

Peer Reviews in a Hong Kong Tertiary Classroom

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Peer reviews are becoming increasingly popular in second language (L2) composition pedagogy. This article describes the implementation of peer reviews in a Hong Kong tertiary classroom: the background, classroom procedure, types of students' negotiations during peer reviews, comparisons of students' drafts before and after peer reviews, and interviews with students. The results, together with the students' positive comments on peer reviews, support the need to introduce peer reviews in L2 writing instruction. The article concludes with some suggestions about ways to incorporate peer reviews in the writing classroom.

Introduction

Peer review is a process where students read drafts written by their fellow students and give each other suggestions to improve the writing. Peer review, however, differs from *peer editing*, *peer evaluation*, and *peer assessment* in that the focus of the former is on the review process, which includes not only editing, evaluating, and assessing, but also responding to the content of the essay and how the essay is written (Mangelsdorf, 1992). Students' attention is focused on how meaning is created in writing and on writing as a vehicle for communication, rather than writing as a formal product. Peer reviews, therefore, "support the shift from a product to a process emphasis in writing instruction" (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988, p. 124). Such a technique in writing pedagogy is underpinned by writing research theories that advocate writing as a process of drafting and redrafting, as well as writing as a process of communicating to a real audience. It is also in line with the goals of a learner-centered classroom, which promote the development of autonomy through collaborative learning.

Benefits of Peer Reviews

The usefulness of peer review as a technique for L1 writing pedagogy is well documented in the literature (Barnes 1976; Brief 1984; Cazden 1988; Forman & Cazden, 1985). There is also research evidence to point to the benefits of peer review in L2 writing instruction (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Mittan, 1989; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Stanley, 1992, Tipper & Malone, 1995). In the traditional classroom, writing is often done in isolation—the students write on

their own, hand in the product to the teacher, get written feedback from him or her, and finally put aside the writing. This is followed by another cycle and the pattern persists. Peer review is a technique that reverses such a traditional approach to writing. Students may still start off by writing on their own; however, once the first draft is done, they get their peers to read it and comment on it. Then they revise it, taking into account their peers' remarks. Writing becomes more purposeful and meaningful as it is read by an authentic audience (Mittan, 1989). Peer reviews reflect writing as a truly communicative process rather than an artificial, lonely exercise where students write for a pseudo-reader, the teacher, who reads students' essays predominantly for assessment purposes rather than for real communication.

Peer review is a useful technique for encouraging revision in writing. It provides a true incentive for students to revise their work. What is more direct and relevant than a peer saying, "This sentence is not clear to me," or "I don't understand this part"? Exposing student writers to readers, who are their fellow students not only broadens the audience, but helps develop their critical thinking skills—both as readers and writers. As readers, students read their classmates' drafts carefully, make judgments, and attempt to put across their messages clearly so as to help their peers. As writers, they have to listen to their peers, judge the usefulness and relevance of their comments, and respond accordingly. The process enables the writers to reflect on their own writing, clarify their thoughts, and come to a better understanding of the needs and expectations of the readers. Peer review provides the best means for writers to turn "writer-based prose" to "reader-based prose" (Flower, 1979).

Peer reviews also provide opportunities for collaborative learning. Students in pairs or small groups can pool ideas, and it is through interacting with others that students learn and develop (Vygotsky, 1978). Students learn to become more autonomous writers as they are prepared to write without the help of a teacher (Jacobs, 1989). Through collaborative learning, students can gain a better understanding of their peers' difficulties in writing, and as a result they may gain more confidence in themselves (Mittan, 1989). Peer reviews can boost confidence, make writing a more positive learning activity, and help students develop greater independence in writing.

Implementing Peer Reviews

Background

The peer reviews described in this article took place in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), where English is taught as a compulsory subject to all first-year and some second-year and final-year students who have been learning English for at least 13 years (6 years primary, and 7 years secondary). Although Cantonese is the students' native language, English is

neither a foreign nor a second language, but an auxiliary language (Luke & Richards, 1982) which has a unique status in Hong Kong. The fact is that although English is an official language (apart from Chinese), it is not the language for social communication. The majority of students in Hong Kong universities study their subjects through English, write their assignments, and take their examinations in English (except those who major in Chinese); however, the medium of instruction is increasingly mixed code, that is, both Cantonese and English. Writing in English takes on a particularly important role in the tertiary context, because so much that students learn has to be tested and examined in English. Writing is also important in the workplace because much correspondence is carried out in English.¹

At the HKPU, however, there was no writing program, writing workshop, or writing clinic for students who had specific problems or needs in their academic writing.² Writing is taught as part of EAP in the academic courses. The classroom described in this article consisted of four final-year students of the BA in Language and Communication Course. These students, three female and one male, aged 21-22, came to me for a one-hour weekly tutorial on English communication skills. They all took a public examination before they entered the university, and their use of English results ranged from C to D (E being the passing grade). According to the students, they had no experience in peer reviews before, and writing in their previous two years of studies was treated as a one-off activity. These students appeared to me to be rather motivated learners, as they told me at the beginning of the academic term that they treasured the one hour of English each week. It was thought that the small group of relatively motivated learners provided excellent opportunities to try peer reviews and to discover their usefulness as a pedagogical technique in the writing classroom.

Classroom Procedure

In the course students were required to turn in a number of written assignments, including an application letter (and a CV), a film or book review, and a project proposal or introduction. The students wrote a first draft and were told to bring it to the lesson. They then worked in pairs (a different partner each time) to review each other's draft. A peer review sheet containing a list of guided questions (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994) was given to students to help facilitate the review process (see Appendix 1). The students in pairs read each other's draft and took turns reviewing. The reviews were all conducted in English, lasted 30 to 40 minutes, and were tape-recorded. After the peer review, the students redrafted their essay, taking into account the peer's comments.

Altogether four drafts (pre- and post-peer review) from two topics were collected. The first essay was an application letter, and the second was a book or film review of students' own choice. Before the end of the course each

student was interviewed individually (in English) to elicit their views of peer reviews. All in all, three types of data were collected from the peer review process: (a) peer negotiations (generated from the peer reviews), (b) students' written drafts, and (c) interviews with students. The three types of data would shed light on: (a) the kinds of negotiations that occurred during peer reviews, (b) the effects of peer reviews on students' revision activities, and (c) students' views of the usefulness of peer reviews.

Peer Review Negotiations

The peer negotiations were transcribed, and a coding scheme developed (see Appendixes 2A & 2B). The categories of the scheme were mostly generated from the transcribed data, with some taken or adapted from the coding schemes by Mendonça and Johnson (1994) and Stanley (1992). The peer negotiations were divided into two categories—peer reviewers' responses and writers' responses. Seven types of negotiations were found in the peer reviewers' responses. Table 1 (see Appendix 1) shows the type and frequency of the negotiations. The most frequent kinds of negotiation were *suggesting* (25%) and *evaluating* (23%), followed by *praising* (14%), *request for explanation/clarification* (13%), *explanation of opinion* (11%), *comprehension check* (7%), and *restatement* (7%). (Examples of the categories drawn from students' drafts are included in Appendix 2A.) Regarding the writers' responses, eight types of negotiations were found. Table 2 (see Appendix 1) shows the type and frequency of the negotiations. The most frequent was *explanation of unclear point or content* (41%), followed by *accepting reviewer's remark* (18%), *eliciting* (16%), *justifying the draft* (12%), *announcing a problem* (7%), *repeating/reinterpreting reviewer's remark* (3%), *comprehension check* (2%), and *disagreeing with reviewer's remark* (1%). Examples of these categories drawn from students' drafts are included in Appendix 1B. It is interesting to note that *grammar correction* did not at all occur in the writers' responses.

The relatively high frequency of suggesting and evaluating by the reviewers indicates students' effort to help each other improve the writing. Praising occurred relatively frequently, which stands in stark contrast with the total absence of grammar correction. It may be that students were caught in role conflicts "where they negotiate between the demands of the classroom and the rules of peer relations" (Tipper & Malone, 1995, p. 78). That is, they had to resolve the conflicting roles of critic, collaborator, and peer. A more plausible explanation is perhaps cultural, that is, students might think that they had to be modest and courteous to each other (essence of Confucian teaching), and hence they were much more ready to praise than to criticize. Although students did evaluate their partner's draft, the suggestions were generally neutral and not negative (e.g., *I think you use quite a lot of difficult words*). Also, the writers tended to agree with the reviewers' comments. Nonetheless, the variety of negotiation types in students' peer reviews sug-

gests that the peer review process can harness students' communicative power (Mittan, 1989). Peer reviews stimulate genuine communication, involving students in practising an array of skills such as reading (especially reading of a higher order, e.g., inferencing) and discussing (agreeing, disagreeing, clarifying, questioning, etc.).

Students' Revisions

The drafts were compared to identify the nature of revisions made. Two patterns of revisions emerged from the comparisons of students' first and second drafts: (a) revisions that were generated from the peer review (R/PR); and (b) revisions that were not generated from the peer review (R/NPR). A third pattern was noted—nonrevisions despite input from the peer review (NR/PR), that is, the writer did not make any changes to a certain part of the text even though it was discussed in the peer review. Altogether, 20 instances of revisions (12 R/PR; 8 R/NPR) were revealed, and 6 instances of NR/PR were found. Table 3 (see Appendix 1) shows the type and frequency of revisions found in students' essays. Examples of R/PR, R/NPR, and NR/PR from students' drafts are provided in Appendix 3.

The number of revisions students made as a result of the comments of the peers is encouraging, and reinforces the value of peer review as an impetus for revision. It is useful to provide the writers with a genuine reader who can tell them what is not clear or what needs to be further developed. Through explaining unclear points, justifying their own writing, and so forth, the writers become clearer about their ideas. It is equally, if not more, encouraging to know that the students also revised their drafts even though they were not prompted by their peers. This reinforces the usefulness of peer review as a technique to stimulate revision in writing.

Interviews with Students

Interviews were held and transcribed to find out students' views of peer reviews. All four students who took part in the peer reviews said that they enjoyed the process because they could exchange ideas with each other through discussions. They also found it useful to have their drafts read by their peers. Student A said, "Sometimes, there are some unclear points in my essays, which cannot be detected by myself, but after being read by my partner, those unclear points are pointed out, and I can clarify them when I write the second draft." Three of the students thought that although the teacher tended to comment on language only, their peers could give them many ideas about how to improve the content. Also, students liked to let their peers read their drafts because their comments were more encouraging than those of the teachers. Student B said, "They [peers] won't say your writing is bad." However, two of them pointed out that they were not ready

to point out grammatical mistakes. Student C said, "My classmate did not tell me about the language." Student A explained by saying,

But I don't feel at ease pointing out my partner's grammatical mistakes because I don't know whether she likes being corrected or not. I am afraid that my partner would feel awkward if I did comment on her grammatical mistakes.

Student D thought that it was all right to point out grammatical mistakes and it was the attitude that mattered: "I think it is the way or how you tell her." Student B suggested that they could give their drafts to more than one classmate. Although the four students had slightly different opinions of peer review, the interview data by and large corroborate the finding that students tended not to be critical, and they did not feel comfortable offering comments on grammar.

Conclusions: Further Suggestions for Peer Review Lessons

In order to incorporate peer reviews effectively in the classroom, a number of areas need to be addressed. The following reflections, I hope, can provide helpful suggestions for teachers who are interested in trying peer reviews in their classrooms.

Making the purpose explicit to students. Before peer reviews, it would be useful to let the students know about the purpose of the exercise and what they are expected to do. For example, the teacher can spell out the aim of the exercise explicitly, reminding students of the importance to give both positive and negative comments. Orienting students to the value of peer review is an important step, as noted by Tipper and Malone (1995), as success in peer reviews largely depends on students' attitudes and values (p. 83).

Grouping of students. Peer review requires students to critique each other's work and is therefore potentially sensitive and threatening. It is important that students work in a pair or a group where they feel comfortable. They also need to develop trust in each other. Frequent switching of groups on a random basis may not be helpful. Apart from pairs, as suggested by one of the students, students can work in a small group so that their drafts can be read by more than one person.

The teacher's role. It is often the case that students do not know how to be critical in a constructive manner or how to be concrete and specific in their suggestions. For peer reviews to become fruitful and productive, teachers have an important role to play. They can help by modeling the review process, either with the whole class or with individual students through teacher conferencing. It will be useful if peer reviews are sometimes used in conjunction with teacher conferencing—not necessarily on the same draft, but perhaps teacher conferencing on a post-peer review draft. This could

provide students with occasional input from the teacher, informing them about different ways to go about reviewing their classmates' drafts.

The student's role. The whole purpose of peer review is to enable students to become more aware of the demands of writing and to take greater responsibility for learning. It would be useful if students could be asked to design their own review sheet, perhaps a different one for a different writing task. In doing this, they become more aware of the criteria required for evaluating writing, especially writing of different kinds. However, this entails more work on the part of the students and has to be done when the teacher feels that the students are ready to take more responsibility for the peer review process.

Making peer review a regular activity and part of language instruction. Peer review is a useful activity. However, it tends to be regarded as a peripheral language activity, done once in a while to fill a gap in the teaching syllabus, or serving as a break from the normal routine. In fact, peer review can be used more frequently and can be incorporated into the classroom as a regular activity—maybe with less time spent, but done more frequently. Writing will then become a more interesting and stimulating—and less daunting—experience for students.

Notes

¹It has been predicted that the role of English in Hong Kong society may change after the change of sovereignty (i.e., after 1 July 1997); however, it is quite unlikely that writing in English will lose its importance, given Hong Kong's strategic position as an international center.

²Recently, the English Language Study Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, which offers supplementary English for weaker students, has added writing as one of the focuses of teaching.

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Appendix 1

Peer Review Sheet (taken from Mendonça & Johnson 1994)

1. Before starting the peer review, explain to your partner what your paper is about.
2. Exchange papers. Spend about 15 minutes reading your partner's paper. While you are reading, consider the following:
 - What is the main idea of your partner's paper?
 - Is there any idea in his or her paper that is not clear?
 - What suggestions could you give to your partner in order to improve his or her paper?

Table 1
Type and Frequency of Negotiations found in Reviewers' Responses

Type of negotiation	Frequency of Occurrence	
	Number	%
Request for explanation/clarification	16	13
Comprehension check	8	7
Explanation of opinion	14	11
Restatement	9	7
Suggesting	31	25
Evaluating	28	23
Praising	17	14
Total	123	100

Table 2
Type and Frequency of Negotiations found in Writers' Responses

<i>Type of negotiation</i>	<i>Frequency of Occurrence</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Explanation of unclear point/content	39	41
Comprehension check	2	2
Restating/reinterpreting reviewer's remark	3	3
Eliciting	15	16
Announcing a problem	7	7
Accepting reviewer's remark	17	18
Justifying the draft	11	12
Disagreeing with reviewer's remark	1	1
Total	95	100

Table 3
Type and frequency of revisions

<i>(R/PR)</i>	<i>(R/NPR)</i>	<i>(NR/PR)</i>
12 (60%)	8 (40%)	6

R/PR = Revised/Peer review; R/NPR = Revised/Not in peer review; NR/PR = Not revised/Peer review.

3. Write down comments or underline ideas in your partner's paper which you have difficulty understanding.
4. Take turns to review each other's draft.

Appendix 2A

Peer Review Coding Categories, Definitions, and Examples Peer Reviewer Responses

Request for explanation or clarification

Reviewers try to get further explanation of what the writer has said or what is not clear to them in the essays (e.g., an unknown term or unclear idea).

Example:

*Why do you think "life's greatest grief is falling in love with the same sex?"
What is the meaning of this word?*

Comprehension check

Reviewers ask writers if they have understood what has been said.

Example:

I don't know this word. Is it ...?

Explanation of opinion

Reviewers explain their remark, e.g., why they think a term or idea is not clear and should or should not be used in the essay, or why they think the writers should follow their suggestions.

Example:

... within the same sentence you try to convey more than one message, also that is why when I read it, sometimes I will feel confused ...

Restatement

Reviewers restate what has been written to show understanding.

Example:

You mean they are looked down upon by other people.

Suggesting

Reviewers suggest ways to improve the essays.

Example:

I think if you can write more about your own feelings, then I think it can be more comprehensive.

Evaluating

Reviewers give judgments on a certain aspect of the writing, e.g., vocabulary.

Example:

I think you use quite a lot of difficult words. To me it is quite difficult.

Praising

Reviewers praise a certain aspect of the writing. The praise can be general or specific.

Example:

In terms of the grammar and use of verbs, I think it is good, excellent.

Appendix 2B

Writer Responses

Explanation of unclear point/content

Writers explain the subject of the essay.

Example:

My film review is ... The actors are ... The story told about ...

Comprehension check

Writers ask reviewers if they have understood what has been said.

Example:

Do you mean this connection is not clear?

Restating/interpreting reviewer's remark

Writers restate what has been said to show understanding.

Example:

Reviewer: I think you have to state your interests.

Writer: *My interests in the job.*

Eliciting

Writers ask reviewers for advice or opinions.

Example:

Does that sound OK?

Do you find any grammatical mistakes?

Announcing a problem

Writers talk about their own problem

Example:

I'm afraid the letter will be too long if I include this.

Accepting reviewer's remark

Writers accept reviewers' comments.

Example:

Yes.

Thank you.

Justifying the draft

Writers respond to reviewers' remarks by justifying their drafts.

Example:

(In response to a remark that there are a lot of difficult words in the essay.)

I just don't want to use the same words. So I use the thesaurus to look up other words.

Disagreeing with reviewer's remark

Writers disagree with reviewers' comments.

Example:

Reviewer: *I think you show your confidence in your letter.*

Writer: *No, not really. I don't think so*

Appendix 3

Examples of Revised/Peer Review (R/PR)

In an application letter written by Student A, Student B suggested that Student A include the details of the course of study and relate it to the post applied for.

Student B: *... I think you should relate with your job, no, co-relate with your course, what you learned in your course, and state in your letter.*

Student A: *It's a good point....*

Student A's second draft had an additional part about the course he was doing (see underlined):

Student A's first draft

I am a student of the English Department of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and will graduate next year.

Student A's second draft

I am a student of the English Department of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and will graduate next year. I believe the comprehensive program in which I have been studying enables and equips me to be a language teacher. Other than emphasizing language and communication skills, the course also concentrates on language acquisition from the perspective of psychology.

Examples of Revised/Not in Peer Review (R/NPR)

Student D elaborated on the original proposition about homosexuality being a taboo in the second draft (the underlined part), although it was not discussed in the peer review.

Student D's first draft

Despite of rapid social change and the wide spread of liberty, homosexuality is still a taboo nowadays.

Student D's second draft

Despite of rapid social change and the wide spread of liberty, homosexuality is still a taboo nowadays. Mass media avoid mentioning this sensitive topic, even the mainstream Hollywood films evade dealing with it.

Examples of Not Revised/Peer Review (NR/PR)

In the peer review between Students B and D, B suggested that D indicate her interest in the post she applied for.

Student B: ... You didn't state that it is your interest to be a [sales] representative.

Student D: ... I don't know whether it is my interest or not. Actually, I can't decide yet what post I want to apply now at that moment. So ...

However, Student D did not make any change to this part in the second draft.

Student D's first and second drafts (same)

Adequate professional training in language and communication and a desire to work hard are the qualities of an efficient Customer Services Representative. I feel I have the necessary qualifications and experience needed for the above post.