"Peer Reviews in the ESL Composition Classroom: What Do the Students Think?"

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Peer reviews in the ESL composition classroom: what do the students think?
Kate Mangelsdorf

Peer reviews, where students read drafts of their fellow students’ essays in order to make suggestions for revision, are common in first-language composition pedagogy. This technique fosters the idea that writing is a process of communicating to an authentic audience. How beneficial are peer reviews for ESL composition students? This article explores the question from the perspectives of forty advanced ESL writing students who were asked about their experiences with peer reviews. Many of the students reported that peer reviews had helped them revise the content of their drafts. However, some students commented that their peers were not able to give useful advice. These students’ responses suggest that peer reviews can be helpful to students during the drafting process, but that the task must be carefully structured in order for the students to become successful critics. Suggestions for organizing effective peer review sessions are given.

Introduction

In recent years, ESL writing teachers have borrowed techniques from first-language composition pedagogy, in particular the process approach to composition, in which writing is seen as a process of discovering and revising ideas. A common activity in a process-oriented curriculum is a peer review session, during which students read each other’s drafts and make suggestions for revision. How effective are peer reviews for ESL composition students? What do students gain from this task? What are its limitations? How should this task be structured so that ESL students from various backgrounds and ability levels can benefit from it? This paper presents tentative answers to these questions based on forty advanced ESL composition students’ reactions to the peer review process as they had experienced it. Most of the students reported that peer reviews helped them revise their essays, especially the content. However, the students’ responses also suggest that the task must be carefully structured in order for it to be effective.

Peer reviews and composition

The peer-review technique is sometimes called peer editing or peer evaluation; I prefer ‘review’ because students are doing more than simply editing and evaluating another student’s essay: they are responding to what the essay says as well as how it says it. For beginning ESL students, informal peer-review sessions usually consist of a group of three or four students reading or listening to a peer’s draft and commenting on what
they found most interesting, what they wanted to know more about, where they were confused, and so on—the types of response that naturally emerge from a discussion of a writer's ideas. The writers then use these responses to decide how to revise their writing. At more advanced levels of instruction, students can use worksheets to answer questions concerning the draft's thesis, unity, development, focus, and so on—whatever the teacher wants to emphasize for that particular lesson. After the students complete the worksheet for a peer's draft, they then discuss with their peer the suggestions they made for revision. (Appendix A contains a peer-review worksheet I have used for a narrative essay.)

As several ESL composition researchers have noted, the peer review has the potential to be a powerful learning tool. Mittan (1989) has written that peer reviews achieve the following: provide students with an authentic audience; increase students' motivation for writing; enable students to receive different views on their writing; help students learn to read critically their own writing; and assist students in gaining confidence in their writing. He also points out that peer-review discussions allow students to use oral language skills. Moreover, Johnson (1990) has shown that peer reviews, both oral and written, require the practice of politeness strategies, an important aspect of language acquisition. I was curious about what the students thought about peer reviews—if they thought peer reviews were helpful, and if so, in what way.

**The study**

The students in this project were enrolled in the first-semester freshman ESL composition course at the University of Arizona. To be admitted to this course, the students had to demonstrate in a written placement exam that they could compose a short essay with a fairly clear thesis, some textual evidence, and a coherent, though not perfect, organizational structure. These students were an extremely heterogeneous group with their native languages as follows (numbers of students in parentheses): Spanish (10), Japanese (5), Arabic (4), French (2), Thai (2), Cantonese (2), Malay (2), Vietnamese (2), German (2), Indonesian (1), Urdu (1), Bulgarian (1), Polish (1), Gujarati (1), Hebrew (1), Somali (1), Greek (1), and Navajo (1). Their teachers were experienced ESL instructors trained in both ESL and first-language composition methodology. All of the teachers used peer reviews similarly: after their students had completed drafting an essay, they traded drafts, read them, and wrote suggestions for revision on review sheets, focusing on content, organization, development, unity, and clarity. The students then discussed their suggestions with each other.

**The procedure**

I asked the five teachers to take about twenty minutes of class time towards the end of the semester to allow their students to answer these questions in writing:

—Do you find it useful to have your classmates read your papers and give suggestions for revision?
—What kinds of suggestions do you often receive from your classmates?
—What kinds of suggestions are most helpful to you?
—In general, do you find the peer-review process valuable?

The students were told that their teachers would not read their responses, because the questions were part of a study in which the teachers were not involved. None of the teachers discussed the questions with the students, nor did the students discuss them with each other. To supplement the students’ perspectives, I asked the teachers to explain to me in writing what they thought were the strengths and weaknesses of the peer review technique.

**Analysis of the data**

The analysis of these data consisted of two procedures. Firstly, I examined the comments globally to determine the students’ overall responses to peer reviews. I rated each student response as ‘positive’ if only positive comments were given, ‘mixed’ if a combination of positive and negative comments were given, and ‘negative’ if only negative comments were given. The overall responses showed that 22 students, or 55 per cent, had positive comments; 12 students, or 30 per cent, had mixed comments; and 6, or 15 per cent, had negative comments. Table 1 shows the breakdown of overall responses based on language background.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Languages</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(55%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(30%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>(15%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Secondly, I analysed both students’ and teachers’ comments by dividing them into what Langer and Applebee (1987) have called ‘communication units’, each unit being a separate expression about a thought or behaviour. I counted only the communication units that were easily comprehensible and that did not simply repeat the wording in the prompt question. For the students, a total of 57, or 69 per cent, of the communication units expressed positive thoughts about peer reviews; 26, or 31 per cent, expressed negative thoughts. For the teachers, 17, or 60 per cent, of the communication units expressed positive thoughts about peer reviews; 11, or 40 per cent, of the communication units expressed negative thoughts. Table 2 shows what was expressed in the students’ positive comments about peer review.

Content is dealt with in 68 per cent of the comments, focusing primarily on the positive effect that peer reviews had on clarifying, developing, generating, and comparing ideas. Organization and style are highlighted in 26 per cent of the comments, with the greater number dealing with organization.

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Table 2: Students' positive comments about peer-review task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication units</th>
<th>Number of communication units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps clarify ideas</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps give different views on topic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps develop ideas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps give new ideas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps with focus</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps in keeping audience interest</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps improve thesis</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps delete unnecessary statements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>39 total (88%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization and style:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps improve organization</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps improve mistakes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps improve title</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps improve transitions</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps improve style</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15 total (16%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps writer be more critical</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student drafts serve as models</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to relate to another student's comments</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 total (6%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows that negative views on peer reviews focus on limitations of the student reviewer and of the task itself. The bulk of these complaints concern students' inability or lack of desire to complete the task.

Table 3: Students' negative comments about peer-review task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication units</th>
<th>Number of communication units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of students as critics:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student criticism can't be trusted</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student criticisms are apathetic</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written comments aren't specific</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewers can't help with grammar</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewers tell you to change your position</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20 total (77%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of peer-review task:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough time given in class</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn't help with grammar</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student drafts aren't readable</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike of criticizing peers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6 total (23%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teachers' positive comments about peer reviews were similar to the students'; the teachers wrote that peer reviews exposed students to a diversity of thought, and encouraged students to become more active

*Peer reviews in the composition classroom*
What the students said
Advantages of reviews

These data reveal that for most of the students and teachers in this study, peer reviews were perceived as a beneficial technique that helped the students revise their papers. The students pinpointed content and organization as the main areas that peer reviews improved. In particular, they emphasized that peer reviews led them to consider different ideas about their topics and helped them to develop and clarify these ideas. These comments suggest that peer reviews can make students more aware of the needs and expectations of their audience, helping them to meet the demands of the writing classroom which their peers are reflecting to them.

The students’ comments (printed here without corrections) illustrate the ways that they thought peer reviews helped them learn from their audience’s responses. For instance, this student used peer reviews to help clarify her ideas:

Everyone that read my paper has a new view of point. Most of the time the comments open my eyes to see that what I mean to write isn’t precisely what my friends read.

The quote illustrates the process of what Flower (1979) has called moving from writer- to reader-based prose; in other words, shaping the text so that what is clear to the writer becomes clear to the reader as well.

Taking into consideration the cultural background of the audience is an important part of moving from writer- to reader-based prose. Peer reviews helped one student understand this:

Through these reviews I know what should be explained. I know that not everybody makes the same assumptions I do. And I don’t make assumptions that would be crystal clear for me if I had another cultural background.

A Japanese student explained how peer reviews helped her to shift from the conventions of Japanese rhetoric to the conventions of English-language rhetoric:

Most of readers do not understand what I want to say. What is the problem? . . . In case of Japanese novel or essay, the author does not explain completely so, the reader has to try to understand what the writer says. Now, I cannot escape from this habit so, I always do not explain well.

One of the most common comments concerning the advantages of peer

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reviews was that this technique helped students understand different points of view.

Usually, I get a lot of questions from different angles. It helps me to think about the subject twice and also let me know which one to focus on or explain more.

One student used the metaphor of a circle to explain the effect of being exposed to different perspectives:

When you write on a topic you might always consider the same aspects and your ideas might be like a closed circle in your head. Your classmates can input new ideas and thus open your circle.

These comments demonstrate the value of interacting with an audience during the writing process. Peer reviews, by making the audience real, enabled the students to understand the responses their audience would make, and the problems their audience would have, as they read the essay. As one student commented:

There are times when I don’t realize the shortcomings of my paper until my peer points them out. It is through this help that better revisions and better papers are written.

The teachers’ thoughts about the benefits of peer review are similar to some of the students’ comments, albeit more theoretically based. Although most teachers did not directly address the issue of audience, their reflections show their appreciation of the value of exposing students to readers during the drafting process. One teacher wrote that peer reviews help ‘reinforce the idea that the purpose of writing is communication . . . real audience, real purpose’. The teachers agreed with the students in several other areas as well. One teacher noted that peer reviews can help students become better readers of their own writing, a thought echoed by this student comment: ‘With enough practice we’ll be able to be critics of our own papers.’ Another teacher pointed out that peer reviews give students models to follow. One student was also aware of this advantage; she wrote ‘It was also very valuable to review other students papers. It helped me to get a better overlook on how to write successfully—in organization and content.’

However, the teachers and students disagreed in one important area: the effects that peer reviews had on student reviewers. Of the teachers’ comments, 29 per cent concern how the teachers thought peer reviews affected students for the better; in particular, they wrote that peer reviews made students responsible for their own learning. One teacher wrote, ‘They cannot be passive sponges—they must actively participate.’ Another teacher noted ‘Students take the responsibility of critic seriously.’ Two teachers also commented that peer reviews helped students gain confidence in their own judgments; in the words of one instructor, ‘[peer reviews] build confidence in students’ ability to analyse a text and to evaluate it.’
However, many of the students believed that peer reviews had neither helped them to be responsible for their improvement, nor to be confident in their ability to critique a text. The problem was that these students did not think that they, or their peers, could be good critics. Of the negative thoughts expressed by the students about peer reviews, 77 per cent concerned the limitations of students as critics; the largest number of complaints dealt with the students’ lack of trust in their peers’ responses to their texts. In the words of one student:

As students we are learning to write essays so it is difficult for us to make good comments of other classmate’s paper.

Because of students’ problems giving critiques of drafts, they sometimes produced suggestions that were vague and/or entirely complimentary. As one student explained:

Mostly what happens is that when a paper is read by a peer they give negligible responses. Most of them cannot evaluate very well due to the lack of understanding of the subject matter.

Another reason for insubstantive comments is student apathy. According to one student:

They [his peers] just want to get it done without awaring the quality of their suggestions.

Another student wrote:

Well, the peer review sometimes help out sometimes not. It depends on who is the one who is reading the paper. Some of the students really are not willing to help each other, so they do the peer review as an obligation.

Almost all of the students’ comments about peer reviews that I analysed as either mixed or negative toward the peer-review task mentioned student ignorance, apathy, and/or vagueness as the primary objections.

The students’ responses to peer reviews suggest another possible problem with peer reviews: students from some cultures might resist such a student-centred activity. Table 1, which gives the breakdown of global reactions based on language background, shows that five of the students from Asian backgrounds expressed completely negative views of peer reviews, with only one student (Greek) from the other linguistic backgrounds also expressing a completely negative view. Of the five students from Asian backgrounds, two were from Japan and one each from Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia. Though the number of students in this study is small, the fact that almost all of the students with totally negative views came from cultures that stress teacher-centred classrooms suggests that the peer review task may be resisted by students not familiar with a collaborative, student-centred environment. Several of these students’ comments about the task demonstrate that, indeed, they preferred teacher-directed discussions of essays rather than the peer reviews. One student wrote that peer reviews were not useful to him...
because ‘they were not related to the main point the instructor wanted.’ Another student with entirely negative views of peer review wrote ‘The only person that ever helped me is my teacher.’ Even students who had some positive reactions to peer reviews showed a preference for teacher feedback. According to one student:

The problem with peer reviews is that most of the time the reviewer isn’t critical enough as the instructor would be, so not much help can be obtained from the reviewer.

**Improving peer reviews**

On the whole, the forty students in this study found peer reviews beneficial; peer reviews helped most of them to see different perspectives about their topics and to generate, clarify, and develop their ideas. In fact, one student suggested that peer reviews be a part of every class, not just English classes, while another reported that she found her classmates’ comments about her draft more helpful than the instructor’s comments because her classmates were foreign students like herself.

However, the complaints that some of these students expressed about peer reviews suggest that peer review sessions have to be carefully organized in order to be successful. I have used these students’ responses to make the following changes in the ways that I use peer reviews in my ESL writing classrooms.

**Modelling the technique**

First, I try to teach the students how to do peer reviews before asking them to do the task themselves. At the beginning of the course, and usually at the beginning of any peer-review task, I spend class time modelling this technique to the students. This modelling consists of two steps. First, we read a couple of sample drafts (used with the students’ permission) and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the drafts—what the students need to do to revise them. We look primarily at the content and organization, seldom at style or grammar. Second, we practise how to make suggestions for revision. Sometimes I will hand out a peer-review worksheet that I have completed to show the students how to be polite, clear, and specific. (‘You might want to change your introduction to make it more interesting. For instance, you can talk about a personal experience.’) Often, we will briefly go over some of the grammar involved in politeness strategies, such as the use of modals.

**Awareness of purpose**

At this time, I also remind the students of the purpose of peer reviews—to help them revise their essays by receiving different points of view about their drafts. These various perspectives give the students rhetorical choices to select from when they revise their essays. Some students complain that they receive conflicting advice from their classmates. In my view, it is often good for them to get different responses, for it can make them revise their drafts more reflectively. Their peers’ feedback consists of suggestions, not commands, and they need to decide which suggestions they will follow. The more views they receive, the richer the options they have to choose from when they revise. Of course, I always offer advice of my own about the feedback if the students ask for it or if I think the

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students are not receiving useful ideas from each other. (For whatever reason, I can usually count on one group in the class being dysfunctional.)

**Collaborative reviews**

If most of the students are fairly unfamiliar with peer reviews, I often allow them to collaborate in pairs on a student’s essay. This way, they can decide together what comments to give and how to express them. By working together, students usually give more accurate and developed comments because they can negotiate ideas with each other. Collaboration also enables the students to feel more confident about the feedback they are giving their classmate.

**Conferencing**

In order to ensure that students distinguish between the helpful and not-so-helpful comments from their peers, especially at the beginning of the course, I often hold conferences after a peer review session during which I review with the students the peer feedback they received, elaborate upon it, and offer additional strategies for revision, if needed. As we all know, students are sometimes good at diagnosing what is weak in their essays, or in their classmates’ essays, but uncertain about how to remedy these weaknesses.

Modelling, collaborating, and conferencing all take time—and I do allow a great deal of class time to be taken up with peer reviews. I have tried asking students to hold review sessions outside class, but I have had mixed results due to many students’ tight schedules. In my view, the class time I have taken with peer reviews has paid off in better final drafts. In addition, spending a significant amount of time on peer reviews (at least a week for a major essay assignment) sends the message that writing is communication with a real audience. To reinforce the importance that I place on this technique, I designate 10 or 15 per cent of the final course grade for peer reviews.

**Grouping students**

One of the most difficult aspects of peer reviews is deciding how to group students. For the most part, I try to group students who are at similar ability levels and who are writing on closely-related topics. When students vary a great deal in ability, usually the better students give good feedback to the weaker students but get little feedback in return. Similarly, when students know next to nothing about a fellow student’s topic, they tend to offer few ideas about the content. Sometimes students work best when grouped with peers from different cultural backgrounds—but there are times when students from similar backgrounds work well together, for they tend to understand the differences between their native rhetorics and English-language rhetoric and can explain these differences to each other.

**Conclusion**

As with any pedagogical technique, peer reviews require that teachers be flexible. In my experience, every class reacts differently to peer reviews, some eagerly, some reluctantly. Some classes work well with review sheets, while others manage better simply reading their drafts aloud to each other and discussing what was said. Lower-level students, in particular, tend to enjoy informal sessions centred around a few content-
oriented questions. Higher-level students, on the whole, are ready to discuss the rhetorical strategies of the writer, as well as what the writer says. I always try to tailor peer review sessions individually to the personalities and skills of each class.

Peer reviews take patience—from both students and teachers. It is natural that students are sceptical about relying on each other for advice, when eventually they will be graded by the teacher. It is also to be expected that the first one or two times that students complete peer reviews, their responses to each other might be partly inadequate. However, with practice, students’ reviews will improve, along with their writing and reading skills. When they begin to see this improvement, their belief (and their teacher’s belief) in the efficacy of this technique will also increase.

In his article on peer reviews, Mitton (1989) wrote that peer reviews can harness students’ communicative power: their power to learn from each other through language. The students in this study, for the most part, appear to agree with this view. However, these students’ comments about peer reviews should caution us that harnessing this power is not always easy.

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References

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Appendix A
Sample peer-review worksheet for narrative essay
Read your classmate’s draft carefully before responding to these questions. Make your suggestions as specific as possible so that your classmate understands your comments.

1. What is the purpose and message of this draft? If this is expressed in a sentence or two, write it down. Otherwise, put this in your own words.

2. Was the purpose easy or hard to figure out? (Circle one of the following.)
   Hard Somewhat hard Fairly easy Very easy

3. How is this draft organized? (For example: chronological; chronological with flashbacks or flashforwards)

4. How well does the beginning of the draft attract your attention?
   Not so good OK Good
   How can the beginning be improved?

5. How well did this draft keep your attention until the end?
   Not so good OK Good
   How could it keep your attention more effectively?
   For instance, where did the essay seem to slow down? What seemed unnecessary? What could be added?

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6 How would you describe the description in this draft? 
Not enough OK Good Very good
Where is the description most effective? 
Where could more description be added?

7 How much telling and how much showing is there? 
Mostly telling Half and half Mostly showing
Where could more showing be added? (Or more telling, if you think this is necessary.) Consider writing strategies such as dialogue and description. Keep in mind the author’s purpose.

On the back of this page, write a letter to your classmate in which you explain the strengths of the draft and your suggestions for revision.

The author
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