

# Potential Benefits of Peer Response in Writing Classes

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## 1. Introduction

Response to writing plays an important role in fostering the improvement of writing. It is regarded as one pedagogical means to encourage learners to facilitate further writing development. Generally, feedback has two types; written commentary by teacher, and verbal interaction between teacher and student or among writers. Writing teachers and researchers have acknowledged that feedback provides a powerful underpinning for revision processes as well as language learning. Thus, feedback is perceived as a critical component to help writers produce better subsequent drafts and attain greater writing proficiency (Ferris, 2003; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

In current Japanese English educational context, instruction in the writing of English seems to be considered less serious. Indeed, the recent English curriculums in junior/senior high school have emphasized the development of speaking fluency rather than the development of writing. In writing classes, the rule-governed grammar translations of Japanese into English become an integral part because the writing classes depend more on the entrance examination practices and on text-making performance.

In this paper, I will describe potential benefits of peer response applications in writing classes. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that writing classes should go beyond the banal approach to surface-level translation practice as well as make a small change of writing

classrooms.

## 2. General Issues of Response of Writing

Empirical research indicates that response to writing considers feedback as an aspect of teaching writing both in and out of composition classes. Studies of teacher written feedback, teacher-student conferences, and peer feedback have identified both the benefits and drawbacks of grammar treatment (Ferris, 2002, 2003; Leki, 1991; Truscott, 1996, 1999; Zamel, 1985), negotiation of text meanings (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Liu, & Hansen, 2002; Nelson & Murphy, 1993), and the cultural impact on writing development in cooperative sessions (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Goldstein, 2005). Although such critical viewpoints of each feedback still remain controversial among writing researches, feedback approaches seem advantageous as an accessible task in writing pedagogy.

## 3. Peer Response

Peer response is one common technique among writing teachers in L2 writing classrooms. Empirical research on peer feedback mainly emphasizes the effect of peer feedback dealing with commentary analyses. Much of the research reveals that peer feedback encourages students to develop their written texts explicitly based on the peers' constructive comments and to apply the written commentary into their subsequent drafts. Some scholars hold a negative view on peer response, although many acknowledge peer feedback serves as a form of

scaffolding of writing.

Peer response influences the revisions of writing through providing more insightful comments on other's written products. Peer feedback sessions are effective for students to review their own drafts and to examine their texts in-depth as well. This peer feedback approach also contains complex and controversial issues in institutes or classroom contexts (Liu and Hansen, 2002). ESL settings where multi-cultural learners exist often have difficulties sharing suggestions and ideas with peers because ESL students have few experiences of feedback activities. Moreover, cultural beliefs influence the interactions with the learners and affect writers' behavior of the revision processes in the peer response workshop. Learners from the Oriental cultures, for example, become reluctant to remark on their products and are rather more likely to work toward keeping a harmonious balance with others (Carson and Nelson, 1996; Goldstein, 2005). Such ideological aspects impede writers from negotiating the meanings with their peers or improving the quality of the written texts with more specific advice.

Previous inquiry of peer feedback exhibits ESL learners' behavioral patterns underlying cultural issues in peer response activities. Carson and Nelson (1996) explore how Chinese ESL learners tried to interact with each other during peer work by taking video-tapes of the peer feedback activities. This study reveals that Chinese learners harmonized with each classmate as the primary purpose of the collaborative session. Connor and Asenavage (1994) compare different types of comments by teachers, tutors, and writers with peer feedback to find the impact on ESL writers' subsequent drafts. The researchers realize that peer feedback had few influences on revising whereas the other three comments were more effective. However, students sometimes

hesitated to share impressions with their peers for fear of hurting the other person's feelings.

As for another issue of peer response, Nelson and Murphy (1993) investigate how learners incorporate both written commentary and oral feedback into their subsequent revisions. Their findings show that the writers developed their compositions with peers' suggestions, provided that peers facilitated in a supportive manner. This present study finds a similarity in the research results of Goldstein and Conrad (1990). Goldstein and Conrad investigate how teacher conferencing influenced the processes of students' subsequent drafts. Their research illustrates that students utilized the teachers' suggestions and ideas on their revisions in cases where teachers maintained an exclusive negotiation of meaning during the conferences.

In sum, further inquiry into the effectiveness of peer response on writing development is still needed. Although much controversy over the benefits of peer feedback still maintains, many scholars affirm the validity of peer response as an interactive approach in writing classes.

#### 4. Benefits of Peer Response

As mentioned earlier, English writing classes in junior/high school in Japan at present appear to have been marginalized recently since communication proficiency in English is the primary focus of the national curriculums. In Japanese English education, writing itself demands exclusive translations of Japanese into English or sentence-making tasks in English. Therefore, it seems that students have few opportunities to have experience of paragraph writing in English and to share ideas toward each other's writing. To diversify learners' current practice of writing in English, peer feedback should be performed. Through the ideal issues of English writing practice in junior/high school, the significant benefits of peer response to enhance students' writing in

English below would be derived.

- More opportunities to negotiate meaning of written products rather than surface-level sentences with peers
- A great chance to be a critical reader toward peers' writing (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005)
- To be an autonomous learner to share writing with peers

The first point indicates that learners can be conscious of a feeling of audience. Generally, students focus heavily on grammatical accuracy and on the products themselves. When students write in English, they identify a teacher as a true reader and presume that peers are "co-learners." This attitude of writing prevents writers from being aware of audience, which leads writers to being "writer-centered," an archetypical characteristic of Japanese writing style (Hinds, 1987). To avoid a traditional approach, students should have an opportunity to negotiate meaning of written texts with classmates. Then, they can discover more thoughtful details to improve further writing products.

The second issue will allow writers to develop their critical thinking by reading others' writing. Japanese learners often hide their own ideas within themselves as a Japanese mentality. When peer response is applied to classes, it gives students opportunities to read many peers' papers and to react their writing logically as well as critically. Through reading classmates' writing, students can analyze how peers' writing is organized, offer valid questions, and demonstrate a constructive attitude on making remark about peers' writing.

Finally, peer response encourages students to improve their independence concerning language learning in addition to promoting further writing proficiency. For instance, students can take notes on peers' writing

performance such as written structure, grammatical accuracy, and word usage and incorporate them into their own written products while reading the written texts (e.g., Fujieda, 2007). This behavioral pattern not only fulfills a role of framework for autonomous language learning but leads writers to promote their writing proficiency.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, the potential advantage of peer feedback activity as in writing classrooms was described. The benefits of peer response still maintain a neutral stance, however, it is undeniable that feedback sessions have no small effect on the development of writing process and successful revisions on subsequent drafts. Furthermore, the feedback approach has enormous significance in requiring change in writing instruction. Writing classrooms in junior/senior high school put a greater emphasis on translations of Japanese into English with complete grammatical accuracy rather than on producing paragraphs of meaningful stories. Students have insufficient opportunities for discussing their own writing products with peers. Nor do they raise their awareness of the audience; required in writing in English. A collaborative work such as peer response will initiate a constructive step for progress in writing classes, if the present circumstances of writing classes in junior/senior high school are taken into account.

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