

Written Peer Response IN L2 Writing

OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, THE PROCESS APPROACH TO COMPOSITION, which was originally developed for first language instruction, has become popular among ESOL writing teachers. A key component of this approach is peer response (also known as peer review, peer feedback, peer editing, and peer evaluation), in which students read each other's papers and provide feedback to the writer, usually answering specific questions the teacher has provided. In most cases the questions focus on organization and style, rather than surface-level grammar or spelling mistakes. Mittan (1989) argues that peer response gives students a sense of audience, increases their motivation and their confidence in their writing, and helps them learn to evaluate their own writing better. Other authors have also cited these benefits of peer response (see Keh 1990; Mangeldorf 1992; Caulk 1994; Zhang 1995; Lee 1997; Tang and Tithecott 1999; Topping, Smith, Swanson, and Elliot 2000 and Hyland 2000).

Oral peer response, as presented in Mittan's classic article (1989), calls for students to work in groups of four or five. Each student gives one copy of her paper to every member of the group. Then, usually out of class for homework, each group member reads the other students' papers and prepares a response to each of them, using focus questions provided by the teacher. In the next class, students give oral comments on each paper they read, as well as ask and answer clarifying questions. Each student then uses this feedback from the other group members to rewrite her paper.

In recent years teachers have changed and expanded methods of conducting peer responses. For example, many teachers now train their students in how to give positive, useful feedback and give them practice in evaluating written work. They do this based on research showing, first, that untrained students tend to focus on surface errors rather than on organization or style (Stanley 1992; Zhu 1995; McGroarty and Zhu 1997), and, second, that feedback formulated in a negative way can be more discouraging than helpful (Nelson and Murphy 1992). Instead of having their students give oral feedback to their peers in a group setting, many teachers today have students write a response, which is then given directly to the author of the paper. After receiving this written feedback, students are given time to read it and ask any questions or seek clarification about what their peers wrote. As in oral peer response, this feedback is then used to write the final draft of the paper.

Although peer response began as an oral activity, teachers today are finding that in some situations, written peer response is the only option for enabling students to give feedback via e-mail or to peers in other cities or countries (Hedderich 1997; Braunstein, Meloni, and Zolotareva 2000). I have found that, when oral peer response is possible, there are advantages to having students give written responses to their peers' writing.

Advantages of written peer responses

1. It creates an interested audience for students' writing.

The best reason to provide peer responses in writing, rather than orally, is to create an opportunity for communicative writing. The students receiving the papers to review are genuinely interested in communicating clearly

their written response and comments because they want to provide useful feedback. Likewise, the authors of papers eagerly receive the written peer comments because they want to do better on their second drafts. Thus there is a sense of audience felt by both authors and reviewers that enables all of the students to understand the purpose of the writing process more profoundly, perhaps, than they do with most of their writing assignments.

2. It provides instant feedback and negotiation of meaning.

Although negotiation of meaning is considered a vital element in language learning (Goldstein and Conrad 1990; Long 1983; Pica, Young, and Doughty 1987), it is difficult to create situations in which students have the opportunity to negotiate meaning in regard to their writing. However, I have found that when students get written responses to their writing, they spontaneously request clarification, ask questions, and even argue about the responses, giving their peers instant feedback and an excellent opportunity for negotiation.

In fact, there can be negotiation of meaning about the peer-written responses themselves, which can lead to more language learning. I have heard student writers seek clarification of the written feedback by asking their peers questions such as "What exactly do you mean by...?" "What about this paragraph did you find confusing?" and "Don't you think it would be a little boring if I added more detail here, as you suggested?"

3. Every student gives and receives peer response.

If a student misses class the day that oral peer response is done, she does not receive any feedback on her writing and misses the opportunity to give feedback to her peers. With written peer response, students can still give and receive feedback, even if they miss class. Giving this responsibility to students may also foster learner independence.

4. Monitoring peer response is easy with written feedback.

Using written peer responses makes it much easier to monitor what each student says, which helps the teacher spot areas where students need practice and improvement, either in their writing or their feedback. Nelson and Murphy (1992) found that some students formulated their feedback in a negative manner

even after explicit training in how to use positive expressions and warnings about the effects of harsh feedback. Written peer responses help teachers check if students are giving the proper type of feedback and can provide actual examples of positive and negative feedback, which is difficult to do with accuracy and depth in oral feedback.

5. *Assessing students' writing is easier with written responses.*

Peer review can pose problems in assessment because it may not be clear how much of the ideas, organization, or even wording of a final draft of an assignment are the work of the student being assessed or of the peers providing feedback for improvement (Gearhart and Herman 1998; Wilhelm 1996). When writing assignments are turned in accompanied by the previous draft(s) and the peers' comments, it is easier for the teacher to ascertain which ideas originated with the student author and how well the student was able to respond to and incorporate the feedback and suggestions from peers, something that would not even be possible with oral responses.

6. *It saves time, especially in large classes.*

Many teachers feel that they do not have enough time for oral peer response during class because it can be a time consuming process. With written peer response, however, class time does not have to be spent on preparing feedback. Also, in large classes, teachers often do not have enough time to write thorough comments on each student's paper. Written peer responses provide students with thorough feedback, because peer reviewers will notice different aspects of the paper (Caulk 1994).

7. *It provides material for review.*

I have noticed that when students are listening to oral feedback, some listen and make very few notes on what is being said. Often they rewrite their papers without the benefit of remembering what the feedback from their peers was and after the semester is over, they have little material to review besides the teacher's comments. Written peer response provides students with reference materials on their own writing.

8. *It is good practice for future teachers.*

This final advantage pertains to students who plan to become English teachers. Written peer review provides practice in writing useful

comments on students' papers. This is important for teachers-in-training because sometimes the comments that teachers write about their students' written assignments are confusing, contradictory, or even useless to the student (Zamel 1985). By practicing written responses to peers' writing as students, future teachers can learn how to focus on clarity and usefulness when giving feedback.

Conclusion

Written peer response can be very useful in a wide variety of classes. Although it has been used primarily in English for Academic Purposes, it can be used in other English classes. For example, in a business English class, students could do a role play in which an employee has to write a letter to an important client. The boss, played by another student, would read the letter and make suggestions for improvement before it is sent to the client. Written peer response can also be valuable in classes where improving speaking skills is just as important as improving writing skills. In my experience, written responses produce just as much conversation and negotiation as oral responses. Overall, I believe this technique can be instrumental in helping students understand the process of writing and become independent thinkers and writers.

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Nat Bartels has taught English, Spanish, and German in many teaching situations and countries. Currently he works at Utah State University, USA, coordinating the foreign language teacher education program.