



On the Analysis of the Effective Implementation of Peer Feedback in Non-English Majors' Writing

YU Zhouyuan^{[a],*}

^[a]College of Life Science, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

For non-English majors, English writing is a difficult problem. As a key stage in writing process, peer feedback plays a very important role in writing. It has been proven to be an effective way to improve students' writing. But its implementation can be affected and limited by some factors. In order to make better use of peer feedback, this paper first introduces peer feedback, and then analyzes the varied factors which may hinder the implementation of peer feedback, finally makes some suggestions to effectively implement peer feedback. By applying cooperative learning principles, making a checklist, combing peer feedback with teacher feedback and making students choosing the language freely, it can make students participate in the activities of peer feedback, ensure them to carry out peer feedback more actively and finally improve their writing ability.

Key words: Peer feedback; Cooperative learning; Factors

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INTRODUCTION

Writing, as a skill of output, is one of the four basic skills in English study. But it is considered the most difficult of the four basic language skills to master. Although college

English is a compulsory course for college students in China, writing is only one part of college English teaching. Though not majoring in English, all freshmen, sophomores and first-year graduates have to learn English in the classroom in almost all universities. The normal writing practice for non-English majors follows a routine: The teacher assigns a topic, the students begin thinking about it individually and put down their thoughts into words and then hand in their final drafts. Although they practice writing in this way again and again, they find it still difficult to improve their writing ability. On the one hand, many teachers devote much time to teaching writing but achieve little; on the other hand, the students generally reflect that it is hard to write a composition. Many college English teachers and students have been plagued by how to effectively carry out college English writing and improve students' writing ability.

Revising is an important stage in writing process, but it is often neglected by students. Many people have the wrong ideas that revision is simply a correction of mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics. It is certainly not right. When revising, students should focus on the content, which is the soul of the writing work. More widely reported is the finding that writers revise differently, with better writers focusing on content and less able writers on surface form (Krashen, 1984, p.15). As a very important stage in process writing, from the 1970s, peer feedback (sometimes referred to peer revision, peer assessment, or peer editing) has been widely applied by writing teachers in first language (Bruffee, 1984; Elbow, 1973, 1981; Gere, 1987; Spear, 1988). Although process writing has been introduced to China since 1990s, it has not been employed in Non-English majors' classroom. It is peer feedback that hinders the application of process writing among non-English majors (Han, 2001). In order to effectively apply peer feedback of process writing among non-English majors, this paper mainly introduces peer feedback, analyzes the

factors affecting the implementation of peer feedback, and then proposes suggestions about how to effectively apply peer feedback in Non-English majors' writing.

1. PEER FEEDBACK

1.1 The Definition of Peer Feedback

Feedback refers to the comments or information writers receive from readers in the writing process. The function of feedback is to provide useful information for writers to revise their writing (Zhu, 2010). Writing feedback mainly includes teacher's feedback, peer feedback and self-feedback. In Chinese College English classroom, teacher's feedback is more often used, and the other two are relatively less used.

Peer feedback is an activity in the revising stage of writing in which students receive feedback about their writing from other students—their peers, typically students work in pairs or small groups, read each other's compositions and ask questions or give comments or suggestions (Richards et al., 2000). It is also the writing teaching activities in which students exchange and read drafts to offer suggestion for revision, or students act as groups to make comments on one of the draft of members under the guidance of the teacher either in verbal or written language (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994). Peer feedback is seen as a way of giving more control to students since it allows them to make active decisions about whether or not to use their peers' comments as opposed to a passive reliance on teachers' feedback (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Mittan, 1989). Peer feedback, in which students offer comments on one another's writing in written and oral formats through active engagement over multiple drafts, has become a common feature of process-oriented writing classrooms (Stanley, 2011). Peer feedback has also proved to have an impact on affect, increasing motivation through the sense of personal responsibility, and improving self-confidence (Topping, 2000). Since student reviewers soon perceive that other students experience the same difficulties in writing that they do, peer feedback also leads to a reduction in writer apprehension and an increase in writer confidence. Responding to peer work involves students in each other's writing, so that they can see similar problems and weaknesses in their own writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

In a word, peer feedback focuses on the interaction between the writer and the reader, encourages collaborative communication. In a group or in peers, the students read their writing, ask questions and give their opinions or make comments. It is beneficial for students to improve their English writing.

1.2 Previous Researches About Peer Feedback

With the popularity of process writing approach, peer feedback has got widespread attention. Many researchers

abroad and at home have done much work on the effectiveness of peer feedback. Most of them revealed that peer readers can provide useful feedback (Caulk, 1994; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Rollinson, 2005).

Jacobs' (1989) study shows peer feedback can increase students' consciousness of autonomous learning and sense of responsibility. Zhang (1995) in his experiment found that peer feedback is better than self-evaluation, and there might be some small mistakes in peer feedback, but no account does it mean that teacher feedback is more effective than peer feedback. Tsui and Ng (2000) also find that students benefit more from reading the drafts of their peers than from written comments. As Rollinson (2005) discovers that 65% of the comments are accepted either completely or partially by readers and writing may make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing. Ji (2010) investigated through questionnaires that 70% learners are in favor of peer feedback, and 68% students believe that they can improve their writing ability through reading and offering peer feedback. Cai (2011) finds in his experiment that peer feedback can sharpen students' awareness of writing for readers, enhance their motivation for learning and mastering writing skills, make them quality-minded of their writing, improve the content and language of their compositions, and help build an English learning community. Liu's (2015) experiment also indicates that Group peer feedback enables the students to play multiple roles in writing, strengthens their motivation, and enhances their writing autonomy and sense of class identity.

As mentioned above, peer feedback has got much more attention from researchers and teachers. Many researchers abroad and at home did much work to prove that peer feedback is effective to help students to improve their writing.

2. FACTORS AFFECTING THE APPLICATION OF PEER FEEDBACK

Despite the fact that many composition teachers have found peer response groups to be an effective teaching tool, however, most teachers who have taught writing in the People's Republic of China would agree that peer response groups are difficult to effectively implement in the Chinese context (Case et al., 2000). The implementation of peer feedback can be affected by the following factors.

Firstly, there is no English writing course for non-English majors in many universities in China. Students often write on their own after class. When they encounter problems or trouble in writing process, they can not get any help from peers or teachers. Writing, for non-English majors, means a simple linear activity. There is no interaction between students and peers, students and the teacher. It is a very typical traditional writing.

Secondly, because of the limitation of students' language level, students intended to respond to surface

errors instead of semantic or textual ones (Leki, 1990). On the effect of peer feedback, a number of studies have pointed out that although peer evaluation has the role of finding the location of the grammatical errors, but on the whole second language students don't trust the language ability of a partner, and do not have enough confidence in peer feedback (Liu, 2015). Their limited language level makes it impossible for them to provide constructive suggestions for others. So the language level of the students has restricted the effective implementation of peer feedback.

Thirdly, Chinese students are reluctant to criticize drafts or disagree with peers and are reluctant to claim authority (Carson & Nelson, 1996). To some extent, the existing examination system affects the implementation of peer feedback. Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger (1992) pointed out that it's much easier for European students to accept their peers' feedback than Asian students and they are more confident in peer feedback. Also, Chinese students have difficulties in deciding whether their peer's comments are valid (Nelson & Murphy, 1993). It is not feasible to carry out peer feedback in the English teaching in Asia based on the existing examination system (Sengupta, 1998).

Fourthly, factors such as face, dignity, the authority of teachers and the textbook hinder the implementation of peer feedback. The embarrassment they encounter when commenting other's writing drives them to take 'face' strategy. On the one hand, Chinese students are used to keep silence in English class. Although peer feedback is one step in writing process, it is carried out by communicating with others. On the other hand, the fact that peer feedback requires students to comment or criticize their peers' writing makes students very embarrassed because they doubt whether their comments or suggestions are authoritative (Zhou, 2010).

Fifthly, both teachers and students think that peer feedback is a time-consuming process (Falchikov, 2001). Peer feedback includes many different stages, such as reading, writing, discussion, drafting and etc., which takes much time to be finished, but in fact non-English majors have only four English classes per week. Rollinson (2005) also points out that students spent a lot of time on peer feedback. In order to conduct effective peer feedback, they must spend time learning many basic programs as well as social interaction skills. In addition, the time is also an influential factor in the teaching arrangement. Teachers must complete their teaching tasks in the given time, so any teachers think that peer feedback is redundant (Liu & Carless, 2006).

3. SUGGESTIONS TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT PEER FEEDBACK

Considering the factors affecting the implementation of peer feedback, teachers may take different strategies to

implement peer feedback. So the following suggestions are made.

3.1 Applying Cooperative Learning Principles

Because there is no English writing course for non-English majors and peer feedback will take much to be finished, it's very necessary for the teacher to establish cooperative learning groups among students so that they can finish peer feedback after class if there is no time for the teacher to deal with peer feedback in class. Although peer feedback is carried out in pairs or group, it does not mean every silent student can take part in the activities of peer feedback. In group or pair, due to the lesser members of audience, the students will find it more comfortable to talk. Jacobs and Inn (2003) proposed cooperative learning principles to be applied in peer feedback. Cooperative learning is to divide students who are at different academic levels into groups, trying to achieve shared goals. Students are not individuals in pairs or groups. They are responsible for both themselves and others. Students in groups act as resources to enable the group members to complete a task that an individual may not be able to complete. In the group, each member is assigned a role in helping the group to function, which may include timekeeper, encourager, checker, recorder etc.. In such a way, each is devoting himself to the group, and each can enjoy the victory, thus we find even when they are talking about others' writing, they should devote themselves into the job. By observing how their peers as readers respond to their writing, they could understand what they need to do with drafts.

3.2 Making a Checklist

To guarantee that students will not leave anything unfinished or to do it methodically, checklists for both the writer and the reviewers will be highly necessary. The function of a checklist is to ensure that the students will follow so that they know what to do to the end. The students writer should clearly let his peers know what he is writing, the purpose and the like. Reid (1993) proposes that the writer should take the following worksheet as a guide to explain his writing to his peers:

The subject /topic of this paper is _____.

The intended audience for this paper is _____.

The main ideas of this paper, in order, are _____.

This essay has _____ paragraphs (sentences).

This piece of writing is writing from the point of view of a person who is _____ (describe the writer/narrator—this may be a persona, not the student herself.)

The subject /topic of this paper is _____.

The intended audience for this paper is _____.

The main ideas of this paper, in order, are _____.

This essay has _____ paragraphs (sentences).

Also, a checklist for the student reviewers like the following will be useful:

What is the greatest strength of this composition?

- What is its greatest weakness?
What is the central idea of this composition?
Which are the ideas which need more elaboration?
Where should more details or examples be added?
Why?
What are some of the questions that the writer has not answered?
At which point does this composition fail to hold the reader's interest? Why?
Where is the organization confusing?
Where is the writing unclear or vague?
The checklist for both student writers and reviewers can make them realize what problems exist in their writing so that they can try to improve what they write.

3.3 Combing Peer Feedback With Teacher Feedback

Because the limitation of students' language level, peer feedback, to some extent, is not so authoritative as teacher feedback. Yang's (2006) study shows both peer feedback and teacher feedback play a very important role, and it's necessary to combine the two to help students revise their writing. Tsui and Ng (2000) explored the combination of peer feedback and teacher feedback in writing review and found that students think peer feedback is more beneficial to second language writing while affirming the positive role of teacher feedback. In the teaching environment of China which regards teachers as authority, peer feedback is a useful supplement to teacher feedback. On the one hand, in big class, there is not enough interaction between students, but peer feedback can increase the chance for students to communicate with others; on the other hand, peer feedback can reduce teachers' working pressure and break through the time limit. So the combination of peer feedback and teacher feedback can improve not only writing feedback system but also the compositions' quality. Also, it can stimulate students' autonomous learning.

3.4 Making Students Choose the Language Freely

In Chinese English Class for non-English majors, one of the important reasons, which makes the implementation of peer feedback to be carried out, is students are not good at speaking and listening. An important measure assuring the students to talk in peer review is to free them to their option of language. As is noted by Case et al. (2000), one of the main features of Chinese classroom is students' weakness in speaking in and listening to English, which makes peer review difficult. However, it must be remembered that the aim is to help the students to revise the text, and language is only means to the end: Talk and respond upon the writing and improve the content. In fact, there is no reason why they have to stick to English, especially for those who cannot fully express themselves at the early stage. If they find it convenient, mother tongue can be used, of course, not encouraged.

CONCLUSION

Peer feedback is a typical and key stage in process writing. It has been proven to be an effective and successful way to improve students' writing. But its significance can never be overstated. The successful implementation of peer feedback can be affected by some factors such as the limitation of students' language level, time and teachers' authority, and so on. The effective peer feedback can be implemented when proper strategies are taken: applying cooperative learning in peer feedback, making a checklist, combining peer feedback with teacher feedback and making students choose the language freely in peer review. Also, students should be told about the importance of peer feedback and take part in peer feedback actively. In writing teaching, it's better to make use of the strengths of different feedbacks to improve students' writing ability.

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