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A Study on the Roles of Peer Review in the Process of PAL

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Abstract

This paper intends to illustrate the major components of English as a Foreign language (EFL) writing as a case by carefully exploring into different roles in Taiwanese college students' writing process learning. The idea of peer-assisted learning (PAL) has extensively been implemented in different fields in the US, such as mathematics, psychology, library science, and many more. Taiwanese college students have long been scrutinized of the lack of cooperation in their traditional English language learning. Peer review is a more pragmatic PAL approach in the EFL writing pedagogy. This study presents the findings of a survey of 18 English major students at one university in central Taiwan and in-depth one-on-one interviews concerning their peer review procedures in junior English writing class. The study serves two purposes. First, the information gathered by the questionnaire is to provide the English teaching curriculum theorists with a profile of current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) placement practices, including strengths, weaknesses, and perceived needs. Second, the information is to help inform and comprehend the development of EFL learners 'independent thinking practices in the roles as tutors and tutees. The qualitative analysis, which consisted of the analysis of students 'think-aloud protocols while revising writings, provided insights into the differences among tutors and tutees. The findings reported here summarize information on students 'different attitudes toward peer review, English language competence, experienced and inexperienced raters, administration and scoring, and strengths and weaknesses of current procedures. Possible limitations of the study and pedagogical implications for EFL writers are also discussed.

Keywords: PAL, Peer Review, Think-Aloud Protocols, Tutor, Tutee

Introduction

Traditionally, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) composition classes at Taiwanese colleges, the professor is primarily the only reader of students' writing assignments. English writing is always a matter of individual performance. English writing is also a solitary act rather than a social or collaborative experience for college learners. Gillespie, Hebert, and Graham (2011) clearly pointed out that "(W)riting is a multifaceted task that involves the use and coordination of many cognitive processes. Due to its complexities, many students find writing challenging and many teachers struggle to find methods to effectively teach the skill."Lee (2005) mentioned that Taiwanese college EFL students have long been criticized for the "lack of the abilities of independent thinking, problem solving, social interactions, and cooperation" during their English language learning. In addition, most student participants in that study are quiet and withdrawn during class time. While providing writing instruction, teachers often overlook writing apprehension. Students with writing apprehension might need more deliberate teaching to unblock the writing processes(R. Boice, 1995).The idea of peer review is an important part of peer-assisted learning (PAL) because it allows students to interact writing by means of writing, as well as oral communication, allowing student writers to be exposed to more thoughtful and attentive comments.

Ideally speaking, this interactive process between pairs would encourage student writers to ask their peers for clarification about comments encourage student writers to explain their writing to their peers and help them understand how their peers read their writing and how they themselves could possibly improve their own writing. However, are student writers ready to revise their partners' writing?

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In addition, in the writing team, are students satisfied with their performances as a tutor as well as a tutee? The following research questions explore the unique scenario in dealing with peer review in a college English composition class in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting in central Taiwan.

Research Questions

First, how can PAL facilitate active learning through peer review in a college EFL composition class? Second, what are the main factors affecting student writers' roles of being tutors and tutees in the practice of peer review?

Literature Review

The traditional approach to developmental writing was undergirded by the theory of behaviorism, which became popular among writing teachers in the 1950s and 1960s (Irvin, 2001). Several studies (e.g. Lazar, 1995; Bruffee, 1984) have shown that peer-assistance improves writing and helps students develop the ability to diagnose problems in the text, monitor their writing process, and develop audience awareness. However, some research shows that peer response fails to improve writing. Regarding the historical background of peer-assisted learning (PAL), Morrow and Woo (2001) stated that tutoring as a mode of training and teaching has had a long history and the spirits of PAL originated "from the philosophical dialogues conducted by Socrates and his students (p.2)." Furthermore, tutoring relationship and friendship combined "task-oriented training" from the "intellectual and moral discipline identified with Oxford and Cambridge Universities in England in the 16th century to the private tutoring conducted at Cambridge's Trinity College in the 19th century". According to Falchikov (2001), PAL has also been widely used in the following specification of "participant characteristics", and the participants in PAL courses have included:

- Librarians who teach
- Students of introductory social psychology
- Pre-service teachers
- Students studying psychological theories of human development
- Undergraduate students of psychology
- Students in an arithmetic course
- Students in abnormal psychology
- Psychology majors studying a course in statistics and research methods of psychological inquiry
- Students from "high-risk" courses such as engineering, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, law, and computing
- Students in higher education

Maheady (1998) argued that PAL serves "as a useful vehicle for individualizing instruction on a whole group basis, and simultaneously accommodating more cultural, linguistic, and instructional diversity within a common setting" (p. 50). Houston and Lazenbatt (1996) also emphasized that peer tutoring is designed to "ensure that students develop personal transferable skills such as teamwork, leadership, problem-solving and communication skills" (p.251-52). The following table gives a clear presentation of the benefits for students, the teachers, and system levels (Topping & Ehly, 1998, p.51). Table 1: Advantages of PAL over Traditional Teacher-Led Instructional Approaches across Student, Teacher, and System Levels Teaching Factor-Educational Outcome

Student Level

Higher academic achievement

- Standardized achievement tests
- Curriculum-specific measures
- Higher levels of cognitive reasoning
- More frequent generation of new ideas and solutions
- Greater transfer of learning across time and settings
- Improved interpersonal relationships
- Increased liking among students
- More acceptance of individual differences (i.e., racial, cultural, linguistic and exceptionality-based groups)

- More frequent positive social interactions within and outside of school
- Enhanced personal and social development
- More positive self-concepts and feelings of self-worth
- More favorable attitudes toward school, learning, and specific academic disciplines;
- More positive learning environment
- More favorable students-teachers ratios
- Increased amounts of active student engagement
- More frequent opportunities to respond
- More frequent and immediate feedback on academic performance (i.e. Both corrective and positive feedback)
- Increased opportunities for assistance and support
- Motivation
- Preferred teaching arrangement over teacher-led or student-regulated options
- More fun and increased opportunities to socialize with peers

Teacher Level

Instructional

- Procedures for individualizing instruction without constant demands on teacher time
- Techniques for expanding one's instructional repertoire
- Strategies designed to accommodate diverse learning groups
- Approaches for facilitating academic integration of students from special and remedial education settings (e.g., inclusion and mainstreaming)
- Increased opportunities to observe and monitor individual student performance
- Classroom management
- Strategies for teaching new, socially appropriate classroom behavior
- Procedures for reducing inappropriate academic and interpersonal behavior
- Training and implementation requirements
- Initially high effort for "start up," low to moderate maintenance efforts
- Relatively explicit and non-time consuming training requirements
- Low to moderate curriculum adaptations required
- Strategies can be utilized in multiple curriculum areas
- Relatively cost effective

System Level

- Comprehensive set of strategies for enhancing student achievement
- Collection of interventions for facilitating inclusion, improving general classroom discipline, and preventing academic failure
- Procedures for enhancing faculty's instructional capacity
- Vehicle for promoting educational reforms (e.g., inclusion, merger of special and general education programs)
- Cost effective instructional interventions

Source: Topping & Ehly, 1998, p. 51.

On the other hand, Cohen, Boud and Sampson (2001) stated that "inappropriate assessment practices in a course can destroy desirable forms of peer learning no matter how well it is otherwise constructed" (p. 249). With regard to the potential disadvantages of PAL, Topping & Ehly (1998) pointed out that between teachers and peers, the special concerns cover the categories in teaching factor/educational outcome, peer training requirements, quality control requirement, content coverage, curriculum adaptation, ethical concerns, and Theoretical concerns about appropriateness and effectiveness. It is understandable that if students are in direct competition with each other for grades it may be difficult to encourage them to cooperate in peer learning. Mutual understanding should be clearly stated between teacher and students, and between students when introducing PAL strategies, to avoid the misleading critical points of views, such as "[t]his promises to be a real 'fun' semester.

I have three classes that require group work. I just hate it when I have to depend on the other people for my grade" (Fechner& Davis, 1985, p. 54). Hativah (2000) also mentioned problems in conducting active discussions in classes, such as low student participation, students' impression that they do not learn much from discussions, negative emotional reactions to discussion, and low expertise of discussion participants. "Absenteeism" is the most critical problem associated with peer learning since it is a general problem in higher education and particularly relevant to working in pairs or to cooperative learning. Why do some students miss PAL sessions? What can be done about it? Falchikov(2001) offers clear guidelines and advice to minimize problems associated with learning in a group. For example, if we have to face reluctant students, educators need to "think carefully about why you are planning to use group learning" in the very beginning. Furthermore, "try to communicate your rationale to students and help students develop realistic expectations about their roles and that of the teacher". As for the issue of structuring groups, remember to structure groups carefully. For example, 4-7 groups tend to do best, permanent groups are better than temporary ones, and heterogeneous groups formed by the instructor are better than homogeneous student-selected groups. Feichtner and Davis (1985) also emphasize the role of the teacher: "Try to listen in on groups as they work together in class. This allows for the early detection of errors or group problems. It 'also seems to provide them (students) with a visual demonstration that we're still doing our job" (p.218).

Writing to Learn and Learning to Write

Writing to Learn (WL) is based on the observation that students' thoughts and understanding can grow and clarify through the process of writing. (Britton, 1982, Bazerman, Little, Bethel, Chavkin, Fouquette, &Garufis, 2005, p. 57) Writing to Learn is also a pedagogical approach which is associated with cognitive theory and was originally initiated from the Writing across Curriculum movement in 1970's. In Britton's "Writing to Learn and Learning to Write" (1982), he used the following chart to explain writing and experience as meaning making. Britton, identified three functional types of writing: transactional, for communicating information; poetic, for creating beautiful objects; and expressive, for exploring and reflecting upon ideas. (1982, p. 57) Furthermore, Langer & Applebee (1987) brought up the notion that different kinds of writing activities would lead students to focus on different types of information, and writing to learn approach started to see writing as a vehicle for learning (Harklau, 2002)Within the writing to learn perspectives, writing will support higher-order thinking process, achieve higher cognitive development, and produce knowledge construction. (Boscolo & Mason, 2001)

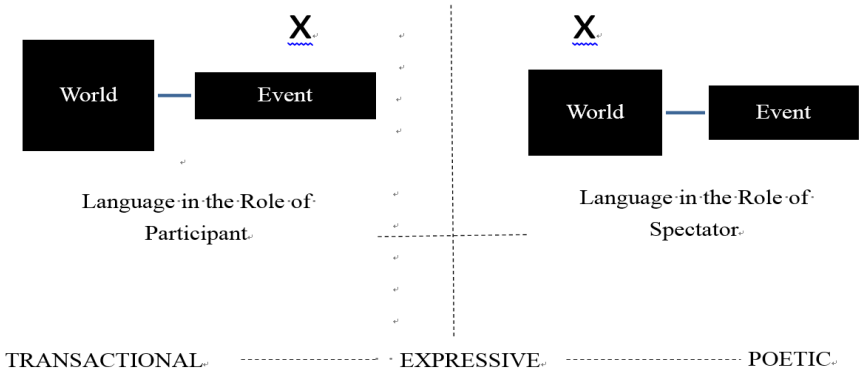

Figure 1. Britton's writing and experience as meaning making

Another pedagogy often compared to Writing to Learn in the field of second language writing is learning to Write (LW). As opposed to Writing to Learn (WL) where students use writing to develop their understanding in a particular area, Learning to Write (LW) places emphasis on the entire writing process (Lefkowitz, 2009) and the matter how students learn to express themselves in writing. This approach requires second language writers to cultivate good writing ability and meaningful writing development. A large number of empirical studies has also been conducted to investigate on helping students become skilled writers in foreign language (Chen, 2011; AlHassan, & Wood, 2015; Cox head& Byrd, 2007) and improving students' writing communication skills.

Think-Aloud Protocol

Think-aloud is a research method in which participants speak aloud any words in their minds as they complete a task. Think-aloud research methods have a sound theoretical basis and provide a valid source of data about participants 'thinking, especially during language based activities. However, are searcher needs to design a process which takes into account a number of concerns, such as selecting a suitable task, a role for the researcher, a source of triangulation, and, most importantly, an appropriate method of interpretation. Charters (2003. p.68) argued that think-aloud research can be effectively interpreted through a qualitative lens. A qualitative approach also has implications for the choice of participant(s) and the treatment of data. In order to understand the relationship of thought and words in think-aloud protocols, it is helpful to go back to Vygotsky's (1962) *Thought and Language* and its concept of "inner speech." Furthermore, think aloud protocols (A. King, 1994) can be used to be applied to many writing stages, such as both self-editing (please refer to: www.studentsfriend.com)and peer-editing stages. Based on teachervision.com, "in pre-writing, model the strategies student writers use to get the process started; during the drafting process, model creating "sloppy copies"; during revision, model how to ask questions and think about readers' needs; and during the editing process, model how to use conventions to help readers understand the message. As students engage in reciprocal think-aloud, they dialogue about their texts. This dialoguing helps students to internalize their sense of audience and fine-tune their craftsmanship as writers". **(**https://www.teachervision.com/skill-builder/problem-solving/48546.html) We educators today definitely would emphasize our students' need to develop their ability to think and solve problems.

Methodology

This study examined whether peer-assisted learning facilitates student writers' active learning through peer review and which factors affect student writer's roles of being tutors and tutees in the practice of peer review. An open-ended questions survey, observation of class pair discussions, follow-up one-on-one interviews, and student writers' assignments with draft(s)were utilized as the main data collection sources in this qualitative study to answer the following research questions: First, how can PAL facilitate active learning through peer review in a college EFL composition class? Second, what are the main factors affecting student writers' roles of being tutors and tutees in the practice of peer review?

Participants

A total of 18 English major students who took an "English Writing VI" class at a university in central Taiwan participated in this study. In addition to 15 juniors, there were 3 seniors who had to retake the class. Only one of the male juniors had not taken any English proficiency test, yet. The following is a brief description of student participants.

Table 4. Brief description of student participants

Pairs	Junior/Senior	Gender (Male/Female)	TOEIC Score
Group 1	Two juniors	Two female students	870 / 675
Group 2	One senior / One junior	Two male students	600 / 810
Group 3	Two juniors	Two female students	620 / 650
Group 4	Two juniors	Two female students	700/ 750
Group 5	One Senior / One junior	Two male students	690 / N/A
Group 6	Two juniors	Two female students	740 / 675
Group 7	Two juniors	One male and one female students	600 / 660
Group 8	Two juniors	Two female students	650 / 680
Group 9	One senior / One junior	one male and one female students	700 / 750

(Note: the departmental English proficiency threshold for graduation is TOEIC 720 or other equivalent tests)

Among the participants, twelve students were female and six male. Two of the student participants were from Hong Kong and Malaysia, and the others were local Taiwanese students. Most of them had studied English as a foreign language since elementary school. Even though the participants were juniors and seniors, not all of them had experienced peer reviewing their previous English writing classes, for example, English writing I to English writing V. Peer review is an aspect of PAL that involves students' one-on-one interaction through their writing. During the brainstorming stage, the researcher also observed the students working together in pairs. Some pairs functioned pretty well and quickly, while other pairs had to work harder to communicate effectively.

Some students have difficulty in expressing their ideas in appropriate English. Peer review helps students to clarify and explain their ideas, logics and written expressions with each other before submitting the second draft writing assignments to the instructor. Different inputs will enrich student writers' ideas in their writing projects.

The Process of Peer Review

According to the English writing curriculum from the university in this study, small class size and interactive teaching approaches are two of the attractions and strengths of the writing program. In the junior year, the important skills being taught include responding to readings, paraphrasing, summarizing, and writing a report and a research proposal. Students in this study involved in various writing tasks, and they bring a succession of drafts – free writing, outline writing, mind map drawing, first draft, self-evaluation sheet, peer review, and turn in the second draft to the instructor for grading. At the end of each semester, each student needs to hand in a writing portfolio with all the drafts of their writing works. The following are the steps for the peer review (adapted from Falchikov, 2001, p.262):

(1) Students were group in pairs;
(2) Exchanged scripts and read through the partner's script in silence; Read through again, still in silence, putting "X" in the margin against anything that seems wrong,"□ " against anything that strikes students as good, and "?" against anything that students don't understand;
(3) Fill in the peer review sheet;
(4) Discuss with each other about what they have noted, consulting a dictionary whenever necessary;
(5) Redraft again for the next new draft.

As Sandmann (2006) reminded us that "revising is the heart of the writing process and conferring is at the center of revising." (p.20), it is through discussion that a writer is able to experience the effect of his or her writing.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher is the primary instrument in data collection. The data were collected utilizing four techniques, an open-ended question survey (adapted from King's "Guided Reciprocal Peer Questioning" regarding students' experience in peer editing for English Writing classes), and observation of class pair discussions, follow-up one-on-one interviews, and student writers' assignments with draft. All the data were confidentially kept by the researcher. Creswell (2002) states that an open-ended question does not "constrain individual response, and it opens up the possibilities." Furthermore, an open-ended question allows a participant to create a response "within their cultural and social experiences instead of researcher's experiences". (p.406)Regarding the follow-up one-on-one interviews, instead of interviewing all eighteen participants, the researcher conducted individual interviews with ten students who were potential respondents with multifaceted situations observed from the questionnaire. It is the most appropriate approach for studying complex and sensitive areas and useful for collecting in-depth information. (Kumar, 2005, p. 131) Moreover, Kumar (2005) specifically state that "Data collection through unstructured interviewing is extremely useful in situations where either in-depth information is needed or little is known about the area. The flexibility allowed to the interviewer in what s/he asks of a respondent is an asset as it can elicit extremely rich information". (p.125) In the follow-up one-on-one interviews, summary notes and key points were composed and jotted down. Phrases, expressions and sentences related to participants' ideas and thoughts regarding peer editing were picked out to be transformed into a set of notes and organized in order. After data collection, the qualitative software program QSR NUD*IST Vivo 5was mainly used to facilitate data storage, coding, retrieval, comparing, and linking. The qualitative analysis of this study, which consisted of analysis of learners' think-aloud protocols (A. King, 1994)while revising writings, provided insights into reasons for the differences among peers.

When analyzing the sorted data, the researcher also constantly compared and contrasted different parts of the data and looked for patterns. She went back and forth between the notes and the transcriptions to determine the themes. Several major themes emerged to add depth to the insights on the roles of peer review in the process of PAL.

Findings

This section describes participants' responses and attitudes toward the peer review method applied in the English composition class. Although peer-assisted learning has a rich empirical and pragmatic history, most of the systematic work has focused on children.

Substantially less peer-assisted learning research has been conducted with adults compared to with children. Yet, gradually more and more peer-assisted learning has been widely implemented, not only at elementary schools but also at university level and in different fields as well as in many countries. Peer review is a more pragmatic PAL approach in the EFL writing pedagogy. This paper presented findings of a survey of 18 English major students at a university in central Taiwan concerning their peer review procedures in a junior English writing class. The following findings both from the perspectives of tutors and tutees answer the research questions in this study.

Role as a tutor

(A) Inexperienced Raters

Findings from the questionnaires as well as the one-on-one interviews and documents from student writers' assignments with draft(s) suggested that the majority of the participants, i.e. more than 90% of the students, were worried about the abilities to revise their peer's writing assignments in the beginning. As mentioned earlier, Taiwanese college EFL composition class learners are used to the professor as the primary and only reader or grader for their writing assignments. They do not hold enough experience and confidence in dealing with challenges like peer review. On the whole, it seems that these inexperienced raters are not ready to take the responsibilities to do adequate and decent jobs. However, some of these inexperienced raters were eager to face the challenges while trying hard to do a good job, such as checking dictionaries as much as possible, or communicating through FB with their partners after class to discuss unclear parts in their draft writings.

(B) Enhancing Students' Motivation toward Writing

Some of the students reported they enjoyed the peer review approach for their English composition drafts. Participants who favored the use of writing pairs saw the benefits including an enhanced motivation toward English writing. One of the female participants mentioned in the survey: "I'm satisfied with this arrangement (writing team). Actually I have long dreamed about reading others' English writing assignments since I was in high school. It's really good to have this opportunity now to be involved in this writing strategy." Another male junior participant stated his viewpoints in the questionnaire: "I'm satisfied with it (peer review) because by this way, you can get other's opinions. Furthermore, instead of limiting my own ideas, I definitely will receive broader inputs to express and develop my writing".

(C) Wasting Time in Revising Partner's Writing

Assignment Two senior students' strong opinions stated clearly and directly in their questionnaire that they preferred having instructors to correct their writing assignments because peer review was a waste of their time while revising their partner's writing assignments. "I'm so busy, and I don't have time to write the assignment again and again. Most importantly, I don't like peer review at all because I don't feel comfortable showing my own English writing to others."

(D) Difficulties in Revising Partner's Writing Assignments

As for the weakness and strength reported from the questionnaire survey, this study showed most student writers lack the skills in revising partner's writing assignments in the following area: vocabulary, phrase, sentence structure, ideas, and writing format. Only one female junior student pointed out that she was confident in her skills in the field of vocabulary usage since she would check an(online)dictionary all the time.

(E) Better Academic Performance

"Usually I hand in my first draft to the teacher. To be honest with you, that's what I used to do in freshmen and sophomore English writing courses. You know to hand in the assignment in the last minute. But now, it's different. I have to write at least one draft and ask my partner to revise for me and sign his/her name on the first draft. My god! It's a lot of work. However, the truth is that I get a better grade now. That's good." One of the participants stated clearly her satisfaction and reactions to peer review. In addition to a better academic performance, the skills of peer review in this study provide student writers with the diagnostic ability in self-evaluation they need to examine their own writing assignments.

Role as a tutee

(A) Developing a Greater Audience Awareness

One of the junior female students stated during the interview: "My high school English teacher once told me that my English writing was boring. And I still put it in my mind now. As a tutee, I really appreciate the new inputs of different ideas from my friends. And this is the most important achievement to know what my reader's reactions while I myself could not possibly reach that level of understanding while writing on my own." Two different roles of being a tutor and tutee at the same time would became a learning experience which student writers can take with them beyond their college career. The peer review experience would offer a good communication skill to keep and it might even make some of student writers think a little deeper when writing. Most importantly, they have developed a greater reader awareness to make their writing more clearly and logically.

(B) Linguistic Competence

One of the highly proficient students stated that "I don't like criticism on my paper so I try to do my best not to have any errors." Even though student writers showed positive attitudes toward the revising process, most questionnaire and interview responses indicated that students felt they were not able to be experts simply because of their linguistic incompetence no matter what position they held. Interestingly, about 50% of student writers were more doubtful about their peers' comments even though they lacked confidence about their own writing at the same time. During the interviews, one junior female student asked: "What if my partner did it wrong? Can I trust him?"

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of the evaluation of peer review in an EFL writing class in this study provides significant information for improving the teaching and learning strategies for both teachers and college EFL learners. Under the different responses of pros and cons from the student writers, consider that if most pairs experience difficulties, then these difficulties do not make the writing team necessarily dysfunctional. Students' open-ended answers in the questionnaire and their comments in one-on-one interviews were mostly enlightening and instructive. Many students feel uncomfortable with peer review because they are hesitant to pronounce a judgment on their peer's writing. This discomfort could be the result of their maturity level, their desire not to hurt a peer's feelings, or simply their inexperience in providing constructive revision on a peer's work. Furthermore, many students in Taiwan do not perceive feedback from peers as relevant to the process of writing the assignment for a course. Most undergraduate students are likely to assume that it is only the instructor's feedback that "counts."The writing process is not linear. Writers move back and forth between stages of writing in a recursive manner. Writing is a process, not a product.

In a student-centered classroom, learning is an individual process and teachers become a facilitator, rather than a director. In this study, both positive and negative feedbacks from student writers, both the roles of tutor and tutee, would justify the efficacy of peer review as a way to develop their self-awareness in EFL writing process. We EFL educators need to shoulder the responsibility of demonstrating the thinking stages a writer normally experiences to conceive and develop ideas and meanings through reading and discussion. The most important goal is to raise students' insights and confidence to write and eventually enjoy writing.

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