How Does Peer Feedback Training Work in EFL Writing?

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Peer feedback, in which students work together in pairs or small groups to critique and provide comments on one another’s writing, is compatible with communicative approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) and process approaches to foreign language writing. This study, drawing on Vygotsky’s sociocultural learning theory, conducted a pretest-posttest comparison group quasi-experimental design with multiple data being collected and analyzed quantitatively by using SPSSWID (ver. 17.0), to explore what role trained peer feedback plays in EFL writing context. Results of a series of t-tests in quantitative analysis showed that peer feedback training had positive effects on participants in various aspects. The experimental group students gained more than control group students in their posttest writing task. They outperformed the control group students in terms of comment quantity and quality, especially generating more specific and relevant comments on global issues and implementing more peer comments into their revisions. Peer feedback training also helped students cultivate more positive attitudes towards EFL writing. These findings suggest that peer feedback training has shown strong positive effects on EFL learners, that is, EFL students can perform peer feedback both efficiently and effectively as long as they are well-trained.
I. Introduction

Process approach in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing encourages students to engage in multiple drafting and revision activities and it highlights the importance of peer feedback as a technique to facilitate the revision. Peer feedback, originally as the supplement form of teacher feedback, has gradually gained importance in ESL writing instruction. Researchers in ESL writing have found that when students comment on one another’s paper, they adopt an active role in learning to write (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994), gain confidence and critical skills needed to analyze and revise their own writing (Leki, 1990; Mittan, 1989), develop a better sense of audience (Gere, 1987; Mittan, 1989;), and acquire knowledge on a variety of writing styles (Spear, 1988). In spite of these potential benefits, there have been some criticisms: L2 learners gave unfocused and unhelpful comments (Conner & Asenavage 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998); Students were not critical enough (Ferris, 2003; Stanley, 1992); they addressed mostly surface errors or grammar instead of global issues of meaning (Leki, 1990; Stanley, 1992); And they sometimes gave advice that did not lead to revision (Leki, 1990).

Regarding the inconclusive findings, Paul (2004) argued that assuming certain conditions of training and organization, peer feedback can be a valuable means of supplementing the traditional teacher feedback. Some other researchers also called for peer feedback training as well as conducted the training (Berg, 1999; McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Min, 2005, 2006; Stanley, 1992; Zhu, 1995). Their work has made peer feedback training a new trend in L2 writing research. However, a further overview of L2 peer feedback literature shows that such studies were mostly carried out in (ESL) classrooms instead of EFL context. How EFL students provide, use and perceive peer feedback, and what effects peer feedback has on EFL learners, has not obtained sufficient attention or has not been fully investigated empirically. The above-mentioned conflicting research findings, together with the gap in knowledge about peer feedback in the EFL context have made research on EFL peer feedback both critical and urgent.