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Title: Peer Review Methods for ESL Writing Improvement

This teacher research shows how peer reviews change draft papers. In the majority of cases, final papers improved in content. The study analyzes data collected from 40 intermediate/advanced nonnative speakers of English enrolled in freshman composition for international students at a large private university. It also examines student reflections on peer review, which indicate that the process is helpful for their writing in many ways. From a Vygotskian perspective, peer review helps students become more aware of their writing needs, and it helps them assume more responsibility for their writing improvement. Further, this research shows ways to train for more successful peer review work, which includes models of helpful student revision comments, and methods to help facilitate better cooperation between peer reviewers. The latter has been seen as essential for successful peer work (Zamel 1985; Anson 1989; Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990; Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger 1992; Nelson and Murphy 1993; Mendonca and Johnson 1994). Ideally, peer review training should also include some cultural awareness training, so that students begin to appreciate the subtle differences in peer responses; this will also be discussed. The teacher-researcher has been using and refining peer review methods for over 6 years, and has confidence in its positive effects on writing improvement.

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Peer Review Methods for ESL Writing Improvement

Students work hard learning how to make more informed decisions about their writing, and to gain more control over improvement of English writing skills. Writing teachers also work hard helping students write fuller, more descriptive and specific papers. I teach process writing to international students from many different cultures, and we use peer review for many of the essays we do. Peer review can help since it gives writers more options to consider when they revise their papers. Peer review does not preclude teacher feedback, but is meant to supplement it. Students value both types of feedback. With training, practice and guidance, students can learn to be more specific and helpful in their responses to a peer's essay. It is a powerful way for ESL students to improve their writing. The present study examines comments students write to peers, discusses training, and examines what student writers add to their papers as a result of peer review, as well as student reflections about peer review.

Many benefits have been associated with peer review in first language (L1) studies, such as providing authentic audiences who are at the writers' same levels, helping to increase motivation and confidence, giving various perspectives on writing, and developing critical reading and oral skills (e.g., Murray; Mittan; Elbow; Moffett). Ultimately this gives students more choices to consider regarding additional information, organization, structure and grammar. Stanley (1992) suggests that the purpose of peer review is "to help students revise their essays by receiving different points of view about their drafts. The various perspectives give the students rhetorical choices to select from when they revise their essays." I use peer review because it does help students. When students have reflected on the peer work they do, they write that it helps

their writing in many ways, in content, form, and grammar. One former student said that now she often asks peers for feedback on her writing.

There has also been much discussion of peer review in second language studies (L2) in attempts to determine the variables that distinguish it from L1 studies (e.g. Allaei and Connor 1990; Carson 1992; Conner and Asenavage 1994; Nelson and Murphy 1992; Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger, 1992; Mangelsdorf 1992; Stanley, 1992). Many of these studies have indicated that students are positive about peer review, and have described some of the variables which lead to success. Yet peer review work remains a controversy in L2 research (e.g. Jacobs 1998, and Zhang 1995) and thus it may not be widely endorsed by L2 teachers. At issue are student preferences for various styles of teaching and learning, which are culturally influenced, and which are highly relevant to learning. Allaei and Conner remind us that "the level of comfort that students have with peer response activities is crucial to the collaborative process" (p. 24). L2 studies are exploring these complex cross-cultural issues.

Nelson and Murphy (1992) looked at the discourse of students during peer review. They noted the various roles students adopted during group work, and how these affected the quality of the group interaction. They found that the type of interaction that the groups exhibited influenced revisions. Mangelsdorf (1992) analyzed written responses from 40 advanced L2s about their experiences with peer review. A majority of these responses (69%) were positive about peer review, but some were critical, which leads to the suggestion of careful structuring of peer work. In a study by Stanley (1992), students trained in a "fairly lengthy coaching procedure" demonstrated more effective peer work than a similar group which received minimal coaching. She concludes that training is needed. Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger (1992) asked students to respond in writing to an essay and then looked at the "stances" students took in their

responses. They found that the majority of students took a prescriptive stance. That is, students expected an essay "to follow a prescribed form," indicating that to them form was more important than meaning. These investigators also conclude that specific training and structure is necessary for students to benefit from peer review. Conner and Asenavage (1994) compared comments from the teacher with other sources of feedback, and their results indicated that students made many revisions, but that few were the result of peer work. They noted that some teachers "may expect too much from peer response groups without understanding how effective collaboration works among L2 writers" (p. 267). Mendonca and Johnson (1994), analyzing oral data, described the negotiations that occur between peer reviewers. They also noted that most students were positive about peer review, and that they used peer suggestions selectively, but had clear rationales for decisions about their use of peer suggestions. In the present study, I also found that students had thoughtful rationales for their decisions.

One of the concerns about using peer work in second language classrooms is that L2 students may have varying degrees of difficulty due to sociolinguistic differences, i.e. different expectations for the group work, and for what a good paper should be, as well as different communication styles. Peer review can be a difficult task in a mono-cultural setting. In a multi-cultural setting, there are additional variables which may interfere with its effectiveness. Joan Carson (1992) studied the development of first language literacy in Chinese and Japanese children, which she notes takes place in cultures which value the collective good, and which give precedence to shared social purpose. Thus for Japanese children language is valued "as a means of expressing social cohesion, not primarily as a medium for individual expression" (Connor, p.204). In addition to this, the different strategies used to teach literacy may be a result of the different language systems. Katagana, hiragana, and kanji in Japan, and kanji in China, are written

languages which have thousands of different signs. Carson points out that traditional instruction in Japan emphasizes memorization, repetition, drilling and testing. She suggests that these differences in cultural and educational emphasis may result in problems in two areas which affect peer review. Students may feel inhibited and uncomfortable with group work which emphasizes individual improvement. They may also be at a disadvantage in areas of creativity and originality since much of literacy development in these languages emphasizes memorization and "internalizing other's styles" (Carson 1992, p. 53).

John Hinds (1990) has shown that textual patterns vary among languages and cultures ("Expository Writing", p. 98). For instance, he notes that Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Thai writers are more inclined to use what he describes as a "delayed introduction of purpose" or an inductive presentation. English readers, on the other hand, expect a deductive organization. Allaei and Connor (1990) discuss the potential difficulty students may have when working in cross-cultural groups, "research evidence [in contrastic rhetoric] suggests that preferred styles and conventions of writing are culturally determined" (p. 22). They also note that "research by sociolinguists on the style and patterns of oral interaction show interethnic and cross-cultural differences that often impede communication" (p. 20). Nevertheless, Allaei and Connor's surveys of students found them to be "overwhelmingly positive" about peer review (p. 24). They suggest helpful methods to address some of these issues in training for peer review. Nelson and Murphy (1993) found that the more cooperative a peer review session was, the more L2 writers incorporated peer suggestions (p. 141). They defined a cooperative environment as "one in which the writer tended to be constructively engaged in the discussion, using verbal behaviors such as paraphrasing and clarifying students' comments" (p. 138).

In a study of three Chinese students, Carson and Nelson (1996) pointed out the potential

problems of cross-cultural peer review. They noted the three Chinese students' emphasis on group

harmony and how this interfered with effective peer work. These students were reluctant to

initiate comments, and to disagree with peer writers. "Self-monitoring led them to avoid criticism

of peers' work and to avoid disagreeing with comments about [their] peers' or their own writing"

(p. 1). Comments, when given, were indirect and under-specific, presumably to preserve group

cohesion. They were thus not as helpful as more direct, specific feedback would be.

The study

The present study examines comments students write to peers, discusses training, and

examines what student writers add to their papers as a result of peer review. It also looks at

student reflections of peer review. The following questions guided this research:

1. Do students write helpful (text-specific) comments when they respond to a peer's paper?

2. What do students add to their papers as a result of the feedback given to them?

3. What do students have to say in reflections about the usefulness of peer review?

The participants were 40 intermediate/ advanced students in two ESL / international

sections of freshman English composition. There were nine native languages represented in this

study: Mandarin 10, Japanese 9, Swedish 7, Arabic 4, Indonesian 3, Malaysian 2, French 2,

Danish 2, and Samoan 1. Dyads were made up of students with different native languages.

I don't have expectations that peer review will improve all papers. I tell students that even if they

can make one specific comment, they can help the writer. Nevertheless, I see many helpful

comments from students, and I tell students this by way of introduction to peer work. For the

present study, students were trained during two class periods. Training consisted of discussion

about why students were asked to participate in peer work, and about how important I felt this

work to be. I coach and encourage students by telling them they are about to undertake very

important work which will help their own writing as much as it helps their partner's. They are also reminded that peer review work will receive grades.

Training

More specific hands-on training first involves students in small group analysis of an essay from the course text, so that they become aware of the rhetorical requirements for their own essays. Subsequent training was adapted from the studies of Mangelsdorf (1992), Stanley (1992), and Neubert and McNelis (1990). In small groups, students are given peer review training worksheets (see Appendix 1) with examples of actual peer review comments to analyze and discuss. These include comments which are either text-based or surface-level, specific or nonspecific. There is class discussion on a few of these comments to help students understand the difference between unhelpful and helpful peer comments. They are told that helpful comments are specific and polite. Students analyze the remaining comments on the worksheet for effectiveness, based on the class discussion. Finally, students list and discuss ideas they think are important to remember when responding to a peer's essay.

After this part of the training, small groups read a student's model essay and discuss strengths and weaknesses, using a structured peer review form students will use for their own papers (see Appendix 2). This is followed by class discussion of the essay and peer comments, including effective ways to tell the writer this information. Then in dyads, students write their own comments about the essay on a peer review form, which is followed by role play in dyads: one student reading comments, and the other listening and writing their reactions to the comments. Finally, again there is class discussion about the most effective types of comments.

When students have completed their work with partners, I do two things. First, I commend them on the hard and useful work they have done. Then I tell them that the suggestions they have

discussed, and the written responses they have from their peers may offer them more choices to use to improve their essays. I say that the options need to be considered carefully in light of the requirements of the essay. But in the end, I say, writers decide the content of their essays; they make the choices. I simplify the peer review process to make it easier for students to accomplish. They work in dyads which are made up of students with different native languages. Thus students work primarily with one partner, although I encourage them to ask for additional readers. From a sociolinguistic perspective, students then must adjust to only one other communication pattern. In addition, although *group* work allows for more variety of responses, it is also very demanding. It requires attention and good listening abilities, because unlike dyads, there are numerous voices. Unless writers write comments, they may not understand what was said during such complex social interaction. I also simplify by using structured peer response forms for students, which helps them focus on limited areas to respond to.

Results

One of the questions in this study was: Do students write helpful (text-specific) comments when they respond to a peer's paper? Two writing instructors, each with over 10 years experience teaching similar writing courses to the one under study, conducted an analysis of student responses, and there was high inter-rater reliability. Student responses were analyzed for two questions about a partner's essay on the peer review form: (Are there any places the writer could be more clear? Be specific; make specific suggestions. Does the writer need more details in order to show or tell readers the story? Be specific; what would you like to know more about?). Twenty students gave 40 comments to these two questions. Of these 40 responses, five students had no comments, four commented on surface errors, and the remainder of the comments were text-specific. Some students gave multiple responses or asked questions, and some gave none.

The majority of students responses were text-specific, such as the following:

I would like to know more about what the teacher said to Susan about her behavior, and

the solutions to change in paragraph 5.

I think she is being very clear and easy to understand, but maybe she could get more

feelings into the story, [such as] *the way her family felt, how her boyfriend talked her into*

moving out. More feelings how and why she started talking to her family.

In your thesis you mention that you have matured, but you don't talk about it in your

essay. Second paragraph need more explanations: Are you discriminated against?

An analysis of student essays provided data for the second question: (What do students add to their papers as a result of the feedback given to them?). Students' first and final drafts of an autobiographical essay were examined to determine if they had added information that related to a comment by a peer. Drafts were examined to determine the number of words added which related to a peer review suggestion. It was found that in a majority of cases, when peer reviewers gave text-specific suggestions, writers acted on these comments, adding more specific information to their papers. When surface comments like grammar were noted, the writers said they sought help. When comments were not specific, or did not ask for information, L2s tended not to add any. Finally in reflections, students were asked to write what their peer review partners said, and what they (the writers) did in response to those suggestions, and their ideas about whether the peer review work. was helpful or unhelpful. This study found a high correlation between students' positive view of peer review work and the number of changes made in response to peer

comments. Student comments are in italics, and there was very limited grammatical editing of student text for clarity.

For instance, one student wrote: *I like the peer feedback because I feel it is very helpful for me to discuss my essay with a partner. From my partner's suggestion I add some details to make my paper more clear to understand. The peer review helped me to come up with new ideas and details.* In her revised paper, this L2 added over 80 words. She responded directly to her partner's suggestion by adding the following paragraph. By way of background, this was about a teacher's influence on her when she was younger.

We spent a long time talking about many thing that were in my behavior. First she wanted me to open my heart and try to get along with other classmates. Second, she gave me a position of helping other classmates with their geography because my geography was good in class; also in this way I could have more chances to communicate with others. Third, she always arranged some time to talk with me and find out how I was doing in this period. All these things that she did for me helped me to become a friendly and active person. If she had not helped me, today I probably would not have friends and would not know how to handle relationships between people.

Another student wrote: *My reactions were pretty happy because my partner understood me. She wanted to know some more between my boyfriend and I, and my family and I. After I saw my partner's comments, I really sat down and tried to think about the whole story.* In her revised paper, this L2 added 200 words to her essay. She added more descriptive feelings, as in the following excerpt when she writes about seeing her future boyfriend for the first time: *My heart was pumping when I looked in his eyes, because he had the most beautiful eyes in the world. They looked very deep, like you could fall down inside if you looked straight at them.* And, again

when she explains about her father's anger over her boyfriend:

He wanted me to make a choice; family or boyfriend. I told him, "I can't choose one of them, I want both." He got so mad at me because I didn't want to leave my boyfriend. He told me, "shame on you." I really got hurt by what he said....I wanted to talk with him again, but I was afraid, and I didn't want to be the first one to start the conversation....I felt very sorry for what I had done to them. They worried about me so much. My parents didn't blame me for anything because they knew I was very upset. I know they love me very much because they are always there when I need them. I still don't know why I thought they didn't love me.

In another revised paper, the student added a new paragraph (30 words) to her essay, explaining about the significance of her experience while visiting Sweden: *I realized that racism can truly exist is this society. I, who was segregated in Sweden, realized that I had been a prejudiced person in a way. By meeting a new culture, I learned a lot of aspects of a nation, which I had never recognized before, and I had not even thought about.*

Another student added one long paragraph to her essay (200 words), elaborating on the relationship between her and her best friend, who had committed suicide.

In two cases, reviewers suggested that a student cut words from an essay. Here is what one writer said. *My partner said, "your paper is well organized, but you used too much words to express your mind." His evaluation was right. It is true that English sentences I wrote are wordy. Many people who checked my paper said same thing to me. That is the point I need to improve in my writing. Considering the points my partner told me, I started to revise my paper. First, I checked whether my English words I used in my paper was appropriate. For example, I changed <u>shocks and fear</u> in the first paragraph to one word <u>affliction</u> because I used <u>shock</u> in sentence before. Also, I found that an English word <u>shock</u> meant <u>so surprise</u> although a Japanese*

shokku express negative feeling, <u>so depressed</u>, so I stopped using <u>shock</u> and decided to use a more effective word, <u>affliction</u>. Moreover, I attempted to combine some sentences with some conjunction. Later, I removed some unnecessary words because some parts I explained too much for my paper. By doing so, I might be able to make my paper clearer. This discussion was very useful for me.*

Sometimes L2s did not add information in response to a specific comment, but they did give clear rationales for not acting on suggestions: *My partner suggested that I add more details about my athletic family. However, I did not change anything about my family description. I thought that it was not necessary to add more details about the background of my family. In fact, this information is not useful to understand the autobiographical significance. Because I had already a lot of details in order to introduce the event that changed a part of my life, I decided not to write my partner's suggestion in my essay.*

Finally, another student wrote: *My partner thought <u>sweat</u> was not a good description for a ballet scene, and I could understand her opinion. However, I wanted to emphasize how hard ballet lessons were, so I did not omit this part.*

Student attitudes about peer review

Finally, 20 students were asked to reflect on the usefulness of peer review. They were asked to give their perceptions about peer review, as well as discuss some of their decisions about revision. These written narratives were examined to determine whether or not they viewed the process as useful. I followed Mangelsdorf's (1992) broad categories in this analysis. That is, responses were coded as positive "if only positive comments were given," negative, if only negative comments were given, and mixed, if there was a combination of positive and negative

comments. A *no comment* response was included in the mixed category.   The table below shows that over half of the students expressed only positive comments, another third had mixed comments, or no comment. It is interesting to note that more Asian students had mixed and negative comments.

Attitudes About Peer Review

Origin	Positive	Mixed	Negative
Asian	7	4	2
European	3	1	
Other	1	2	
Totals	11	7	2

Conclusion

Based on long experience teaching and using peer collaboration with university ESL students, and also based on this classroom research, peer review is beneficial to writing improvement with appropriate training and structure. Strategies for interaction and revision need to be taught. Students and teachers need to understand the difference between text-based and surface-level revision, and politeness strategies need to be practiced, since they vary from culture to culture. Other researchers suggest role play and teacher modeling of effective peer exchanges. Some students may need to learn negotiation and clarification strategies; many L2 students need models of what to say and how to say it. They also need to be encouraged to talk, question and negotiate meaning with their partners, and importantly, they need encouragement throughout the process of this difficult work.

In terms of classroom research, determining the source of text changes is difficult to remember by writers themselves. As writers ponder their texts over a period of time, ideas for revision my come to mind which may not be attributed to any one peer comment. It may be that peer comments are a sort of catalyst for cognitive work They may, in fact, be a reaction to a combination of information, including peer responses. Students have said that simply reading a peer's paper often gives them ideas for their own.

The reflections of students after they have completed peer review /revisions of their papers are beneficial to students for several reasons. They engage students in meta-analysis of thinking and writing as they seek to determine why they have made certain revision decisions. This may help to focus writers on reasons for decisions, which may help clarify strategies for future writing. For this and other reasons, peer review is a powerful strategy to help students improve writing.

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Appendix 1   **Peer Review Training**
                                                                          Autobiography

Read each of the following peer comments about a partner's paper, and evaluate them for how helpful they would be in revising a paper.

Comment	Effective, because	Not effective, because
Be careful of the verbs tense.		
You should add one more sentence in the summary.		
The summary isn't really a summary, but I like it anyway.		
Maybe you can get more feelings into the story.		
In paragraph 4, you should be more clear: who is "you" in your essay?		
Sentence structure is not too good in some places.		
Your story is OK.		
The first paragraph should be more detailed and catchy about what's going on in 1989.		
Maybe she could write more about Erica, such as her character.		
The details are sufficient.		

Appendix 2   **Peer Review form**
                                                   Autobiography

Soares

Directions: Peer exchange is important work: your peers are often your best audience, because they are a real audience. Read your partner's work carefully two times. Do not talk to your partner until **after** you have answered all of the questions below. You are working on ideas or content now, so do not mark for grammar unless it keeps you from understanding the meaning. Fill in the writer, reader and title of the essay before you begin reading it. **Remember: please try to give your partner short, specific comments responding to the meaning of the essay.**

Writer: _____ **Reader**: _____

Title of Essay _____

1.   What is the paper about: an event, a phase or a person?

2.   Is the thesis sentence in the first paragraph? If not, where is it? **Write the thesis here.**

3.   Are there any places the writer could be more clear? Be specific; make specific suggestions. What would you like to know more about?

4.   Does the writer need more details in order to **show or tell** readers the story? Be specific.

5.   Does the last paragraph close the paper with a summary?

6.   What do you think is the **autobiographical significance** of this writing? In other words, what can readers learn from it? (See *Reading Critically, Writing Well*, p33)

7.   Do you know something about what the writer has written which might add to this work? Write the information here.

Appendix 3   **Student reflections on peer review information from partners**

Prompt
Describe how you (the writer) changed your paper as a result of your partner's comments. Be specific, give examples.