Peer Response as an Effective Writing Strategy

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Abstract
This paper presents the peer response as an effective strategy in the teaching of college writing. In the textual analyses, feedback conference and through the evaluation questionnaire, peer response strategy was assessed as dynamic and successful and that editors and writers worked constantly with each other as a matter of scaffolding wherein writers chose their editors based on perceived scholastic standing, peer relation, and shared fields of interests. It was also found out that the writers were expecting more on the suggested changes for improvement and the identification of common errors for corrections than on the estimated grade given to their works. It is therefore concluded that peer response could be an effective way of managing big writing classes, capitalizing on the editing skills of students. This decentralized writing technique empowers students to manage their own pace, control their own taste of subject matter, and discover their own style.

Keywords: peer response, peer editing, writing strategy

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Introduction

This study was designed to obtain information on the relevance of peer response as an effective strategy in teaching college writing. As writing remains an essential medium of learning not only that it serves as an outlet for student creativity and intellect but also as another instrument in assessing their verbal and mental developments where all other types of learning emanate from. Thus, writing is given high regard in schools, be it in any form of academic and professional papers that are required to students and which are usually given much weight in the grading system.

Peer response can be defined as the 'use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's draft in the process of writing' (Liu and Hansen, 2002:1). Considering writing as a recursive process involving sub-processes such as generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating, and reviewing (White and Arndt, 1996), peer response creates a comfortable and trusting writing environment for students (Liu and Hansen, 2005).

As usually practiced, peer response is reserved for experts, those who excel both in craft and substance. In a writing class in English, that would be the job of the teacher, who reads, edits, and judges the works of his students based on craftsmanship and substance. If there are about fifty students in a class, it would literally mean a great job. Hence, it is neither practical nor necessary that the teacher alone should pass judgment over a written work. To help out the students become better writers, they must develop their own editorial skills, practically because they are the very first readers of their own works.

However, teachers seldom do give their students an opportunity to pass judgment on their classmates' works. So, students are missing out an essentially important aspect of the writing process, i.e. the social dynamics of writing. Students usually are given instructions to write an article and submit it the next day. Upon submission, instructor reads it, edits it, assigns it a grade, and records it (or returns it to the writer for improvement and resubmission). That is basically the flow of a writing class in most English classrooms in the Philippines. While it is true that the article has been checked and returned by the teacher to the student, it cannot be denied that only the teacher was the sole reader and editor of the text—the sole judge of its craft and substance. It cannot be denied, too, that students would just accept whatever the judgment passed was (and sometimes the teacher does not even provide feedback). Liu and Hansen (2005) believe that 'when properly implemented, peer response can generate a rich source of information for content and rhetorical issues, enhance intercultural communication, and give students a sense of group cohesion'.

In peer response, merely finding problems in a piece of writing is not enough. A peer reader should offer some solutions to the problems that have been identified. Individual conferences, self-evaluation, and peer evaluation all help English teachers manage the study load, the biggest single obstacle to writing assignments in many writing classrooms (Readence, Bean & Baldwin, 2001). Further, it also believed that the students should be introduced gradually to the writing process and encouraged to improve their writing through prewriting and careful revision. With these also in mind, the researcher implemented this peer response to immerse students through the varying stages of the writing process, with students acting as writers and editors of their works (Salomone and McDonald, 2005).

The researcher (also the instructor in the writing classes) always believes in the thought that writing is a dynamic process; consequently, to add more actions to the process, it (process) has to involve more students and not only the writer and the teacher in the different stages of writing. To solve this impasse, the researcher came up with a more liberating and emancipating writing strategy in

his writing classes: the peer response as a critical strategy for improving students' writing (Bijami, Kashef & Nejad, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Peer response (or peer review, peer tutoring) has been used since the ancient Greek era (Topping, 2006). Peer response is supported by several theoretical frameworks. Peer response is supported by the collaborative learning theory, which holds that learning has to be socially constructed through interaction with peers (Bruffee, 1984; Eryaman, 2008; Eryaman & Genc, 2010). Support for peer response also comes from Vygostsky's zone proximal development theory (1978), which holds that the cognitive development of individuals results from the guidance (scaffolding) of more experienced peers. Also supportive of the peer response is the socio-constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which holds that knowledge is socially-constructed as a result of interaction among students, and where the density of learning activities takes place (Guiterrez & Stone, 2000). This interpersonal relationship may be effective when students have more contacts with other students, thereby generating more ideas (Goalty, 2005), developing an inventory shared knowledge (Henderson & Bradley, 2008; Prior, 2006; Gutierrez, 2008), that in the end creates a writing community, in which student-writers tend to work with more advanced peers (Gee, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Hence, the writing process becomes interwoven with the social, cultural, historical, and linguistic orientations of the student-writers (Bomer & Laman, 2004). These initiatives have been also commonly seen in the classrooms as peer tutoring, cooperative learning and peer collaboration (Christianakis, 2010). Hence, a growing range of researchers has highlighted the use of peer feedback because of its social, cognitive and affective benefits (Hinkel, 2004; Lundstorm & Baker, 2009; Min, 2008; Pol, et al., 2008; and Storch, 2004), which guides student learning (Orsmond, et al., 2013).

Objectives of the Study

With the above premises, this study was set at ascertaining the dynamics of peer response as an effective strategy in teaching college writing. Its purpose was to provide teachers of English with the practical skills and raise awareness on the importance and implementation of this writing strategy in the classroom. Specifically, it is aimed at (1) assessing the dynamism of the peer response for both the writers and the editors; (2) determining the factors considered by the editors in choosing the writers they are to work with, and vice versa; (3) finding out editors and writers' expectations; (4) identifying the most common writing problems committed by the writers as noted by the editors; (5) describing the editor-writer relationship; and (6) highlighting the success and effectiveness of the peer response.

Significance of the Study

This study is expected to humbly provide practical knowledge and skills to English teachers, most importantly the teachers of writing classes, in the employment of a more emancipating writing policy that would liberalize their classrooms from the teacher-centered practice of judging student writings to a student-centered one. The findings of the study will help the students achieve and appreciate the essence of being a writer and an editor as well. Moreover, the findings of the study may provide English classrooms with some strategies and techniques to immerse students into actual practice of the writing process in the context of the backward approach in language teaching and learning.

Methodology

This study can be considered as qualitative and descriptive-interpretative because it describes the evaluation of the participating students on the peer response strategy employed by the researcher.

Participants

The participants of this study were 155 students (all from three freshmen writing classes during the second semester of academic year 2014-2015) of Pangasinan State University in Alaminos City. It turned out in the end of the sessions that 30 students were selected as editors, and there were

125 student-writers. Not only were the participants' evaluation responses taken into account but also the observations of the researcher during the various sessions of the writing activity.

Peer Response Guidelines

The peer response sessions had the following guidelines, to wit:

Activities	**Time Frame**
1. The instructor tells the students that each of them must choose a peer to be his editor. Then he discusses the peer response and writing session proceedings, including the manners of planning, drafting, editing, and revision.	Week 1 – Wednesday
2. Every week, instructor assigns ten students to write 5-paragraph articles on any topic of interest. Students write the first and second drafts during the weekends.	Week 1 –Friday
3. Students submit their second draft to the editor of their choice for critiquing. This may be done in a form of printed copy submission or online submission (e-copy). Editors read, proofread and edit the second drafts; and write their observations and comments as marginal notes or on a separate sheet.	Week 2 – Monday
4. Editors return the articles to the writers for revision, with comments attached.	Week 2 – Tuesday
5. Writers resubmit the revised articles to their editors for 'mirroring'. If suggestions were followed and noted errors were corrected, editors mark the article as 'revised', and forward it to the instructor.	Week 2 – Wednesday
6. The instructor accepts the article, reads and comments on it. If errors are further noted, he returns it to the writer for further revision. Otherwise, he shall mark it as 'final in form', and shall be given a grade.	Week 2 – Thursday
7. Steps 2-6 are repeated until all student-writers have done their articles.	Week 2 –Friday

Basic Assumptions

The peer response underscored two basic assumptions, namely (1) the writer writes a not less than a 5-paragraph article, says what kind of writing it is, what general purpose it has, accepts the judgments of the editors, and abides by the comments of the editor; and (2) the editor gives the writer editorial comments by the margin, or on a separate sheet, tries to meet the expectations both have agreed on, and provides suggestions to the writer as to how to change his work for the better.

Data Gathering Procedures

During the feedback conference, questionnaires and interviews were used as data gathering instruments to obtain information to (1) assess the dynamism of the peer response for both the writers and the editors; (2) determine the factors considered by the editors in choosing the writers they are to work with, and vice versa; (3) find out editors and writers' expectations; (4) identify the most common writing problems committed by the writers as noted by the editors;(5) describe the editor-writer relationship; and (6) highlight the success and effectiveness of the peer response. Constant observations and monitoring were done as well all throughout the duration of the writing session. Their works were kept on file for further reference; i.e. the student drafts were scanned individually to find out common errors committed and the suggestion sheets or marginal notes were also noted to identify what editors gave their writers. Ratings given by the editors on the draft and revised manuscripts were also taken into account to determine meaningful improvement.

Results and Discussions

As this study ascertainied the dynamics of peer response as an effective strategy in teaching writing, the results were summarized and presented in tables, whenever applicable, for greater and easier description, interpretations and reference.

Assessment of the Dynamism of the Peer Response

The editors and writers were asked as to the dynamism of the writing experience they had during the peer response sessions. As shown in Table 1, the activity was rated as ***dynamic*** by both the editors (86.7%) and the writers (94.4%), respectively.

This dynamism may be founded on the assumption of peer response in which the writer comes to the editor for relationship, having in mind the intention to establish a dynamic and interactive exercise. Hence, the purpose of this exercise is to arrive at agreements on the basis for a writer and editor 'connection'.

Table 1. *Dynamism of the Peer Response, by Editors and Writers*

Assessment Results	***Writers***		***Editors***	
	F	***%***	***f***	***%***
Dynamic	*118*	*94.4*	*26*	*86.7*
Not dynamic	*4*	*3.2*	*4*	*13.3*
Does not matter	*3*	*2.4*	*0*	*0*
Total	***125***	***100***	***30***	***100***

This concept of discourse highlights the need for interactions and exchange of not just views, emotions, values, and beliefs, but that of techniques and styles as well, that oftentimes are provided by a "dedicated" reader of the text made, which of course in this case, is the editor. Draayer (1990) supported this with his advice to students,

> *"It is neither possible nor desirable for the teacher to be your only editor. In order to grow as a writer, you must develop your own editorial skills. Editing raises specific obstacles you have to overcome. Some of these have to do with understanding the art and craft of writing, but others have a more personal basis. As a student, you should experience both the technical and interpersonal sides of editing, where your social skills and responsive abilities as writers and editors come together."*

With this, peer response has been essentially utilized to better improve learning by allowing students construct their own knowledge through social interface (Liu, et al., 2001). It is claimed that students learn while reading the works of their peers (Zhao, 2014). Essentially, peer response is conducted to improve the writing skills of students (Corbin, 2012), to increase motivation to write collaboratively (Farrah, 2012).

Factors on Choosing Writers and Editors

When the editors were asked on how they chose the work to edit, and writers were asked on how they chose their editors, varied answers came out; hence, the researcher clustered these responses into four common factors as shown in Table 2.

How the editors considered their choice of writers were ***by class standing*** (rank 1, 39.2%), ***by shared field of interest*** (rank 2, 36.0%), ***by peer relation*** (rank 3, 24.0%), and ***by certain personal standards*** (rank 4, 0.8%), respectively. As for the writers, they chose their editors ***by peer relation*** and ***by shared field of interest***, (tied at rank 1, 36.67%), ***by certain personal standards*** (rank 2, 16.67%), and ***by class standing*** (rank 3, 10.0%), respectively.

Table 2. *Factors on Choosing Writers and Editors*

Factors Considered	***Writers chose their editors***		***Editors chose their writers***	
	f	***%***	***f***	***%***
By peer relation	*30*	*24.0*	*11*	*36.67*
By class standing	*49*	*39.2*	*3*	*10.00*
By shared field of interest	*45*	*36.0*	*11*	*36.67*
By certain personal standards	*1*	*0.8*	*5*	*16.67*
Total	***125***	***100***	***30***	***100***

This implies that the editors and the writers have exercised certain degrees of standards in choosing their editors, and in accepting their writers. Furthermore, as Aquino, et al (2000) underscored the importance of proofreading and editing by positing that it is integral to have someone, who is a better reader, to edit the work. Presumably, that better reader (editor) is someone who is academically better than the writers yet he may whom he shares common interests with. These choices have reflected their preferences with respect to the academic standing (in choosing editors) and shared fields of interest and peer relation (in choosing writers). Friendship bias (as found in Cheng & Warren, 2005; Harris & Brown, 2013; Azarnoosh, 2013) and non-proficient editors (as found in Hu, 2005; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000) were not problems.

Further, since writers choose their editors (or vice versa) by shared fields of interests and peer relations, the more they are comfortable when giving feedback and the better they understand one another (Zhao, 2014). Rollinson (2005) further noted that writers need an audience that understands them so as to remove difficulty and immediate response is given.

Expectations of Writers and from Editors

The researcher used what Draayer (1990) spelled out on what writers might want from editors and/or what editors may be giving their writers; these are (a) questions about the work, (b) suggested changes, (c) list of strengths, (d) list of weaknesses, (e) list of things the editor observes or notices, (f) an estimate of the mark writers would like to receive, (g) corrections, (h) ideas to expand in the writing, (i) discussion of content, and (j) praise. The editors were asked to identify three things that they give their writers after editing their works. The writers were also asked to identify three things they expect to receive from their editors. Their responses were recorded in Table 3.

Table 3. *Expectations of Writers and from Editors*

Expectations	***What writers want from editors***		***What editors give their writers***	
	F	***Rank***	***f***	***Rank***
Praise	*7*	*8.5*	*4*	*6.5*
Corrections	*76*	*2*	*11*	*3*
Discussions of content	*30*	*5*	*10*	*4*
Strengths	*18*	*6*	*4*	*6.5*
Weaknesses	*13*	*7*	*4*	*6.5*
Ideas to expand	*72*	*3*	*17*	*2*
Things he notices	*49*	*4*	*3*	*9*
Estimate of grade	*7*	*8.5*	*4*	*6.5*
Suggested changes	*98*	*1*	*23*	*1*

The editors and writers had clear expectations on what to give and what to receive. These are the ***suggested changes*** (rank 1), ***ideas to expand and corrections*** (tied at rank 2) and ***discussion of content*** (rank 3). The editors and writers have positively been looking forward to complimenting each other, committing themselves to common expectations and interests, and responding to writing needs that both care about; thus establishes relationship between editors and writers (Howard, 2010). Writing well is not the solitary job of the writer, as an engineer works hand in hand with his architect to see to it that the masonry satisfies the intended design. Therefore, it would be a better practice if

student-editors take the editorial enterprise very seriously, and student-writers insist that they submit their writings for editing. Both should fully understand their mutual responsibilities. Their consistent responses exemplify their mutual responsibilities over the work at hand.

Surprisingly, both the editors and writers were not up to grades but for the development of ideas. They were more interested at improving the work and the various ways of doing it. This finding further implies that writing is not considered by the writers and editors as a product but a process, a work in progress.

Similarly, according to Min (2005), students claimed to have gained more awareness on their own writing because of the suggestions given by their editors. Students also claimed that their peers had good suggestions for improving their writings (Hu, 2005). In addition, students may develop a 'sense of ownership of text' as they are not obligated to use all the comments and suggestions they received (Tsui & Ng, 2000: 162).

Most Common Writing Problems

Asked what writing errors they encountered in most of the writings they had edited, the editors' responses are shown in Table 4.

The most common writing problems identified were along ***vocabulary use*** (rank 1), ***placement of sentences*** (rank 2) and ***defining purposes and surface errors*** (tied at rank 3), respectively. Writers had problems in using appropriate vocabulary particularly in keeping the tone and mood of their writings. They also had problems in sentence placements, whether clefted or fronted, active or passive, dangling or run on, among others. Furthermore, the purpose of their writings was hard to tell by reading the introductory paragraph. A number of the writings were also riddled with surface errors such as spelling, punctuation, syllabication, among others. Mawlawi Diab (2010) also showed that the students committed errors on subject/verb agreement, pronoun agreement, wrong choice of words, and sentence structures.

Table 4. *Most Common Writing Problems Identified by Editors*

Writing Problems	***F***	***Rank***
Defining purpose	*10*	*3.5*
Irrelevant materials	*4*	*7*
Placement of sentences	*13*	*2*
Sentence variety	*7*	*5*
Voice and style	*2*	*8*
Vocabulary use	*15*	*1*
Order	*6*	*6*
Surface errors	*10*	*3.5*

Moreover, the intention of this exercise is not only to consider the writing as good or bad, but to pursue an approach that leads to "making observations." An observation, according to Draayer (1990), is simply a record of something you noticed, however insignificant it seems. Observations are the foundations of any adequate judgment. Good observations lead writers to attend to something they might otherwise have overlooked. Good observations will also lead editors to make useful suggestions the writer can build on, suggestions that stop short of passing judgment.

Hence, editors are expected to observe (1) what the writer is saying, (2) the content of the writing, and (3) about how they are saying it (or the method). The best moment of peer response comes when writer and editor see a way to enhance the purpose of the writing. At that moment, a light turns on in the writer's head, illuminating the way to a clear and final product, explained Draayer (1990).

Editor-Writer Relationship

When asked how they can describe the editor-writer relationships, the 87% of the editors confirmed that they ***constantly*** worked with their writers. On the part of the writers, 89% of them said that they ***constantly*** worked with their editors. These constant relationships included exchanging notes on some suggested changes, mirroring activities to test that what had been suggested by the editors were carefully noted and incorporated in the paper, and revising and proofreading activities.

In the light of these editor-writer relationships, Readence, Bean & Baldwin (2001) suggested that peer evaluation can play an important role in the revision process. If students have tried to evaluate their own writing objectively, they would know how hard this process can be. They would know what they want to say, even if the actual version they produced on study is incoherent. A peer reader will quickly find these problems.

Students can become skilled in evaluating each other's writings when they have some practice and clear guidelines on the process. Students should begin editing a peer's work by first complimenting their partner on some aspects of the writing. It is also suggested that students phrase any negative comments as questions. This approach avoids engendering any defensive feelings as a peer helps in the revision process. Hence, the practice of peer response is important because it allows the practice of giving and receiving individual comments (Lundstorm & Baker, 2009).

However, it was found out that 43% of the editors experienced anxiety in editing someone else's writings, and 45% of the writers felt threatened that their writings were critiqued and evaluated by their peers. The anxiety felt by both the editors and writers may have stemmed up from the thought of having another person read and/or edit their writings, though they both knew the benefits of the peer evaluation. When asked if their works improved, 97% of the writers responded in affirmation.

Success and Effectiveness of the Peer Response

Upon the end of the peer response sessions, it was evaluated to be ***successful*** by the editors (96.7%) and ***successful*** by the writers (96.8%), respectively, based on Table 5. No one considered it a failure, and only 3% evaluated the peer response as very successful.

Table 5. *Success and Effectiveness of the Peer Response*

Level of Success and Effectiveness	***On the part of the editors***		***On the part of the writers***	
	F	***%***	***f***	***%***
Very successful	*1*	*3.3*	*4*	*3.2*
Successful	*29*	*96.7*	*121*	*96.8*
Failure	*0*	*0.0*	*0*	*0.0*

Generally, the peer response was a success in its strictest sense. The participants considered it an effective strategy in writing classes. It is through this strategy that participants were able to look at their own writing styles and that of their classmates not at the point of comparing who's a better writer and who's the lousier one; but, comparison on what could have made their works better after submitting it for peer response or peer editing. It may not produce a perfect writer but peer response could undoubtedly produce a diligent writer who listens to his editor and/or reader for comments and suggestions; hence, the start of a healthier peer relationship in an English classroom. As Suzuki (2009) posited, peer revision may have improved both the self-confidence and decision-making of student writers throughout the whole process. Maarof, et al. (2011) also added that since students become aware on how their peers write, how writing takes place, and how revision is carried out, they become more autonomous writers. Also, Bijami, Kashef and Nejad (2013) affirmed that peer response provides a flexible opportunity to help students write critically and with autonomy, and authority.

Conclusions

Writing has never been a one man's job, for at all times, the writer is the first reader and editor of his own work. Student peer response is an effective way of training students to become good

editors and readers, by providing them with good scaffolding environments. The dynamism of good peer response in writing depends on the perceived connection between the editors and writers, and their shared expectations. This editorial partnership is successful and effective only when the editors and writers focus their attention on the things they notice on the writing rather than on what they think it should contain, neither the grades nor marks, but on the suggested changes for improvement. The peer response would be an effective way of managing big writing classes, capitalizing on the editing skills of students. This decentralized writing technique empowers students to manage their own pace, control their own taste of subject matter, and appraise their own style.

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