

Interaction Patterns in Peer Reviews

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This paper aims to draw a profile of student interaction patterns during peer reviews. It is based on a case study that was carried out on first-year Bachelor of Business Administration students at the National University of Singapore in an English for Academic Purposes module. The study shows that students preferred to work with people who were similar to them and that they were also more attuned to an authoritarian style of peer review. It also reveals that the teacher intervention is still important, particularly in providing language feedback.

■ Introduction

Peer reviews have an important role to play in ESL writing classes as they help students to articulate and extend their knowledge, and bring about positive changes in their writing. Peer reviews also heighten students' awareness of audience reactions and help develop their concern with audience's expectations (Gere & Stevens, 1985; Lockhart & Ng, 1995). In giving feedback to peers, students practise critical and analytic skills (Nystrand & Brandt, 1989; Berg, 1999). As they work in pairs, students take turns to be the 'expert' and explain things to each other. In that process, they construct a more coherent representation of their own language knowledge (Ohta, 1995). In addition, they discover their own meaning and learn how to convey that meaning through the written mode. Through this collective scaffolding (Donato, 1988), they are able to develop learner autonomy (Tsui & Ng, 2000).

The process of peer reviews is a complex one. Learners negotiate not only their topic but their relationships as well. This has a bearing on the way feedback is handled. Nelson & Murphy (1993) claims that group dynamics and the roles assumed by participants determine, at least in part, the effectiveness of the feedback. For example, they report that learners who interact in a cooperative manner are more likely to use peer suggestions to revise their writing than those who interact in a defensive manner. According to Lockhart & Ng (1995), there are four stances that a reviewer can take: authoritative, interpretive, probing and collaborative. They also report in their study that the collaborative and probing stances engage students in a fuller understanding of the writing process.

Feedback and responses to feedback may vary but maintaining harmony is paramount in certain cultures. For example, Carson & Nelson (1994) show that Chinese speaking students studying ESL will generally work

toward maintaining group harmony and mutual face-saving to maintain a state of cohesion. It is also found that ESL learners have a tendency to unconsciously 'assign' different roles to different categories of reviewers as evidenced in Yang, Badger, & Zhen (2006), which reports that teacher feedback brings about revisions at surface level while peer feedback brings about a higher percentage of meaning-change revisions.

The present paper reports on a case study of peer reviews conducted for a tertiary level English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. The purpose of this study is to discuss how peer reviews were carried out and perceived by these students and, based on the findings, suggest actions so that they can gain fuller benefits from this exercise.

This case study is based on an EAP module for first-year Bachelor of Business Administration Degree students at the National University of Singapore. The module, NK1001, was taught over 12 weeks and essay writing was the main component of the course. Peer reviews were an integral part of the writing process as students were required to provide feedback at various stages of their writing.

Sixty-seven students were the subjects of this study. These students had been identified through the university's Qualifying English Test (QET) to be requiring instruction in Academic English. They were between the ages of 19-26 and of different nationalities: Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, and Singaporean. The Vietnamese, Chinese and Cambodian students were on Singapore Government scholarships and had limited or no experience in English academic writing before they came to Singapore. The majority of Singaporean students had either attended a polytechnic and obtained a diploma or studied in a junior college and sat the GCE Advanced Level examinations. Students from polytechnics did not

have prior training in academic writing while students who came from junior colleges did because they were required to take the General Paper as one of their subjects for the Advanced Level examination. Even so, these students had only managed to attain a B5 grade or below for the subject. In general, students were highly motivated as they understood their need to improve their language skills in order to succeed in their course of study.

Students' self reports indicated that before taking this module, they had very little audience awareness and were unfamiliar with the practice of using peer feedback to help them improve their writing. Initial pieces of writing showed that they had difficulties with language accuracy, generating and developing ideas, and organization. Thus it would be interesting to understand how they perceived peer feedback in their writing process and in what way this exercise could be improved to help them be better writers.

■ Methodology

This case study was carried out in two phases: the first phase was carried out with two groups of students between January and April 2007, and the second was with another two groups of students between August and October 2007. Both groups were very similar in terms of their course of study, background and composition. The purpose for carrying out the investigation in two phases was to uncover emerging patterns more clearly and validate the first set of results with the second set. Multiple perspectives were drawn from observations of group interactions, students' written reflections and finally, verbal clarifications. Permission to make use of the data for the present research was obtained.

In the initial stage, observation notes were taken as the peer reviews went on. Emerging themes from these observations then formed the basis for developing interview questions. At the same time, students were required to write their reflections based on the following questions:

1. To what extent did you find the peer reviews helpful in improving your essay? Be specific. What suggestions, if any, do you have which would have made this activity more helpful to you?
2. To what extent do you think you have become a better writer? In what ways have you improved as a writer?
3. Do you have any other thoughts about this assignment and the way it was written?

Finally, questionnaire interviews were carried out, covering the following main areas (see Appendix for a copy of the questionnaire interview form):

1. Choice of peer reviewer
2. Preferred style of review (authoritarian, interpretive, probing, collaborative)
3. Evaluation of review experience
4. Handling of disagreements
5. Relative importance of the roles of teacher and peer reviewer

■ Findings

The value of peer reviews

On the whole, students indicated a positive attitude towards peer reviews. In fact, they preferred them to classes dominated by teacher talk. The reason given was that peer reviews would keep them on their toes and prevent their minds from drifting in class, especially when these were held in the afternoons. Inadvertently, peer reviews also served a social purpose. A student in the second group commented that most of their other classes were one-directional with the tutor talking most of the time and so they valued the chance to get to know their classmates better through peer reviews in writing classes.

When asked to comment on the helpfulness of peer reviews, the students responded positively. Responses ranged mainly from 'helpful to some extent' to 'very helpful'. They reported that peer reviews were most helpful in meaning change revisions, concurring with findings reported in Yang, Badger, & Zhen (2006). Specifically, meaning change revisions came about as students gained more awareness of audiences. In one student's words, "I try to put myself in my reader's shoes to see how they'd feel if they read my essays." Most students reported that they felt that they had improved as writers because they were now more aware of their perception of their essays and would try to write in a way that could be easily understood.

Some degree of learner autonomy was also achieved, concurring with Tsui & Ng's (2000) findings. One student reported that he had become a more organized writer: "I have learned to be more detailed in checking for errors through peer reviews." Another student also reported,

"I felt that after taking this module, I have become more conscious with my grammar usage. At the same time, I will also constantly remind myself to keep to the guidelines of good essay writing."

The vast majority of students felt that peer reviews were mutually beneficial to reviewers and writers. One student commented, "Peer review not only allows someone else to critique your work but also allows you to look closely at another person's writing and learn from it." Another student reported, "There is also comparison with each other's work, so we can pick certain points from each other." In this process, collective scaffolding of knowledge is achieved (Donato, 1998).

The relative importance of teacher and student feedback

Although students in both groups were generally positive about peer reviews, they were somewhat doubtful about their friends' ability to comment competently on their work, particularly with respect to grammar usage. One student reported, "Peers helped to highlight grammar errors. However, they have limited capability (in correcting errors) and might even 'correct' what is already right". Another student commented,

"I am mildly skeptical of the effectiveness of peer reviews. My peers are more or less as bad as me in English Writing (that explains why we need to attend NK1001). I cannot comprehend how having our work edited by each other help us identify mistakes."

Some students indicated the need for more intervention from the teacher at every stage of drafting. A student suggested, "I think it will be good if we can hand up our work every week for the teacher to correct so that we will know whether the corrections made are right or can be improved." Some students also reported that they would make changes only if they were confident of the credibility of their peers' comments. All the students indicated that they valued their teacher's feedback more than that of their peers.

Preferred peer review partners

Most students showed a preference for working with classmates of the same gender and nationality or with those who were also their friends outside class. They explained that they could work more easily with people who were similar to them. Two Singaporean students highlighted difficulties in working with international students. They explained that some international students whom they worked with did not understand what they were trying to say and this sometimes led to misunderstanding. In the same vein, an international student also reported that he preferred working with students of his own nationality because it was easier to communicate with them, and that local students were difficult to understand. These comments are, however, not generalisable.

Despite the differences, many positive comments about international students were made. Local students reported that students from China and Vietnam placed a lot of emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and this made the local students more aware of the need to pay more attention to these areas. It was also generally acknowledged that international students were fast learners.

Reviewer stances

Observations which were later confirmed by self-reports found that most students took an authoritarian stance when commenting on someone's work and they also probed very occasionally to clarify meaning if they were unsure.

Despite Lockhart & Ng's claim (1995) that the collaborative and probing stances adopted by reviewers were the most helpful in making students understand the writing process, the majority of students preferred their reviewers to adopt an authoritarian stance. The reason given was that this style was clear-cut, time-efficient and easier to manage. Other possible reasons could be that students were used to passively receiving one-directional feedback from their teachers and class time was limited. This could also be due to learner anxiety that some of them experienced. Zhang (2001) explains that Chinese students were often instructed in Chinese during English

classes and English was hardly or never used outside the classroom. As a result, students were not confident of their speaking ability and unaccustomed to learning and constructing meaning through discussions. It is thus not surprising that in his study, students indicated that they had difficulty in adopting the probing and collaboration styles as these would require more time and effort. Only a small number of students indicated that they would have liked their peers to help them develop their ideas further or in other words, adopt a more collaborative stance.

Despite some lingering doubts about their peers' linguistic competence, students interacted with their peers harmoniously as they valued good relations. In situations where students did not agree with peers' comments, some would quietly check with the teacher. They explained that they wanted to maintain friendly and non-threatening discussions and so did not openly disagree with their peers. Other students tended to sidestep any points of disagreement. They also did not openly invite the teacher to intervene for fear of appearing to be confrontational. Ultimately, both types of students would ignore peer comments that they disagreed with and choose not to incorporate these ideas in their revised drafts.

■ Conclusions

From the findings, a general profile of the students can be drawn. Students were generally positive about peer review and valued it. They tended to use student feedback to revise their ideas, and teacher feedback to improve their language accuracy. At this stage of learning, they seemed to appreciate similarity rather than diversity, and this was shown in their preference for working with people whom they perceived to be similar to them. Given their previous learning experience and other constraints, they favoured a one-directional, authoritarian form of peer feedback. They also had a tendency to maintain harmony and were reluctant to voice disagreement, even when there was a valid point for doing so.

Clearly, such interaction patterns would limit the effectiveness of the feedback given as learners are not free to explore the reasons behind their disagreement and extend their knowledge through discussion. The tendency to put harmony above all else may mean that good ideas may be missed as more in-depth debates are held back.

To move students onto a higher plain, there is a definite need to encourage critical thinking and open discussion. This could possibly be done through training students to take on a more probing and collaborative stance when giving peer reviews, and to handle diverse views properly. The role of the teacher as a language resource person should be highlighted at the outset so that he or she can be approached more openly. In this way, both the reviewer and the writer can benefit equally.

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APPENDIX: Questionnaire on peer reviews

Please tick the appropriate boxes:

- Which of the following is/are your criteria for choosing a peer for conducting reviews? (You may tick more than one criteria)

<input type="checkbox"/> Person of same nationality	<input type="checkbox"/> Person of different nationality
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal friend	<input type="checkbox"/> Someone from same tutorial group in other modules
<input type="checkbox"/> Someone of the same gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Someone of the opposite gender
- Assuming that your peer is a competent reviewer, you would prefer that he/she
 - tells you directly where the 'problems' are, according to the review questions.
 - talks about areas in the text that interest him/her.
 - seeks your clarification on the areas in the text that he does not really understand.
 - works with you and helps you reflect and expand on your ideas.
- In most of your peer reviews, your peers have tended to
 - tell you directly where the 'problems' were, according to the review questions.
 - talk about areas in the text that interested him/her.
 - seek your clarification on the areas in the text that he did not really understand.
 - work with you and helps you reflect and expand on your ideas.
- What would you do if you did not agree with your peers?

<input type="checkbox"/> get tutor to arbitrate	<input type="checkbox"/> explain why you did not agree
<input type="checkbox"/> keep quiet and then ignore comments	<input type="checkbox"/> others _____
- Which role was more helpful in making you a better writer?
 - reviewer
 - writer receiving comments from reviewer
 - both of the above
- Whose opinion did you value more in revising your drafts?
 - peers
 - tutor
- On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being "not useful at all", 5 being "extremely useful"), how do you rate your peer's comments on your grammar?

<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
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- Your decisions to accept your peers' views were based on:

<input type="checkbox"/> agreement with comments	<input type="checkbox"/> availability of time
<input type="checkbox"/> confidence in your peer's comments	<input type="checkbox"/> peer's attitude