PEER RESPONSE: MAKING IT WORK IN AN EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract: Although peer response has become common place in a foreign language writing classroom in the last few decades, research findings in the area have not conclusively pointed to its usefulness. With little understanding in theoretical justifications behind it, namely process writing, collaborative learning, and interactive and second language acquisition, some practitioners are reluctant to employ peer response activities, especially in a real EFL context where both learners and teachers are nonnative speakers of English. This paper presents how an Effective Peer Response Model can be constructed for students learning argumentative essay writing. Teachers, who will be teaching EFL writing, yet have never incorporated peer response activities in their teaching or those who are skeptical about them will find the proposed model stimulating and useful.

Introduction

Peer response has been adopted into foreign language writing classroom as an activity in the writing process approach of instruction for 2-3 decades. It has been praised for several reasons. For example, it gives learners opportunities to play a more active role (Fujieda, 2007), which is necessary for becoming autonomous learners, in their learning. It also enhances learners' cooperation by giving them additional roles of a reader and advisor (Jacob, 1989 cited in Teo, 2006). Moreover, it raises student writers’ awareness when they write. Since they know that their peers will read their essays, they tend to write them as comprehensibly as possible. In addition, through reading peers' written drafts, learners are gradually able to identify errors in their own written drafts (Bartels (2003). In other words, they are empowered to become autonomous writers through the peer response activity.

Rationale for the Development of a Peer Response

Although peer response activity had been introduced, it was not seriously implemented. Students’ inadequate English, lack of self-confidence and trust among themselves were among the reasons given. Consequently, the students were not provided an opportunity to take full responsibility for their own revision. They were not trained to work cooperatively with their peers. Thus, they did not have a chance to learn from one another, which is a path to becoming autonomous learners, a characteristic much needed in EFL learners. A practical model of peer response activity should provide them such opportunity to achieve the learning autonomy.

Development of a Proposed Peer Response Model

Based on theoretical premises on the writing process, existing research findings on the peer response technique, and the results of the preliminary study, a peer response model is constructed to use in an EFL writing class. To solve the problem of hierarchical pattern and self-confidence, students are assigned into a peer response group because it is believed to allow equal relationship among group members, and this happens only when strengths and weaknesses of group members are well balanced. These designated peer response groups are designed to be permanent. However, shifting groups can be done if it is necessary, for example, when students cannot get along well with each other. Changing a group should be done only based on the results of the diagnostic test.

Characteristics of the Model

Group Size

Deciding on group size should be done based on a particular type of writing, its length and the time allocated. For example, in dealing with reading and giving feedback on 300-350 word argumentative essays, students need more time to complete the tasks. A big group means heavy workload for the student, which probably affects the quality of feedback they give on each essay and/or decreases their motivation. The group size proposed for an EFL argumentative writing class is 3 (Torwong, 2005).

Group Composition

Since one of the main purposes for employing the peer response group activity is to foster students' learning from one another, and the fact that students are different, balancing group composition is necessary in order to ensure effectiveness of the group’s function. Strengths and weaknesses can be balanced using a diagnostic test, an indirect type (discrete-point tests). For EFL students, a practice test for TOEFL, particularly the grammar part, may be used for balancing strengths and weaknesses because they do not only evaluate the
strengths and weaknesses of the students but also examine students' ability on error detection, the same method used in the peer response activity (Torwong, 2005). As the group consists of students with different language levels, group member rotation, if necessary, has to be done carefully.

**Physical Arrangement**

According to Parris (1989 as cited in Torwong, 2005), a group of five can be arranged in a horseshoe format in order that students face one another or turn to face the teacher when needed. This format, however, may strengthen the hierarchical pattern of group interaction, particularly in an EFL peer response group. The student who sits in the middle seems to be the chairperson or a person of high importance. He or she is probably the best student in the group. For an EFL context, a peer response group may be arranged in a circle pattern. With this physical arrangement, the equal relationship among the group members should be enhanced because it gives each member equal importance and it then fosters equal contribution rather than hierarchy as arises in the horseshoe seating.

**Steps of the Activity**

The steps of the peer response activity according to the constructed model are listed below.

1) Response sheets are distributed to group members.
2) Each group member gives the other members a copy of his/her written draft which is well written, with double spaces and 1-inch left and right margins.
3) At home or outside class, group members read their peers’ written drafts and write their comments on the response sheets using HOC-based revision guidelines. The students can do it in their mother language or in English as their convenience so that language is not a barrier of idea conveying. No coding for revision is used in this activity because it required time to remember and might lead to confusion.
4) Students bring the drafts and response sheets to discuss in their peer group.
5) Draft by draft, the group evaluates and discusses the comments, which can be done in a combination of the mother language and English as their convenience too. The owner of the written draft notes down the results of the discussion.
6) Students revise Draft 1 to produce Draft 2 at home.
7) Students repeat Steps 1-4 for revising Draft 2, but this time the main focus is on the LOC errors. The students might also give some more comments on the HOC errors if any.
8) Each student revises Draft 2 to produce the final draft at home.

**Materials**

The materials used in the peer response activity include guidelines for revision, guidelines for peer response activity, response sheets and other supportive materials.

(1) Guidelines for Revision
The aims of the guidelines are to enable students to identify errors in content, organization and word choice first; then on grammar, spelling and punctuation. Students need to be trained to use the guidelines. Following are the guidelines for revision.

**Guidelines for Revision 1: HOC**

1. Content
   1.1 Introduction
   (a) Is the opening interesting for you to read on?
   (b) Is the topic introduced in this part?
   (c) Is the background information given?
   (d) Is a different opinion about this topic stated?
   (e) Is the writer’s viewpoint or position stated clearly?

   1.2 Body
   (a) Does this part comprise the ‘pros,’ the ‘cons’ and the refutation’?
   (b) Are the main ideas of the ‘pro’ paragraphs supported adequately? Should they be given more explanation, examples or any related evidence to become more convincing?
   (c) Does the writer give strong refutation?
   (d) Should any part in each paragraph be omitted?
   (e) Do all the paragraphs strongly support the thesis statement?
1.3 Conclusion
(a) Is the writer’s position about the topic restated?
(b) Does the writer review all the reasons why his or her position is the best?
(c) Does the conclusion end with a statement that emphasizes the writer’s position?

2. Organization
(a) Are all paragraphs relevant to the thesis statement?
(b) Are all the paragraphs in a logical order?
(c) Are the paragraphs well linked?
(d) Does each paragraph contain one main idea?
(e) Is there any paragraph that is too short or too long?
(f) Are the sentences in each paragraph well connected?

3. Word Choice
(a) Should any of words be changed to suit the context?
(b) Is there a repetitive word in each sentence?

Guidelines for Revision 2: LOC
1. Does the essay have any errors of the following points? How can they be changed?
   (a) Tense and verb form
   (b) Subject-verb agreement
   (c) Singular and plural nouns
   (d) Pronoun reference
   (e) Possessive pronoun
   (f) Preposition
   (g) Punctuation
   (h) Sentence faulty
2. Do you find any other errors in the essay? What is the best way to improve those errors?

(2) Guidelines for Peer Group Response Activity
Following is a set of guidelines for peer response activity, which gives guidance to students when they do the peer group response activity.

Guidelines for Peer Group Response Activity 1:
Content, Organization and Word Choice (HOC)
Directions:
1. Read the entire essay to get a general idea of what the writer has expressed; then, give feedback on the essay using the guidelines for revision (Guidelines for Revision 1: HOC). Give specific comments and always begin with a positive feedback.
2. Write your comments on Response Sheet 1 (HOC) of each essay.
3. Exchange the response sheet with peers and evaluate your peer comments on each essay. Put ‘?’ after the comments that you do not understand and ‘D’ after those you disagree with.
4. In groups, discuss the comments with ‘?’ and ‘D.’
5. Record the conclusion of the discussion on your work in the remark column of the response sheet.

Guidelines for Peer Group Response Activity 2:
Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (LOC)
Directions:
1. Read the essay focusing on grammar, punctuation and spelling.
2. Scan for errors using the guidelines for revision.
3. Write your comments on Response Sheet 2 (LOC).
4. Also read your friends’ comments and put ‘?’ after the comments that you do not understand and ‘D’ after those you disagree with.
5. In group, discuss the comments.
6. Record the conclusion of the discussion of your work in the remarks column of the response sheet.

5. Recommendations for the Use of Peer Response Technique
The following recommendations could be made to use the peer response technique effectively to enhance the teaching and learning EFL writing.
1. The writing process-based approach should be employed so that students can improve their writing through multiple drafts.

2. It is apparent that the students benefit from the guidelines for revision of argumentative essays. Therefore, similar guidelines should also be developed for teaching other rhetorical modes of writing, namely, narration, description, and exposition.

3. The peer response should be included as a class activity so that students learn to become autonomous learners. Furthermore, this activity increases students’ motivation in their learning. It also raises awareness as the students are expected to identify errors in peer-written drafts and then help one another to find an appropriate solution for a particular error. In so doing, they will learn to avoid making the same errors in their subsequent writing.

4. Before assigning students to groups, teachers should balance students’ strengths and weaknesses and consider sociological aspects as well.

**Conclusion**

This peer assisted writing activity can help promote ESL/EFL student’s argumentative writing skills. To achieve its optimal effectiveness, teachers should provide students with constant modeling of the strategies in each step of the activity. Furthermore, teachers should ensure that they constantly promote a trusting relationship between the writing partners throughout the writing process. Finally, in response to the teachers’ limited time to do a writing correction for around 30-40 students in one class, this peer response done in group could be one of the best solutions in an EFL situation, like Indonesia. Overall, I believe this technique can be instrumental in helping students understand the process of writing and become independent thinkers and writers.

**References**


