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Teaching Writing Students How to Become Competent Peer Reviewers

With the increasing number of English language learners in global classrooms, it has become more and more difficult for teachers to maintain their role as the primary communicator with students via one-on-one interactions. As a result, teachers often assign duties to their students. This change of power may be difficult for teachers and students who prefer to play traditional roles, but the new classroom dynamics can be beneficial. One area that can benefit from this sharing of roles is peer review and feedback.

According to Covill (2010), many writing specialists recognize the need for teachers to train students to provide effective feedback to their peers or at a minimum provide them with instructions on how to properly conduct peer reviews. In order to accomplish this crucial component of peer review in the classroom, I spent many worthwhile hours planning and executing peer-review training to a class of 25 intermediate and upper-intermediate English as a foreign language (EFL) students of mixed first languages at a university in Europe. This article will guide writing instructors through the training and writing exercises I utilized to empower intermediate-and-above students to become competent peer reviewers.

PEER FEEDBACK

From an instructor's viewpoint, teaching academic writing is challenging for various reasons: time is needed to explain and model essay types, writing is complex and requires higher-order thinking skills, and seemingly endless marking must accompany feedback on numerous drafts. Despite these issues, there are many benefits of peer review in the writing classroom, including the following:

- clarifying ideas and improving rhetorical organization (Berg 1999)

- providing opportunities to give and receive feedback, ask and answer questions, and play both beginner and expert roles (Mendonça and Johnson 1994)

- making both surface- and meaning-level changes to writing samples (Paulus 1999)

- improving grammar and augmenting vocabulary (Storch 2005)

- establishing and maintaining intersubjectivity between reader and writer (Villamil and de Guerrero 1996, 1998, 2006)

In substantiating the benefits, Lu and Bol (2007) report on studies on English as a second language (ESL) writing instruction (Paulus 1999; Mangelsdorf 1992; Chaudron

1983) that suggest "peer feedback was as good as or better than teacher feedback in helping revise and improve students' papers" (Lu and Bol 2007, 101). These positive aspects of peer review encouraged me to attempt to implement the activity in my writing course.

TRAINING STUDENTS

Before you allow your students to review a classmate's essay, make sure you spend sufficient time covering one of the most important aspects of peer review: training. First, provide students with a copy of examples of the types of constructive questions and comments that can be offered to a peer during review; the idea is to clearly "explain the different types of comments/ questions and how they affect the peer response process" (Liu and Hansen 2002, 138). For example, Liu and Sadler (2000) offer four categories of statement and question types (see Table 1) that illustrate how to write a constructive comment or helpful question. Explain that the more explicit a comment or suggestion is, the more likely it is to be understood by the author and to help him or her write a better second draft.

Next, conduct an in-class demonstration on peer-review training. If possible, use a laptop and projector or handouts. In my case, I showed the class an essay written by a previous student entitled "The Causes and Effects of Poverty" because cause-and-effect essays were the instructional focus at the time. However, you can use whatever type of expository writing your students are working on.

Then, to allow ample time for modeling and student practice, demonstrate the peer-review

process by providing feedback on the first half of the essay, which in this case includes the introduction and the "cause" paragraphs. According to MacLeod (1999, 90), this step prepares "students to make effective and diplomatic comments on their peers' writing [for] computer-generated messages tend to be honest and direct because information is not relayed face-to-face." If you have a computer and projector, show the class how to use Microsoft Word Track Changes and how to insert comments. To my surprise, not one student in my class had ever seen these features, so it might be a good idea to model the features beforehand. If you have only paper and no computers, distribute copies of the essay to the students, but make sure the margins are large enough to accommodate feedback. As you read through the essay with your students, encourage them to make suggestions and ask the author questions about the text. You can type these suggestions and questions directly into the original essay, or students can write them on their copies, which they can use as a reference when they do the actual peer review and feedback.

As you receive questions and comments that your students offer, carefully model how to comment appropriately, whether the comment is made electronically, written anonymously, or spoken face-to-face. MacLeod (1999, 90) offers tactful approaches to help students provide "constructive comments and encourage open, honest communication." Examples from MacLeod (1999, 91) include the following:

1. Start on a positive note.

2. Use words that are tactful and respectful.

Four Categories of Statement and Question Types

1. Evaluation: Makes a judgment—"Your conclusion is strong because it summarizes the main points in an interesting way."
2. Clarification: Asks for more explanation—"What does this sentence mean?"
3. Suggestion: Offers advice—"You should provide an example here."
4. Alteration: Directs the author to change something—"Try using active voice instead."

Table 1. Four categories of statement and question types (adapted from Liu and Sadler 2000)

3. Give examples to clarify points.

4. Always maintain a positive tone by avoiding negative words like *error*, *failed*, and *mistake*.

5. Be humble so that you don't come off as a "know-it-all."

After you have finished reviewing the first half of the essay, task the students to continue the review on their own, either in class or for homework. Ask them to continue providing feedback and adding comments to the remainder of the essay; with the cause-and-effect essay, that would include the "effect" paragraphs and the conclusion. All participants use the same essay to practice executing an anonymous peer review. This task, which Liu and Hansen (2002) label a practice draft, is a crucial step in the training process; the purpose is to "engage the whole class in a peer response activity and practice asking clarification questions" (Liu and Hansen 2002, 138).

In addition, provide students with the Peer Review Feedback Sheet (see the Appendix). This sheet focuses their attention on evaluating various aspects of essay writing, including introduction, body, structure, content, reader interest, grammatical accuracy, unity, coherence, and conclusion. Relate to your students the advice noted in Covill (2010, 203): "It is not the number or type of revisions made by a student, per se, that leads to good writing. The real issue is whether the revisions are strategic, that is, whether the revisions bring the text closer to the goals that the author has for his or her text."

Emphasize to your class that the primary goals of this review exercise are to become a proficient reviewer and to aid the author in writing a better essay. I define a "better final draft" as one in which the ideas are supported well by the author and are clear to the reader, with fewer grammatical and organizational errors than in the first draft. Make sure to encourage your students to make positive comments on the essays, indicating parts that are well written and/or interesting.

Finally, ask students to email you their completed feedback and to bring a hard copy of their peer-reviewed essay to your next class so you can discuss their homework activity collectively. In your next class, if possible, use a computer lab to share documents or to project some of their comments and suggestions. Remind the class that the original author is not required to make all the suggested changes when revising, and repeatedly inform the students that any critiques made to the essays are a critique of the essay, not a criticism of the writer. Your students must understand that the focus of peer review is always the written text, not its author.

PEER-REVIEW TASK

After you answer questions and clarify any remaining issues, your students are ready to conduct a peer-review activity on their own. Although the training can be somewhat time-consuming—approximately two hours in class for training and two hours practicing for homework—students must be made aware of how to conduct peer review and feedback before it can be profitable. De Guerrero and Villamil (2000, 56) observe that "in the brief pre-revising stage, we see the students' efforts at appropriating the task; in other words, not until the task had become more meaningful for them and the roles and responsibilities had been assigned could they proceed with their work." As with any task, fundamental principles have to be clarified and experienced firsthand by students before they will be competent enough to do a peer review on their own.

Rollinson (2005, 24) acknowledges the importance of peer-review training when he observes that "training students in peer response leads to better revisions and overall improvements in writing quality." If you want to further expose your students to practice essays, give them another anonymous student essay of the same genre or practice a second time. Instruct each student to follow the same procedure of providing feedback, just as you demonstrated in class and just as the students practiced for homework. When they finish their peer review, repeat

the procedure of going over their work in class collectively. This will show you whether everyone has completed the task successfully, and it will provide you, the instructor, with an opportunity to resolve any issues before students peer-review and give feedback on one another's essays.

Once you feel your students are ready to conduct a peer review and provide feedback on their own, give them an hour in class or in a computer lab to write or type an essay. Be sure to have some system in place to keep the essays anonymous. I simply code the papers with unique number–letter combinations that correspond to a list of codes I pre-assign to the students. If you do not have access to computers, tell your students to handwrite the essays, leaving sufficient space between the sentences and in the margins for feedback, suggestions, and comments to be made by a peer. I suggest administering the essay task under exam conditions; students should not be allowed to talk, leave the room, use any dictionaries or online devices, or ask any questions about essay formatting, content, grammar, or punctuation. In my case, with intermediate and upper-intermediate writers, the essays ranged in length from 209 to 476 words, with most falling between 300 and 350 words. You could set the word range or limit beforehand. Collect the essays when students complete them or when time is up.

In the next class, distribute each essay and the Peer Review Feedback Sheet in the Appendix to an anonymous classmate for review. This is a long and somewhat complex worksheet that forces the students to deeply analyze and evaluate their classmate's essay. If your students are not capable of using it due to limited language proficiency, you can modify or reword it to best fit your student population. Realistically, low-level students would not be able to use the worksheet in its original form, so perhaps this part of the peer review could be optional.

Give each student one hour to review a classmate's essay, suggesting changes by inserting or writing comments on the computer or with a pen or pencil. If possible, instruct each student to complete the Peer Review Feedback Sheet as he or she reviews the essay. While questions, comments, and revisions are meant to identify specific areas that need to be addressed, the worksheet requires students to examine their classmate's essay on a more holistic level. It includes evaluating the introduction, body, conclusion, interest level, and various grammatical aspects such as fragments, run-ons, comma splices, subject–verb agreement, capitalization, and punctuation. At the end of the class, collect the peer-reviewed essays as well as the filled-in worksheets.

Finally, during the third class, redistribute the essays with the peer's comments, suggestions, and changes back to the original authors. Each student will then review the classmate's questions and suggested changes and incorporate them into a revised draft before submitting it to you.

RESULTS OF THE PEER-REVIEW EXERCISE

Considering the amount of time it takes to train students on peer review and the extensive work they do writing, peer-reviewing, and rewriting their essays, the pressing question is, "Did my students become better peer reviewers?" A post-activity analysis of the 25 student essays in my class revealed a total of 124 comments and questions and 490 corrections offered to peers. Of course, not all the suggested changes were correct, but at least the original author's attention was refocused on certain parts of the text that could be improved.

Follow-up interviews with my students showed that the majority found the peer-review experience to be helpful to them as writing students. More than half offered comments praising the activities. Positive comments included, "It helped me with my mistakes"; "I learnt from my peer's mistakes"; "Reading essays could give me ideas to improve my writing and to avoid errors"; and "I am more critical now and I find the mistakes easier." One student hinted at recognizing a sense of audience, writing, "[It] is a good way to improve your skills in writing putting yourself on the teacher's side." One comment by another student revealed that the peer-review process, for him, met one of my most important objectives. He stated, "I would like to add that the experience helped me realize mistakes that I would not have noticed before." Clearly, students found benefits beyond simply grammatical or surface corrections, which some opponents of peer review feel is the main focus for students.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: TRAINING AND TIME

As with any other classroom task, peer review requires that foundations be set to increase the chances of success (see Rollinson 2005). Before I attempted to incorporate peer review, I was aware that I would have to explicitly teach and model to the students what peer-reviewing entails. It is also important to understand the deeply rooted cultural limitations of your students regarding politeness strategies and saving face. It is prudent to explain, via mini-lessons and class discussion, how to give polite, constructive, and tactful comments. One method is to show your students various anonymous comments and let the group decide what is acceptable and what is not.

As the literature draws so much attention to the importance of proper peer-review training, I was curious to see how the participants would evaluate the training exercises that we participated in as a group. After receiving peer-review training, 21 of 25 students in my class agreed that it was helpful. No one wrote anything negative about the training, and it seems that the training was worth the time and effort for all involved. Therefore, it is imperative that instructors who plan on implementing peer review in their writing courses properly train their students, not only demonstrating to them how to conduct a review but also providing them ample opportunities to practice peer-reviewing on their own before attempting it in a high-stakes activity. Only after extensive training should a graded peer-review task be assigned.

In my opinion, the explicit comments and questions that the participants directed at specific parts of the text indicated the "why" behind the suggestions the students were offering to their peers. Had I not utilized Liu and Sadler's (2000) model, shown in Table 1, I would have received only surface corrections and editing marks on the essays without any examples of how the students were interacting with the text. Such information is invaluable for classroom writing instructors to share with future students who will participate in peer review, for it shows students that they are capable of making valid and useful suggestions to one another's essays.

I could find no references in the literature suggesting how much time should be spent on training students on peer review. The students in my class were given 150 minutes of in-class training plus at least an additional 30 to 60 minutes' worth of homework related to the task—a total of three to four hours of training time. Given their intermediate to upper-intermediate levels of English, I felt this was sufficient for most of them. However, it may not have been enough for all. One dilemma is allotting sufficient time to the training without having the activity occupy too much of overall class time. In my case, one full week out of a 14-week semester was set aside for peer-review training. This is about seven percent of the total semester, which I feel is appropriate. Another important factor is the English level of the students. More-advanced students will need less preparation and practice time, whereas lower-level ones may need several additional hours.

CONCLUSION

It is prudent to advise every instructor to change the misconception that most students have towards peer review and feedback in the writing classroom—namely, that its purpose is "to be finding mistakes or problems in each other's essays" (Nelson and Carson 1998, 121). Given sufficient time for training, practice, and execution, peer review is a productive, worthwhile, and beneficial activity in the writing classroom. Training writing students in peer review is well worth the time and effort required, for it is a skill that students can use for the remainder of their writing careers, not just in English, as well as an ability that they can share with other students. One of my students, who had never experienced peer review and feedback before taking my course, told me that he would ask his future English composition instructors to include peer review in their courses, since "it was the most useful thing I did all year."

Instructors must also be mindful that peer review may not always provide the expected outcomes. Target-language competence, culture, and individual personalities must all be taken into account before students are assigned activities that require peer collaboration. Both individual and contextual differences, along with proper training in peer feedback, must be fully addressed with all students in order for them to get the most benefit from the peer-review experience in the ESL or EFL writing classroom.

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APPENDIX

Peer Review Feedback Sheet

1. How interesting was the essay?

Very interesting   Somewhat interesting   Not very interesting

2. How would you rate the introduction for content?

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

3. Was there a "hook"? YES or NO? If yes, how interesting was it?

Very interesting   Somewhat interesting   Not very interesting   Boring

4. Was there a clearly written thesis statement? YES or NO?

5. How would you rate the body for content?

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

6. How would you rate the conclusion for content?

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

7. How would you rate the essay as a whole?

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

8. Please rate the author's ability to control sentence fragments.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

9. Please rate the author's ability to control run-on sentences.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

10. Please rate the author's ability to control verb-tense conjugation.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

11. Please rate the author's ability to control subject–verb agreement.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

12. Please rate the author's ability to use correct punctuation.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

13. Please rate the author's ability to use proper capitalization.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

14. Please rate the essay's unity, defined as all the ideas supporting and being related to one another.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

15. Please rate the essay's coherence, defined as all the ideas being connected or flowing logically from one paragraph to the next.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

16. Please rate the overall grammar of the essay.

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

17. Were there any parts of the essay that you did not understand? Where and why?

18. You did not know the author of the essay. How do you think this affected your review? Check one:

_____ I was more critical because I did not know the author; therefore, I made more corrections and suggestions.

_____ I reviewed and corrected the essay the same as when I know the author; therefore, the number of corrections I made would have been the same if I had known the author.

_____ I was less critical because I did not know the author; therefore, I made fewer corrections and suggestions.

19. Do you prefer to review an essay anonymously, or would you rather know who wrote the essay you are reviewing? Explain why.

20. Is this the first time you have done an anonymous peer review? YES or NO?

21. How would you rate the overall experience of anonymous peer review?

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

22. Would you like to participate in this activity again? Why or why not?