Peer Review Comments Provided by High- and Low-Proficiency L2 Learners: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This study explored the variations in peer review comments provided by L2 writers of high and low proficiencies. Two sampling procedures were used. First, convenience sampling was used to locate a college essay composition course as the setting of the study. Second, purposeful sampling was used to identify high- and low-performing writers as the subjects, from whom the peer review comments were collected and analyzed. An instruction-learning cycle on argumentative essay writing was conducted for 4 weeks. Each student was subsequently provided with the same sample argumentative essay and a peer review form to conduct the review. The rubrics on the review form included introduction, support for position, sequence, refutation, conclusion, voice, and grammar and spelling. Content analysis was conducted to compare the manner in which the comments varied among students of different writing proficiency levels. The results indicate that, although identifying problems was the dominant comment type of both high- and low-performing writers, high-performing writers tended to provide more details when explaining the identified problems and offering suggestions for revisions. The findings are discussed regarding the implications to peer review training.

Keywords: language proficiency, peer review, peer review training, writing instruction

1. Introduction

Although writing is frequently considered a personal undertaking, real-life professional writing often requires teamwork in order to integrate expertise and enhance the level of persuasion by incorporating various viewpoints (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 1999; Hyland, 2003). An approach to providing students with opportunities to practice negotiation of meanings and enhance collaborative writing skills needed in the workplace (Hyland, 2003) is to use peer review or peer response groups in a writing class. Previous studies indicate students benefit from peer interaction and support in the composing process, not just from comments regarding a final product (Hyland, 2000). Perceiving the potential advantage of incorporating the element of peer review into writing instruction programs, the researchers explored the manner in which peer review comments differed among L2 writers of high and low proficiencies, and subsequently used the information to discuss possible implications to refine the design of peer review training programs in future studies.

The use of peer review in an L2 writing program is consistent with the learning theories of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and Dewey (1963). Vygotsky (1978) argued that collaboration among peers promotes learning because the process enables learners to operate within each other’s “zone of proximal development” (p. 86). Working with peers is academically beneficial because, when learners are closer to each other in their levels of proximal development, they can describe things to each other in a simpler manner that can be comprehended more easily than an explanation by a person with a different mental stage. Similarly, Dewey (1963) stressed the importance of “active cooperation” in the process of constructing knowledge (p. 67).

The beneficial effects of peer review are threefold. First, comments by peer reviewers increase the audience awareness of writers and help them enhance the quality of writing when the “writer-based prose” is revised to a more “reader-based” piece of work (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Second, when critically reading each other’s drafts, the reviewing process enables reviewers to reflect more upon the writing and revision process, which enhances
their judgment of what makes a writing piece good (Min, 2003). Third, the reviewing process enables reviewers to enhance the awareness of their own composition, which helps them become superior writers (Stoddard & MacAuthur, 1993). However, although prior research has indicated the merits of peer interaction in the writing process, in order to maximize the effects of peer support, it is crucial to understand the manner in which learners of different characteristics write and revise before effective writing instructions and writing programs can be designed.

Prior studies have shown that more proficient writers focus on the global aspects of their writing, such as organization and audience (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Zamel, 1982, 1983). Conversely, less proficient writers usually have a narrower approach and focus on vocabulary and the surface grammar structure (Pianko, 1979; Porte, 1996, 1997). Experienced writers can foresee readers’ comprehension needs and tailor their writing accordingly with respect to content and linguistic elements; however, this is difficult for novice writers (Flower & Hayes, 1980). In this regard, peer review can assist a novice writer in considering the writing piece from the perspective and state of mind of the reader (Hyland, 2003).

Prior research has also indicated L2 proficiency as an important factor in the quality of writing and problem-solving behavior (Plakans, 2008; Roca de Larios, Manchon, Murphy, & Marin, 2008; Roca de Larios, Murphy, & Marin, 2002; Zamel, 1983). Particularly, reading ability has been found to be a key factor that affects reading-to-write performance. For example, the amount of notes and the sophistication of the content of the notes are influenced by reading levels of the learner (Kennedy, 1985). According to Connor and Krammer (1995) and Delaney (2008), less proficient L2 learners can have difficulty in writing or reading-to-write tasks because they tend to lack the necessary vocabulary and grammar at the sentence level or reading comprehension and writing competence at the discourse level.

Even though previous research studies have found that learners vary in their writing strategies and performances, little research has pinpointed at the peer review behaviors among L2 learners of different proficiencies. Therefore, the present study bridges the gap in the literature by exploring possible variations between the peer review comments of high- and low-proficiency L2 learners.

2. Method

In order to examine peer review comments provided by L2 writers of different proficiency levels, the study used both convenience and purposeful sampling, including extreme-case sampling, to identify the participants, from whom the data of peer comments were collected at the end of a 4-week peer review instructional-learning cycle. The sampling procedure, peer review training, data collection, and data analysis are shown in Figure 1 and discussed in the subsequent sections.

2.1 Subjects

The researchers used two sampling procedures to recruit participants. First, convenience sampling was used. A college English essay writing course in an urban technical university in Taiwan was selected as the setting of the study. The course was compulsory for English majors. The essay writing course focused on argumentation and had an enrollment of 29 students. Subsequently, two purposeful sampling methods were used. First, students at the top and bottom quartiles were identified based on the average scores of the midterm and final essay writing in the previous semester (M = 83.7, SD = 7.4). The seven higher-performing writers at the top quartile (M = 88.7) are referred to as H1 to H7 in this paper, whereas the seven lower-performing writers at the bottom quartile (M = 75.2) are referred to as L1 to L7. Regarding the general English proficiency of the participants, the top quartile had an average of 573 points on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) listening and reading, and the bottom quartile 496 points. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the learners in the top quartile were at the B1 level (i.e., threshold or pre-intermediate level), and those in the bottom quartile were at the A2 level (i.e., waystage or elementary level).

After the learners at the top and bottom quartiles were identified, extreme-case sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997) was used to select cases that represented the most clear cut instance of language performance. With an analysis on the essay writing scores of the previous semester, the researchers identified six learners whose writing scores were more than one standard deviation away from the mean, that is, higher than 91.1 (H1, H2, and H3) or lower than 76.3 (L1, L2, and L3). The top three writers had an average of 733 points on the TOEIC and the bottom three had 467 points, which were equivalent to B1 and A2 levels, respectively. Table 1 shows an overview of the English proficiencies of the participants.
2.2 Instruction-learning Cycle

Before data collection, the students learned skills of argumentative essay writing through lectures provided by the instructor as well as reading and analyses of two example argumentative essays. The lectures included the six-paragraph organization of argumentative essays, development of thesis, adding supporting information, counterargument and refutation, controlling tone with modals, and selection of topics appropriate for argumentative essays. In-class learning activities were conducted at each step of the lectures. The activities included identifying key components of an argumentative essay (e.g., thesis, supporting sentences, counterargument, and refutation), providing supporting information, writing pro and con thesis statements, selecting modals, constructing a topic for argumentation, and planning an outline. The instruction-learning cycle was implemented over 4-weeks.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In the fifth week, the participants were provided with a 453-word sample argumentative essay to conduct a peer review. The instructor explained the format of the evaluation and feedback form, as well as the rubrics for
actually critique each other’s writing.

6. Limitation and Suggestions for Further Research

As in other studies, the present study has limitations. First, the results are generalizable to L2 learners of similar English proficiency levels, that is, CEFR A2 (elementary) and B1 (pre-intermediate) levels as shown in Table 1. Furthermore, learners of different English levels exhibited differing performance in all comment types except asking for clarification and identifying problems. Better writers provided more feedback in the areas of explanation of problems, suggestions for revisions, and encouragement to peers. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that the definition of “more” feedback in the present study was determined quantitatively by word counts. Therefore, the definition may be limited in nature and unable to get the full picture regarding the quality of comments. It is thus recommended that future research with qualitative analysis be conducted in order to discover whether the feedback provided by the higher-performing writers is indeed better in content. Two possible areas of analysis are the types of problems that reviewers identify and the types of suggestions that they provide.

Additionally, it is suggested that interviews with learners, particularly those with less proficient writing skills, be conducted to learn their reviewing process and whether their own revision strategies may have led them to focus on certain comment types. Writing strategy questionnaires can also be utilized to facilitate the understanding. Moreover, this study examined variations in peer review comments in order to provide insights as how to construct helpful peer review training. It is recommended that future study be conducted to scrutinize the effects of the interplay of peer review instruction and language proficiency on peer review performance.

To sum up, the study offers the following suggestions for future research. Firstly, qualitative analysis on peer comments can be conducted to understand how high- and low-performing writers vary in the nature of problems that they identify and the suggestions that they provide. Secondly, interviews can be conducted to explore possible relationships among the reviewing processes of the learners, the revision strategies that they usually implement, and the comment types that they use more (or less) frequently. Thirdly, writing strategy questionnaires can be administered to assist the above exploration. Finally, training in peer review should be provided in future studies and the effects of the training on peer review behaviors and effectiveness be examined.

References


