Peer Revision in Academic Writing: Making It Work[1]

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Introduction

Peer revision is an important part of the teaching and learning experience in the Integrated English Program (IE) in the Department of British and American Literature at Aoyama Gakuin University. During the first semester of the second year, students enroll in IE III: Writing in which they learn to write classification and persuasive essays, are introduced to the MLA bibliographic style, and learn how to incorporate and cite quotations in their work. During the second semester in Academic Writing, they learn how to write a research paper. Learning to write academic English is not easy; however, by following an explicit, step–by–step process of guided instruction most students can learn to write well–structured, readable essays and reports. Moreover, motivation, class atmosphere, and the overall learning experience can be greatly enhanced through the use of peer revision in a cooperative learning environment (Dörnyei, 2001; Nelson, 1995; O'Bryan, 1995). This essay briefly explains the factors that contribute to the success of peer revision in these courses.

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Establishing a Routine and Setting Goals

Students' feel more comfortable and experience less classroom anxiety when they clearly know the goals and structure of the course and the format of each day's lesson: what is going to be done, why they are doing it, and when they are going to do it. In my classes, students quickly get used to a standard lesson format: (1) greeting attendance, homework confirmation; (2) explanation of the agenda written on the board; (3) teacher–led, whole–group instruction using the textbook or handouts; (4) pair or small group activity with on–going teacher monitoring and help and occasional one–to–one consultations; (5) whole–group follow–up activity; and (6) explanation of homework for next week's class. Because peer revision involves judging and being judged, it can be psychological stressful. Therefore, it is important from the beginning to create a comfortable environment.

Explicit Instruction and Comprehension

Among the greatest obstacles to effective peer revision are lack of comprehension and confusion about what and how to do it. Instruction is more likely to be effective when (1) the pace is not too fast; (2) oral explanation is accompanied by having the students follow along, mark, and annotate the text (e.g., underline, double–underline, wavy underline, circle); and (3) the teacher uses plenty of concrete examples, restatements, and repetition. Liberal use of the chalkboard (e.g., drawing graphic organizers and writing down key words and instructions) also enhances comprehension.

Modeling

Before beginning pair or small–group work, it is important to clearly model how to do the peer revision activity (Chandrasegaran, 1995; Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Price–Machado, 1995). In a whole–class format and using a model essay from the textbook,

the teacher models the process step–by–step and line–by–line. After a paragraph or two, the teacher calls on students one by one to continue. Students read aloud the sentences and comment on the revisions that may be necessary. The teacher provides hints and advice as necessary (Lewin, 1995). Good points as well as weak points of the sentences and paragraphs are brought to their attention such as over or under use of transition words (e.g., however, in addition, therefore). The activity goes more smoothly if the instructions are written on the board with examples and the key words are highlighted with colored chalk (underline, boxes, etc.). For example, students are directed to circle transition words, underline topic sentences, or draw a wavy underline under in–text citations.

Cooperative Learning and Monitoring

Following the modeling phase, students work in pairs or groups when doing the peer revision. Students bring multiple copies of their draft to distribute to each member of their group. Using the instructions written on the chalkboard and guidelines in the textbook or on a handout (see Appendix), students take turns reading aloud each sentence and performing the indicated tasks. Instructions are usually in the form of questions that students ask each other such as these:

Is there a topic sentence?

How many transition words are in this paragraph? What are they? Are they used correctly?

Are there any direct quotations? Is there a citation? Does the citation match the Works Cited list at the end of the paper?

Does the content of the paragraph match the outline?

Do the subjects and verbs agree?

Peer revision done in this way becomes a lively period of oral interaction. The teacher constantly monitors the process and frequently engages individual students in conversation to check

understanding and establish rapport.

When the peer revision activity is finished for that day, students take home the feedback they received from the other students and teacher and rewrite their paper. For the following class, students bring multiple copies of their revised draft and repeat the peer revision process with a new group of students. They must bring their first draft with them as well and explain what changes they made. After three drafts, the papers of most students are nearly perfect. The teacher should collect all three drafts of the students' papers as a way to evaluate each student's progress and understanding.

Discussion and Conclusion

Course evaluations over the past several years have indicated that students rate this approach to peer revision highly. Moreover, ever student who attended regularly and completed the homework assignments as directed produced a coherent, well–written report by the end of the semester. The notion of "scaffolding" may be the key to understanding the success of this approach. According to Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), scaffolding is "a process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his [or her] unassisted efforts" (p. 90). Scaffolding is a practical application of Vygotsky's (1962) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD); that is, the gap between what learners can do on their own and what they can do with the assistance of a more capable peer or skilled adult.

Specifically, how does scaffolding work? According to Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004), scaffolding can be divided into three types. *Verbal scaffolding* focuses on language development. It includes techniques such as corrective feedback techniques, especially elicitation and clarification requests (see Tedick & Gotari, 1998, for details). *Procedural scaffolding* refers to grouping and activity structures. Some examples are pair work, cooperative

group techniques, use of routines, modeling, and process writing. *Instructional scaffolding* consists of "tools" that support learning, such as using graphic organizers, labeling, and visuals. In the course describe above, each type of scaffolding was employed as part of the peer revision process. Scaffolding is a powerful concept that can be applied to many aspects of a course and works especially well with peer revision.

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Appendix

Self–Evaluation Checklist for Academic Writing

Preliminary Work: ☐ List of topics   ☐ Thesis statements   ☐ Outline
☐ Graphic   ☐ List of sources (references)   ☐ Other:

Draft 1: ☐ Outline   ☐ Introduction   ☐ Body   ☐ Conclusion   ☐ Works Cited
Draft 2: ☐ Outline   ☐ Introduction   ☐ Body   ☐ Conclusion   ☐ Works Cited
Draft 3: ☐ Outline   ☐ Introduction   ☐ Body   ☐ Conclusion   ☐ Works Cited

Oral Presentation: ☐ Quiz ☐ Note–taking ☐ Q & A ☐ Re–telling ☐ Delivery

In–class Writing: ☐ Topic 1: "My Writing Experiences" ☐ Topic 2: "How to Write a Research Report" ☐ Topic 3: "How to Avoid Plagiarism"☐ Topic 4: "How to Evaluate the Credibility of Sources"

Overall Evaluation (5 = excellent, 1 = poor)

1.	I *attended* class regularly.	5 4 3 2 1
2.	I came to class *on time*.	5 4 3 2 1
3.	I *participated* actively in class.	5 4 3 2 1
4.	I used *English* as much as possible in class.	5 4 3 2 1
5.	I did all the *homework* and in–class *assignments*.	5 4 3 2 1
6.	My homework was completed *on time*.	5 4 3 2 1
7.	My work was done *neatly*.	5 4 3 2 1
8.	I used proper *margins, line spacing, page numbers*, etc.	5 4 3 2 1
9.	My writing was *well organized* (thesis, topic sentences, etc).	5 4 3 2 1
10.	I supported my topics with *details* and *examples*.	5 4 3 2 1
11.	I used *indirect quotations* and *paraphrase* correctly.	5 4 3 2 1
12.	I used *direct quotations* correctly (quotation marks, citations).	5 4 3 2 1
13.	I avoided *plagiarism* (see 11 and 12 above).	5 4 3 2 1
14.	I used transition words (*in addition, however, therefore*, etc.).	5 4 3 2 1
15.	I used a variety of *sentence types* (compound, complex, etc.).	5 4 3 2 1
16.	My *Works Cited* list and in–text citations matched correctly.	5 4 3 2 1
17.	My *Works Cited* list used correct MLA style.	5 4 3 2 1
18.	My *grammar, spelling*, and *punctuation* were correct.	5 4 3 2 1
19.	My oral presentation was well done.	5 4 3 2 1