

THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS AND JAPANESE ESL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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Although the peer review process has been widely used in L1 writing classes, it has not been clearly established that it can be used as successfully in the L2 context. In this pilot case study, our broad research question was: How does the peer review process work for Japanese students in a culturally-diverse American adult ESL writing class? To answer this question, and several sub-questions, we focused on four intermediate-level Japanese ESL students in an intensive English language program. We found that the peer review process can be effective in ESL writing classes, but that there are important factors that ESL teachers should be aware of. In this paper, we present our research findings, and implications for teaching based on these findings. We also make some suggestions for further studies on the use of the peer review process in ESL classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

There are varying definitions given for peer review in writing classes. In their extensive review of literature on peer response groups, DiPardo and Freedman discuss various functions writing groups may serve, but specifically define response groups as learning-teaching situations "in which the group members work in turn with different individuals on their individually owned products" (p. 120). Mittan (1989) specifies certain integrated activities that comprise the peer review process, including students reading and responding in writing to their peers' writing using a peer review sheet; students exchanging oral comments about their writing; and the teacher reading and responding to both the students' writing and to their peer review sheets (p. 208).

For the purposes of our study, we considered the peer review process to be that in which writers exchange comments, both written and spoken, about one another's written drafts for the purpose of providing authentic reader feedback to the writers.

In several studies we reviewed, the findings indicate that there are positive aspects of using peer review in L1 and/or L2 classrooms. For example, many ESL students do consider the peer review process to be helpful in improving their writing skills in English (Jacobs, 1989; Rothschild and Klingenberg, 1990). Also, student oral interaction can be useful (Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1992), and groups tend to focus on content (Gere and Abbott, 1985). In addition, peer groups help students anticipate reader response to their writing (Nystrand, 1986). On the other hand, some studies suggest that the peer review process may not work well for all students. Student writers may not assimilate suggestions given by peers (George, 1984), and some students may mistrust peer feedback or may question its value (Chaudron, cited in Rothschild and Klingenberg, 1990; George, 1984).

More importantly, we found several studies that emphasize important considerations that teachers using the peer review process must take into account. First, teachers must be aware of the larger instructional context within which they are trying to use peer reviews (Freedman, 1992). For example, before implementing peer review groups, teachers must consider what their role will be, and must realize that allowing their students to review each other's work does not mean that they are not doing their job of teaching (Newkirk, 1984). Also, teachers must be aware that how well groups work together is dependent on how peer group selection is made (Freedman, 1992; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Nelson and Murphy, 1992).

Second, teachers must take into account the fact that personality differences among students will make a difference in the efficacy of the peer review process (Berkenkotter, 1984). Third, they must consider the fact that peer review does not work equally well for all students, especially those who come from teacher-centered educational backgrounds, such as Japanese students

(Mangelsdorf, 1992; Mori, 1991; Nelson and Murphy, 1992). Fourth, social and cultural considerations must be addressed in grouping students for peer review work (Allaei and Connor, 1991; McGroarty, 1991). Finally, ESL teachers need to make certain that peer interaction is constructive and meaningful (Nelson and Murphy, 1993).

We became interested in how the peer review process works for adult students in an ESL classroom with students of various cultural backgrounds after observing and teaching such classes in an intensive English language program. We decided to conduct a pilot case study of students in this program, focusing on Japanese students because they are the largest nationality of students in intensive English language programs (IELPs) in this country. Of 35,220 students enrolled in IELPs in Fall 1991/2, 10,335 were from Japan, representing nearly 30% of total IELP enrollment (Zikopoulos, Sutton, and Julian, 1992, pp. 81-82).

Our broad research question was: *How does the peer review process work for Japanese students in a culturally-diverse American adult ESL writing class?* In addition to this general guiding question, we also addressed these more specific questions: How does the cultural background of Japanese students affect their level of participation in the peer review process? How does Japanese students' linguistic background affect their participation in peer review groups and in whole-class discussions? What general strategies are useful in drawing out Japanese students so that they will participate in group and class discussions? How does teaching style affect the efficacy of the peer review process, especially for Japanese students? What other important factors determine how effectively peer groups work for Japanese students? How do Japanese students' attitudes toward the peer review process change as they become more familiar with it?

OUR STUDY DESCRIPTION

Our research took place in an intensive English language program, in an intermediate level writing class with an emphasis on writing for academic purposes that met 50 minutes per day, 5 days per week, for an 8-week session. Six of the 16 students were from Japan, and the rest were from Kuwait, UAE, Mexico, the Congo, Taiwan, and Korea.

The expert teacher has a Master's in Education and English, and a Ph.D in English Literature. She taught English to native speakers for 5 years in the U. S. before going to Israel for 25 years. There she taught EFL, trained teachers, headed a department, and wrote three textbooks. She has also done teacher training in Taiwan and Australia. In 1990 she began teaching in an intensive English language program; she has written two teacher resource books while there. There was also an intern teacher, inexperienced in teaching ESL, doing some teaching in the class. Our approach was a case study, and our focus was on four of the six Japanese students.

Besides classroom participants, our study included a Japanese informant who was also an intern teacher in this institute during the course of our study. This participant was a fellow graduate student who had been an English teacher in Japan for eight years before coming to the U. S. in 1991. Thus, he was familiar with both the Japanese and the American educational systems.

After briefly explaining what our research project was about, we asked for volunteer participants from among the six Japanese students; four students volunteered, two females, Mihoko and Shiho, and two males, Toshi and Tomozo (not their real names). Although all our participants were from Japan, in interviewing them we found some interesting individual differences in their backgrounds.

Mihoko, who began learning English at the age of 13 in Japan, had been in the U. S. for 5 months when we first interviewed her, and this was her second 8-week session in this institute; although she had done some pair work, this was her first experience with peer review groups. Shiho had been in the U. S. for 7 months, and although this was her first session in this institute, she had previously studied English at a community college where peer review had been used in the writing class.

Toshi had been in the U. S. for only 3 weeks at the beginning of our study. Prior to this, he had studied in a Japanese high school in Paris for 6 years. He had had a British English teacher but had not experienced the peer review process in his English writing classes there. Tomozo had

also been in the U. S. for only 3 weeks when we conducted our first interview. Like Mihoko and Shiho, he had studied English in Japan, but for him, the peer review process was a completely novel class activity.

DATA COLLECTION

In order to strive for validity, our data collection involved the use of five techniques. These included eight naturalistic classroom observations, four individual interviews with our student participants, one formal interview with the expert teacher, several informal interviews with our informant, and a review of relevant research and literature. All formal interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. During the observations, we focused on our Japanese participants and took notes on interactions within their groups. Through the use of these five data collection methods, we attempted to cross-validate our information to better answer our research questions.

This triangulation was particularly important because neither researcher can speak Japanese (one is a native speaker of English, and the other is a native speaker of Mandarin). Thus, student interviews had to be conducted in English, and it was sometimes difficult for the participants to express their thoughts in English. It was also important in establishing validity that our presence in the classroom be as unobtrusive as possible. Thus, we tried to make it clear to both teachers and students that our role was that of non-participant observers. We explained to our participants and the other students why we were not participating in the groups, and we stressed to them that we were not evaluating their work. We thereby hoped to foster a more naturalistic environment for our observations of peer group interaction.

Although we initially expected to focus on the writing revision process in peer review groups, we soon realized that we would need to change the focus of our study. This was necessary because, since the students' writing proficiency level in English was intermediate, the teacher did not emphasize having students suggest revisions for each other's writing products. Instead, she used peer review groups primarily to provide authentic audiences for the student writers. Thus, we shifted our focus from students' revision of their written work to sociolinguistic interactions in peer review groups, trying to determine how effectively students of varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds were able to work together in peer review groups.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze and organize our data, we used our six specific research questions about the peer review process. As we answered each question, we drew upon the data from our five sources: the classroom observations, the student interviews, the interview with the expert teacher, the interviews with our informant, and the research and literature review. This was a recursive process, as we found ourselves going back over our data several times, looking for patterns and relevant examples to help us answer our questions.

EXPECTED FINDINGS

Before we began this case study, certain biases colored our expectations of what we would find. For example, we expected that Japanese students would not be experienced in giving and receiving peer feedback on their writing, and that they would have difficulty adjusting to this process in an ESL class. We predicted that they would hesitate to give negative feedback to a peer unless they were very sure of themselves on a point, but that male Japanese students would be more likely than females to express their opinions in a peer group.

We believed that they would place a higher value on a teacher's comments than on a peer's comments, but that they would have some awareness of cultural differences regarding attitudes toward peer feedback in the U. S. compared to Japan.

ACTUAL FINDINGS

Based on the data we collected in this case study, we found that while many of our expected findings were confirmed, others were not.

1. We learned that the cultural background of our Japanese student participants affected their level of participation in the peer review process in several ways.

Our review of relevant studies showed the potential importance of Japanese students' teacher-centered educational background in determining their participation level in peer review. For example, based on her finding that five out of the six students classified as negative toward peer review came from teacher-centered classrooms, Mangelsdorf (1992) suggests that students unfamiliar with a collaborative, student-centered environment may resist peer review. Of the five Japanese students in her study, two made only negative comments about the peer review process.

In the initial interviews, all four of our participants expressed a strong preference for getting feedback from the teacher rather than from peers, suggesting that their teacher-centered educational background did affect their attitudes and behavior. Mihoko put it this way: "Because when my friend comment, I can disagree about that. But when teacher corrects something, I must correct this."

We learned from the literature that, in the Japanese culture, it is important not to cause others to lose face, and Shimazu (1984) notes that the Japanese do not express orally what they are unsure of; they would rather be defensive than risk an unsure answer, thus exposing themselves to criticism. This also helps explain why it was difficult for our participants to exchange negative comments with peers.

When asked how it made her feel to get comments about her writing from others in her group, Mihoko said: "If I get good comments, I feel good, but if is not good (something like you must add more detail and it is not good enough), I cannot accept the comments. It hurts me." Shiho answered the same question in this way: "If they say something good to me, I will be very happy; if they point out some errors in my composition, I will ask the teacher, because she is a English specialist."

Tomozo also expressed his dislike of receiving negative comments from his peers: "I do not like negative comments, not even a little bit criticism. I believe in my own opinions. I like positive things. If I cannot believe that opinion, I do not accept it. Sometimes, their opinions are so stupid."

Our Japanese informant gave us his perspective on why it makes Japanese students uncomfortable to get criticism from their peers: "As long as they're getting comments from the teacher, the upper hierarchy, it's okay. But a peer is on the same level, so they feel they shouldn't have to accept criticism from them."

2. We found that these Japanese students' linguistic background affected their level of participation in peer review groups, and in whole-class discussions, in various ways. In general, it appeared to be easier for them to understand their peers and to express themselves in small groups rather than during whole-class discussions.

For example, although during one peer review session Mihoko did not hesitate to comment on the others' compositions after they had been read by the authors, during the whole-class discussion she said nothing. When asked about this later, she stated that a small group is better because "there is small number, and I have a chance to talk." Also, she confessed that it is difficult for her to follow what is being said during the class discussions, so she could not comment because she was unsure of what had already been said. In the small groups, however, she said she was able to understand what her peers were saying.

Our Japanese informant stated that the main problem for Japanese students in this institute is that "most don't understand what their peers are talking about. . . . Also, they are not very good at speaking, can't express what they feel; probably that puts them to shame."

3. We also found some specific strategies that seemed to be useful in getting our Japanese participants to express themselves orally in large groups. Although not directly related to peer

review, these strategies did appear to be indirectly related to the success these Japanese students experienced in peer groups.

First, the expert teacher designed activities for the purpose of allowing students to get to know one another in a fun way; this, in turn, seemed to create an environment in which it was easier for students to share opinions, both in whole-class and in small-group discussions. Asked about the theoretical basis of her teaching, she answered: "I basically believe people have to relax." Our observations showed that, over the course of our study, our participants and the other students were able to relax and open up to one another more as time went on, and appeared to develop some sincere cross-cultural friendships.

Second, we found that it was important to allow our Japanese participants a longer wait-time to express themselves. Listening to our recordings when transcribing our first interview, we noticed that there were times when we began asking another question before the students had finished responding to the previous one; in subsequent interviews, we allowed a longer wait-time so that they would have a chance to get their thoughts across to us. We also noticed that the expert teacher allowed Japanese students adequate time to respond or to finish speaking before calling on someone else.

Third, the expert teacher used the strategy of focusing specifically on Japanese students in order to draw them out. For example, she chose a composition written by Mihoko for practice in peer review. Each group talked about what they liked as well as what could be improved, and then ideas were exchanged in a whole-class discussion. Because the topic of her composition touched on Japanese culture, almost all the Japanese students became involved in the group and class discussions. Asked about her strategy, the expert teacher said that when she first began teaching Japanese ESL students, "it seemed to me like they wanted their private space . . . it turns out this is not so, that they really need more attention than everybody else. As a matter of fact, they love it when you cater to them. And I can just see their faces lighting up now, and so I now always make a point of asking them, now how is this in Japan."

4. We found several ways in which teaching style affected the efficacy of the peer review process, especially for the Japanese students. Comparing the style used by the expert teacher with that used by the novice teacher was very useful for us in investigating this issue.

For example, the expert teacher was very careful to get the class' attention before leading a discussion of what the groups would focus on. Her style in these class discussions was to elicit ideas from the students and then to do comprehension checks to make sure that everyone understood. Also, she spoke at a moderate pace, and she used clear examples to illustrate the main points that emerged from the discussions.

By contrast, the intern did not wait until students were ready to listen before she began to talk about what the groups were to do. In addition, instead of eliciting comments from the students, she tended to answer her own questions in a lecture format, and did not check to see if students had understood her. Her pace of speaking was very rapid, and the examples she used were often confusing.

As a result, the peer review process appeared to be much more effective when the expert teacher was in charge than when the intern was in charge, especially for Japanese students.

To confirm our impressions about the importance of teaching style, we asked our student participants if they understood what the teachers expected them to do in peer groups. Three of the participants admitted that they had difficulty understanding the intern; all participants said they could easily understand the expert teacher.

5. We found other important factors that determined how effectively peer groups worked for these Japanese students. Especially important were group size, composition of groups, and availability of copies for all members of the groups.

For example, when the intern formed groups of five or six students during our first observation, the result was that very little effective interaction took place. In the subsequent sessions, group size was usually three, and we noted that peer interaction was much more productive with this group size.

Also, we found that random selection was not always effective. For example, when a Japanese female was placed in a group with two Mexican males, she had very little opportunity to

express her opinions. This was probably mainly due to her lower level of English listening and speaking proficiency, but was perhaps also due to cultural and gender differences in rules for interaction.

On the other hand, random selection sometimes yielded effective combinations. In general, it seemed to help Japanese students if there was one Mexican student in their groups. Recognizing this fact, Toshi explained: "Spanish people, Mexican, know a lot of vocabulary, so I'm interested in what they say. I listen carefully." Tomozo also spoke about his preference for doing peer work with Mexican students.

An equally important element in determining how effective students were in reviewing each other's written drafts was the availability of copies. We observed that when peer group members were not supplied with copies of the composition they were to review, the process was not effective. In interviews, our student participants confirmed our impression that this was because it was very difficult for them to understand another non-native speaker of English reading aloud, especially when what was being read was also written by a non-native speaker of English.

6. We found that all four participants' attitudes toward the peer review process became more positive over the course of our case study.

In the final interview, Mihoko said that now she is more comfortable expressing her own feelings in whole-class and small-group discussions. In fact, when she goes back to Japan to be a teacher, she may even try using peer review with her students.

Shiho stated, in the final interview: "When I first came here, I was shy and I didn't want to share paper or check answer. Now, I can learn something from my friend, so I like to share paper with them."

As for Toshi, he declared in the final interview that it is easier for him to participate in peer review because "I can speak English more easily now."

Although we observed that Tomozo participated more freely in peer review sessions as time went on, the final interview revealed that he still had reservations about this activity. He stated: "Now to tell the truth, I am still trying to . . . I don't like the negative criticism. I will accept good suggestion."

We felt the students' self-evaluations on this point were valid because we also found through our observations that their behavior seemed more relaxed as they became increasingly accustomed to participating in peer review.

UNEXPECTED FINDINGS

Two of our major findings were contrary to the expectations we had prior to conducting our study. First, although we had expected that adjusting to the peer review process would prove difficult for Japanese students, our findings indicate otherwise. On this point, our informant was not surprised, however. Before we conducted our final interview, he predicted that our participants would say that it was easy for them to adapt to American classroom activities such as the peer review process. "Most Japanese students will adapt because of the freedom here. Most Japanese schools are very strict and students' personal lives can be restricted by the schools. Here they have more freedom both inside and outside the classroom."

Second, we had expected the Japanese male students to be more likely than the Japanese female students to express their opinions to their peers. However, in our case study, based on our classroom observations, the female participants gave and received comments to their peers much more than the male students did. Although this may have been partially due to the females' prior exposure to American classroom activities, all our participants also stated in interviews that we would not find males participating more than females in a Japanese classroom, either. Thus, our expectation that males would talk more than females was not confirmed by our study. Our Japanese informant was not surprised at this finding, either. Upon reading our findings, he stated: "In Japan, it is considered a sign of weakness for a man to talk too much. For example, the wife will usually talk more than her husband at a party."

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Based on our pilot case study, there are several important elements that the teacher of Japanese ESL students should take into account when using the peer review process in writing classes.

1. According to our findings, it is important for teachers to understand the deep-rooted cultural factors that may make peer review difficult at first for Japanese students, such as their discomfort at getting criticism from a peer.

2. Our study seems to indicate that teachers should be aware that intermediate-level Japanese ESL students may need extra help in comprehending what their non-Japanese peers are saying so that such Japanese students will be able to effectively participate in whole-class discussions.

On the other hand, if teachers select for class discussion a composition with a theme to which Japanese students feel an emotional connection, they may be more likely to state their opinions despite their limited speaking proficiency.

3. Our findings suggest that there are specific strategies that teachers may use to draw out their Japanese ESL students, including creating a relaxed, community atmosphere in the classroom; allowing a longer wait-time for intermediate-level Japanese students and encouraging other students to do so as well; and, finding ways to pay special attention to Japanese students.

4. Because we found that teaching style is very important in determining the efficacy of the peer review process, ESL teachers may benefit from having a high awareness of their own style (e.g., eliciting ideas from students vs. using a lecture format, and using clear examples vs. using confusing examples). It appears that teaching style is particularly important for Japanese students because broad differences in both cultural and linguistic background can make the peer review activity especially challenging for them.

5. We found other important factors that determined how effectively peer groups worked for Japanese students. Especially important were group size, composition of groups, and availability of copies for all members of the groups.

For example, teachers may find that pairs or groups of three work well for intermediate-level Japanese ESL students; groups larger than three may not work as well for peer review work. In terms of group make-up, if both Japanese and Spanish-speaking students are in the class, it seems advisable to have one Spanish-speaking student and at least one Japanese student in the same group, when possible.

Teachers should be aware that it is particularly crucial in an ESL class for each student to have a copy of the composition being reviewed. Due to their difficulty in comprehending spoken English, this may be especially important for intermediate-level Japanese ESL students, particularly for those in a culturally-mixed ESL classroom.

6. In general, our study suggests that teachers' expectations of what ESL students can be expected to accomplish in peer groups should be realistic, based on the level of English proficiency of their students. Perhaps the most important function peer review groups serve is to provide students with an authentic audience for their writing.

The expert teacher expressed this thought in an interview: "I think it's very important for them, very important, to be able to read their stuff to an audience. And I think this is a real fundamental need. . . . I value the peer review process simply because they get an audience that listens to them. And they do listen to each other because they want to be listened to when they read."

She also stated that when students read out loud in peer groups, they become an audience for their own writing: "There's a tremendous amount of self-correcting that goes with reading aloud. The self becomes a peer reader."

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Although our study seems to have yielded some useful implications for using the peer review process in ESL classrooms, particularly those with intermediate-level Japanese students, our findings are based on a small case study. Thus, the results should not be overgeneralized.

However, in the course of reviewing literature for our study, it became clear that there has been relatively little research done on certain aspects of the use of peer review groups in the ESL context. Therefore, our research maybe useful in pointing out unexamined issues in using the peer review process in such classrooms.

For example, Japanese students are only one group coming from a teacher-centered educational background; it would be interesting to see if case studies done on students of other nationalities, coming from similar educational backgrounds, would yield similar findings about their attitudes toward the use of peer review.

It would be also interesting to see other research done across proficiency levels in order to determine if students' level of participation in, and attitudes toward, the peer review process are influenced by their level of linguistic competence.

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