A Corpus-Based Study of Peer Comments and Self-Reflections:
How Did ESL Learners Use Peer Comments in an Online Newswriting Project?

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ABSTRACT

Engaging students in peer reviewing in the writing classroom has been widely practiced as a way of assessment for learning. In-depth research is needed however to investigate how students specifically use peer comments in their editing process. Using a corpus-based approach, this article investigates the acquisition of journalistic writing skills by 112 undergraduates in Hong Kong. The learner corpora comprise student comments and self-reflections from an online news writing project. While grammatical accuracy remains to be a concern for effectiveness of the peer review practice, the findings reflect sound understanding of structure, layout and style of the online news genre among the participants. Although the students commented more on contents and organization of news writing, findings from keyword search and co-text in the concordances demonstrate awareness of main features of the online news genre. The findings further clarified judgement and choices made by the ESL learners during the drafting and editing processes. The study suggests how peer assessment and self-assessment can be effectively practiced through a cycle of reviewing peer writing, receiving peer comments and self-reflecting on their own drafts. It also indicates how peer review may help acquisition of style and lexico-grammar which can be demanding for many ESL learners.

KEYWORDS

ESL Writing, Learner Corpus, Online News Writing, Peer Comments

1. INTRODUCTION

Peer feedback and collaboration are supported by sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) that students can have opportunities to scaffold each other’s learning. The practice of peer review has been widely adopted in the English as Second Language (ESL) writing classroom and studies over the recent decades. With the application of digital technologies, use of online peer review becomes popular in the writing classroom and is found to facilitate the drafting and editing process and is used as a part of the feedback process in addition to more traditional teacher comments. In their book on formative assessment, Boud and Falchikov (2007) suggested the ability to accurately judge one’s own work and the work of others is one of the fundamental competencies required in the workplace. It has therefore
encouraged re-construction of feedback to make the assessment and evaluation process effective to meet the vocational needs. In a discussion of developing sustainable feedback practices, Carless, Salter, Yang and Lam (2011) further stated the importance of student self-regulation in fostering an active and constructive process of feedback. Incorporating peer and self-editing in the learning and teaching of writing therefore can be an option to create meaningful tasks and authentic assessment for learners to prepare for challenges in the workplace.

The present study examines the use of online peer review in ESL learners’ acquisition of journalistic writing skills at a university in Hong Kong. Through posting drafts and peer comments on a course weblog, the students practiced skills of desktop publishing simulating an authentic news-desk environment. In this paper, the discussion focuses on corpus analyses of student peer comments and self-reflections collected over a period of three consecutive semesters (September 2011 to December 2012). The researcher endeavors to investigate students’ adoption of peer comments in their drafting and revising of an online news article, using a quantitative approach based on keyword search and co-text of concordance findings. By examining the language features identified in the student corpora, the paper also aims to reveal the acquisition of online news genre and shed light on how peer review can be better implemented in the ESL writing classroom.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Practice of Peer Review

Over the last two decades, an increasing number of studies has been dedicated to the practice of online peer review in the writing classroom because of the spread of digital technologies. Computer-mediated peer review or online peer review is found to be an alternative or improved form of peer review, often conducted in anonymity and across participants and classes or disciplines, in comparison with face-to-face and paper-based peer review (Schultz, 2000; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Cheng & Warren, 2007; Guiller, Durndell & Ross, 2008; Chang, 2012; Orita, 2016; Storch, 2017).

In addition to positive results of skill development, benefits of conducting peer review online in many recent studies provide evidence of ease in administering and monitoring of peer review, improving fairness and reducing bias. With the popularity of social media, digital tools like the weblog and wiki in training of writing and conducting peer review has gained acceptance from both teachers and learners. Specifically, benefits reported include enhancing collaboration (Liang, 2008; Lam, 2010), nurturing critical thinking (Rollinson, 2005; Wooley, 2007), building professionalism (Chang, 2012), facilitating editing and critiquing (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Ma & Yuen, 2008), and improving digital performance and mediating communication (Cheng, 2009; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Chen, 2016; Min, 2016).

Although online peer review can be conveniently practiced in the ESL writing classroom, it does not fully resolve challenges resulting from factors like group dynamics and peer influence. In a study about students’ views on peer assessment, Foley (2013:202) raised one question:

*Can students make an objective assessment of their peer’s work when they will not only be actually aware of the other student’s overall ability but may also wish to protect their feelings and avoid destabilising the specific social dynamics of the group?*

In fact, Johnnie Hafernik had already addressed the above question in an earlier paper (1983) by setting guidelines on why and how to introduce peer editing in the ESL classroom. Although the paper did not study students’ overall ability, it suggested “a self-evaluation component” (ibid:51) before the peer editing session. The self-assessment activity aimed to help students become familiar with the editing process and bring them closer to being “good self-monitors”. In a literature review
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