

Shared Learning Experiences in the Writing Classroom: Strategies for Process- Based Peer Editing & Peer-Response Activities

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the outcome of a 4-semester project with intermediate and lower intermediate Japanese university students in freshman introductory English writing classes. Specifically, I describe teacher-designed and student-created peer editing and peer response activities that were used as an integral component of the course curriculum. Redesigning the focus of peer editing and peer response as *part of* the process of writing and instruction, rather than as a terminating activity is regarded as positive practice. It aids student understanding of both the processes and patterns of writing; develops learner autonomy; is learner-centered; and enhances the development of meta-cognitive skills associated with the writing process. On the other hand, problematic aspects of peer editing and peer response are understood as deriving from: students' lack of proficiency or confidence in the 2nd language, (English in this case), to recognize errors and recommend revisions on a piece of writing; students' tendency to focus on surface errors while ignoring aspects of meaning & content; and neglect on the part of instructors to provide clear guidelines and appropriate practice for students to benefit from peer editing as an ongoing process in-line with the writing process itself.

I. The What: Introduction

This paper is the result of four semesters of what might be called *practitioner research*. I hesitate to use the term *research* in this instance, as I do not believe this project warrants such a lofty ideal and further feeds criticism of this, by now, well-respected, research methodology (Metz & Page, 2003). Certainly, at best, this is a reflective practitioner piece, albeit I have likely created this idiosyncratic term to fit the specific needs of this paper. Nonetheless, the concept of reflective practice has now become part of the common pedagogical vernacular (Shön, 1983), and there is little argument over the value of analyzing one's own practice, or designing research projects based on it. In fact, if teachers neglect to engage in reflective practice they run the risk of teaching according to a default philosophy of education not of their own design or ideological stance (Gunzenhauser, 2012; Raimes, 2002).

To remain committed to my own pedagogical development, I prefer to side with Raimes (2002) when she states,

Teachers do not always consider themselves researchers. But any teacher who ponders why one class or activity works and another does not, any teacher who tests out a new approach and notes its effects, is a researcher, theorist and practitioner . . . (p. 314)

with Raimes on my side, I will share my experience of reflecting on my pedagogical practice and describe the peer editing and peer response activities I developed in the hopes that it will help other writing teachers introduce their students to peer editing and response. I will provide a brief background of the peer editing and peer response literature that helped to guide me as I designed my course to better include my students in the instructional and editing process. I will, then, explain about the process-based approach I developed to support the students' success with peer editing and peer response practices, which resulted in more engaged learning experiences and better compositions.

II. The Why: Theoretical and Pedagogical Discussions

Peer editing, peer correction, peer feedback, peer evaluation and peer assessment are all names that have been attributed to the inclusion of students as viable supporters and editors of each others' work in the ESL/EFL writing classroom (Bartels, 2003; Mahmoud, 2012). In fact, shared learning in the writing classroom has now become a commonly agreed upon practice since Flower and Hayes (1981) introduced the importance of viewing writing as a recursive process, which was a welcome response to the traditional form-focused writing practices that dominated writing classes, and unfortunately still tends to, particularly in Asian university classrooms (Peng, 2010; Sadeghi & Daulati-Baneh, 2012; Tang & Tithcott, 1999). It is all too easy to fall into a trap in the ESL/EFL writing classroom of supplying set rhetorical forms that are often utilized to help students internalize structural features and lexical development, rather than to tap the generative potential of writing. Again, Raimes (2002) helps to clarify the necessarily messy nature of writing. She urges teachers not only to recognize this as part and parcel of the teaching-learning writing experience, but to rather embrace it.

Writing is for discovery of learning, not just demonstration of learning. For writing, unlike speaking, provides us with a way not only to generate ideas before presenting them to an audience, but also to scrutinize the ideas and language we produce; this re-vision, this seeing again, lets us receive feedback from ourselves and others and, learning as we go, make changes and corrections. If we simply ask students to analyze, manipulate, and imitate given texts, we are not allowing them to grapple for that fit between content and form that all writers need to grapple with. (p. 309)

Along with the popularity of the process approach to writing instruction came the increased view that students should be involved in helping each other to evaluate their writing. Generally, peer editing, peer evalu-

ation, or any of the other terms used to describe this activity, as mentioned above, have used peer work as a final step, focusing on the evaluative aspects of peer editing and response. According to Richards and Schmidt peer evaluation is “an activity . . . in which students receive feedback about their writing from other students — their peers” (in Mahmoud, 2012, p. 390). Oftentimes this feedback is made in the form of structural errors, such as: seeking out and commenting on grammatical, lexical, punctuation and other surface errors, which students may not be prepared for, or proficient enough to correct (Jacobs, 1989; Mendonca and Johnson, 1994). Likewise, this evaluative form of peer editing not only places too much of a burden on students to supply the ‘correct’ form of structures, but it ignores the potential of peer editing and peer response as part of the process of writing (Ferris, 2002).

In fact, ESL/EFL students positively support peer editing and peer response in the writing classroom because it allows students to bounce ideas off of each other, supports collaborative learning as students share their writing ideas with each other, either in pairs or groups, is learner-centered, and allows students an opportunity to discuss their ideas with others while still in the process of writing their drafts (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Peng, 2010; Sadeghi & Daulatie-Baneh, 2012; Tang & Tithecott, 1999). Ferris (2002) supports the claim that peer editing aids students’ ability to further self-edit their work by helping them to become more autonomous and confident writers. She refers to the work of Bates, Lane and Lange (in Ferris, 2002) and Hendrickson (in Ferris, 2002) when she claims that using peer editing and peer response as *part of the process of writing* allows for a “discovery approach [to writing] through which the [students] will become independent self-editors” (p. 329).

It is precisely this aspect of peer editing and peer response that I found myself nurturing in my students after not having much success with the traditional evaluative method, which is used mainly to provide feedback before the final draft is produced, and then turned in for the teacher’s final assessment. Despite providing instruction on how to ‘do’ peer edit-

ing per the textbook form, the students in my classes were unsure about their role as editors, nor were they able to provide the kind of critical and well-considered responses I was hoping they would give one another. Thus, I began my own reiterative and reflective practice that culminated in engaging my students in the process of peer editing and peer response right alongside the process-oriented instruction that was taking place in the class. As a result, I designed a course in which I combined the use of teacher-created supplemental materials made from student writing samples to introduce peer editing and peer response from the third week of class, and developed the students' peer editing/response skills throughout the term. I will now describe the courses, textbooks and process-based peer editing and peer response procedures I used in my writing classes.

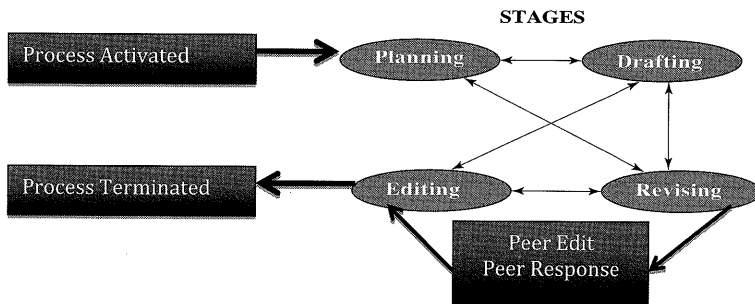
III. The When & The Who: A Practitioner Designed Process-based Peer Editing & Peer Response Method

I underwent this reflective practitioner project between 2009 and 2011 when I was an adjunct instructor at the Rikkyo University Language Center. The English instructors at the Language Center are responsible for the Zenkari English Program courses, and teach students from the various departments on both the Ikebukuro and Niiza campuses. I taught a total of nine writing classes in four semesters while working there. I began developing the process-based peer editing and peer response component of my writing courses soon after realizing that solely depending on the textbook peer-response instructions and form did little to help the students, as its intended use is as a final evaluative tool.

I taught intermediate to upper-intermediate students for the first three semesters and had a low-intermediate class for the first time during my last term. As peer editing and peer response is generally recommended for students at the upper levels, I was particularly interested to try out my process-based peer editing and peer response activities with these

lower level students. During my fourth term, I asked the students in my three writing courses to answer a short survey on their experience. There were a total of 56 respondents from two intermediate classes and the one low-intermediate class. I will include some of the responses from that survey in the conclusion of the paper. For both the upper and lower level students I chose to use texts from the MacMillan Language House writing text series. For the upper level students I used, Zemach, Dorothy E & Rumisek, Lisa A. (2003) *Success with College Writing: From Paragraph to Essay*, and for the lower level I used, the Zemach, Dorothy E & Islam, C. (2005) *Paragraph writing*. Both of these texts support a process approach to teaching writing, provide interesting themes for university students, and introduce peer-feedback as part of the writing experience, (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the lower level form provided in the text).

The trouble I initially encountered when using peer editing and response was that the text introduced peer feedback as a final step to the writing process. The upper level students who had more confidence in their language ability were able to provide some advice with regard to structural points, but they could not provide any constructive feedback on the global content or the organization of ideas presented in their peers' pieces. Seow (2002, p. 315) illustrates the general flow of the process approach to writing, which I have provided below to highlight where, typically, peer editing and peer response occurs in the writing process.



I have adapted Seow's (2002) chart by adding a peer edit and peer re-

sponse box to show where this activity normally takes place.

In line with contemporary discussions in the field, it is generally agreed that placing peer editing and peer response at a terminal point in the writing process lessens its potential as a valuable addition to the writing learning-teaching experience. Rather, instructing students on the hows and whys, as well as, about the benefits of peer response and peer editing results in generally positive experiences and improves students writing (Ferris, 2002; Peng, 2010; Peregoy and Boyle, 2000; Sadeghi & Daulati-Baneh, 2012; Tang & Tithecott, 1999). This is what I found as well. Now, I will describe the process that I developed to aid the students to not only support each other via peer editing and peer response throughout the writing process, but also to learn how to use the *language of writing* with each other.

IV. A Step-by-Step Process: Learning How to *Do* Peer Editing & Peer Response, AND Learning *the Language of Writing*

One of the things I discovered early on when trying to get my students to do peer editing and peer response is that they didn't have access to the language they needed to talk about each others' writing. I recognized that, not only were they generally unprepared to provide written feedback and correction to their peers' writing, but they struggled with how to do so verbally. Therefore, I decided to spend some time allowing them to focus on the language of writing, while simultaneously introducing peer editing and peer response alongside teaching about the process of writing. For all students, even those in the upper-intermediate classes, this meant going back to the basics of writing a good paragraph.

I always introduced new material with the textbook to develop and reinforce the skills required to start out writing, but once I had samples of student produced writing I incorporated the students' work into my lessons and created materials from them.

Throughout the time I was teaching writing at Rikkyo I saved exam-

ples of students' work to use in my lessons. At first, I did not use any student writing samples for peer editing and response from the class I was teaching, as it is important that students feel comfortable with their classmates before sharing their work (Peng, 2010; Tang & Tithecott, 2012).

After having given the students their first assignment (week 3), to write a one-paragraph self-introduction, I provided each student with an anonymous student sample of the same written assignment from a past class to evaluate individually. They were, then, to share their responses and corrections with their peers in groups of three. By providing a sample of student writing not produced by one of their peers, there is no fear of hurting another students' feelings, which is a common complaint lodged by students (Peng, 2010). Additionally, the students could honestly appraise the quality of a piece of writing similar to their own, in that it was written for the same purpose, and then apply those corrections to their own writing.

The first step in this process was to identify the topic and main idea to determine if there was a topic sentence. The students were then to check whether the body of the paragraph supported the topic sentence and to cross-out any information that was unnecessary or not linked to the topic or main ideas. For this first step, these were the only directions given to the students. After they had compared their individual corrections with their group members, one member of the group had to read the corrected paragraph aloud to the class. Once all the groups had read their corrected paragraphs we discussed the recommended changes as a class. The students then had to go back to their own self-introductions and rewrite the first draft, before submitting it to me. In this way, the first draft that I received for review was actually their second draft. To reiterate, in the first stage of the writing process, I focused both the writing and the peer editing and peer response on the following components of paragraph writing:

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- Writing good topic sentence
- Connecting ideas to main topic
- Removing information not related to topic

As the next step, (week 4), I worked on matching up concluding sentences to the topic sentence. To do this, I took samples from the first drafts of the students' second piece of writing; to write about something they enjoy doing, or do to relax. I used student sample sentences for this activity, because it allowed the students to read information directly related to their own lives and is more meaningful. The first activity was for students in groups of three to read over the topic sentences and rank them from strongest-to-weakest, with regard to the criteria of a strong topic sentence we had learned earlier in class, (week 2 & 3). Once the students had determined the rank of each topic sentence, I asked them to discuss their reasons for ranking the topic sentences as they had, and how these sentences might be improved.

Upon completing this peer response task, we turned our attention to concluding sentences. I asked the students to turn their worksheets over to find the original concluding sentences written by the authors of the paragraphs-their peers. The students then had to match each topic sentence with its respective concluding sentence. Once they had done this individually, they were asked to pair up and go back to the topic sentence and rewrite the weaker ones to include any information that was provided in the concluding sentence, without making the topic sentence an exact match to the concluding sentence. For the wrap-up, one student from each group then came up to present their new topic sentences to the class by putting their worksheet on an overhead projector for everyone to see. Below is the handout that I created with the sample student sentences.

One of the most important aspects of these activities is that the students not only are able to work on each others' writing without fear of hurting their classmate's feelings, because they work in groups they are

I. Working on TOPIC SENTENCES

Rank the following topic sentences with a score from 4 (weak) to 1 (strong). **Remember the topic sentence should provide both the topic & the main idea. The concluding sentence should restate or return to the topic sentence**

_____ A) Do you know a traditional Japanese instrument?

_____ B) When I feel stress and want to relax, I always play with my friends. And, my favorite spot where I play with my friend is Kichijoji

_____ C) I have a food that gives me energy, and it has something to do with my birthplace and my mother. That is okonomiyaki.

_____ D) When we are busy everyday, we need to relax to change our mind.

II. Working on Concluding Sentences

Now, match the topic sentences above with the matching concluding sentence. **Remember the concluding sentence restates the topic sentence and should include the topic and main idea of the paragraph originally stated in the topic sentence.*

_____ Someday I want everyone to know how beautiful traditional Japanese instruments sound.

_____ Let's go to Kichijoji! You can relax and visit many happy spots in Kichijoji.

_____ So, personally speaking I think bathing is great habit for relaxation and bathing.

_____ My mother's okonomiyaki always gives me energy and reminds me of home.

FINALLY, pair up with a partner. Check your answers & then rewrite the weaker topic sentences by using the information in the concluding sentence that is missing in the original topic sentence.

not solely responsible for correcting their peer's writing. Additionally, the students acquire a habit of using the terminology of writing, which they exhibit when presenting their ideas regarding editing their peers' writing to the class. As the students continue to work on peer editing and peer response they gain more confidence not only in their ability to judge and edit another person's writing, but they also become capable of communicating effectively about the process of writing.

It is important to note that up until this point the students have not been asked to edit or respond to a full piece of their peer's writing. For the third step, I targeted attention on the organization and flow of their writing. To do this, I again created a worksheet using samples of student writing that focused on the following skills:

- Combining sentences and ideas
- Supporting ideas with examples
- Providing additional information

Following a similar procedure as step 1 and step 2, where I focused the students' attention on topic and concluding sentences, I provided a hand-out and had them first work individually to consider how to combine sentences using coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Once they had completed their work on their own they were able to share their sentences with a partner. Upon completing this section of the worksheet, they turned their attention to enriching the content of the writing, by adding additional information and supportive statements. The students remained in pairs and read over the sentences provided in the second section of the worksheet. I asked that the students "ask questions of the author", meaning that they were to consider where the author had not given enough information to satisfy the reader. Once they had gone over the worksheet, one member of each pair would read off the newly rewritten sentences. In this way, the authors, who were members of the class, would benefit by hearing their peers read out more fully conceived ideas,

while, at the same time, all students would be able to return to their own drafts and apply these newly learned strategies. Here is a sample of the worksheet used for this practice.

I. Combing Sentences Using: and, but, because, so, and however

- 1) When I have free time, I practice the bass guitar. I want to become better at playing it.

Combined Sentence:

- 2) My grandparents lived there. I could visit every year.

Combined Sentence:

- 3) My family and interests are very important for me. I can enjoy my daily life thanks to them.

Combined Sentence:

- 4) In judo this is called “gou”, meaning hard. In Aikido, it is called “sei”, meaning silent.

Combined Sentence:

II. Adding Information to Make Sentences more Interesting and Informative

- 1) When I was a first-year student of high school I tried to obtain a license. After that I bought a motorcycle, and I went to many places by motorcycle.

Rewritten sentence(s) with additional information:

- 2) I have continued to play the piano for 14 years. During this time I wanted to stop it, but I think that it was good to continue it for these 14 years.

Rewritten sentence(s) with additional information:

- 3) I like drawing illustrations, playing video games, reading comic books or novels, watching animations, and singing or listening to songs.

Rewritten sentence(s) with additional information:

Up to this point in the class (week 5), the students had written two paragraphs and several drafts, yet they had not been asked to either use

the peer feedback form from their text, nor were they required to provide feedback to one of their peers' completed pieces of writing. After this last stage, I believed that the students would be confident enough to provide adequate peer editing and peer response, so for Step 4, this is precisely what they did. I asked that they write a third paper, one or two paragraphs, where they focused not only on writing strong topic sentences, combining and enriching their sentences, and ending with a strong conclusion, but they had to write their papers using the organizing information by order of importance format we had just finished working on in the text, (week 6 lesson).

I wanted to decrease any student anxiety that they might feel doing a traditional style peer editing and peer response exercise, as this would be the first time they did so on their own for a fully developed piece. Therefore, I designed an anonymous writing competition. I asked the students to bring in the first draft of their paper, typed, without providing their names. I collected and redistributed the papers to groups of three students, with each student in the group getting one paper. The students in the groups were then to each read the papers aloud. If any of the students received their own paper I asked them to let me know, and I would collect the papers and redistribute them, so that no one had their own paper to evaluate.

After reading all three of the papers, and discussing them in their group, the students had to select the best paper of the three student papers they had received. They determined which one was the best according to a point system I had provided, based on the criteria we had worked on throughout the first half of the term, to equal a total of ten points for each student paper, (i.e. strong topic sentence ~ 2 pts; concluding sentence ~ 2 pts; supportive ideas ~ 2 pts; use of transitional phrases/conjunctions ~ 2 pts; spelling, grammar, punctuation ~ 2 pts). Once they had made the calculations for each paper, they were able to pinpoint the highest scoring paper. They, then, had to provide comments on each of the papers, being careful to provide both positive feedback and recom-

mendations on where the author could improve based on the point system. For this final peer editing activity I made sure the students also focused on grammar, spelling and punctuation (see Appendix A for one of the winners).

Finally, the groups had to report on why the paper that received the most points was chosen. Similar to one of the first peer editing and peer response activities described earlier, the group reporter used the overhead projector and discussed each of the areas in the paper that received high points. To end the activity I collected all the papers and put them out on a table and called the students up one-by-one to retrieve their paper. They then had to do a re-write of this first draft, and subsequently used the second draft for their first 'official' peer editing and peer response experience. I asked that they use the form at the back of their text to help focus their peer editing and peer responses, but also to directly add comments on their classmate's paper. They then submitted their peer feedback form along with the 2nd draft, with comments, to their partner, who then wrote their third draft and turned all of these materials in with the third draft to me for my final comments. By this point, the students were not only well versed in the language required to discuss each others' writing, but also they knew what to look for specifically, and they had developed confidence in their ability to do so.

V. In the End . . . A Positive Experience for All

The process-based peer editing and peer response procedure that I described above was developed across three terms, where I worked on the separate stages and collected student work to use across classes. I was quite surprised at the impact this process-based peer editing and peer response approach had on the quality of writing and the engagement of the students in the writing process. In particular, the lower level classes were just as capable of providing well thought-out responses to their classmates' writing, as were the upper level students. Most strikingly was

the communicative aspect of this approach. Initially, the students were able to respond using the peer feedback sheet provided in the text, but were not able to verbalize their feedback effectively. After having been exposed to the various terms and specific language required to discuss the structural and strategic aspects of the writing process, the students were much better prepared to express these concepts orally.

As I wrote earlier, I asked my students to fill in a questionnaire at the end of the fourth term, which was my last term at Rikkyo University. I had a total of 56 students who responded, (two classes of 18 students, and one class of 20). Overwhelmingly, the response to the questions regarding preference for teacher-made material vs. the textbook, and the usefulness of using student writing samples to learn about peer editing and peer response were positive on a Likert-scale questionnaire. The questionnaire had a total of 13 questions asking about their opinions with regard to improvements in their writing, materials used in class, ability to comment on peer's writing, preference for teacher feedback vs. student feedback, and most/least enjoyable activities. The interesting point about the responses was that the majority of students provided clear-cut responses, meaning only 6% circled the non-committal, 'no opinion' response. About 90% of the responses leaned toward the A (agree) and S.A. (strongly agree) end of the scale, as opposed to D.A. (disagree) or S.DA. (strongly disagree) to the statements provided (e.g. "Peer editing has helped me improve my writing", or "I feel confident providing feedback on my classmates writing"). I also provided some open-ended questions to ask for student opinions about the experience of using student sample writing and teacher-created materials in the classroom. Here, I provide just a sample of the generally positive comments submitted below, unaltered.

About preference for *teacher-created material vs. textbook*:

- The textbook is very confusing, but the teacher-created materials is very clear.

- Teacher-created materials have originality, so I felt very fun!
- Teacher-created materials is more interesting.
- Because teacher-created materials comment is more useful than the textbook
- Because teacher-created materials are very easy to understand what teacher wants to teach for us.

About using *student writing samples as learning material*:

- Sometimes there are some good sentences on student's papers. I was happy to know other student's idea.
- I enjoyed when we read our writing to each other.
- It is difficult to analyze other student's writing. The textbook is more helpful because there is an answer to how to improve the writing in the textbook.
- Examples of student writing is near miss for us, so it is good example.
- When making my draft, using samples of student writing, I can understand, "what should I do" more clearly

From these comments, and this is just a small sample of the mostly positive comments the students supplied, it is clear that the students not only enjoyed using materials tailored to their level and their needs, but also learned from each other's writing. Had I the foresight to have envisioned this reflective practitioner research project and given the same questionnaire to my students that first semester, prior to developing my process-based peer editing and peer response approach, I believe the answers would have been radically different. That said, this is a fruitful idea for further investigation. It is my hope that this introduction to the process-based approach that I developed for my students will be helpful to teachers who feel that their students are not benefitting from peer editing and peer response to its fullest potential.

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Appendix A

Peer Feedback Form from, (2005) *Paragraph writing* Zemach, Dorothy E & Islam, C..

Peer feedback—paragraph

Writer's name:

Reviewer's name:

Assignment:

1. What is the topic of the paragraph? What is the main idea?

Save the Earth. (1)

We must think we waste much energy and break nature. (Mi.)

2. Does the paragraph have a topic sentence? If so, write it here.

There are a lot of problems. So we must think about^{to} how solve these environmental problems.

3. Does each sentence support the topic sentence? If not, which sentence or sentences do not belong?

One way is saving energy.

Second way is reduce garbage.

Finally, the most important thing is peace. For example, war. War is many break environment.

4. Does the paragraph have a concluding sentence? If so, does it restate the topic sentence or sum up the information?

Earth is not only human's thing.

So we have to protect beautiful earth.

5. Are there any places where the writer could add more details? Do you have any questions for the writer?

Final sentence wants to^{have} more information.

Because, finally is very important idea, but it is very short.

6. What are some good things about this paragraph?

It is easy reading for me.

Because, There are many good information.

You used various similes and metaphors in telling your story.

Sample of student writing that was chosen as a winner in the writing competition

(intermediate level)

One of my dreams

I strongly have a big dream of becoming a translator who can translate writings from English into Japanese. There are three reasons. First, I always think that it is good for us to do what we like in our jobs, and in my case, I like English. Second, I am attracted by the fact that a translator has an important role of conveying cultures between countries. Third, since I like English, I want to know more about English. As the first step to realize my dream, I entered a university where I major in English literature. But now I am far from a translator because I don't have enough knowledge about English. I have many things to learn to be a translator, so I'll try hard at the university.