Chapter V

A Student-Centered Online Writing Course

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Abstract

This chapter looks at a student-centered online writing course, where peer corrections were the sole source of feedback. Using the peer correction system-tool (PCS-tool), designed especially for the course, students wrote one text a week and sent their texts to anonymous readers for corrections. The study described here evaluated students’ texts from 25 randomly chosen portfolios, looking at, among other aspects, the number of unreturned texts and false repairs as well as the amount of improvement in the students’ writing over the semester. Based on the very positive results of the study, the author hopes that other universities will adopt the PCS-tool for their courses so that their students, too, can have the advantage of using this non-threatening environment to practice and improve their academic writing. The PCS-tool is open-source and available to all interested parties.

Introduction

Foreign language learners are aware that their classrooms do not truly reflect the foreign language as it is used in the real world. For this reason, many learners yearn to try out
what they have learned in their classes on people in real-world situations. It is always exciting when strangers actually understand and respond to what a student has learned and when mistakes are not responded to as critically as in a classroom setting. However, finding opportunities to practice oral skills in real-world situations is not always easy, and depends on many circumstances; for example, the number of foreign visitors in the area where the student lives and the distance a student has to travel to visit another country. On the other hand, finding opportunities to practice written skills in real-world situations is not as difficult. Today, the Internet provides students with countless opportunities to practice their written skills outside of the classroom. Students can easily participate in e-mail exchanges or in chat rooms to practice their second language. Despite the valuable practice these real-world online exchanges offer students, they lack two important criteria necessary to assure that students can become successful writers in an academic setting. The style of writing carried out in these real-world exchanges does not help students practice the type of formal writing that they will need for academic and career purposes. In addition, these exchanges offer little or no feedback to the writers concerning their errors. Consequently, we have designed an online writing course that offers students the opportunity to practice their academic-style writing techniques in a real-world setting where they also receive feedback. For this purpose we have developed the PCS-tool, which enables students to send academic-style texts to peers whom they do not know and receive feedback from them.

**Collaborative Learning**

Over the past several decades, research has substantiated the benefits peer collaboration can bring to the learning environment. When students’ academic and social behaviors become more interactive, this results in a higher level of thinking (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1992). Students who are given responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers are more motivated to perform better and more supportive of their fellow students (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). Student-centered learning, therefore, encourages learners to be more autonomous and to take charge of their own learning (Abrami, Chambers, Poulsen, DeSimone, d’Apollonia, & Howden, 1995). In a non-threatening and non-competitive collaborative learning atmosphere, learners feel less fear, which enhances the affective aspects of learning (Johnson et al., 1991). As a response to this paradigm shift from the teacher-centered classroom toward a student-centered classroom (He, 1993), many writing instructors have begun to use peer-response groups in their writing classes.

**Peer Review in Writing Classes**

Using peer review in writing classes can especially benefit the learners’ developmental processes. Vygotsky (1978) defines the distance between the learner’s actual developmental level and the level of potential development as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Because the level of texts written by peers is likely to operate within this zone, learning is likely to take place. This idea is also supported in the field of foreign language...