Peer Feedback on Second Language Writing through Blogs: The Case of a Vietnamese EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Vietnamese EFL students view blogs as tools with which to practise writing, examines whether student comments assist in peer revision, and evaluates whether peer comments result in substantive revisions of written drafts. Participants in this study included 11 students in an English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classroom in Vietnam. Data collected included students’ first and final drafts for two writing topics, comments posted online, and student responses to a questionnaire. Student responses to the questionnaire were analysed and their comments were coded as revision-oriented or non-revision-oriented (Liu & Sadler, 2003). This study’s findings indicate that most students expressed positive attitudes toward using blogs to practise second language (L2) writing and that most students made revision-oriented comments on their peers’ drafts. There is also evidence that students used their peers’ comments to revise their own final drafts. The implications of this study for language teaching practice are discussed.

Keywords: Blog, Language, Peer Feedback, Revision, Web 2.0, Writing

INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technology (ICT) have generated significant changes in all fields, including that of second/foreign language teaching and learning. Recently, many educators and language researchers (Campbell, 2003; Dippold, 2009; Penrod, 2007; Pinkman, 2005; Soares, 2008) have suggested that blogs can be useful tools through which language can be taught and learned.

As defined by Webopedia, blog is a shortened form of the term Web log, which is “a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual,” normally updated daily and often reflecting the personality of the author. Penrod (2007) states that blogs are “the world’s hottest, fastest-growing electronic medium for writing and distributing opinions and information” (p. 1). In terms of the applications of blogs to second language teaching and learning, Campbell (2003) suggests that there are three ways in which blogs can be used as teaching tools in an ESL context: tutor blogs, individual/learner blogs, and class blogs.
Recently, an increasing number of language instructors have integrated blogs into their teaching. Research has also explored the effects of blog use in L2 writing (Dippold, 2009; Pinkman, 2005). However, insufficient attention has been paid to blogs and their influence on second language writing, particularly within the context of Vietnamese EFL classes.

Teaching English Writing in Vietnam

Writing is not generally regarded as an important skill in most Vietnamese EFL classrooms. In most high schools in Vietnam, the teaching of writing is confined to a focus on the sentence level, with typical exercises including sentence transformation and sentence building. Although textbooks include some writing activities that instruct beyond the sentence level (such as the writing of letters and narratives), these activities are considered optional due to the constraints imposed by large class sizes. In fact, Vietnamese high school students have few opportunities to practise writing in English or to receive feedback from their teachers. Similarly, writing is not a focus of Vietnamese EFL classes at the tertiary level where more emphasis is placed on grammar and reading. It is not compulsory for undergraduates to study writing except those majoring in English, who are required to take Academic Writing courses. Non-English majors are required to take General English (GE) and/or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for the first two or three years of their undergraduate studies, depending on the nature of their specialties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer Feedback in Second Language Writing

In recent years, the use of peer feedback to improve student L2 writing has generally been supported by research. Peer revisions are thought to give students the sense of having an audience, to encourage a collaborative dialogue and two-way interaction, and to be less formal and potentially more accessible than tutor feedback (Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000). Research has been conducted to investigate the effects of peer feedback both on students’ affective aspects (Amores, 1997; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1995) and on the quality of their writing (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Miao, Badger, & Zhen, 2006; Rollinson, 2005; Villamil & Guerrero, 1998).

There has been controversial debate about the impact of peer responses on students’ attitudes. Some research has addressed the negative attitudes of learners towards peer review, claiming that peer feedback is problematic in second language writing (Amores, 1997; Leki, 1991; Zhang, 1995). These researchers reported that students overwhelmingly value teacher feedback but have doubts about peer responses and consequently ignore them. More often, however, researchers have contended that peer feedback can result in positive attitudes among students toward L2 writing (Jacobs et al., 1998; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Tsui & Ng, 2000).

Regarding the relationship between peer feedback, revisions, and writing quality, many scholars believe that comments from peers do have a positive impact on the quality of student writing (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Rollinson, 2005; Villamil & Guerrero, 1998). Similarly, Miao, Badger, and Zhen (2006) noted that although teacher feedback was more likely to be adopted to bring about improvement in student writing, peer feedback resulted in a higher percentage of revisions that caused changes in meaning. Moreover, peer-initiated revisions were more successful because peer interactions helped to “enhance mutual understanding and reduce misinterpretation and miscommunication” (Miao et al., 2006, p. 193).

In short, although the effect of peer response on student attitudes is controversial, the majority of researchers concur that peer feedback is welcomed by learners (Jacobs et al., 1998; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Tsui & Ng, 2000) and that peer feedback, in combination with teacher responses, has a more positive influence on ESL/EFL learners than feedback delivered.
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