

Engaging Students in Peer Review for Different Essay Types

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Peer review is an activity that focuses on the learner and allows students to think critically and learn from each other within the classroom. The most difficult aspect with peer reviewing may be the reluctance to give critical feedback. This discomfort to offer a frank opinion could be more prevalent in Asian societies as students may feel uncomfortable expressing negativity. However, through detailed planning of lessons and regular implementation, students are able to complete this task successfully. The results indicate how feedback from fellow classmates not only enhances their critical thinking and interactive skills, but also their level of effort, knowing that their friends will be reading their writing.

Introduction

Reviewing other students' writings is a viable and important activity to improving one's own writing. It is generally thought that L2 writing students can improve their own writing by transferring abilities they have learnt when reviewing peer texts (Lundstrom and Baker, 2009). However, being able to review freely and the extent of offering an honest comment might be challenging in societies that are more conservative than others. This reserved attitude is frequently prevalent in societies heavily influenced by Confucianism. Such countries include China, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam and Japan (N.V.T.Hang et al, 2015). One of the values in Confucianism is about remaining stable and in harmony with natural and social environments (Berthrong and Berthrong 2000). This is undoubtedly an important drawback in the peer reviewer's performance. The objective of this paper is to suggest an approach not only to improve the writer's skill on reviewing, but also to provide a safe environment and encourage students to make the effort and give honest feedback

Rationale

Self-checking is an essential skill that is useful to students in improving their writing ability. Students should cultivate a habit of examining and re-examining their work regularly before submission. A way to make students more conscious about their handiwork is through peer review. Previously, I realized that students from my writing classes did not see the importance of peer review. They were mostly focused on their own work and only relied on the evaluations from the teacher. Students also did not feel comfortable critiquing the work of their classmates and would often comment unconstructively and briefly with words such as “good” and “so-so” in their checks. I decided after, to rethink the way of implementing this activity. I believe that this revised process of conducting peer review activities could not only enable them to improve their checking and critical thinking skills, but also raise the level of care and pride in their examination of their classmates’ essays. Knowing that their checks have a direct impact on the final drafts of their friends and their personal grades makes them take responsibility and view this activity more critically. In addition, they will take more care with their writing as this time, the audience would not only be just the teacher, but their peers as well.

Method

Students

Eighty-eight students between the ages of 19-21 at Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan participated in this activity. They were second year students from the Science and Technology department and were enrolled in the writing class. The second-year writing program in this department is an introductory essay writing course. Students had fourteen weekly ninety-minute classes per semester. They were required to complete two essays during this semester.

Procedure for each essay

Brainstorming, outline



First draft



Peer review



Second draft



Teacher's evaluation



Final draft

Peer review response sheet

This is a two-page handout created for students to check off specific areas and write their comments down after examination. There are three sections on this response sheet: format, correction symbols and content. The first section is a brief checklist about indentations, line spacing, font and font size of the typed out essay. The next section covers writing mistakes in grammar, spelling, word forms and punctuation. The final section contains questions relating to the structure and content of the essay. This includes stating the thesis statement and topic sentences of the body paragraphs. There are also questions on relevance, context and comprehension for the reviewer to answer, and a separate column for suggestions during revision.

In-class modeling

Before students reviewed the essays of their classmates, I felt that it was necessary to demonstrate in class how to give constructive comments using the response sheet. I used a sample essay and had students review it in class with a partner as an activity. Next, on the whiteboard, I showed them how to check, mark and put notations on the essay and response sheet. For example, circling the space before the first word of the paragraph if an indentation for the paragraph was absent and writing down “font size” or “line spacing” when there were formatting mistakes. With regards to grammar checks, correction symbols, e.g. “p” for punctuation errors and “sv” for subject-verb-agreement mistakes were used. In the final section on content and structure, I emphasized that a comment like “good” was unacceptable. It should be followed by a reason. For instance, “good, the three main points are presented in the thesis statement”, or “poor, sentence is irrelevant to the main point”. Students could also question the writer with “Why? Explain ...” or “I do not understand this sentence”. Suggestions on revision should also be made on the sheet. In addition, during this time, the reviewer and the writer should be seated beside each other so that the reviewer can comment and ask the writer when unsure. The discussion could be held in English or Japanese.

Feedback from teacher

The first essay with the peer review response sheet attached is important. The teacher's marking has to be very thorough and remarked on extensively. This feedback from the teachers sets the tone on the criteria for the writings to come. By looking through the students' second drafts and peer reviews, and reviewing the students' observations with comments such as "insufficient detail", "what do you mean by ...?", "please read paragraph 2 again", requires the student to reconsider their evaluation. The grades and weightage of each part of the essay too are essential. A third of the total essay grade was placed on the peer review response sheet. In regards to the first second and final draft, the weightage was thirty percent, twenty percent and thirty percent respectively of the overall essay grade. The reason behind placing heavy emphasis on the peer review response sheet was to indicate to students the importance of this exercise and at the same time motivate them to explain in more detail.

Revision from writer

Due to the initial in-class modeling of the sample essay, students had a clear idea on what was expected on the response sheet. Further remarks and points given by the teacher after submission gave the students a stronger impression about what is required with the peer review activity. As such, students made more effort in their comments on the response sheet. It was partially successful as most of their comments were constructive and showed that they had read and identified the key points in their partner's writing. Unfortunately, there was a small number of students who needed more guidance. They had written one-word comments or described content as weak because of spelling mistakes rather than the subject in question.

Discussion*Room for improvement*

There were some shortcomings in the procedure. There were too many items to cover on the response sheet within a single 90-minute lesson. It would have been more productive to cover one section per class. Furthermore, there was not enough time for students to check for format, grammar and content altogether. This may have affected the quality of the students' reviews as they had to complete the assignment quickly. On hindsight, content and structure could be reviewed

after the first draft, followed by checks for grammar and format after the second draft.

In-class modelling could be done twice or more during the semester. It would be more effective to remind students on the aspects to be careful of. In addition, if there was a new grammar point covered or writing feature taught, this added session would serve as an appropriate occasion for revision.

Conclusion

This paper represents a preliminary undertaking of the peer review process personalized for the second-year science students in my writing class. Further considerations have to be deliberated for this activity to be more effective. The proficiency level of students and time constraints are some of the main issues to anticipate. Time and training are essential for effective peer review activities (Lundstrom and Baker, 2009). As such, I believe that more scaffolding, constant reviews and reminders are necessary to accustom the students to be more comfortable with peer review and feedback; and in turn, develop their writing skills.

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