

What Students Learn from Peer Editing L1 Writing

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Abstract

Peer editing is a core activity in most English writing classes, including those at Japanese universities. In addition to improving the quality of drafts submitted to the teacher, it is also widely accepted to have numerous benefits for both the givers and receivers of the feedback. In order to help students make useful comments, some degree of support and training is generally required, as many students will have little or no experience of either giving or receiving peer feedback on written assignments. In this small-scale study, the teacher tested the idea of training students in giving peer feedback on L1 writing in order to help them to understand the process. The participants were surveyed after the class to find out how they felt about the experience. Most of the students reported that they found the feedback from their peers both constructive and useful, and that the experience would be likely to help them in future peer editing activities in their English writing classes.

Keywords: Peer editing, peer review, peer feedback, L1 writing, writing

In L2 writing classes, teachers commonly ask students to read and give feedback on one another's assignments before they submit them. This process is known by a range of different terms including "peer feedback," "peer response," "peer review," and "peer assessment" (Yu & Lee, 2016). One commonly cited definition provided by Liu and Hansen (2002) is that peer feedback is "the use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a trained teacher" (p. 1). This paper looks at the evidence supporting the use of peer editing activities in L2 writing classes. It also discusses some of the issues that can reduce the

effectiveness of such activities, and it proposes a new idea for improving students' ability to give feedback to peers and also to utilize peer feedback to improve their own writing.

Justification for the Use of Peer Editing

One practical reason for employing this technique is that reducing the number of basic mistakes, such as spelling and layout errors, in written assignments before they are submitted will leave teachers time to focus on higher-level feedback that will help the students to become better writers. Some researchers have reported that EFL students tend to view peer feedback as being less useful than that provided by the teacher. For example, Yang et al. (2006) reported that more than 90% of students felt that teacher feedback was useful or very useful, whereas only 60% felt the same about peer feedback. Other studies, however, have found that EFL students place a high value on feedback from their peers. One study of Japanese students in a Canadian university (Seror, 2011) found that they viewed peer feedback as a valuable source of advice that was often clearer and easier to understand than comments from the teacher. Similarly, Kaneko (2011) found in a survey conducted at a Japanese university that “none of the students had negative feelings about peer editing activities” (p. 381).

Although the commonsense notion might be that the main value of peer feedback would be the help that receiving it could give you in improving your own writing, a case can be made that giving feedback can also be highly beneficial for learners. For example, a study of Swedish lower-secondary students (Berggren, 2015) concluded that the giving of feedback helped to improve students' writing at the global level. Another study (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) found that when one group of students only gave feedback and another only received it, stronger gains were made by the givers than by the receivers.

Other studies (e.g., Birjandi & Hadidi, 2012; Lam, 2013; Suzuki, 2008) have provided evidence to support the notion that both peer- and teacher feedback can be helpful for students, although they may serve different purposes. Kobilova (2016) claimed that in addition to improving their writing skills, peer editing also helped students to develop critical thinking and reading skills. In their summary of research findings, Yu and Lee (2016) concluded that “recent research has provided generally positive evidence to support the use of peer feedback in L2 writing classes” (p. 467). The available evidence appears to suggest, therefore, that teachers who encourage the use of peer editing in their L2 writing classes are justified in doing so.

The Process of Peer Editing

Peer editing usually takes place in the classroom, although it can also be done online if the writing assignments are created in an electronic form. Students give their assignment to one or more classmates and ask them for suggestions on how it can be improved before they submit it to the teacher. At the most basic level, students are asked to look for linguistic errors such as misspelled words, subject/verb agreement problems, and incorrect or missing punctuation.

Although this may sound like a fairly simple task in theory, that is not always the case in practice. One common problem is that some students do not feel motivated to do a thorough check of a classmate’s assignment because they do not perceive any direct benefit to themselves. This lack of interest may manifest itself in the overlooking of even obvious errors like the misspelling of names. Even students who apply themselves diligently to the task may miss a large number of mistakes simply because they do not have the knowledge or proficiency to identify or correct them accurately.

One way of helping students to edit effectively is to give them a checklist such as the one provided in Barker (2014). This identifies a number of key categories of errors and provides students with references to Japanese explanations of how to correct them. Giving students a checklist encourages them to take a systematic approach to the task of looking for specific types of errors, and the content of the checklist can be adjusted to focus on areas that the teacher thinks are the most likely to be problematic for their students.

From a teacher's point of view, however, identifying and correcting linguistic and stylistic errors represents only the first step in the editing process. After all, the ultimate goal is not only to teach students how to write correctly, but also to teach them how to write well. While most students are able to comprehend the idea of looking for and correcting mistakes, many appear to feel that an English assignment that is free from linguistic errors is as good as it needs to be. These students may genuinely feel at a loss when asked to suggest ways in which the writing can be improved.

This is a particular problem in Japan, where many students have little or no experience of peer editing in their own language. Students who have never done it before will naturally need instruction both on the goals of the process and the criteria they need to focus on. For example, Gifu University's Writing textbook (2020) encourages students to look for ways of avoiding repetition, to think carefully about vocabulary choice, and to add information to make sentences more interesting for the reader. Even with this advice, however, many students struggle to understand what they are being asked to do, and as a result, are unable to provide useful feedback to their peers.

In order to help students grasp the concept and experience the process of giving higher-level feedback on a written assignment, the teacher in this study decided to remove the distraction of linguistic errors by asking students to write, and then peer edit, an assignment in their own language.

An Experiment in Peer Editing L1 Writing

The study described below was conducted with a class of second-year English-education majors at a Japanese university. The aim of the class was to teach students how to write an academic essay in English following the standard five-paragraph format. The students had already taken a class in basic writing the previous year and were accustomed to the process of peer editing. However, although most of them were reasonably competent in identifying and correcting mistakes, none was able to give the kind of feedback that the teacher was hoping for. To help them get to grips with the concept, he decided to repeat an assignment that the students had already completed, but this time, to have them write it in Japanese. It was made clear to the students that although it was fine for them to reuse points they had made in their English essay, the second assignment was not meant to be a translation of the first, and no comparison between the two would be made. The students were given a week to write their assignment and upload it to the class folder.

In the following class, students were put into groups of three or four to read and give feedback on one another's assignments. The assumption was that with no linguistic errors, students would be free to focus on giving feedback at a higher level, which might help them to gain a better understanding of what the teacher was asking them to do when they checked English assignments. Students were told that they should suggest ways in which the writing could be made more interesting for the reader. In addition, they were told to look for examples of what they considered to be particularly effective writing and give positive feedback on that.

To help them further, the students were given a list of five categories on which to focus their feedback. The categories were as follows:

- vocabulary selection
- ordering of elements and flow

- points that could be added
- existing points that could be expanded
- phrases or expressions that could be improved

The class was conducted online using the Zoom platform, and students were put into Breakout Rooms to give one another feedback.

Teacher Observations of the Peer Editing Process

As the students worked together in their groups, the teacher took the opportunity to visit each Breakout Room in turn to observe the feedback process. The first thing he noticed was a change in the dynamic between himself and the students. Although he was able to read and write Japanese, the students obviously had a higher level of expertise given that they were writing in their own language. This meant that instead of taking on his usual role as an adviser, the teacher elected to take part as a student, asking questions about words and expressions with which he was not familiar. He also tried to give feedback on how the writing could be improved, but this was done from the standpoint of a peer rather than that of a teacher.

The second point the teacher noticed was how much more talkative and willing to give feedback the students were than in a regular English class. The teacher did not feel that this was because they were speaking in their own language (students are allowed to use Japanese for peer-editing of English assignments as well), but rather because they simply had more to say about an assignment that had been written Japanese.

The final point of interest was that there were significant differences in the quality of writing produced by different students. In most groups, the members were in full agreement about which was the best assignment, and many of the better ones were written by students who were not particularly strong in the English class. This demonstrated the importance of

remembering that a person's ability as a writer does not necessarily correspond with their level of English proficiency, and vice versa.

Student Reflections

Following the class, students were asked to complete a survey about their experience.

They were asked the following questions:

1. Did you ever do this kind of peer editing of Japanese writing in school?
2. Which category of advice did you receive most from your group?
3. Which category of advice did you find the most useful?
4. Give an example of an expression that you changed based on the feedback.
5. How did you feel about giving and receiving feedback on Japanese writing?
6. Do you think that this experience will help you in your English writing class?

Participation in the survey was optional, and all responses were anonymous.

Results and Discussion

A total of 20 out of 24 students completed the questionnaire. Both the questions and the answers were written in Japanese, as the teacher wanted to minimize the burden on the students of filling in the questionnaire. The responses have been translated here by the author.

In response to question 1 about their experience of peer editing in school, 11 students (55%) said that they had never done this before. A further 4 students (20%) said that they could not remember having done it. Only 5 students (25%) reported having done peer editing of Japanese writing in either junior high or high school. Note that these were students at a national university who had spent most of their time in high school preparing for the Center Test. The responses may have been very different from students who had prepared to enter private universities, many of which have a writing test as part of the entrance examination.

The second question asked students about the category or categories of advice they received most from the other members of their group. Multiple answers were permitted. The most frequently mentioned category was category 5 (expressions that could be improved), which was selected by 10 students. This was followed closely by category 1 (vocabulary selection), which was chosen by 9 students, and category 4 (point expansion), which was mentioned by 8 people. New points were suggested to only 3 students, and flow/ordering was mentioned to only 1 person.

In terms of which types of feedback the students found most useful in improving their writing, the most popular answer was vocabulary selection, with 9 students (45%) choosing this option. Feedback on the rewording of phrases or expressions was mentioned by 5 (25%) of the students. This was interesting because although it was one of the most frequently offered categories of feedback, it was perceived as being much less useful than advice on vocabulary selection. Advice on expanding existing points was also felt to have been useful by 5 of the students, but only 1 student mentioned being given useful advice about adding a new point.

When asked to give specific instances of expressions that they had changed based on feedback from other members of the group, students gave examples that included replacing “delicious” with a more detailed description of the taste and texture of the food, using more formal language to match the style of the assignment, and adding details to make sentences more interesting. These are exactly the kinds of things that teachers hope their students will highlight in the peer editing process in English writing classes. This experiment therefore demonstrated that although students may find it more difficult to give this kind of advice about writing in a foreign language, they are certainly able to understand the basic concept and provide feedback that goes beyond simply identifying and correcting mistakes.

In response to the final question, students were asked to choose a number to represent their feeling about how useful this experience would be in helping them to give feedback in future English classes. The response options were on a standard Likert scale of 1 (not useful) to 5 (extremely useful). In total, 17 of the respondents (85%) said that they thought the experience would be useful (8 students) or extremely useful (9 students). Of the remainder, 2 students did not know whether it would be useful, and only 1 student did not feel that the experience of peer editing in Japanese would help them to do it more effectively in English.

Conclusion

In Western countries such as the U.S., the U.K, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, which are home to many of the non-Japanese English teachers in Japan, it is common practice to give and receive feedback on essays written in English classes in school, and children are encouraged to think not only about writing correctly, but also about writing well. Because they have this background, there is a danger that many non-Japanese teachers will assume that their Japanese university students have had the same experience of peer editing their Japanese writing in junior high and high school. As shown by the questionnaire responses in this study, however, this is not the case for every student.

For teachers of foreign languages, common sense suggests that it is not a good idea to ask students to do things in the target language that they either have no experience of, or would struggle to do, in their mother tongue. The students' lack of experience of peer editing in Japanese might be one reason why so many of them find it difficult to give feedback on English writing beyond looking for basic mistakes. The results of this study suggest that giving students the experiences of peer editing assignments written in Japanese might be one way of helping them to understand how the same process can help them to improve both their own and their classmates' English writing.

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