

A Review of Literature on Peer Review in ESL/EFL Writing

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Abstract: Peer review is an activity for revising writing by peers. It gets more and more attention in pedagogical use with the spread of the popular student-centered idea. This paper focuses on peer review use in ESL/EFL writing classes. It reviews the recent papers from three aspects: the effectiveness of peer review, the factors influencing its effectiveness and the necessary training for student reviewers. Some limitations and implications are given in the final part, aiming at help both teachers and students achieve better peer review effect and pointing out the future research directions for the researchers in this area.

Key words: peer review, effectiveness, motivation, training

Introduction

In the past decade, researchers and teachers paid more and more attention to improving students' writing skills by making efforts in the revision stage. Peer review activity applying in the ESL/ EFL writing class is one of the sensible pedagogical strategies, which is defined as an activity in the revising stage of writing in which students receive feedback about their writing from other students—their peers. And this term is often used interchangeably with peer review, peer editing, peer critique, peer assessment, and peer feedback.

This paper develops as follows: First, it will review several papers in recent years concerning the effectiveness of using peer review in the context of ESL or EFL writing class. Then, the papers about those factors which may influence the effectiveness of peer review will be presented and interpreted. Third, it will offer some implications that training peer reviewers should be necessary by reviewing the related papers. Finally, some suggestions are provided when implementing this activity.

The Effectiveness of Using Peer Review

Nearly all the studies written in the last decade concerning the use of peer review in ESL or EFL writing context confirm its effectiveness in certain aspects, such as in cognitive aspects, pedagogical aspects and social aspects, etc. The benefits of the peer review process occur for both peer reviewer and reviewees. Using peer review in writing classes is not only discussed by researchers but also practiced by teachers in their own classrooms.

Van Den Berg et al. (2006) conducted a multiple-case study to examine the use of peer review, which involved 168 students and 9 teachers. In their study, the students expressed their ideas that they valued peer feedback as being helpful for revising, and reading and assessing their fellows' work was really a useful activity; most teachers also thought that peer assessment was an effective means of stimulating subject matter discussions between students. The authors noted and summarized several most important design features supporting effective peer critique and recommended that a combination of written and oral combination should be of good use.

In terms of effectiveness, peer review has also been compared with self-review, teacher review in some studies reviewed. Suzuki's (2008) study is one of them, which examined and compared 24 Japanese students' self-revision and peer revision processes in EFL writing. The results of the study suggest that the two conditions of revision in L2 writing classes may have an optimal order, that is, peer revision first (for improving the content of writing) and self revision later (for improving the language forms).

Grace and Paul (2009) also conducted a study investigating the effectiveness of peer feedback from communal, cognitive, cooperative and pedagogical perspectives. Their study involved 16 English majors from a National University in Taiwan, at a required writing course. The results of the study revealed that most language learners believed that peer feedback positively assisted their learning in English writing and many agreed that they preferred peer feedback to teachers' feedback. The authors also recommended that peer feedback pedagogy should be applied in English class.

Crossman and Kite (2012), using mixed methods, did an empirical investigation of the use of directed peer review to improve writing

. The analysis of their study revealed that there was a significant improvement from the initial draft to the final submission, specifically reflecting in four aspects: focus, support, organization and writing conventions, which suggested that the face-to-face peer editing did improve the quality of a revised written work and have the potential to develop essential skills relating to writing.

The number of studies discussing the effectiveness of peer review forms a big proportion in the reviewed studies concerning peer review. All the above studies on the effectiveness positively regard peer review using in ESL or EFL writing classes as a rather effective way, more effective compared to teacher review and self-review in the content, structure and logic of ESL or EFL writing.

Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Peer Review

Although the positive effect of peer review using in writing classes has been widely admitted, the improvement of students' writing ability through peer review process still depends. In recent years, with more and more attention to the reasonable use of peer review, some factors influencing the effectiveness of peer review use has gradually been investigated.

The English proficiency level of students is one of the factors taken into first account. Liao and lo (2012) conducted a comparative study to explore the variations in peer review comments provided by high- and low-proficiency L2 learners . The results of the comments analysis showed that the differences between the high- and low-performing writers are very distinct in comment type and depth in that high-proficiency writers are more capable than their low-proficiency counterparts in elaborating their thoughts – they provided more feedback in explaining the problems, making suggestions, and acknowledging the strength of the writing and their comments are relatively more in-depth and detailed.

Yu and Lee (2014) examined the influence of students' motives for participating in group peer feedback in their case study . The study is guided by the constructs of activity and motive in activity theory. The findings of this study revealed that the two Chinese EFL students' group peer feedback activities and their subsequent revisions were driven and defined by their motives, which are shaped and mediated by their sociocultural context.

Students' perception or attitudes towards the peer review activity, which can be related to very complex social relationships and personal feelings, also influences the effectiveness of peer review using in writing classes. Foley (2013) explored student views of peer assessment with a case study involving students at an international school . The findings of this study showed that the overall attitudes of students towards peer assessment within the study were positive, but students' perceptions of peer review concerned with more complex social interactions, for example, the feedback from peers would not be held to be so valuable compared to the teacher. It concluded that students preferred for anonymity in the peer assessment process and students' understandings and perceptions of the peer review process should be paid more attention when teachers plan to adopt this pedagogical activity.

There seems to be very limited studies on the investigation of the factors influencing the effectiveness of peer review in L2 writing classes. Few studies have investigated the L2 students' motives for participating in peer review and even fewer have concerned about students' perceptions about this activity. In fact, these factors cannot be neglected, because students themselves are the core actors taking part in peer review, their internal feelings will make a difference to the process and the result of the activity.

Making Peer Review Effective: Training Student Reviewers

A few studies reviewed about peer review in writing class by teachers emphasize the importance and efficacy of trained peer feedback. Based on their experience of implementing peer review in class, they make such suggestions in studies that carefully designed and step-by-step training is really necessary for providing effective feedback and of more help comparing to the untrained peer feedbacks.

Hu (2005), a teacher, implemented peer review in his own class. He described students' performance and discussed the training activities he prepared his students for effective peer review in his practitioner research . He shared the whole process of his developing use of peer review in his English for Academic Purposes writing course and his experiences and suggestions gotten from this practice. He concluded that peer review was used most successfully in the third group in which more useful training activities and teacher follow-ups were included.

Although to date, not many studies have examined how the training activities influence the effect of peer review activity, the answer of

whether it influences is definitely “yes”. From the type, the content or the ways of expressions of the peer feedback, trained reviewers can do better compared with the untrained.

Conclusion:

This paper reviewed the recent studies to help both the teachers and the students in ESL/EFL environment get a basic understanding of peer review use. To implement this activity, some suggestions are as follows: first, students’ English proficiency and their attitudes toward peer review should be taken into first account. Students with low English proficiency may not provide high-quality feedback and get a good understanding and revision of the feedback; second, teachers would better group students reasonably by considering some social factors, such as students’ relationship and their personal situation; third, peer review should be combined with suitable teacher follow-up feedback and /or self- review and reflection in order to achieve better effects.

Although the reviewed studies have made great contributions in ESL/EFL writing area, few researchers have conducted longitude study to see the improvement and change of the long effectiveness of peer review, and limited researches have investigated peer review use among postgraduates which are with higher English proficiency and writing more academic papers. I hope future studies can fill this gap and give more precise interpretation of the use of peer review.

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