Perception of Academic Writing: A Case Study of an ESL Writer during Peer Review

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This paper investigates how peer review affects an ESL student writer’s perception of academic writing in English, a writer who is diagnosed as a weak writer by his ESL writing instructor. The two aims of this paper are to explore whether this ESL writers’ underdeveloped sense of academic writing might threaten reciprocity during peer review and how peers deal with it. For this purpose, this paper tracks the changes in the ESL student, Sol’s perception of academic writing through peer review, a teacher conference, and his final draft. This paper uses two levels of analysis: dialogic discourse analysis and in-depth analysis of peer and teacher talk. Although emphasis is on Sol, his two peers Icy and Chen and his instructor are also included as participants in order to understand the co-construction of text meaning. The peer review and individual teacher conference were recorded and transcribed, and written materials—first and second drafts and teacher comments—were obtained. The results reveal that peer review provides Sol with a chance to discuss an issue he could not discuss in teacher conferences and as a result, contributes to his better understanding of academic writing in English.

Key words: Perception, Academic writing, Peer review, Reciprocity

I. Introduction

The controversy of whether peer review is helpful in the second language context has been addressed in recent years based on Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory. Several scholars have argued that peer review is helpful for mutual learning of second language learners (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2003; Kroll, 1991; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1990, 1998; Zamel, 1985). In particular, De Guerrero and Villamil, and Mendonça and Johnson confirmed that comments students
receive from their peers during peer review have actually been reflected in their revisions, as shown through comparisons between first drafts before peer review and second drafts after peer review. These scholars seem to arrive at a consensus that discussion or negotiation occurring during peer review contributes to mutual scaffolding and makes a real difference in learners’ writing.

These studies provide a new perspective on the use of peer review in the second language context, but rather than delving into peer review in depth, they focus more on finding a pattern. For example, Mendonça and Johnson (1994) examine what types of comments from peers have been more frequently incorporated and to what extent they have been reflected in the final version. Villamil and Guerrero (1996) categorize what types of revision activities students engage in and what strategies they use to facilitate the revision process. In these efforts to find patterns, some moments of peer talk, which may not fit into any of these patterns or categories but may reveal what is actually going on during peer review, are easy to lose. Instead of these patterns, this paper examines what kinds of troublesources threaten reciprocity during peer review and, in particular, focuses on one of the troublesources too much support. According to Nystrand (1992), troublesources are points that “potentially threaten the temporarily shared social reality (TSSR)” between writer and reader (p. 166). When writers are faced with troublesources, they need to renegotiate a new TSSR by elaborating on the troublesources. Once I located the troublesource too much support—the only troublesource initiated by Sol who is diagnosed as a weak writer by his ESL writing instructor—disturbed TSSR during peer review, I followed it up by examining the teacher conference interaction and the learners’ final draft as well. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do peers deal with the troublesource too much support?
2. How is the content of the peer talk reflected in revision?
3. How has one ESL student’s understanding of writing changed through his interaction with peers and his instructor over this troublesource?

II. Literature Review

In English writing classes, especially in a first language context, peer review has not only been used extensively, but has also been theoretically justified. For example,