Synopsis

On the Development of Writers’ Awareness in Essay Writing:
Using the Peer Review Setting

Yukinobu Satake

This study examines the peer review activity among high-level Japanese university students (an average TOEIC score of 675) in their EFL (English as a foreign language) writing class and explores the effects this activity can have on students’ cognitive processes in EFL writing. Based on Schmidt’s concepts, “noticing” and “understanding,” and Muranoi’s concept, “intake,” which are key concepts for discussing the cognitive processes in learning a second / foreign language, this study analyzes the students’ draft and revised essays, Peer-Editing Sheets (used when they wrote their comments about other students’ essays and their responses to their peers’ comments), and interviews. As a result, peer review can be considered to be effective for facilitating their EFL writing, because (1) it promotes “noticing” because people point out problems in their writing; (2) it deepens their “understanding” about how to solve their writing problems specifically; and (3) it motivates them to improve their essays so that others can understand them more clearly.
On the Development of Writers’ Awareness in Essay Writing: Using the Peer Review Setting

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Introduction

Oftentimes we do not notice errors and mistakes in our writing. It is not until someone else identifies them that we can recognize our errors. It can be said that this kind of activity can enhance our mental learning in the specific areas of “noticing” and “finding,” etc. Therefore this writer believes that peer review activities are worth considering and should be incorporated into ESL (English as a second language) / EFL (English as a foreign language) writing classes as a regular classroom activity. Ultimately this approach can be effective in activating students’ cognitive functions, to enable them to reflect on their own writing problems. There are, however, relatively few studies which analyze and discuss students’ cognitive processes, while they are engaged in peer review activities. The focus of the current study is to explore the type of cognitive processes that affect the way students conduct peer review and how they reflect on their revisions.

Literature Review

A number of researchers have focused on the impact of peer review on ESL / EFL writing and some of them suggest that positive effects can be derived from this writing activity. Wigglesworth and Storch (2012) expand upon previous studies, by analyzing how learners compensate for the weaknesses in each other’s writing when they work in pairs. They also draw on their own extensive research and observe that collaborative writing activities can generally provide many opportunities for the discussion of language. Dobao (2012) goes one step further and concludes that
texts created by groups are more correctly written than those created in pairs or individually. Dobao's study discovered that more correctly resolved language-related episodes could be found among students who collaborate with each other in groups throughout the writing processes. The study sample included 111 native English speakers enrolled in six intermediate level classes of Spanish as a foreign language at a U.S. university. Suzuki (2008) also concurs with Dobao's findings in her analysis of Japanese EFL university students' negotiation episodes and text changes, concluding that more metatalk can be produced through peer revisions than through self-revisions and that "self-revision tended to involve brief solitary searches for word choices or self-corrections of grammar based on individual memory searches or repetitions" (Suzuki, 2008: 209).

Other studies have examined how often and how much students actually incorporate their peers' suggestions into their revised drafts, as well as how peer revision activates their writing capabilities. Nelson and Murphy (1993) maintained that students' cooperative interaction is the best strategy to facilitate peer revision feedback. In their study of four foreign students enrolled in a 10-week intermediate ESL writing course at an American university, they considered the nature of the students' interactions as a key factor in deciding whether their feedback was incorporated into their peer's revision. These student's interactions were classified into four characteristics: interactive; noninteractive; cooperative; and defensive.

Based on Vygotskyan framework, Guerrero and Villamil (1994) further develop the notion of social-cognitive dimensions of interaction in L2 peer revision, by proposing that there could be six probable student-to-student relationships: that is, SER/SER, OTR/OTR, OBR/OBR, OTR/SER, OTR/OBR, and OBR/SER. Among these student-to-student relationship categories, they observed that the OTR/SER relationship (other-regulated stage and self-regulated stage) was the most common type of peer revision in the classroom. The other relationships were not commonly found in their study of university-level ESL learners' peer revision activities. In their conclusion they found that the collaborative, not authoritative, OTR/SER relationship was
the most ideal situation because it "created an instructional space where learning was fostered by the more skilled peer assisting the other in solving particular textual problems" (Guerrero and Villamil, 1994: 491).

Mendonca and Johnson (1994) also observed that twelve advanced international graduate students (nonnative English speakers) in a writing class at an American university, use peer feedback in their revisions selectively, deciding for themselves what they should revise in their own essays. They classified the students' response to their peer's feedback into three types: (a) Revised / In Peer Review; (b) Not Revised / In Peer Review; and (c) Revised / Not in Peer Review. After categorizing each part in the students' essays according to this classification, they studied the reasons why the revision feedback was either incorporated or not incorporated. Finally, they observed that students used their peers' feedback when they also understood that more explanation was needed, however, they did not use feedback when "the discourse conventions in their fields of study" (Mendonca and Johnson, 1994: 762) did not indicate that it was necessary.

The studies cited thus far, however, do not explain students' cognitive processes in depth, or more specifically, what happens when they are determining whether or not to incorporate their peers' feedback. Some of these studies have pointed out that peer or group review facilitates metatalk or discussion of the learned language among students. Several other studies explore the types of students' interaction which are more effective when they are determining whether or not to incorporate their peers' feedback (Nelson and Murphy, 1993; Guerrero and Villamil, 1994). Mendonca and Johnson's study investigates the specific reasons why students incorporate their peers' feedback, but does not embrace the findings of previous studies exploring the cognitive processes in SLA.

This study focuses on assessing students' cognitive processes during peer review activities in EFL writing classes. In conducting this study, Schmidt's concepts, "noticing" and "understanding," and Muranoi's concept, "intake," will be used to determine the cognitive mechanism which occurs during the process of learning EFL.
writing. These are key concepts for discussing the cognitive processes in learning a second / foreign language. Schmidt explains the cognitive working of “noticing” as follows:

We may notice that someone has a regional accent without being able to describe it phonetically, or notice a difference between two wines without being able to describe the difference. (Schmidt, 1990: 132)

In other words, “noticing” does not necessarily mean that one can describe it in language form. On the other hand, Schmidt views the cognitive working of “understanding” in this way:

Having noticed some aspect of the environment, we can analyze it and compare it to what we have noticed on other occasions. We can reflect on the objects of consciousness and attempt to comprehend their significance, and we can experience insight and understanding. All of this mental activity—what we commonly think of as thinking—goes on within consciousness. (Schmidt, 1990: 132-133)

Thus “understanding” can be seen as the cognitive action of analyzing or comparing what we have noticed; or in other words, the act of thinking. According to Schmidt, “noticing” is the first step in the process of being able to “understand.” “Intake,” on the other hand, is the process by which “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985: 2) or input that is “understandable” by a learner becomes incorporated into his or her “interlanguage” system. This process is enhanced by a learner’s speaking or writing and thereby testing a hypothesis which is formulated based on his or her interlanguage (Muranoi, 2006: 14). Therefore, “intake” is important for a student’s learning ability. This position is also advocated by Swain from the perspective of “comprehensible output,” when she says that “one function of output is that it pro-
vides the opportunity for meaningful use of one’s linguistic resources” (Swain, 1985: 248).

Methodology

The participants in this study are 57 high-level university sophomores with an average TOEIC score of about 675. All of them are majoring in commerce at one of the most prestigious universities in Japan. Therefore, most of the participants studied English very hard in order to pass this university’s entrance examination when they were high school students. This quasi-experimental research study is conducted within a classroom, so it is critical to collect authentic data in a natural setting. The participants were required to write six different essays during one academic semester, using a variety of rhetorical modes and word count. The rhetorical modes and word count for each essay are as follows: Narrative including 150 words; Illustration including 170 words; Illustration including 300 words (a mid-term essay); Classification or Reason including 250 words; Cause and effect including 250 words; and Personal opinion including 450 words (a final essay). They could freely choose any topic for their essay as long as they followed the mode of discourse. They usually spent two or three classes (about 3 to 4.5 hours) writing their first draft for each essay. If they could not finish their first draft during this time, they were asked to take the draft home and complete it by the next class. In the next class, they were asked to conduct peer review and, after receiving feedback from other students, revise their first draft accordingly. After revising, they submitted their revised final draft to their teacher.

When they were engaged in peer review, initially their revised drafts were distributed randomly. Then the students were asked to read an essay which they received and write comments about it on the Peer-Editing Sheet (see Appendix 1). Peer editors wrote down their comments about the essay they were assigned to review in the left-hand column of the Peer-Editing Sheet. In the right-hand column, the essay’s author wrote responses to those comments. If the author adopted the comment, he or she
wrote “A,” which means “adopt,” and if the author did not adopt the comment, he or she wrote “N,” which means “not adopt.” In both cases, the author was required to provide reasons for adopting or not adopting the feedback. If the author thought that the feedback was appropriate but still did not adopt it, he or she wrote “NA,” which means “not any of them,” and had to provide a reason, too. This Peer-Editing Sheet was collected along with their essays after the peer-review sessions. In each peer-review session, they were asked to review about four or five students’ essays. After the semester ended, some of the students were chosen randomly and invited to have an interview with a different teacher whom they did not know in order to elicit their comments objectively. The aim of the interview is to allow the students to reflect on their cognitive process while engaging in peer review and elicit their comments. All the interviews were audio-recorded. Thus, the data collected in this study consists of the students’ Peer-Editing Sheets, draft and revised essays, and interviews.

Discussion

Peer’s feedback example 1:
Your essay discusses the reasons why running is so popular now. The sentence beginning with “Moreover” seems to be included in the first reason, which is related to health. However, this sentence only refers to the effect of running in refreshing runners, but does not mention anything about the relationship between refreshing and health. So I recommend that you should add some sentences so that the link between refreshing and health becomes clearer.
Author’s response: Adopt
Reason: Actually, I had thought that there was no clear logical connection here too. Therefore, taking this feedback into consideration, I added one sentence which allowed the readers to see a logical connection here more clearly.
(All the comments from the students shown in this paper are originally in Japanese but are translated into English.)

As can be seen from the author's response to his peer's feedback above, this author had actually realized that a part pointed out by his peer reviewer had some problems. The reviewer could not see a clear logical connection in one part of his essay. The author "noticed" that a logical connection was missing, but did not know how to solve the problem. However, with the help of the peer's feedback above, he could "understand" the reason why a logical connection was missing and tried to apply it to his revision, which can be understood from his comment above, "...taking this feedback into consideration, I added one sentence... ." The following is the author's rough draft and how he changed it after receiving the peer's feedback above. The changed part is shown in italics.

[Rough draft]
... The first reason is an increase of health-conscious people. For example, "obesity" has been a topic which worries a lot of people these days. So people try running hoping an effect of dieting. Moreover, I think a refreshing power it has is also one of the appeals. Not a few people feel that sweating can make them take their mind off. ...

[Revised draft]
... The first reason is an increase of health-conscious people. For example, "obesity" has been a topic which worries a lot of people these days. So people try running hoping an effect of dieting. Moreover, I think a refreshing power it has is also one of the appeals. Not a few people feel that sweating can make them take their mind off. And that results in reduction of stress, which lowers the risk of disease. ...
The added sentence in the revised draft allows the readers to see how a refreshing effect brought by running leads to people’s good health more clearly.

What is more important here, however, is that this author first seems to “notice” the importance of paying attention to the broader context in his writing, not a narrow one. Traditionally, “controlled composition,” which is a “practice with previously learned discrete units of language,” (Silva, 1990: 12) has been prevalent in Japanese junior and senior high schools’ EFL writing classes, probably because this approach is considered to be more effective and efficient to train them to pass Japanese high school or university entrance examinations. In other words, they were trained not to pay attention to any broader context in their junior and senior high school writing class. However, receiving his peer’s feedback, this author “noticed” that this approach to writing could make his writing more difficult to understand; in other words, he was ready to change his writing focus from “what he knows” to “how he writes.” Essentially, he began to “understand” how to pay attention to the broader context in his writing.

A similar change of focus in writing can be seen in another student’s response to his peer’s feedback.

Peer’s feedback example 2:
The logical order of “Takeda [one of the daimyos in the Japanese Warring States period] was strong → But Oda [also one of the daimyos in the Japanese Warring States period] used guns → So Oda defeated Takeda” is easier to understand than the one of “Oda defeated Takeda → Takeda was strong → Oda used guns” you used in your essay.

Author’s response: Adopt

Reason: After rereading my essay, I also thought that the logical order suggested by this peer was easier to understand, so I changed the expression “beat” to “was confronted with”.

This author, after receiving the peer's feedback above, began to pay attention to
the logical order in his essay, which he had previously thought was not a problem.
The following is the author's rough draft and how he changed it after receiving the
peer's feedback above. The changed part is shown in italics.

[Rough draft]
... In 1575, he [Oda] beat Katsuyori Takeda in the battle of Nagashino. Then,
it was said that Takeda's cavalry was the strongest, but he used 3,000 guns
against them. This tactics was effective against them. ...

[Revised draft]
... In 1575, he [Oda] was confronted with Katsuyori Takeda in the battle of
Nagashino. Then, it was said that Takeda's cavalry was the strongest, but he
used 3,000 guns against them. This tactics was effective against them and led
him to winning. ...

The logical order in the revised draft becomes easier to understand than the one of
the rough draft.

In the final interview, the same author comments on the effect of his peers’ feed-
back as follows:

If my peers think so, it can't be helped. I mean, if my peers think so, although
I don't think so, I think that my writing should have some problem ...

He comments on the effect of his peers' feedback, which shows an example of his
cognitive process; that is, the peer feedback had the effect of making him pay atten-
tion to the reader's ability to understand his essay, something which tends to be over-
looked in Japanese junior and senior high schools' EFL writing classes. This also
allowed him to reflect on his writing, which can be understood from his comment
above, "if my peers think so, ... I think that my writing should have some problem."

The students mentioned above, all "noticed" the importance of using a broader context in their writing and "understood" how to apply them to their revisions. However, as discussed in the literature review section, the next step to complete their learning process about writing is testing whether this "understanding" is correct.

*Peer's feedback example 3:*

... I learned very much about the ways to use adverbs from your essay because you used various adverbs effectively in it.

This peer's comment indicates that she feels her weakness is using adverbs in her essay. The following is her own essay, which describes three countries which she wants to visit in the future:

There are three countries that I am interested in.

A country I want to go to the most is the United Kingdom. I have regretted for a long time that I had gone to the Japanese school when I had lived there. I had rarely touched the local culture and had not communicated with people living there at all. They caused me not to have got a good command of English. I really want to live again to know much more about the U.K. and be a good English speaker.

Another country I hope to go someday is Spain, where is famous for football. It sounds great to watch a football game in a Spanish bar and feel a live excitement there. *At the time* I will try to speak my second foreign language, Spanish.

The last one is Taiwan. The Taiwanese massage is famous even in Japan. I would like to try it. After refreshed, I will go night stall. I heard there had many kinds of fruits and local dishes with cheap price.

The latter two countries are attractive for sightseeing so that visiting
only once will make me satisfied. However, in the U.K., I will stay long for studying. It may be best for me to go there while I am a university student.

However, her next essay after writing the peer feedback above, which discusses the reasons why Japanese university students do not study so hard, is as follows:

University students have been getting unclever in Japan. While the half number of children goes to a university nowadays, why has it happened? There are many reasons affecting this. I will give three of them here.

To begin with, university students do not study. They study only an average of 3.5 hours per day including classes. This is the fewest figure of all the “schools.” Even primary school students study more. One of the reasons causing this is the second reason.

Almost all the classes in Japan are made by a professor. On the one hand he talks, on the other hand students listen or use a mobile phone and finally fall asleep. However, in the U.S., for example, students themselves make a presentation and discuss. They have to prepare before a class for a speech. Without this, they cannot take part in a class. This need of preparation makes not only the time of studying more, but also students think academically. This difference has an effect on Japanese students studying less.

The third one is because of consciousness of students. A research showed the statistics that 54.8 % of university students chose to take a class which gives them a credit easily instead of which they are interested in. This displays that they do not want to study hard. However, it is also a problem that there are not a few classes like that. …

Apparently, this essay uses many adverbs or adverbial phrases, compared with her previous one. It is particularly notable that before starting the second paragraph in this essay, she uses the phrase, “to begin with,” which is considered to be one of the
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adverbial phrases which are effective for connecting paragraphs as well as "Secondly," "Thirdly," etc. It is probably because she learned something about the effective use of these words and phrases in order to enhance her essay's coherence from her classmate's essay and tried to use them in her next essay. What is more important here, however, is that she first "understands" how to use these words and phrases and then actually "outputs" them in her next essay to test whether this "understanding" is correct.

**Conclusion**

As mentioned before, "noticing," "understanding" and "intake" are the key concepts in discussing the cognitive process of learning a second / foreign language; in other words, if some teaching method can facilitate students' "noticing," "understanding" and "intake," it may be an effective teaching method, which is also suggested by Schmidt (Schmidt, 1993: 217-218). Encouraging Japanese university students to engage in peer review to learn EFL writing may be an effective teaching method, because (1) students can have more opportunities to facilitate their own "noticing" because other students point out problems in their writing, (2) students can deepen their "understanding" about how to solve their writing problems specifically by receiving feedback from their peers or by reading other students' essays, and (3) students are more motivated to improve their essays and write so they can be more clearly understood, because they realize that they can assess their own essays, and that this responsibility is not just the teacher's role. Regarding comment (3), one student said as follows:

Well, when my essay is read and evaluated by the teacher, there is no essay to compare with mine. So, I only try my best to improve my essay's quality as much as I can. When I think that I cannot improve the quality of my essay any more, I give up improving it and submit it to the teacher. However, when I read other students' essays, I always compare their essays with mine and
often think, "I still have many things to improve in my essay because other students wrote such a good essay."

However, there are cases where students do not adopt their peers’ feedback. In this study, for example, a few students oftentimes did not adopt their peers’ feedback. In their final interviews, one of the students said that he owed a cram school a lot for his English learning when he was a high school student and another commented on his learning experiences when he studied English hard to prepare for university entrance examinations. In both cases, their strong learning goals, which were closely related to their past learning experiences, interfered with their willingness to incorporate feedback from their peers. As discussed in the literature review section, “intake” is a process of “comprehensible input” or input “understandable” by a learner, which is incorporated into his or her “interlanguage” system. However, once a learner’s “interlanguage” is fossilized, which can happen when “the learner believes that he does not need to develop his interlanguage any further in order to communicate effectively whatever he wants to” (Ellis, 1985: 49), “comprehensible input” or input “understandable” by the learner can be rejected. The two students mentioned above may be involved in their own learner beliefs so strongly that they are unwilling to communicate with others. Whether students can adopt their peers’ feedback successfully or not largely depends on whether they are willing to communicate with others; in other words, to what extent do they want to be understood through their writing. If they are not motivated to do so, they will never activate their cognitive function which is the most effective way to accomplish this.

In short, although there are some cases where peer review does not promote the students’ learning process in their writing, some students can benefit from activating their three cognitive functions which are necessary for successful writing: “noticing,” “understanding,” and “intake”. It remains to be seen whether this can be applied in the case of lower-level students, of course, but conducting peer review may increase higher-level students’ ability to edit themselves not only with smaller problems but
also with writing from a broader context.

Appendix 1: Peer-Editing Sheet

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<th>Comments of peer editors</th>
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Author's name
References