L2 Learners' Perception of Peer Feedback in ESL Writing Classes

Ozge Yol

Northern Arizona University

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Author Note

Ozge Yol, Department of English, Northern Arizona University.

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Northern Arizona University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ozge Yol, Department of English,

Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86011.

E-mail: oy8@nau.edu

Abstract

This study examined learners' perceptions of a new peer feedback technique in ESL writing classes. This new technique required students to write a feedback letter by following a series of necessary steps. 38 international students registered in four different sections of freshman composition at a university in the United States participated in the study. The participants were divided into two main groups (i.e., treatment and control group). A Solomon four group study design was followed in order to increase the internal validity of the study. The two sections in the treatment group were trained in the new peer feedback technique. The two sections of the control group received no peer feedback training. All sections received the post-survey, but only two sections (one treatment and one control) received the pre-survey. Results based on pre and post surveys indicated that being trained in the new technique slightly improved students' perceptions of peer review, suggesting that new letter writing technique could be an addition to teachers' repertoires of peer feedback techniques.

Keywords: peer feedback, perception, ESL, writing.

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Background

In the post method era, which favor active participation of learners into their own learning process, English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers mostly encourage learners to accept writing as a recursive process of planning, outlining, drafting, revising and editing rather than an end-oriented product (Seow, 1992). In this process oriented writing, students are expected to first understand the prompt or the topic, think, read, or listen about it, and then start planning their own writing and produce their first drafts. The first draft is generally followed by teacher feedback. However, promoting learner autonomy and encouraging interaction among learners have been emphasized in current second language (L2) classes. That's why, peer feedback has become a common practice as much as teacher feedback in ESL/EFL writing classes. It is regarded as an opportunity for the L2 learners to develop their own learning skills through interaction, and favored by composition teachers.

Peer feedback is applied in a way that engage learners in reading their peers' drafts and in providing feedback based on what the teacher asks for. Traditionally, learners are asked to exchange their drafts with their partners and evaluate the organization, content and the language of the papers by answering some questions. With the help of the feedback received, learners are assumed to edit their writing for the subsequent drafts.

As stated by Ho & Savignon (2007) "the goal of peer review is to foster an atmosphere of reciprocal teaching between learners". Some studies proved the effectiveness of peer feedback in writing classes in terms of linguistic, social and affective skills' development (Tsu and Ng, 2000). Although the efficacy of peer feedback in writing classes was empirically supported by

some studies, results of how learners perceive peer feedback varied. Generally, students favored teacher feedback more than peer feedback.

Research Questions

Peer feedback in L2 writing classes is beneficial in some ways; however, the students' views of it widely vary depending on the way of its application. The purpose of this study was to answer the question whether peer feedback technique affects ESL learners' perception of peer feedback in college freshman writing classes. Although there are many factors that may affect the perception of peer feedback, the way how it is conducted may play an important role.

Methods

Participants

This study required practicing a peer feedback as a part of a writing class, the students enrolled in Program of Intensive English (PIE) of Northern Arizona University (NAU), Arizona, the USA were selected as a part of convenient sampling. It was conducted in ENG 105 college reading and writing course, which was held 4 hours a week throughout 14 weeks and required 4 written projects (i.e., rhetorical analysis, informative argumentation, annotated bibliography and prospectus, and argumentative essay). 38 international students from China, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait participated into the study. They were enrolled in four different sections of ENG 105 during spring 2014 semester. They practiced traditional, in-class peer review in their previous writing classes before; however, giving peer feedback through letter writing was a new experience for them.

Instruments

At the beginning and end of the study, a-17-question survey was conducted to understand the learners' perception of peer review and compare it with their perception of teacher feedback.

The survey was constructed upon a 5 point Likert scale format (i.e., 5: strongly agree, 4: agree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 2: disagree, 1: strongly disagree). The items had been based on 2 main constructs (i.e., perception of peer feedback and teacher feedback).

Procedure

In this study, "Solomon four group design" was employed; therefore, there were four groups in the study. The first group was the control group one, which received both the pre and posttest and included six participants. The second group was experimental group one with eight students. It was given both pre and posttest and the treatment. The third group was control group two. It included 12 students who were only given the posttest. The fourth group was the experimental group two. It has 12 subjects, who received both the treatment and the posttest.

Treatment

A treatment requiring students to practice giving feedback by following some necessary steps and writing a feedback letter to their peers is designed for the study. Two different teachers followed this design for two consecutive writing projects in the experimental group classes. In both of the writing projects, learners received feedback first from their teachers and revised their papers accordingly. Then, they received feedback for the revised version from their peers. Briefly, the focused peer review technique of this study required students to switch their papers with their partners, to follow the steps in the take-home peer feedback sheet, to write a feedback letter and to discuss the issues with their partners in the following lesson.

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Results

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Based on the statistical analyses, it was concluded that peer feedback technique altered the learners' perception of peer feedback as the results of the posttest between groups were different. However, the effect size is not statistically significant (15%). The main question was

whether this change was due to the effect of the treatment or the pretest. Both the comparison of pretested groups in their pre and post test results of perception of peer feedback showed that the participants were not sensitive to the pretest. Thus, there was a chance that they might be positively affected by the treatment. However, the independent t-test within the groups themselves showed that the treatment did not have an effect in the study in general. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that peer feedback technique changed the perception of the learners.

The reason for this controversy might be due to many reasons. A possible explanation of this slight change can be due to the inconsistency in the item reliability. There were two experimental groups taught by different teachers. Even if the steps were clarified, and the learners were provided with the same task sheet, the approach of the teachers' to the tasks and training might be different. In addition, the difference between the traditional in class peer feedback, which requires answering specific questions and letter writing technique might not be emphasized. As the peer feedback is a dynamic task, the role and the willingness to participate of the learners are also important for the activity being beneficial. Some learners might not take it seriously and meet the expectations of the tasks. This might have affected the perception of their peers.

The moderator variable perception of teacher feedback did not change although some students were introduced with a new peer feedback technique. Even the mean score in the posttest increased in the experimental group while control groups kept their means almost the same. In other words, students' perception of teacher feedback was not affected negatively by the peer feedback technique. They still either prefer or not prefer it.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Although the results of the study may not be applicable to all the PIE students and ESL learners enrolled in composition classes in the USA, this study may help language teachers in both PIE and the USA to plan their peer review sessions accordingly. The results showed that learners valued teacher feedback more than their peers. Based on this, teachers may think of other ways to promote peer feedback in the writing classes and to alter learners' perception by taking into account the problems encountered in this study. In any case, this technique of peer review can be an alternative to vary peer feedback techniques in writing classes.

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