

Peer Interaction in the Communicative Classroom

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Abstract

This paper discusses (1) the use of peer interaction in the EFL/ESL classroom, (2) effective ways to implement peer-feedback on student compositions, and (3) peer evaluation, and team teaching in EFL oral classrooms. Peer interaction is considered from both the perspective of English language learning and overall personal development.

Introduction

The shift toward a learner-centered classroom and communicative curriculum, where students are intimately involved in the language learning process, has been a focus of much recent ESL/EFL research (Nunan, 1989). Teachers and students alike seem to respond positively to this involvement by learners in their own language development (Assinder, 1991). Along with this emphasis on student involvement has come the recognition of the importance of peer interaction in the classroom (Chaudron, 1988). Areas in which peer interaction can be of relevance are listed below:

1. Pair/group work on dialogs, role-plays, discussions, debates.
2. Peer tutoring; better students helping poorer students with classwork.
3. Peer-feedback/evaluation on compositions and oral presentations.
4. Peer grading of compositions and oral presentations.
5. Peer teaching of traditional classroom content, i.e. grammar, reading, functional patterns, etc.

Composition

Peer-conferencing in composition classes has been advocated by a number of educators (cf. Chaudron, 1983; Murray, 1985; Raimes, 1983; Zamel, 1985, and Hafernik, 1983). However, many teachers remain reluctant to use peer-conferencing in their classrooms for fear that students may not improve as much as they do with traditional teacher correction. Research shows this fear to be unfounded. Chaudron's 1983 study of intermediate and advanced ESL writers concluded that neither type of feedback was superior, but encouraged the use of peer-feedback as a time saver for teachers. Additional benefits that can be gained are listed below. Students:

1. learn the criteria for effective writing better;
2. learn critical reading skills and how to question their own and others' weaknesses;
3. learn to anticipate objections, criticisms, and how to answer them;
4. understand the importance of an "audience" other than the teacher;
5. realize writing is a communicative activity similar to speaking;
6. cannot depend exclusively on the teacher, i.e. students learn independence;
7. take more care in their own proofreading efforts before class;

Peer- vs. teacher-feedback study in Japan

While Chaudron (1983) found peer-feedback to be as useful as teacher feedback on improving subsequent drafts of the same essay, there have been no studies examining the long term difference in improvement in peer-versus teacher-feedback groups. In addition, research into the effectiveness of peer-feedback for lower as well as higher level EFL writers has not attracted attention. Chaudron's study of ESL writers may not be applicable to EFL situations. To test the hypothesis that peer-feedback would be equal to teacher feedback and replicate Chaudron's 1983 in an EFL context, the author conducted a one year study with two other researchers.

The study involved 141 subjects assigned to six classes by placement exams. Classes were divided into three pairs of approximately the same levels; upper-beginner, lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate, and each pair was assigned to a teacher. The pairs were then divided into peer- or teacher-feedback groups. Subjects in both groups received the same materials and instruction. The peer-feedback group (PF) took part in peer-conferencing sessions on both the content and grammar of their essay drafts using proofreading checklists (see appendix A). The PF group received no grammatical correction from the teacher. The teacher feedback group (TF) used the checklists individually and received teacher feedback on specific checklist items. Both groups were administered pre- and post-test essay exams, which were rated according to a standard composition profile rating sheet - The ESL Composition Profile Sheet (Hughey et al, 1983).

The results of the study (Kanel, Swenson, and Barrow, 1991) indicated there was no statistically significant difference between subjects' improvement for treatment, supporting the researchers' hypothesis that peer-feedback would be as effective as teacher feedback, and extending the scope of Chaudron's 1983 study of intermediate and advanced ESL writers to include upper-beginner through upper-intermediate level EFL learners. The researchers concluded that by involving peers earlier in the writing process, and in groups using peer-feedback checklists, peer-conferencing encourages students to more carefully examine the content, organization and grammar of their own and other students essays.

Implementing peer-conferencing on compositions

To incorporate peer-conferencing into the curriculum, only a few adjustments need to be made. Pre-writing and idea formation remain an essential first step. This is followed by the assignment of writing a first draft on the topic, and bringing the draft to class by an assigned date. The essay is then read by a peer, usually another student in the class, who comments on the content, organization, and grammar of the paper, pointing out strengths and weaknesses. The writer, taking the suggestions into consideration, then rewrites the essay. For the study described above, however, students were divided into groups of four and given checklists to work with.

When conducting peer-conferencing sessions, there are several steps to follow:

First, have students sit in groups of four facing each other, which will facilitate verbal feedback and the passing of papers. Then, give students peer editing checklists to be used by other

students when reading the draft. Writers put their names and the title of the paper on the checklist. Teachers then explain the checklist to make sure students understand the categories and their duties.

Next, students pass their papers and checklists clockwise to the first reader. The drafts circulate, going from student to student, as each serves as first reader, second reader and third reader, before being returned to the writer. In this way, a draft is read by three people and each student reads three drafts.

The first reader signs the checklist and reads the draft. Encourage readers and writers to discuss and clarify points that are not clearly understood. While some teachers discourage the use of the native language, others feel that it can be used more effectively to clarify.

When the first reader has finished, the drafts and the checklists are passed to the second readers who sign their names and follow the second category on the checklist. When the second reader is finished the draft is passed to the third reader. Again, readers sign their names and follow the checklist. Last, the draft is returned to the writer.

Throughout the process, teachers should circulate, helping writers and readers and encouraging them to discuss and clarify the paper. Writers are then given the opportunity to incorporate any of the suggestions they received by rewriting the draft.

Peer-feedback on oral presentations

While a number of studies have shown that peer-feedback on compositions benefits students' writing, this researcher was interested in whether peer-feedback in the form of evaluations on oral presentations would provide similar benefits. Assinder (1991) found peer teaching, that is, students teaching other students, to be an effective method of increasing interaction in the classroom. In her study, students evaluated each other's performance through questionnaires, but were not asked to actually give grades. Moreover, the effect of the evaluations was not examined. To date no studies investigating the effect of peer evaluation, or the reliability of peer grading have been found by this author.

With these concerns in mind, it was decided that an examination of the evaluation process itself in terms of the interrater reliability of student evaluations with teacher evaluations would be a useful and needed step in determining whether peer evaluations could or should be used in the classroom. The research questions were: 1) when given specific criteria for evaluating each other, would students give marks similar to the teacher, and 2) would students' awareness of the criteria, concentration on the material presented, and overall interest in the class increase.

The study (Kanel, 1993) conducted during the 1992 academic year compared student scores on in-class oral presentations with the scores of the researcher. Overall correlations of .787 at Doshisha University (N=87), and .613 at Kinki University (N=237) suggest that with minimal training, students can acquire a fairly high degree of objectivity and consistency when evaluating their peers' presentations. Correlations in individual classes were as high as .840, again showing that the students were able to consistently maintain a set of criteria similar to the researcher.

Though more empirical research into the effect of peer evaluation on performance needs to be done, the author found that, in general, students: 1) develop better understanding of the criteria; 2) desire to perform better for peers gaining a better sense of the meaning of "audience"; and, 3) empathize with the performers, concentrating more as their friends are "on stage".

Peer evaluation can be both reliable and effective, but it is important to bear the following considerations in mind when devising evaluations sheets and employing peer grading:

1. Should evaluators be anonymous?
2. How many categories should there be per rating sheet?
3. What is the ideal number of raters per rating group?
4. How can raters concentration be kept best? Should raters alternate, take breaks to maintain concentration?
5. How much training should raters get before rating?
6. Should the teacher review the criteria before each session?
7. Should teachers make any comments before, during or after presentations?

Peer team teaching:

Peer teaching, by an individual or in small 2-4 member groups is another way to involve students in the content of the lesson. Peer teaching is when members of a class design and actually teach material to the rest of the class through an oral presentation. Materials may be drawn from the text, library, TV, etc. By generating their own materials students can let the teacher know; 1) where their interests lie, 2) what they feel is relevant, 3) what they as yet have not learned, and, 4) what the teacher may have missed. Additional benefits of using peer teaching are that it provides humor and variety, students learn to appreciate the teacher's job, i.e. preparations, decision making, and from an overall educational perspective, students gain experience at public speaking, cooperating and working in groups.

In addition, while the student-teachers take the risks, teachers can draw from successfully taught lessons and incorporate useful techniques and activities in their own teaching.

Actually having students do peer team teaching requires that the teacher make a substantial time commitment. It is advisable to wait until the second semester before trying student teaching in order to give students a chance to absorb some of the techniques the teacher uses, and for them to become comfortable with the group. There may also be risks in that time given for organizing groups and presentations may seem wasted, some groups perform poorly, some material presented is irrelevant, etc. Another factor to consider is when to intervene with a particularly poor group. Therefore, in order to employ peer team teaching most effectively, teachers must make sure beforehand that the criterion, subject matter, and requirements are clear. To do this it is important that teachers guide students in:

1. forming groups; either at random, according to time schedules, by the teachers 'rational' means, or by letting the students group with their friends

2. deciding on teaching objectives, i.e. grammar, hobbies, holidays, sports, travel, etc.
3. selecting or designing their own teaching materials,
4. figuring out how to involve other students in activities (quizzes, role-plays, TPR, skits, etc.),
5. being able to transmit the key points of the lessons clearly and smoothly,
6. learning how to use time and materials effectively.

Basic guidelines and criteria for peer teaching:

1. Emphasize the main point(s) of the lesson so the other students become aware of them.
2. Give easy to understand and follow explanations and directions, and ask for questions.
3. Make sure vocabulary, grammar and content are at the appropriate level.
4. Make sure that the class will be able to retain what they have studied.
5. Make their presentation interesting, creative, humorous, etc.
6. Use English as much as possible for both content and their explanations.
7. Prepare and practice their presentation thoroughly.
8. Make sure not to get off track.
9. Speak loud and clearly enough for everyone to hear.
10. Walk around checking on the progress of students doing the activity.

Conclusion

Though for many teachers the thought of turning over the teacher's traditional tasks of correction, evaluation, and lesson planning may sound risky the advantages students gain through communicative interaction, and increased motivation and interest can make the risks worthwhile. Indeed, most students recognize that the teacher is trying something unique and creative for their benefit and cooperate enthusiastically. Still more research needs to be done on the overall effects of peer interaction and the various teaching situations in which it can be employed. Readers are encouraged to utilize this versatile teaching tool in their own classrooms and further explore areas where it can improve classroom instruction and communication.

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Appendix A: Unit One: Peer Feedback Checklist (Illustration)

Writer: _____

Title: _____

A. Content: First reader: _____

1. Write the **main idea** of the paper. (This should be the topic sentence):

2. Underline the **part** that is hardest to understand; anything which isn't clear or explained well enough? Then put a question mark (?) in the margin next to it.
3. Underline the part that you **like best** about the paper and put a **star** (*) beside it.
4. Write two **questions** that you have about the paper?

B. Organization: Second Reader: _____

1. How many **examples** and **illustrations** of the ideas are written in the paper? _____
2. Write the **transition** words that are used: _____

3. What is the **concluding** sentence? _____

C. Mechanics and Grammar: Third reader: _____

1. _____ Do all the **verbs agree in tense**? Circle the ones that don't.
2. _____ Are all the words **spelled** correctly? Circle the ones that aren't.
3. _____ Is the **correct paragraph form** used?