An Investigation into the Effectiveness of Peer Review of Writing

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Abstract

This paper reports about the pilot study conducted (a) to introduce students to collaborative writing (b) to introduce students to peer review of writing(c)to try out the instruments to be used in the main study and (d) to find out what kind of training will help students to learn to give constructive feedback. The pilot study was conducted at Silicon Institute of Technology, which is a private engineering college under the Biju Pattanaik University of Technology of Odisha.The participants were seventy five undergraduate engineering students of three different streams of engineering namely Applied Electronics and Instrumentation, Information and Technology and Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering. The study was conducted over a period of three weeks. Data included responses to a questionnaire, first drafts of a writing assignment, written peer comments, revised drafts of the assignment and teacher's observation. Qualitative analyses of the questionnaire data and teacher's observation in the class reveal a general acceptance towards peer review. Quantitative analyses of the peer comments and subsequent revisions to the drafts show a significant improvement in the revised drafts which can be linked to peer feedback. The findings from the pilot study show peer review as a socioculturally appropriate pedagogical activity for engineering students. However, the two levels of main study which are planned to be conducted by the researcher are expected to reveal many interesting facts about the effectiveness of peer review.

Keywords - Second language writing; ESL learners; Feedback; Peer review ; Process writing; Second language writing

Introduction

Writing is an important skill and everyone needs to master it. Yet a large number of students find it difficult to master even after more than twelve years of formal learning in school and college. The poor writing skill of students is a matter of concern not only in India but also for the educationist and researchers all over the world. "How do we help students learn to organize their thoughts to effectively focus on topics, frame an argument, choose appropriate examples, analyze issues, synthesize different points of view, clarify confusing passages, and make their imaginative ideas come alive with a tone that fits the subject and audience?" (Carl Nagin, 2003:210).

Although writing, like every skill, requires practice to be mastered, it makes up only a fraction of most students' school work. For many students, writing simply means filling in blanks or copying sentences on worksheets. Experience shows that at the college level also not much emphasis is given to writing. The classrooms are overcrowded and teachers usually give lecturers in the classes. No written assignments are given during theory classes. The students appear in an end term examination and get their grades. No feedback is given to them even on their end term paper. In such a scenario, there is a need to search for some alternative mechanism of teaching writing which will improve the writing skills of students. A survey of related literature revealed an alternative pedagogic procedure which seems to have an answer for the above mentioned

problem. This procedure is grounded in the socio cultural theory which is discussed next.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory of human learning describes learning as a social process and the origination of human intelligence in society or culture (Lantolf, 2000). The major theme of this theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. It talks about the presence of a "zone of proximal development (ZPD)" (Vygotsky, 1978) in the mind of a student. This "zone" is the area of exploration for which the student is cognitively prepared, but requires help and social interaction to develop fully. So according to the sociocultural theory collaborative learning, discourse, modelling, and scaffolding are the strategies which support the development of intellectual knowledge and skills of learners.

An investigation by Donato (1994), regarding how non-native speakers develop language learning experiences in the classroom setting and how second language development occurs in the social context shows that "collective scaffolding may result in linguistic development in the individual learner. Scaffolding occurs routinely as students work together on language learning tasks and therefore it appears useful to consider the learners themselves as a source of knowledge of group work in giving students the opportunity to discuss problems which result in a social context" (Donato, 1994:51-52).The findings of Donato support the importance scaffolding which in turn assists in learning .The important message in this argument is that learners can mutually assist and scaffold each other's performance in the same way as experts scaffold it with novices.

Thus, peer interaction should be taken into consideration in providing language learners with various learning tasks or environments, as such scaffold help from peers as sources of interaction may improve performance.

Recently, second Language writing practitioners as well as researchers are giving a lot of emphasis on peer review as a pedagogical activity (e.g., Campbell 1998; Harmer 2004; Porto 2001). In peer review, students are engaged in the collaborative activity of "reading, critiquing and providing feedback on each other's writing, both to secure immediate textual improvement and to develop, over time, stronger writing competence via mutual scaffolding" (Hu 2005a, pp. 321-322). Second Language writing practitioners find peer review interesting because it blends well with the practices of process-oriented teaching of writing and provides an appropriate alternative to the traditional source of feedback on student writing, namely, teacher response (Hu 2005a; Hyland and Hyland 2006a; Krapels 1990; Nelson and Carson 1998). Researchers of second language teaching and learning express an interest in peer review as it puts emphasis on socio-cognitive learning activity and also on the Vygotskian notions of regulation, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development (de Guerrero and Villamil 2000; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Min 2005; Villamil and de Guerrero 1998; Vygotsky 1978, 1986).Moreover, it is believed that compared with teacher feedback, peer feedback can be more informative because second language learners can understand each other better (Chaudron 1984; Lockhart and Ng 1993; Paulus 1999) and this leads to more careful consideration during revision decisions(Hyland 2000; Mittan 1989; Rollinson 2005; Tsui and Ng 2000). Last but not the least, a few studies (e.g., Rollinson 2005; Villamil and de Guerrero 1998) have found that students do incorporate large proportions of peer suggestions while making revisions to their drafts.

The Pilot study:

The pilot study was conducted at Silicon Institute of Technology, which is a private engineering college under the Biju Pattanaik University of Technology.This institute offers engineering degrees in five areas namely IT, CS, EEE, E &T and MCA .Students join this institution after completing their twelfth standard or +2 on the basis of their ranks in competitive examinations like JEE or AIEEE and through a personal interview. Some students are also admitted through management quota.So, in a class we find students with different schooling backgrounds like CBSE,ICSE and State Boards .These students belong to the age group of 18-20 and are of different language abilities.During the personal interview the candidates are evaluated in terms of their ability to communicate orally.No written test in English is done for selection.

During the four years of engineering, technical English is taught in the first three semesters**.** The first semester is devoted for phonetics, grammar and basics of communication Skills , the second semester is devoted to developing the technical English writing skills of the students, in which they are taught to write paragraph, business letters, reports, memos and proposals and the third semester focuses on developing the corporate skills of the students. During the first semester, the students don't do much writing except completing one assignment on communication.Even this activity doesn't involve extended writing.Other activities in the first semester are based on grammar and phonetics.Only in second semester is some emphasis given on writing.The students are initially given some theoretical inputs on writing and are provided with samples on each form of writing and are then given written assignments. Similarly the third semester does not involve many writing assignments. Their

writing is only limited to writing a CV and a cover letter.

Sometime their assignments are checked and given back to them in the next class but most of the time the written assignments are kept for evaluation at the end of the semester.As a result , the students don't receive much feedback from the teacher on their written assignments and they just don't pay any attention to whatever feedback is given by the teacher .Teachers are also helpless as they have to manage a large group of 60 students with varying levels of language abilities in a classroom. Writing thus remains a neglected area in this context.

In such a scenario, peer feedback, because it is positioned in a background of sociocultural theory, seems to have the potential to improve the writing skills of the learners. Peer feedback is the only form of assessment where feedback can be given immediately within the time allotted for a class. And as the students themselves are a part of the assessment process they pay more attention to the corrections made and incorporate them while writing the revised draft. And as Swain and Lapkin argue 'peer review provides multiple opportunities to discuss the language through collaborating in a variety of tasks (writing, discussing feedback, rewriting) that leads to learning. When learners work collaboratively, they are able to identify gaps in their own knowledge, to hypothesize about language, and most importantly, to discuss about the different aspects of language while developing a jointly constructed text.' Donato (1994) argued that 'collective scaffolding,' that is, where learners can draw and build on each other's knowledge, allowed them to interact at higher levels of activity than would have been the case if they had worked individually'. So peer feedback seems to be a more effective way of improving the writing skills of students.

Hence the purpose of the study is to examine whether use of peer feedback as a technique would improve the writing skills of engineering students. As most of the students at this stage are used to the practice of receiving feedback from only their teachers and not used to the practice of receiving feedback from peers, it was decided to carry out a pilot study to find out the acceptance level of the students towards receiving feedback from their peers .

The objectives of pilot study were as follows:

- to introduce students to collaborative writing.
- to introduce students to peer review of writing.
- trying out the instruments to be used in the main study.
- to find out what kind of training will help students to learn to give constructive feedback.

Procedure:

The pilot study was conducted over a period of three weeks with 75 students .All of them were undergraduate engineering students who had come from diverse backgrounds . Most of them had learnt English as a second language for more than 12 years. They belonged to three different streams of engineering i.e. AEI, IT and ETA.

The first session started with the briefing of the syllabus and was followed by a discussion about the importance of communication for an engineer. There was a discussion about the four language skills and the importance of writing skill. Then the researcher administered the questionnaire to all the students to capture both qualitative and quantitative data.

In the second session the teacher asked the students whether they would like to work alone or as a pair that day. Their instant and unanimous decision was to work in pairs. The students were given a choice to select a partner. After a little bit of discussion the pairs were formed. The teacher explained the process of writing and showed them how to do the idea map and outline through an example. Then they were asked to select a topic from the given list of topics. Few pairs said they will select their own topic. They were allowed to do so. They were asked to generate an idea map for their respective topics, then do the outlining and then write the essay. They were given 25 minutes to do the idea map, 20 minutes for the outline and 45 minutes for writing the essay .The teacher was roaming in the class to observe their activities and answer their queries.

In session three, the teacher discussed about peer review and told the pairs what they were supposed to do once they get their peer's paper. The teacher advised them to read the drafts carefully, give constructive feedback and suggest changes. The pairs were given essays which were written by other pairs. They were given the peer review worksheet and were told to go through it and clarify their doubts regarding any of the terms which they didn't understand. They will be given 10 to 15 minutes to read the paper and 30 minutes to give feedback using the peer review worksheet. Teacher asks them to write their comments on a separate sheet of paper.

The students were then assigned the homework of reading the peer comments closely and write a second draft incorporating some of the changes which they feel necessary. They submitted the second drafts together with the first drafts and the written comments from their peers.

Peer Review Training Session: The teacher conducted a peer review training session to prepare the students for the peer review activity. The students were made aware of the importance of peer review. They were taught that peer review is an integral part of the writing

process which consists of three steps: drafting, revising and editing and that peer review is done between the first two steps so that the writers get the necessary feedback to revise their papers.

Basically They were taught not to rush through the peer review process and offer only vague comments like, "I liked your paper"," Good job", "Good paper" etc .They were counselled not to feel uncomfortable while giving comments on a peer's paper and were taught to accept some of the genuine comments and ignore some which they feel as unnecessary. They were also advised to give specific, descriptive and constructive comment on a peer's paper. If required they will be taught the sub skills of reading like skimming, scanning, listing the main points and the supporting details ;indicating sentences or paragraphs that seem out of order or not properly explained and writing skills like writing clear, specific comments(A paper's introduction is its strongest point ; the paper's main point or thesis is not clear ;there are gaps in the logic presented in the paper or comments like "I found this description very clear", or "I didn't understand how this point relates to your thesis" etc.) and specific questions (could you tell the writer what you found effective or appealing about the paragraph ?And why? Could you tell the writer where you got lost? What word or phrase confused you?) . They were also taught to build an atmosphere of mutual support and trust .They were given the worksheet for peer review and were asked to discuss about any of the components which they didn't understand . A previous assignment. was used to give students practice in responding to each other's writing.

Instruments used in the study:

Writing Skills Questionnaire: The participants were given a questionnaire to complete in class. The questionnaire was written in English and consisted of twenty-five questions , distributed across three sections, all designed to elicit information about the learner's perception about teacher's feedback, peer feedback and how competent they felt they were as far as writing was concerned. Except question number one all other questions were of multiple choice. The first part was designed to collect general information and so the participants were asked to rate themselves as speakers and writers, whether they enjoy writing in English, what kind of text they like to produce and what are the problems they face while writing. Part two focussed on teacher's feedback and so the participants were asked whether they received any feedback from their teacher; how useful was teacher's feedback in improving their composition, and how often they followed teacher's comments while making revisions; they were asked to elaborate whether peer feedback can be a suitable technique to improve the writing skills of students; In part three they were asked to indicate how frequently they had been involved with pair and group work and their degree of agreement or disagreement with collaborative learning as well as autonomous learning in ESL writing classes. Finally, they were asked whether they would like to see more students' involvement in ESL writing classes and receive peer feedback on their composition or not. The participants were encouraged to ask the teacher for clarification of terms or anything they did not understand in the questionnaire.

The Peer Review Worksheet: The purpose of administrating this worksheet was to assist the students in peer review activity. The worksheet contained questions which were meant to guide the students in giving constructive feedback so that the quality of the paragraph will improve. There were questions about the topic sentence, about the effectiveness of the introduction and conclusion, the purpose of the paragraph; the students were asked to identify the best parts of the paragraph; to comment on the ideas they

found interesting, to identify their favourite sentence as well as to identify the parts which were not clear to them. They were not only asked about content related questions but also to comment on the grammar and structure of the paragraph. Finally, the students were requested to give their recommendations for improving the paragraph.

Post Peer Review Questionnaire: This questionnaire was meant to collect information about the experience of students after doing the peer review activity and so it contained questions regarding the entire process of peer review, the benefits derived from the activity as well as the difficulties faced during the activity. Each student was asked to give their views regarding whether they liked to review their peer's paper and their paper being reviewed by someone else.

Researcher's Diary: The researcher maintained a diary throughout the study in which she kept a detailed account of what was done in the class. This helped in collecting qualitative data.

Findings:

The entries in the researcher's diary, researcher's observation in the class and the questionnaire responses were analyzed qualitatively to collect data about the students' responses to peer review.

Researcher's Diary:

During the first session, when the questionnaire was given to the students they asked about the meaning of 'peer feedback', ESL',' autonomous learning' etc. They also enquired about whether they should attempt the part-ii, which is about the teacher's feedback. If yes, was it about that class teacher's feedback or not. The class was doing the activity quietly, except few students who were discussing about few of the questions and then asking the teacher. The rest of the class preferred to directly ask the teacher in case of any doubt.

During the second session, when the teacher asked the students whether they would like to work alone or as a pair that day, their instant and unanimous decision was to work in pairs. The students were quite involved in the activity and the teacher observed the following things:

During the third session, after the teacher gave them training about peer review and then exchanged their copies to give feedback, the pairs were seen reading the essays seriously. The teacher had to resolve few issues like: one pair was telling let's give good feedback to the other pair, so that they will give us good feedback.(the teacher had to take up the issue and advised them not to indulge in anything like this and do it with little sincerity. The teacher had to change the sheet of one pair as they were verbalizing the comments on the essay given to them and the pair who had written the essay was sitting just next to them. Few pairs had doubts about giving negative feedback .The teacher had to counsel the pairs about the benefits of such feedback and how one should give such feedback and accept such feedback.

Teacher's observation:

- A lot of interactions were happening between the members of the pairs and a few intra-group discussions were also happening. In some pairs one student was writing after the discussion and the other person was dictating sentences. In two pairs the teacher found that both the partners were writing separate drafts and when asked said they would develop separately and merge it together.

- In most pairs after the writing was over one member was seen reading out the draft and the

International Journal of Research

Available at https://edupediapublications.org/journals

p-ISSN: 2348-6848
e-ISSN: 2348-795X
Volume 03 Issue 08
April 2016

other person listening and suggesting necessary changes.

- All the students seemed fully engrossed in the job and not getting distracted by anything.

Analysis of Qualitative Data from the Questionnaire:

Analysis of qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire revealed many interesting things:

Expectations of Students: It was found out that students came to the class with various expectations like how to develop the skill of generating ideas ,how to properly organize ideas, learn about the different genre of writing, increase their vocabulary, improve thinking and writing skills, improve grammar and communication skills in English. Some even were eager to learn how to refer to a dictionary and become effective novel readers.

Peer Feedback can be a Suitable Technique:

To the question "Do you think that peer feedback can be a suitable technique to improve the writing skills of students?" the students responded in interesting ways. Some of their answers are:

Gaurav Sachan- "Peers can give different ideas and information about the assignment which can be useful to us."

Soumya Maharana-"When a mass appreciates our writing will improve."

Pallavi Priyadarsini-"Yes, it is useful. Because I perform better when my peers push me time and again to do so."

Md. Shahrukh –"Yes, it is useful, because I perform better when my peers push me and encourage me."

Bhanu Priya Mehta – "Because our friends understand our problems and they can help us to be good in writing and communicating."

So, most of the students agreed that peer feedback actually helped to receive feedback from their friends as their friends know their

difficulties and mistakes better than the teacher. It helped them to clear their doubts through discussion, improved grammar, helped them in getting new ideas, it gave flexibility of understanding the problem and they got immediate feedback. Students were generally very close to their peer groups so they would listen to their advice because they were also their competitors in class. There were students who liked it because they felt as they were frank with their peers it would help them to know their weakness in English and be helpful to improve their writing skills. Some even felt that it

increased their thinking ability. Some students were of the view that it was effective as peers were of the same age and have similar thinking and similar ideas.

Some students didn't appreciate the idea of receiving feedback from students and cited several reasons for that. One of them said she didn't like it as she thought her classmates were learners too and It was always better to take up the feedback from a senior or someone more experienced .She argued that it was not bad to take up peer advice sometimes but not always . Another student said it was not good because students didn't have the perfect idea and couldn't judge as appropriately as a teacher. Moreover a student's point of view is very less. Some also expressed concern that it would not be of much help as the students might be wrong at times and this would lead to more confusion rather than help. Again if the feedback contained some negative points of a student and if it was discussed in front of all, then it might hurt the sentiments of the student .Receiving feedback from a friend might also create inferiority complex in the student's mind and he would start degrading rather than improving. So, teacher should give their own feedback.

Out of the 43 students who had responded, 16 students answered in the

negative. This means while 35percent students didn't accept peer review as a suitable technique, but the rest 75 percent students were excited with the idea and felt it would be helpful in improving their writing skills.

More Involvement of Students:

As English is a global language and every student must know how to communicate in this language the students felt more active involvement in ESL classes would improve their communication skills. Presence of more people would lead to the generation of more ideas and more discussion and this in turn would help the students to become fluent speakers. Not a single student disagreed that it is important and being more involved in these classes would help them to know more about their mistakes and get it corrected through peer review.

Post Peer Review Questionnaire:

The research had administered a post peer review questionnaire to find out about the students' experience about the peer review activity.

The different benefits that the students said they got from the peer review activity were it broadened their way of thinking , helped to improve their personal ideas ,they came to know about their drawbacks and the areas where we need to improve. They also said it improved their vocabulary, they got to know about their grammatical errors, and it exposed them to better pieces of writing. They realized it lead to better collaboration of ideas, they learnt how to do more practice while elaborating any idea and how to read carefully and then comment. One of them said," I liked the review because I got to know my friend's review which was totally different from mine and I learnt to be more articulate in my style of writing". Another pair said, "We compared our own ideas with our friends and discussion with friends generated more ideas. We came to know about our

mistakes and learnt that we have to concentrate more on the topic. We also learnt to make our conclusion more effective. Peer review is beneficial as it helped to improve my essay. It taught us to be careful while giving feedback so that it doesn't hurt the sentiment of our friends".

Though most pairs said they didn't face any problem while doing peer review, some of them complained about few issues like sometimes reviews were not true, some ideas were rightly pointed out but in whole the review was unsatisfactory, handwriting should be much clearer and some reviews were an incorrect interpretation of our essay.

Conclusion: From the pilot study the researcher found the students taking utmost interest in doing the peer review. They did the peer review activity with sincerity and interest. All the pairs were fully engrossed in both the tasks of writing the essay collaboratively and doing the peer review collaboratively. Except few negative remarks, most of the students said peer review is beneficial and helped them in numerous ways and that they would like to be involved in more such sessions. The instruments prepared by the researcher were used in the pilot study and helped in generating useful data.

The researcher also realised that the students should be given more training in peer review. They should be exposed to a mock session on peer review using some sample peer review sheet. The researcher also decided to record the conversation of students when they are engaged in reviewing each other's paper and to invite her colleagues to observe peer review sessions as it will help in maintaining triangulation.

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