the second draft, however he did not.

Although this study did encounter the above problems, generally, the students were given the opportunity to think more about their writing, and to make revisions on their own. In the next step, the teacher could give the students feedback about their second drafts, as these often still contained many errors.
Regarding Research Question 3, the students’ reflections revealed what they learned about their own writing through receiving peer comments. The students mostly had a positive attitude toward getting comments. It reflected the results for the first research question. As adding specific information to the text was found to be the major type of revision for Research Question 1, they realized that their drafts often needed to include more explanation. In addition, a small number of students reflected on the difficulty of making comments and deciding on a topic. This is related to the problem of students’ lack of knowledge about writing, as discussed earlier. This activity promoted autonomous learning for writing skills. In many situations, it seems that learning autonomously is more effective than learning through a teacher’s oral or written instruction, because the students could realize by themselves what was needed to improve their writing.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed at examining what role peer response plays in the learners’ writing process. The findings of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of both original and revised texts as well as peer comments were consistent with students’ reflections. Peer comments were limited mainly to specific content. They helped the students to realize that they needed to include more detailed explanation or information in their text. Adding sentences to the original text was the most popular method of responding to peer comments. The research ensured that such comments made students more aware of audience and their own writing style. One problem was that some students had difficulty in making comments and in utilizing the comments they received. In order to continue incorporating such peer response activity into future writing classes, a teacher would have to encourage the students to think about what constitute helpful comments for the writer, and how a writer should utilizes them. As Zhu (1995) and Kondo (2004) suggested, giving students some training sessions could be a good way to improve peer feedback. Providing them with structured checklists as a guideline might be one example for their training (Keh, 1990). In this way, as readers they would be able to pay more attention to other specific elements of writing, such as organization as well as to content. It would encourage the students to read their own writing critically and to revise it. As a result, they would take one more step toward becoming truly autonomous learners.

References


Appendix

*Writing Sample*

[first draft] Title: A. M.

My hobby is playing sports. I like playing tennis and volleyball. *I like watching soccer game.* I belonged to track and field club at junior high school, and tennis club at high school. I acquired guts, and had very precious friends. *I made precious memories for six years.* I belong to tennis club at college. There, I want to find precious friends, and want to have a good time.

[second draft] Title: My hobby

My name is A. M. My hobby is playing sports. I like playing tennis and volleyball. *and watching soccer game.* I belonged to track and field club at junior high school. *My specialty was the high jump.* It was exciting for me, and it was pleasant me. At high school, I belonged to tennis club. Though I'm not good at tennis, playing tennis is very nice. I acquired guts, and had very precious friends. *Six year's lives are my very precious memories.* I belong to tennis club at college. There I want to find precious friends, and want to have a good time.

Note: The underlined parts indicate revision. Revision types 1) title change 2) deletion(phrase) 3) addition(sentences) 4) substitution(sentence)