Peer Feedback in Learning English Writing: Advantages and Disadvantages

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Abstract

Peer feedback is considered as an important dominant tool in enhancing the process of learning English writing. It also is regarded as a social activity. Some researchers consider peer feedback as an ineffective technique for improving students' writing and prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback. But ample of researchers have claimed that peer feedback in writing classes is useful because of the cognitive, and social benefits of peer feedback. The present article seeks to briefly summarize some of the main arguments in favor and against the role of peer feedback in learning second language writing.

Keywords: Feedback, Peer feedback, Language learning, English writing, Writing process.

Introduction

Writing is a system for interpersonal communication using various styles of language (Jalaludin, 2011). It plays a fundamental role in our personal and professional lives. In academia, writing has become central as a measure for academic success. Students attempt to gain more control over improvement of English writing skill (Hamid, 2012).As writing process approach has changed the way of teaching writing from students' final products to the process of writing, peer feedback has come to take an important part in writing instruction. Traditionally, teachers are only one who has high knowledge to provide feedback to students' writing. But nowadays, peer feedback has been known as a critical technique for improving students' writing all around the world. A growing body of research has recommended 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) because good feedback helps students understand their subject area and gives them clear guidance on how to improve their learning(Orsmond et al., 2013).

Feedback

Feedback is a key element in language learning. It can promote minimal or deep learning. Hattie and Timperely (2007) state that feedback is "information provided by an agent regarding some aspects of one's task performance". (p.81). Narciss (2008) also defines feedback as "all post-response information that is provided to a learner to inform the learner on his or her actual state of learning or performance". (p.127). what is clear from these definitions is that feedback is designed to provide an understanding of performance through offering guidance on the knowledge that they possess. One of the factors which seems to be of great importance in dealing with feedback is that it helps students to reconstruct their knowledge or skill to what is desired. Mory (2003) discusses four perspectives on how feedback supports learning. First, feedback can be considered as an incentive for increasing response rate and/ or accuracy. Second, feedback can be regarded as a reinforcer that automatically connects responses to prior stimuli (focused on correct responses). Third, feedback can be considered as information that learners can use to validate or change a previous response (focused on erroneous responses). Finally, feedback can be regarded as the provision of scaffolds to help students construct internal schemata and analysis their learning processes. A part from these perspectives on how feedback supports learning, the type of feedback varies considerably as well. Nelson and schunn (2009) identified two types of feedback, namely; cognitive and affective. In cognitive feedback, more attention is given to the content of the work and involves summarizing, specifying and explaining aspects of the work under review. Affective feedback concentrates on the quality of works and uses affective language to bestow praise ("well written") and criticism ("badly written"), or uses non-verbal expressions, such as facial expression gestures and emotional tones. Moreover, Nicole and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) suggested seven principles for feedback practice. They claimed that good feedback practice:

1- Helps clarify what good performance is (goal, criteria, expected standards);

2- Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection)in learning;

3- Delivers high-quality information to students about their learning;

4- Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;

5- Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;

6- Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;

7- Provides information to students that can be used to help shape teaching. (p.205).

Based on these principles, it is clear what feedback is trying to achieve. Sadler (1998) asserts that good feedback lies at the heart of good pedagogy with its source (i.e. teachers or peers). It must be stated that various kinds of feedback have been used in the class namely; peer feedback, conferencing, and written teacher feedback. Some innovative methods also are recommended in the class for learning such as taped commentaries and computer- based respond. It is important to mention that based on the way these types of feedbacks are given, their effect can be either positive or negative (Musa et al., 2012).Walker (2009) acknowledges that feedback must be usable by students. He points out that to be usable by students, peer feedback must be designed to help students to reduce the gap in their performance and look beyond the assignment just submitted to future work. The following section increasingly suggests that peer feedback plays a fundamental role in the kind of scaffolding that students need to reduce or close gaps in their learning process.

Peer feedback

Peer feedback, which is referred to under different names such as peer response, peer review, peer editing, and peer evaluation, can be defined as "use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other is such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing" (Liu and Hansen, 2002:1). The rationale of peer feedback is explained by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) claims that mind develops through one's interaction with the world around him/her. He emphasize that learning is not an individual activity; but rather a cognitive activity that the nature of learning shifts the focus on learning from individual to the interaction within a social context. Thereby, peer interaction is cardinal to the improvement of students' learning, because it allows students to construct knowledge through social sharing and interaction (Liu et al., 2001).

Peer feedback and writing

In the past two decades, feedback has been increasingly used in English as a second/ foreign language (ESL/EFL) writing instruction (Zhao, 2010). Some researchers profess that peer feedback has a pivotal role in improving student writing skills and learning achievement (Topping et al., 2000; Plutsky & Wilson, 2004). Richer (1992) compared the effects two kinds of feedback, peer directed and teacher feedback, on first year college students' writing proficiency in an experimental study with 87 participants. The result indicated that using peer feedback provides a feasible method college student to enhance their writing skills and improve their learning achievement. Lin et al., (2001) in their study found that specific peer

feedback and critical peer feedback may greatly facilitate students improving their writing skills. In addition, in their quasi-experimental study comparing three methods for teaching student writing, Plutsky and Wilson (2004) found that peer feedback helped students become proficient writers. More importantly, most students view peer feedback as effective as the instructors. Jacobs et al., (1998) found nearly the same percentage 93% of their EFL students in Hong Kong and Taiwan said they would like to receive peer feedback as one kind of feedback. According to Wakabayashi (2013) through peer feedback, learners engage in critical evaluation of peer text for the purpose of exchanging help for revision. Because learners can learn more about writing and revision by reading other's drafts critically and their awareness of what makes writing successful and effective can be enhanced and, lastly learners eventually become more autonomous writers (Maarof et al., 2011).

Advantages of peer feedback

Peer feedback has been advocated in several studies for a number of benefits. For example, Hyland (2000) mentions that peer feedback encourages student to participate in the classroom activity and make them less passively teacher- dependent. Yarrow and Topping (2001:262) claim that peer feedback plays a pivotal role in "increased engagement and time spent on-task, immediacy and individualization of help, goal specification, explaining, prevention of information processing overload, promoting, modeling and reinforcement". Moreover, using peer feedback can lead less writing apprehension and more confidence as well as establish a social context for writing. Yang et al., (2006) also add that peer feedback is beneficial in developing critical thinking, learner autonomy and social interaction among students. More importantly, the practice of peer feedback allows students to receive more individual comments as well as giving reviewers the opportunity to practice and develop different language skills (Lundstrom and Baker, 2009).

Disadvantages of peer feedback

Despite its perceived benefits, some researchers found that peer feedback were viewed with skepticism and produced few benefits. A number of studies challenged the strong positive comments about peer review and cautioned that some peers are likely to comment on surface errors and give advice that does not help revision. In doing research on the impact of peer and teacher feedback on writing of secondary school EFL students in Hong Kong, Tsui and Ng(2000) discovered that all students prefer teacher feedback than peer feedback. The main reason is that they assume teacher is the one who is qualified to provide them with useful comments. So the teacher is defined as the only source of authority for giving the suitable comments. Saito and Fujita (2004) report that a number of studies indicate that there are a number of biases associated with peer feedback including friendship, reference, purpose(development vs. grading) feedback (effects of negative feedback on future performance), and collusive (lack of differentiation) bias. Another issue of concern is that most peer responses focused on product rather than the processes of writing, and many students in L2 contexts focused on sentence- level errors (local errors) rather than on the content and ideas (global errors) (Storch, 2004).

Conclusion

From the studies reviewed, it can be concluded that peer feedback on writing develops students to improve their knowledge through providing opportunities to think critically, and to improve their autonomy. It is noteworthy that peer feedback has come to take an important part in writing instruction because it provides a flexible platform to help students writing practice.

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