

Problems and tactics in Peer feedback in EFL Writing Teaching

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Abstract. Peer feedback, as the key step in process writing approach, is widely used in the teaching of EFL writing. Peer feedback plays a positive role in promoting teaching and learning. However, it also has many problems in teaching. This article finds that students' having no confidence in giving feedback to peers, students' lack of trust in feedback received from peers and the absence of positive peer feedback are the key factors that would influence the effect of peer feedback. In order to optimize the effect of peer feedback, we should pay attention to reasonable grouping, peer feedback training, instructor's timely intervention and emphasize the positive peer feedback.

I. Introduction

In recent years, process writing approach is favored by more and more domestic scholars and teachers. Peer feedback, as the key step in process writing approach, is strongly recommended by many researchers and instructors. Peer feedback refers to learners' providing advice on the learning outcomes of peers from the aspects of quantity, level, value and quality (Topping, 1998), and it is a learning activity based on constructivism. A large number of studies have shown that peer feedback plays a positive role in teaching and learning. Peer feedback will enable students to get feedback from a more diverse audience which may bring multiple perspectives, help students to gain confidence in writing, stimulate students' interest in learning, enhance students' learning motivation, improve students' critical thinking skills and serve them to acquire a lifelong learning skill - how to evaluate a work (Villamil et al., 1996; Topping, 1998; Lee, 1998; Omelicheva et al, 2005).

II. problems of Peer feedback

Though peer feedback has many advantages, it also has some problems in teaching. First of all, students lack confidence in whether they can provide specific and qualified feedback. In most cases, teacher is the only person to give feedback to students' homework. Since teacher, who is superior to the students in the aspects of professional knowledge and experience of writing commentary on students' homework, has an irreplaceable position in giving commentary in students' mind, and students have doubt about if they can substitute for teacher to provide peers with specific and qualified feedback. Second, students don't quite trust peer feedback. Students worship teacher's authority and rely on teacher's commentary, and they are skeptical about peers' ability to give feedback, and thereby distrust feedback from peers, especially peers they consider as lower competence students. Third, positive feedback is absent in peer feedback. For a long time, most researchers and instructors consider feedback as error correction. This view also affects students deeply. When giving feedback, Students only focus on the shortcomings and errors of companions' writings, which makes the comment full of correction and criticism and lack of encouragement. This kind of commentary would greatly affect peer's confidence and interest in learning (Cresswell, 2000), and it will also reduce students' utilization of feedback from peer. All the above problems impact the effect of peer feedback, so in order to optimize the effectiveness of peer feedback, we need to find solutions to these problems.

III. tactics for problems in the application of peer feedback

Combining the analysis of related research with the author's teaching experience, the author proposes that tactics like reasonable grouping, peer feedback training, instructor's timely intervention and emphasizing of positive feedback are the key to resolving the problems of peer feedback in teaching and learning.

A. Conduct peer feedback training to cultivate students' confidence in giving feedback

Peer feedback training is a key to help students build confidence in giving feedback. A number of researchers found that peer feedback training can reduce the influence of subjective factors on peer review, improve the feedback quality, and make the feedback more effective (Freeman, 1995, Min, 2005,2006). Stanley (1992) discovered that trained students may feel they are well-trained and are capable of providing more specific advice for company, and that they are, therefore, more confident to provide quality feedback. The procedure of training can fall into four steps: first, emphasize the function and significance of peer feedback. Students should have a clear idea that peer feedback will enable them to receive comments from a diverse way, and that peer feedback can be beneficial to their learning. Second, provide feasible evaluation criterion. Students would be clear about how to comment a peer's writing with the guidance of the criterion, so that they can provide specific commentary to a work. Therefore, the well-prepared students would have faith in their ability to give feedback to peers. Meanwhile, providing evaluation criterion for students can improve the reliability of peer feedback (Omelicheva et al, 2005). And the more reliable the peer feedback is, the more confidence students may have in giving feedback. Third, explain the evaluation criterion. Instructor can use specific examples to illustrate the criterion in detail. Fourth, demonstrate how to give peer feedback. Teacher randomly selects a student's work as an example, and guide students to provide feedback to it in accordance with the criterion.

B .emphasize reasonable grouping and instructor's timely intervention to promote recipients' trust in peer feedback

1. Reasonable grouping

That students do not have faith in peers and peer feedback is mainly due to the failure of grouping (Gong Xiaobin, 2007). There are two unreasonable ways for grouping: 1) teacher arranges group randomly or students form group freely; 2) teacher divides students into groups according to students' competence: high proficient students, intermediate proficient students and low proficient students. These two ways for grouping are likely to have students that are all high proficiency level or all low proficiency level in a group. High proficient students can provide peer feedback with no doubt. But the low proficient fellows may not be able to find the errors in their fellows' writings, let alone giving feedback (Gong Xiaobin, 2007), which may lead to their low engagement and lack of training in the peer feedback. Therefore, group with the same proficiency level students, or homogeneous group, is not a suitable choice. According to vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZDP) theory, learners can attain higher skill than their current one with the assistance of teacher or peer. This suggests that learners can get the greatest learning gain with the assistance received from a more competent peer. So for the low proficient students, heterogeneous group with students at different proficiency level is a better choice. However, there is still one problem with the heterogeneous group: high proficient students won't have access to feedback from a more competent companion within the group. Instructor mainly applies one-to-one principle to peer feedback, that is, a student only comment a work from a less competent member within a group. This principle may enable both low and intermediate proficient students to receive assistance from a higher proficient peer, but may spare high proficient students from getting "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1987). To solve the problem, it is advisable to let students work in groups to read and review writings from another group together. In this way, high proficient students can get feedback from the high proficient peers in another group. And, more importantly, both low and intermediate proficient students can reap more benefit, for they can not only obtain expected skills such as how to give feedback to a work from more competent group members

through discussing within group, but can gain higher skill from the feedback given by another group.

2. Instructor's timely intervention

During the process of peer feedback, instructor mainly acts as organizer and manager, and had better not to intervene in the process. However, in order to enhance the students' confidence in peer feedback, it is advisable to intervene after students' writing commentary on peers' works. The procedure is as follows: firstly, teacher selects and checks group A's written commentary on the writings of group B, and discusses the commentary with group A's members outside class. Secondly, praise the merits in the commentary to increase members' confidence in providing feedback. Thirdly, guide members to find out the demerits in the commentary with questions so as not to discourage their self-confidence, and let them do modification. Fourthly, let group A's leader take pictures of and upload their commentary to the students' QQ group (each English class sets up a QQ group), so that students in other groups can appreciate the successful examples of peer feedback and gain confidence in feedback.

C. Give due weight to positive feedback to enhance feedback effectiveness

Many researchers and instructors hold the view that feedback is all about errors correction and negative comments. Influenced by their teachers, students may only concentrate on errors and write negative comments, which may lead to recipients' helplessness and despair, a feeling that may reduce recipients' motivation to correct errors and decrease their utilization of feedback from peer. In effect, feedback should include positive comment (Bartels, 2003). Positive comment can enhance students' confidence in their writings, and intrigue their motivation and passion to write (Zamel, 1987; Gong Xiaobin, 2007). Hence, to improve the effectiveness of peer feedback, teacher should guide students to give due weight to positive feedback. For instance, instructor can ask students to point out a certain number of strong points in a work (Gong Xiaobin, 2004).

IV. Conclusion

Peer feedback changes the traditional teacher-centered and teacher-dominated teaching mode, manifesting the constructivism idea that students are the center. Effective peer feedback enables students to learn expected skills in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, and play an irreplaceable role in teaching and learning; however, peer feedback has its problems. Therefore, to optimize the effect of peer feedback, we should pay attention to reasonable grouping, peer feedback training, instructor's timely intervention and emphasize the positive peer feedback.

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