Using peer feedback in the ESL writing class

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Although both research and practice have generally supported the use of peer feedback activities in ESL and L2 writing classes, many teachers (and most students) are less than convinced of its usefulness in their own particular situation. The objective of this article is to briefly summarize some of the main arguments in favour and against peer feedback, and to explain how teachers can establish a positive context for effective peer group response by organizing proper procedures and training.

Introduction

Although in recent years the use of peer feedback in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classrooms has been generally supported in the literature as a potentially valuable aid for its social, cognitive, affective, and methodological benefits (see, for example, Mendonça and Johnson 1994; Villamil and de Guerrero 1996), doubts on the part of many ESL teachers and students are not uncommon. Teachers may question its value within their particular context, or wonder how such a time consuming activity can be reconciled with course or examination constraints. Students may have even more doubts: they are uncertain about its purpose and advantages, they may feel instinctively that only a better writer—or a native speaker—is qualified to judge or comment on their written work. They may feel that feedback received from classmates whose English level is more or less the same as theirs is a poor alternative to the ‘real thing’—that is, the teacher’s periodic red-penned notations. Sadly, these perceptions may prevent a teacher from engaging students in what can be, given the right conditions, a highly profitable interaction on many counts. This paper, then, will discuss some of these real concerns, and also focus on some of the practical issues concerning how to use peer response to advantage in the ESL writing classroom.

A substantial amount of research has been done over the last two decades into the value of different kinds of response offered to student writers, both in L1, and increasingly in L2. Studies have typically focused either on teacher or peer response, or have compared both, and have looked at different kinds of response (e.g. praise or criticism, intervention versus final draft comments, grading versus non-grading, and so on) and their effect on student attitudes to and performance in writing (see, for example, Berg 1999; Jacobs et al. 1998). Some of the more significant (not to say obvious) insights that have emerged are the following, in no
particular order: good writing requires revision; writers need to write for a specific audience; writing should involve multiple drafts with intervention response at the various draft stages; peers can provide useful feedback at various levels; training students in peer response leads to better revisions and overall improvements in writing quality; and teacher and peer feedback is best seen as complementary (see, for example, Chaudron 1984; Zamel 1985; Mendonça and Johnson 1994; Berg 1999).

However, it is true that less than profitable interactions have been found within peer groups, sometimes because of the participants’ lack of trust in the accuracy, sincerity, and specificity of the comments of their peers (Zhang 1995). Certainly the often promoted affective advantages of peer response over teacher response (less threatening, less authoritarian, friendlier, more supportive, and so on) have not been immediately recognized by students, nor indeed supported by research. In several studies, peer feedback has been judged by the participants as less helpful than the teacher’s feedback, and in one case even less useful than an NS friend or grammar book (Leki 1991).

However, once the peer response process is underway, the writer’s perception of the value of the enterprise is likely to change if she begins to receive useful feedback, or finds that commenting on essays is helping her to be more critical of her own writing. For this to happen, however, the class has to be set up properly. Failure to establish proper procedures, or to engage in pre-training, is quite likely to result in less than profitable response activities. These issues will be dealt with in more detail below.

**Why use peer feedback?**

There are a number of reasons why teachers have chosen to use peer feedback in the ESL writing classroom.

**Response and revision**

Peer readers can provide useful feedback. For example, Rollinson (1998) found high levels of valid feedback among his college-level students: 80% of comments were considered valid, and only 7% were potentially damaging. Caulk (1994) had similar results: 89% of his intermediate/advanced level FL students made comments he felt were useful, and 60% made suggestions that he himself had not made when looking at the papers. He also found very little bad advice.

It has also been shown that peer writers can and do revise effectively on the basis of comments from peer readers. Mendonça and Johnson’s (1994) study showed that 53% of revisions made were incorporations of peer comments. Rollinson (1998) found even higher levels of uptake of reader feedback, and 65% of comments were accepted either completely or partially by readers.

Another reason why peer feedback has been adopted is that it tends to be of a different kind from that of the teacher: Caulk (1994) found that teacher feedback was rather general, whereas student responses were more specific. Thus it can be seen as complementary, as Berg (1999) and Chaudron (1984) note.

Finally, it may be that becoming a critical reader of others’ writing may make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing.

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Audience

It is clear that writers need to write for audiences, preferably those that can give more or less immediate feedback. Most writing done by L2 learners will be for communicative purposes: a responsive ‘real’ audience will let the writer know if her message was effective, and will encourage the writer to formulate her writing in line with the characteristics and demands of her readers. Peer audiences are also potentially more sympathetic than the more distant and possibly more judgemental teacher audience.

Collaboration and communication

Peer feedback, with its potentially high level of response and interaction between reader and writer can encourage a collaborative dialogue in which two-way feedback is established, and meaning is negotiated between the two parties. It also ‘fosters a myriad of communicative behaviors’ (Villamil and de Guerrero 1996: 69) and highly complex socio-cognitive interactions involving arguing, explaining, clarifying, and justifying.

Peer response vs. teacher response

Peer response operates on a more informal level than teacher response. This may encourage or motivate writers, or at least provide a change from (and a complement to) the more one-way interaction between the teacher and the student, where the student may end up making revisions without necessarily agreeing with or even understanding the teacher’s authoritative comments. The writer receiving comments from peers retains the right to reject comments, and is thus more able to maintain the possession of her own texts. In any case, teacher feedback may not be nearly as effective as has been believed. There may in fact be many deficiencies in the written comments of teachers: they have been criticized as being unspecific, incomprehensible, contradictory, inconsistent, inaccurate, meaningless to the student, vague, over-general, abstract, formulaic and idiosyncratic (see, for example, Zamel 1985).

It is also obvious that peers can spend much more time providing feedback on an individual draft than the overworked teacher, and there will also be a quicker ‘turnover’ time between finishing writing a draft and receiving feedback. Thus there is both a higher density of feedback, as well as a more immediate interaction between writer and reader.

Student attitudes

Students themselves may not only find the peer response experience ‘beneficial’ (Mendonça and Johnson 1994: 765) and see ‘numerous advantages’ of working in groups (Nelson and Murphy 1992: 188), but its social dimension can also enhance the participant’s attitudes towards writing (Chaudron 1984).

Problematic aspects of peer feedback

Against these enthusiastic claims and generally positive findings, however, the following considerations should be taken into account.

Time constraints

Whether feedback is oral or written, the peer response process itself is a lengthy one. Reading a draft (probably more than once), making notes, then either collaborating with another reader to reach a consensus and write the comments, or engaging orally with the writer in a feedback circle, will consume a significant amount of time.
Even before the response process begins, some form of pre-training is crucial if the activity is to be truly profitable. Here also the investment of time is considerable, since students have to learn a variety of basic procedures, as well as a series of social and interactional skills, such as arriving at a consensus, debating, questioning, asserting, defending, evaluating the logic and coherence of ideas, and expressing criticisms and suggestions in a clear, comprehensible, yet tactful way.

**Student characteristics**

Many students may need a significant amount of initial persuasion of the value of peer feedback, since they may not easily accept the idea that their peers are qualified to act as substitutes for the teacher, and critique their writing. Students from certain cultures may feel uncomfortable with certain aspects of the social interaction demanded by peer review. For example, the Chinese students in Carson and Nelson’s (1996) study tended to withhold critical comments, either to maintain group harmony, or because they were reluctant to claim a degree of authority.

Other factors—such as the age of the students or their interlanguage level—may constrain the extent to which the response activity can safely or profitably be left in the hands of the students (once the pre-training period is over), since they may find the co-operative, collaborative, aspects of peer feedback somewhat beyond them.

**Teacher roles**

Another issue requiring some consideration is that the teacher might find it difficult to hand over a significant degree of responsibility to the students, since he or she will not be able to oversee each group simultaneously, particularly if the response groups are providing oral feedback. In addition, the teacher may find it difficult not to interfere by providing feedback in addition to that of the student readers, which might well reduce the students’ motivation and commitment to their own responding. No less significant is the fact that the teacher’s role as trainer and supervisor may be rather arduous (see ‘Intervention Training’, below).

**Creating effective peer response groups**

Most of the potential problems above, regarding both practical and pedagogical issues, can be alleviated by a) properly setting up the group and establishing effective procedures, b) adequate training, that is, coaching students in the principles and practices of effective peer group interaction and response. Without such training, it is more likely that student response will be inappropriate: it may be destructive and tactless (or, conversely, overgenerous and uncritical); it may also tend towards dealing with surface matters rather than issues of meaning and content, or it may be prescriptive and authoritarian rather than collaborative and supportive (Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger 1992). In any case, as Stanley (1992: 230) points out: ‘it is not fair to expect that students will be able to perform these demanding tasks without first having been offered organized practice with and discussion of the skills involved’.

**Setting up**

The teacher interested in using peer response first has to make a number of important decisions in the setting up of the group. In terms of basic procedures, issues to consider will include: size of groups (probably three
or four; larger groups are unwieldy); number of drafts to be written (often three); evaluation (will feedback be evaluated or graded by the teacher?).

Regarding the response activity itself, the teacher will have to choose between having the students provide oral or written feedback. Although most peer response has been done by means of oral feedback, written feedback is an alternative offering a number of advantages. It gives both readers and writers more time for collaboration, consideration, and reflection than is normally possible in the cut and thrust of oral negotiation and debate; it avoids time being wasted on unimportant issues, and reduces possible friction, defensiveness, or negative interactions; it also provides the reader with a written record for later consideration. Finally, it gives students further practice in being explicit, detailed, persuasive, and audience-focused in their writing. Written feedback also gives the teacher a better chance of closely following the progress of individuals and groups, both in terms of feedback offered and revisions made. Students themselves (both as readers and writers) may also prefer giving and/or receiving written comments.

Additionally, decisions will need to be made about how the response sessions are to be organized. Should readers provide feedback independently, or should they form consensus groups in which they have to reach agreements about what feedback to present to the reader (fruitful but time-consuming)? If response is to be oral, how long is to be allowed for reader–writer interactions, and to what extent will groups be supervised? If, on the other hand, response is to be written, what degree of oral interaction is allowed for clarification or debate? To what extent might this be restricted, so as to encourage the readers to be as specific and persuasive as possible in their comments?

Finally, different heuristics may be used to guide the students’ responding, or for self-reporting. Response guidelines help students in the initial stages to focus their commenting (e.g. global-level concerns on first drafts, surface issues on second drafts). Self-report heuristics enable the student to evaluate and articulate concerns about his or her experiences as reader and writer, or to comment on the feedback received. The teacher will have to consider how this stage will be followed up (e.g. with teacher–group discussion, or teacher student conferences).

Pre-training

The objectives of pre-training are numerous and overlapping, but broadly speaking concern three areas: awareness raising (the principles and objectives of peer response); productive group interaction (collaboration, supportiveness, tact, etiquette); and productive response and revision (basic procedures, effective commenting, reader–writer dialogue, effective revision). There are a number of pre-training activities that can be effective.

- The ‘propaganda phase’. Explanation of the value of peer response vs. teacher response. Discussion of student concerns about using students to provide response. Reasons why peers at the same level can give helpful feedback. Examples of professional writers’ use of peer review. Demonstration of teachers’ own revisions from colleagues’ comments.

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Class discussion of the purpose of peer response and the role of the responder. Comparing the role of the peer reader with that of the teacher reader. Discussion of the role of the reader as a collaborator rather than corrector.

Non-threatening practice activities during which there is class modelling and discussion of adequate and inadequate commenting. The teacher could show a variety of authentic comments for the class to analyse and evaluate. Then the class could respond to a sample paragraph, discussing possible improvements as well as how these suggestions might be expressed clearly and supportively. The teacher could also model effective collaborative comments: that is, those providing a balance of explanation of weaknesses, or problems with concrete and extensive suggestions for improvements.

Small group work. Collaborative writing of short texts, and group response (either written or oral) to the writing of other groups. This could be followed up by self-evaluation activities and then group/class discussion of experiences, uncertainties, doubts regarding methods, and so on.

Discussion of effective revision. Not all students may find it easy to revise systematically from reader comments, so there could be some modelling of adequate and inadequate revision strategies. Discussion of the writer's sense of obligation to revise vs. freedom to reject comments.

Intervention training

The broad objective of intervention training as defined in Rollinson (1998) is to maximize the benefits of the peer response activity for each group and each student. The teacher deals with specific problems in the feedback or revising strategies of particular groups or individuals as they arise, and suggests techniques for improving response or revision behaviours or techniques. Although in some cases students will approach the teacher with doubts about appropriate responses or revisions, or to help them resolve uncertainties with procedures, it is the teacher's responsibility to maintain a very close contact with each group. By means of informal discussions, as well as self-report heuristics which require writers to note their feelings and reactions to the comments received, or which ask them to note their reasons for rejecting particular feedback, and through reading of the successive drafts and the revisions undertaken, the teacher can build up a detailed picture of the activities and output of each group, and the individuals comprising the group. In doing this, the teacher is in a position to suggest measures for improving the readers' commenting, or the writer's revisions. The disadvantage of this kind of intervention is that it requires considerable effort from the teacher to be effective. On the other hand, even already successful groups will benefit from such ongoing ad hoc training.

Doing peer feedback

The activity of giving feedback may proceed in a number of ways, depending on the requirements of the teacher. Pre-training should have focused the students on the need to act as collaborators rather than correctors, and the teacher may leave the groups relatively free to develop their own feedback procedures—always bearing in mind the stated objective of 'helping the writer do a better next draft'. Alternatively,
and more commonly, readers will proceed with the guidance of heuristics appropriate to the essay type and draft, reminding the students to focus on particular aspects of the writing rather than others.

Oral feedback may usefully involve reader discussion preceding the reader–writer conference, to give readers time to formulate their thoughts, and how best to convey them. Alternatively, readers may simply give their spontaneous reaction to the essay (which might be read aloud by the writer). This has the advantage of taking less time and leading to lively debates, though the response itself might be less than thorough.

During written feedback, readers can explore how to locate comments (interlineal, annotated, introductory/end), and which techniques to use (such as colour to represent different levels, types, or priority of comments) for best effect. Based on response from the writers, the readers can shape their feedback to fit his/her preferences, not only about the nature of the comments (location, detail, supportiveness, and so on), but also about the aspects of the text focused on. It is likely that different writers will have different needs, and in many cases will perceive these (see Rollinson 1998). Readers and writers can be encouraged to discuss the issue of shaping feedback to satisfy both sides, although, in practice, the kinds of comments and the ways they are made will tend to stem naturally from pre-training activities and concerns, which will in turn reflect the teacher’s priorities.

The amount of time to be spent on the different phases of writing–responding–rewriting will evidently depend on a number of factors: the level of the students, their experience in group work, the length of the essays written, whether feedback is oral or written, the number of drafts required, but above all on how much time the teacher is willing to make available for the process!

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that peer response in the writing classroom is a time-consuming activity. However, it may not be time wasted. As Bartholomae (1980) points out, it is easier to teach students (as readers) an editing procedure than it is to teach students (as writers) to write correctly at the point of transcription. Consequently, by giving the students practice in becoming critical readers, we are at the same time helping them towards becoming more self-reliant writers, who are both self-critical and who have the skills to self-edit and revise their writing. This may in the end be a more achievable pedagogical objective than getting them to do it right first time.

However, only if the class is adequately set-up and trained can the benefits of the peer feedback activity be fully realized, and even so there are considerations of age, cultural background, class size, and interlanguage level which may significantly influence overall outcomes. Nevertheless, for the teacher who perhaps wishes to escape from the tyranny of the red pen (if only temporarily) and explore an activity that can complement her own feedback to her students’ writing, collaborative peer group response is a potentially rewarding option.

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Notes
1 It should be noted, however, that not all of the steps mentioned below would need to be undertaken, since good results have been found even without students being subjected to extensive training (Caulk 1994; Rollinson 1998).

2 Such as: 1) Writing is a skill composed of many sub skills. One student might have strengths in a particular area that another does not, even if the latter is perhaps overall the better writer. 2) Even if a reader makes questionable suggestions or corrections, the writer is forced to either: (a) defend her writing, (b) look at her writing more critically, and from a different perspective, (c) seek further clarification or feedback if she is not sure. If she is certain she is right, then she is in a position to help the reader learn something. 3) It is often easier to be critical than to be creative.

3 By making properly collaborative suggestions such as: ‘We think you could talk about how these battered women feel. You can talk about their fear and loneliness, it’s important, not just that they are beaten’ (sic), the readers actively partake in the construction or reconstruction of the content of the essay, and in a real sense become co-writers, offering new material, ideas, and insights for the writer to incorporate.

References

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