

A Brief Study on Peer Feedback in College English Writing Teaching

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Abstract. One of the aims about EFL Teaching is to enhance students' abilities of independent learning. In order to achieve the goal, many educational researchers have proposed to apply peer feedback to improve students' independent writing ability. Peer feedback, which sources in the mother tongue writing teaching, obtains the universal application in second language writing teaching. To be specific, peer feedback is one of the methods of process writing. It is used frequently in writing teaching. It is one way to check the students' compositions, namely students read and revise their partners' compositions. It can improve students' independent learning ability and their writing quality. The thesis first introduces the definition of peer feedback, relevant researches, features and current situation of writing teaching, and then elaborates how to use peer feedback in junior English writing teaching. Finally it applies the case study to draw the evaluation of peer feedback.

Keywords: Peer feedback; writing teaching; college English.

1. Introduction

One of the aims of EFL Teaching is to enhance college students' abilities of independent learning. At the same time, they should do more pair work or group work according to cooperative learning theory. As for college English writing teaching, effective peer feedback is a positive method to improve students' writing abilities. After all, a large number of educational researchers have already done numerous researches on peer feedback in writing teaching.

For a long period of time, Product Approach plays a leading role in college English writing. This traditional teaching method frequently ignores students' cooperative ability. Therefore, some teachers carry out English writing teaching as follows: firstly, teachers arrange tasks for students and students hand in after finishing them. Then teachers check every student's composition. The last step is that teachers point out the mistakes in most students' compositions and ask them to correct their mistakes by themselves.

In this kind of teaching process, teachers are the center and teacher feedback plays a controlling role. Teachers just point out students' mistakes in their writing directly. The problem with such teacher-centered teaching mold is that students just take part in the activities passively, finish the work arranged by teachers and accept teacher feedback unilaterally. Consequently, students' abilities of independent learning have not received the attention they deserve. Thus their abilities of innovation and self-expression have been weakened bit by bit, which not only fail to improve their ability of self-learning and cooperation, but also wipe out their creativity and imagination.

To meet the development of modern education and the requirement of education reform, college English teaching has turned to "student-centered" teaching model. Students' autonomous learning and cooperative communication are the key points of the reform. Teachers should guide students to participate in class actively. Consequently, when it comes to college writing teaching, peer feedback can be applied to achieve a better teaching efficiency.

2. Literature Review

Since Cooperative Learning Theory was advanced, a lot of scholars have done empirical researches on peer feedback. As much as they have different opinions about the effect of peer feedback in English writing teaching, the majority of them have come to a similar conclusion: peer feedback plays a positive role in the process of improving students' writing levels.

2.1 Definition of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is one of the methods of process writing, which is used frequently in writing teaching. Educators regard the process of writing as a communicative activity among crowds. Peer feedback is beneficial for students to understand their own writing process, and give full play to their intellect. Peer feedback is the process that students finish their compositions according to the titles given by teachers, and then they work in pairs or groups, reading partners' compositions. They ask questions, or make comments, or give advice on partners' compositions. As a way of cooperation among students, peer feedback encourages students to finish the writing tasks by communicating and discussing. This approach regards students as information sources and interactive parts, in which students undertake teachers' obligations and revise students' compositions and give advice. It is helpful to improve students' "learner autonomy".

In the process of developing peer feedback, students grasp the steps and skill of feedback continually, and develop the ability of feedback in terms of readability, persuasion, content, structure and consistency. Moreover, during the course of feedback, students' writing ability of is bound to be improved gradually.

2.2 Research on Peer Feedback

Since peer feedback was proposed, lots of researchers at home and abroad have done a lot of research about it. King Barbara found that "allowing time for peer interaction and formulation of ideas may result in better attitudes toward writing" [1]. Peer feedback can improve students' writing motivation. The effects not only manifest in the students' motivation, but also have a great contribution to enhance their writing ability [2]. John Clifford's research found that "To test the hypothesis that a collaborative composing method would improve writing performance more than a traditional one." [3] As for the acceptance of peer feedback, researches manifest that students "preferred to have feedback from other students as one type of feedback on their writing." [4] And many of the students reported that peer reviews had helped them revise the content of their drafts [5].

2.3 Features of Peer Feedback

To meet the needs of new education model, peer feedback, one of English writing teaching methods, centers on students. It has demonstrated a number of features both in theory and practical applications. And it plays a positive role in the process of promoting students' writing quality.

2.3.1 Leading to independent learning

Peer feedback can give full play to students' central role in learning process, and develop student-centered teaching mode successfully. First of all, it encourages students to improve their abilities to revise their own compositions by analyzing partners' compositions. Moreover, students regard their partners as their readers, which help them become more conscientious and pay more attention to readers' requirement and desire in the writing process. Finally, as co-operation is necessary among students, peer feedback encourages students to finish their writing tasks by communicating and discussing, which can develop learners' autonomous learning ability.

2.3.2 Adding flexibility

Compared with traditional writing teaching mode, peer feedback has greater flexibility. It has altered the traditional mode which is dull and boring, and has increased the flexibility of writing classes by appropriate activities, such as brain storm, pair work and so on. A variety of interesting activities should be arranged for students in writing classes. Students will be more willing to take part in these activities, and thus their writing abilities can be improved. Of course, it not only focuses on flexibility of classes, but also stresses on flexibility of students' thoughts. While students fully develop their imagination, they will have more views and opinions of their own, which can provide more materials for writing.

2.3.3 Improving students' interests in writing

Peer feedback can not only change students' attitudes on writing, but also increase students' interests and raise their confidence of writing. Through a series of group activities, students will have a stage to show their views. Moreover, students can learn other members' opinions and increase their own knowledge by revising their compositions. Obviously the writing classes will become more and more interesting. Student-centered teaching approach is to help students learn by themselves. Sometimes, students can play teachers' roles and undertake teachers' responsibility. So revising other members' compositions can help students become more interested in writing.

2.3.4 Enhancing innovative ideology

Peer feedback can encourage students to add a lot of newer and better views in their compositions. In order to show their best work to group members, students will write more seriously, and try to develop creative thinking and inspire their own innovation potential. Through peer feedback, students can also find the scarcities of their innovative views, which is helpful to improve their creativity.

2.3.5 Promoting emotional communication

As is known to all, students like communicating with their peers better. Since they usually consider teacher feedback very sermonic, they prefer to accept peer feedback. The researches indicated that students "learners prefer to receive peer feedback as one type of feedback on their writing." [4]

Communication not only consists in activities of peer assessment but also in discussion. When students discuss in groups, they can communicate emotion with their partners and strengthen their friendship while promoting their writing quality.

3. Approaches to Developing Peer Feedback in College English Writing Teaching

Fostering students' autonomy as well as independent learning should be much accounted of. Since peer feedback has been introduced to writing classes of college English, it has recorded great achievements. It is necessary to summarize the approaches to develop peer feedback, such as grouping, training, discussing and evaluating. And it is also important to combine teacher feedback with peer feedback.

3.1 Developing Activities of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is mostly carried out in classroom activities. The form and results of the activities are the key to the success of peer feedback. Therefore, the activities should be developed according to certain steps, so that the effectiveness of peer feedback can be ensured.

3.1.1 Grouping

Activities of peer feedback are developed in groups. So the first step is dividing students into groups, which enables them to discuss and communicate conveniently. Teachers designate one student as the group leader. When grouping, teachers should try to match premium students with poor ones so that they can help their partners and achieve better results.

3.1.2 Training

With insufficient knowledge and skills, it's difficult for non-English majors to evaluate their partners' compositions, so it's significant to train them how to evaluate an English composition. First of all, members in every group should finish reading the samples, and then discuss and communicate with each other about these samples. Moreover, they should take notes of their evaluation. Secondly, the evaluation should be handed in. Then a collective discussion should be developed about the samples in order to draw up evaluation criterions. And the teacher can add some other criterions and help students evaluate the samples according to the evaluation criterions.

Finally the teacher should examine and verify their evaluation. Training is the first step and should be treated seriously.

3.1.3 Discussing

The members in every group are required to take part in the discussion seriously when they check others' compositions. Furthermore, the group leaders are responsible for supervising the process of discussion. The contents which need to discuss include the advantages and disadvantages of the article and suggestions for improvement. The members can put forward their own views by turns, and then develop a discussion focusing on these views. If appropriate, teachers can also take part in students' discussion and communication. The output of the above activities which can help students test their own English writing skills and promoting standards in terms of English writing is a worthwhile recommendation to their learning strategies.

3.2 Combining Teacher Feedback with Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is popular among students, but many students think that teacher feedback is the most authoritative. Therefore, it's critical to attach equal importance to teacher feedback and peer feedback. In practice, it is not unusual that some of the errors haven't been found or corrected when compared the revised version of the manuscript with the original draft. The reason is that students' abilities are restricted. Sure, this situation is inevitable and it shows fully that teacher's revision is necessary.

In the empirical study of peer feedback, many scholars have reached a similar conclusion: combining teacher feedback with peer feedback is the best way. Naturally, the integrated valuation of teacher feedback and peer feedback should be the final result, which can meet the needs of students who trust the authority of teachers and help students attach more importance to peer feedback.

4. Evaluation

Based on the scholars' researches and the teaching practice, the practical value of peer feedback in college English writing teaching can not be ignored. The level of students' English writing can be improved while peer feedback can also effectively enhance students' abilities of independent learning. Especially after discussion, students will involve many novel ideas into their writings. Moreover, students become more interested in English writing class than ever before, and they are more willing to join the discussions. They feel very smooth in writing. Every student has a positive attitude toward the team members, who seriously modify the errors of grammar and vocabulary in others' compositions to the best of their ability. In the activities of peer feedback, students could grasp the steps and skill of feedback continually, and develop the ability of feedback in terms of readability, persuasion, content, structure and consistency. Moreover, during the course of feedback, students' writing ability has improved evidently. However, some problems should be handled properly in practice. Students sometimes have difficulties in judging the validity of their peers' views and they are more likely to have the teacher feedback, so the attitude of their feedback is not serious.

5. Conclusion

In summary, peer feedback in college English writing teaching has a good practical sense and it can cultivate students' independent learning ability and team work too. What's more, peer feedback will stimulate students' interest in improving writing. Teacher feedback still occupies an important position in the students' minds. Therefore, combining peer feedback with teacher feedback can improve students' skill in writing and greatly improve writing teaching efficiency, which deserves more active exploration and practice.

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