

Helping ESL/EFL Writers with Peer Response Groups

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In this paper, I will discuss the importance of peer response groups and feedback in ESL/EFL writing. Before I proceed, I want to address two issues which are central to my discussion.

The first of these is a common misconception about the importance of writing. The common goal of all language teaching methods is to teach people to communicate in a language other than their own. In teaching English as a second or foreign language to students, writing has traditionally been included in syllabuses as it is one of the four skills needed for communication. However, when language teaching methods are examined, starting from the grammar-translation method, in which target language structures and vocabulary have to be known for the sole purpose of translating literary texts, to the modern methods which emphasize teaching students the necessary abilities to express themselves, it is observed that the reason why and how writing should be taught has not been clearly stated. White (1987) says:

“Arguments are sometimes put forward for not teaching students to write because it is felt that a command of the spoken language and of reading is more important” (p. 259).

Nowadays, teachers of English to non-native students, in general, emphasize the development of communicative competence which will enable their students to express themselves carry out conversations, and respond appropriately to people and situations verbally. Basically, only the verbal side of communication is given prominence in the teaching/learning process, and writing is basically considered as a means to measure student performance in English. In other words, it is considered as no more than a secondary activity.

When we examine verbal and written communication, we see that verbal communication occurs in particular situations between people. Therefore, it is context-bound. Written communication, on the other hand, exceeds this limitation of verbal communication and has a wider range. A daily newspaper is a good example to explain what is meant here. The information it includes reaches a

considerably larger number of people and is shared by them. In addition to this, teachers of ESL/EFL have to realize that the ever increasing importance of English as an international language urges learners to learn to write in English both for occupational and academic purposes. Therefore, we, as teachers, can not neglect writing because it occupies an equally important status with other language skills.

The second misconception want to mention here is about the nature of writing which is common among ESL/EFL teachers. The most common stereotype about writing describes it as a lonely act. In other words, there is only one party involved, namely, the writer. However, this is not true. Any piece of writing is always shared by a certain audience. For example, an article which discusses the importance of wait time in questioning is a piece of writing that attracts the attention of teachers and is read by them.

Moreover, writing is not only produced by individuals. Educational reports discussing particular teaching problems in a country or government documents on unemployment are prepared by a group of people and such an effort is collaborative. Therefore, it is not correct to assume that writing is not a communal activity.

Even though in real life writing is done to address a certain audience and sometimes done by groups, school writing falls into a different category. It is considered as an activity which serves to measure student performance, and students write not to communicate but to show that they are able to use the target structures and vocabulary items that are being tested by constructing sentences.

The audience is always the teacher for school writing and in doing evaluation, ESL/EFL teachers pay attention to the formal properties of students' tests such as grammar and spelling which are the surface features of writing, but not to the content which refers to the messages that students want to convey. Sharing of ideas which is an important part of real writing is not observed in school writing.

One related issue is that when teachers approach writing from this perspective, they focus on the product. Such an approach by teachers leads students to misconceptions about the nature of writing. Students think that the important thing in writing is to finish and hand in a piece of writing. Thus, when a piece emerges, they consider it as the final product which doesn't need any modification or revision. This view neglects the fact that writing is a process through which meaning is created. Zamel (1987) directs attention to this issue:

"Recently, however, the focus on research on composition has shifted. Rather than investigating what students write, teachers and researchers are beginning to study the composing process itself... It is therefore important that ESL teachers of writing take into account the current findings in research on composition" (p. 268).

The recent research in the field of composition enables us to understand that writing is not only an individual composing process as believed but an interpersonal process as well since what is written is shared by a community of readers. Spear (1988) says:

“The communal features of writing are even more significant when we consider not written products but the process of writing. Whenever writers seek responses from others by verbalizing ideas or sharing drafts, the process of writing becomes a social one. Sharing allows writers to hear what their ideas sound like and to solicit feedback as they continue to think about a topic, draft, or revise. The verbal and nonverbal feedback they receive contributes to the evaluation of ideas” (p. 3).

What can we do, as ESL/EFL teachers, to help our students become better writers if we want to focus on the process of writing which will enable us to do everything I have mentioned above?

One way to do this is to establish peer response groups in ESL/EFL writing classes. Group interaction reinforces the idea that writing is not only what is produced, i.e. the product, but the activities undertaken to create it, i.e. the process. Groups make sharing possible at all stages of the composing process. The stages of the composing process are identified, as “rehearsing”, “drafting”, and “revising”. Group interaction enables student writers to rehearse their ideas verbally in groups before writing to understand how their ideas sound to others, to share their drafts and revisions with group members to get feedback which I will discuss in detail in the next section.

The group functions as an audience throughout the process and gives student writers a chance to consider the factor of audience and to make their texts appealing to, them. These activities lead students to focus on the process of writing and to conduct goal-oriented discussions to solve the issues that arise in their texts.

In ESL/EFL teaching, all activities take place in the classroom which is an artificial setting. Peer group interaction, however, gives an opportunity to reduce the gap between this artificial atmosphere and the real life, and writing becomes an activity within groups to approximate learning to real life by giving the flavor of it to students.

Bell (1991) says:

“Using peer response groups:

- fosters student independence, self-direction, and responsibility
- integrates speaking, listening, reading, and writing in a goal-oriented activity;
- manifests writing as a process;
- helps students learn to collaborate effectively on writing something they will probably have to do in the future:
 - encourages students to make friends and acquaintances possibly across traditional barriers of age, race, and so on;
 - changes the instructor’s role in ways that are refreshing, and fulfilling, resulting in professional growth; and
 - gives instructor a better written product to read” (p. 51).

Feedback in Peer Response Groups

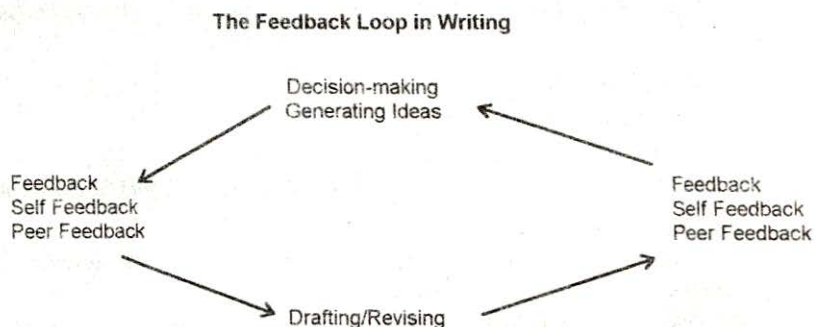
In this section, I will discuss how students approach the notion of feedback, the role of feedback in the writing process, what kind of feedback is preferred by non-native students, and what L1 and L2 students emphasize in giving feedback.

Students usually understand feedback as criticism, i.e. as something that has negative connotations, which is given to show what is wrong in their papers. They also believe that giving feedback requires some expertise which they think they don't have. Therefore, they sidestep when it comes to giving feedback because they believe that if they direct criticism to a student's work, the same thing will happen to them when it is time for them to talk about their papers. Students have also another concern. In order to maintain good relations with their peers, they make positive comments on every issue that arises. Because of these, the role of feedback must be explained to students to enable them to use it effectively to help their peers throughout the writing process. Teachers must spend some time to teach their students how to give and receive meaningful feedback which is constructive. Constructive feedback is helpful for student writers because peers in groups help writers develop and refine their ideas, and it is central to information processing.

Feedback is a circular process not a linear one. This means that it doesn't move from one person to another and ends there. Rather it moves from one person to another and moves back to that person. It is an interactive process. To explain the role of feedback in the writing process and the difference between the product and the process approach, Spear (1988) says:

"... the concept of feedback expands the traditional linear model of Think-Write which underlies the product approach to composition. Instead, feedback is central to the recursive, process model of writing in which the concepts of growth and change figure so fundamentally" (p. 133).

Spear (1988, p. 133) also provides a figure to show how feedback looks like in writing and discussion:



There are three types of feedback: supportive, challenging, and editorial. First, in order for feedback to be supportive the writer must ask for it when he needs it. Writers need to learn the responses of their readers and ask for responses. Feedback should not be given without the request of the writer. It should also focus on issues in student writer's paper which the student feels that s/he can handle. Also as process is emphasized, feedback should encourage, guide, and improve the continued thinking efforts of writers.

The second type of feedback is challenging feedback which must become a part of the peer groups' interaction skills. It is done to ask for clarification, challenging generalizations, making clear any hidden assumptions, and citing

counter-examples. In order to develop this skill, it is useful to make a list of possible ways to challenge an idea. In such a list, for example, to examine the limitations of a belief or a conclusion, a question such as "When and for whom might this idea not apply?" can be included and the list is prepared to guide students to give challenging feedback. Teachers must give practising opportunity to enable their students to develop the ability to give challenging feedback.

The last type, namely, editorial feedback is what students want to give from the very beginning. It deals with the lexical, syntactic, grammatical, and mechanical issues of student writers' papers. However, within the writing process it should be the last and the final component of the feedback continuum to polish a text. In order to help students develop the ability to give editorial feedback, Spear (1988) makes the following suggestions to teachers:

"Using groups of four or five members, establish four or five categories or criteria against which to review final drafts; for example, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, syntax, diction, coherence and structure. Ask the groups to draw on member- expertise by assigning a category to each person, the best person to read drafts for that element... The goal is to make the group accountable for the group's texts and to submit polished pieces for the teacher's review and evaluation" (pp. 150-151)

The use of peer feedback produces papers of higher quality and thus makes the evaluation process an enthusiastic one for teachers.

Teachers of ESL/EFL must be aware of the preferences their students make in regard to the type of feedback and the use of feedback in L2 writing situations.

A study worth mentioning here is the one conducted by Jacobs and Zhang in 1989 at college level. They conducted a study in the context of L2 writing to find answers to the following questions:

- Do L2 learners provide mostly faulty feedback to their peers, miscorrecting rather than correcting composition drafts?

- Is peer feedback more effective or less effective than traditional teacher feedback?

- How do L2 learners feel about the use of peer feedback? Will they welcome it or resist it?

As an answer to the first question, they found that peer correction of grammar seemed to be beneficial to students both for the suggestions they received from their peers, and for the learning which went on as they edited their peers' drafts.

The answer to the second question was that for content, organization, and vocabulary, feedback was not a significant factor. This means that peer feedback does not create a superb effect on the rhetorical and informational dimensions of L2 writing, but it does improve grammatical accuracy.

As for the third question, students, in general, agreed that given a choice between traditional feedback and peer feedback, they would prefer teacher feedback even though teacher feedback was not significantly superior to peer feedback. Jacobs and Zhang (1989) interpret this finding in the following way:

"This suggests that L2 learners might resist peer feedback, if the instructor overly emphasizes the role of peer feedback or employs the peer critique procedure to the exclusion of teacher input... However, it is important that L2 learners be made aware of the potential of peer feedback" (p. 17).

Teachers should be careful not to impose peer feedback at the beginning as the only activity without explaining the merits of peer feedback and should not eliminate teacher feedback completely. Instead, they should make peer and teacher feedback complementary to each other.

The last point I will make in this section is what L1 and L2 learners emphasize in giving feedback. As, I mentioned above, in the Jacobs and Zhang study L2 learners of English emphasize the grammatical and mechanical aspects in giving feedback. On the other hand, Danis (1982) found that the L1 students she studied made the greatest number of suggestions in regard to content. Suggestions on mechanics followed those.

Here we see a difference between L1 and L2 learners and teachers have an important role to overcome this difference. The difference does not stem from the use of different strategies that L2 learners use. Raimes (1986) says:

"ESL writers use strategies similar to the ones native speakers use. They explore and discover ideas through writing, just as native speakers do... in this complex cognitive task of writing, the difficulties of ESL learners stem less from the contrasts between L1 and L2 and from the linguistic features of the new language of the new language than from the constraints of the act of composing itself" (p. 6).

Teachers, therefore, should emphasize the process of composing in order to establish an equilibrium in their students to pay attention both to content and mechanics. Doing this requires acquisition of knowledge by teachers and providing opportunities to students to replace their understanding of writing as an activity done for the teacher to get grades with the real nature of the writing process.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed how to improve the use of writing, the teaching of which has always been a part of ESL/EFL teaching but viewed only as a means to measure student performance from a list of criteria such as grammatical accuracy, spelling, etc. Such an approach to writing leads to misunderstandings in students about the nature of this skill. Students, who are taught in the traditional way to teaching composition which emphasizes the product, think that writing is an individual activity done primarily for the teacher, and when the first draft of a piece of writing emerges, there is no need to make changes because it is considered finished. The traditional product approach also leads students to ignore the audience factor because the audience never changes. It is always the teacher. This approach makes writing become an artificial individual activity and strips away the communal nature of writing which is based on sharing a text with readers. Writing is not considered as a medium used for communication but as a classroom activity.

Writing is an active process of creating meaning and evaluating the finished product to see how well certain grammatical structures and vocabulary

items have been mastered should never be the top priority in teaching writing. Instead, students must be given opportunities to experience the real nature of the writing process.

One effective way to do this in the artificial atmosphere of ESL/EFL classrooms is to form peer response groups and have the students employ the potential of feedback. Doing this will enable students to realize that writing is a continuous process in which meaning is created by negotiation and doing revisions throughout the composing process in order to make meaning clear to a certain audience.

In order to create peer response groups in which feedback is used to promote the quality of writing, teachers should teach the uses of the different types of feedback by either explaining and/or by introducing activities that will help students require the necessary skills.

L2 learners of ESL/EFL have a tendency to prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback. This stems from the fact that foreign students think of their English teachers as the only authority who have the real knowledge. In this case, teachers should incorporate peer and teacher feedback with a tendency to promote peer feedback more in order to engage students in the writing process.

Feedback in peer response groups never delegates the final evaluation process which is done for grading purposes to students. Instead, teachers have an opportunity to read and grade better quality papers which have passed through the three stages of feedback. A natural consequence of this is better grades and the development of higher self-esteem in students who now believe that they are able to write better pieces. Peer response groups are ideal to show the nature of the writing process, to let students experience the communal nature of writing, and to enable them to produce good pieces of writing.

The emphasis of process in writing is the result of a paradigm shift in the composition theory for the better. Teachers of ESL/EFL writing have to follow the recent developments in the field in order to help their students become better writers. They should always remember that it is the teacher who makes a change not the newly published writing textbooks which claim that they are the best.

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