Guiding principles for effective peer response

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This article presents guiding principles teachers can utilize in their own planning and student training for effective peer response. As the principles illustrate, teacher planning and student training are ongoing processes that must be addressed before, during, and after peer response, although the majority should be carried out before peer response commences. Planning and training encompass students’ responding to and revising their papers based on peers’ comments. The principles are listed chronologically, from before to during and after peer response, and for each, concrete and practical suggestions are provided.

Introduction

Peer response can be defined as the ‘use of learners as sources of information, and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other’s drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing’ (Liu and Hansen 2002: 1). Peer response, also sometimes referred to as ‘peer review’ or ‘peer editing’, usually goes beyond giving feedback on grammar or stylistic concerns. When properly implemented, peer response can generate a rich source of information for content and rhetorical issues, enhance intercultural communication, and give students a sense of group cohesion.

Peer response is supported by several theoretical frameworks, including process writing, collaborative learning theory, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, and interaction and second language acquisition (SLA). Peer response was considered a necessary component in the process writing approach that emerged in the 1970s (e.g. Elbow 1973; Emig 1971). It is also supported by collaborative learning theory, which holds that learning is a socially constructed activity that takes place through communication with peers (Bruffee 1984). Support for peer response also comes from Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development theory (1978), which holds that the cognitive development of individuals results from social interaction in which individuals extend their current competence through the guidance of a more experienced individual, which is also referred to as ‘scaffolding.’ Peer response is also supported by interactionist theories of SLA, which hold that learners need to be pushed to negotiate meaning to facilitate SLA (e.g. Long and Porter 1985).
Second language (L2) writing research (e.g. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz 1992; Paulus 1999) has found that peer response comments can lead to meaningful revisions, and that compared with teacher feedback, revisions based on peer comments can be better in vocabulary, organization, and content. Increased text length has also been found as a result of revision based on peer comments (Berg 1999; Villamil and de Guerrero 1998). Collective scaffolding, negotiation of meaning, and interactions employing a wide range of language functions have also been found to take place during peer response (e.g. Di Camilla and Anton 1997) activities which may promote L2 development (cf. Donato 1994; Long and Porter 1985).

Based on the theoretical frameworks and research discussed above, the following guiding principles for peer response have been developed. These principles have been field tested and refined by the two authors at a two-year community college, and at the freshman composition level as well as in composition classes for international graduate students. However, these principles may not be generalizable to all contexts. Rather, they are intended as adaptable guidelines for writing instructors in ESL and EFL contexts, to be used selectively and creatively for various classroom scenarios. While some teachers may be hesitant to use peer response because of concerns about its efficacy, time constraints, or prior unsuccessful experiences, well-articulated and purposeful peer response activities can be beneficial. The key to making peer response a welcome component in writing classrooms lies in teacher planning and student training, and therefore the guiding principles given below emphasize the pre-peer response stage.

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**Before peer response**

*Plan when peer response should be introduced in the writing process.* While peer response activities are typically introduced in the revision stages, when students have already produced a written text, they can be utilized effectively across all stages of the writing process. For example, a typical beginning to a writing assignment is a brainstorming activity to help students generate possible topics. After this activity, the teacher can encourage students to make a list of all the topics they have generated, and then guide them to discuss these topics with their peers in light of their relevance, importance, and difficulty level, as well as availability of resources. This may help students decide which topic is more appropriate, and also generate more information. If outlining is a stage in the process, peers can also read and respond to the outlines. Students then have the opportunity to work with their peers through the entire writing process, which may enable them to be better responders on a written draft, as they have more knowledge of the content of their peers’ writing, and may result in increased negotiation of meaning and scaffolding.

*Decide when to incorporate teacher’s comments in the writing process.* It is more beneficial for students if the teacher’s comments are not given on the same draft (or step in the process) as utilized for peer response, since students may pay more attention to the teacher’s comments. Additionally, it may minimize the importance of (and the perceptions of the teacher’s trust and confidence in) peers’ comments. It may be more
effective to comment on a draft (or step) after students have revised their papers based on peers’ feedback. It is important to note that since one of the goals of writing classes is to make students autonomous writers, students should be given the authority to retain certain aspects of their texts, and not to make certain changes advised by students and the teacher. However, students should be able to justify why they did not make the said changes; this will be elaborated on in more detail below in the discussion of ‘After peer response’.

Discuss students’ prior experiences with peer response and group work. Invite students to reflect on their own experiences, L1 cultural norms, and perceptions towards peer response work and group work in general, in order to understand students’ concerns or attitudes towards these activities. This can lead on to a discussion of classroom norms and interaction patterns expected from the students in that particular class or cultural setting.

Create a comfortable environment for students to establish peer trust. This can be done via warm-up/icebreaker activities (e.g. interviewing another student and introducing this student to the rest of the class) and having students engage in other group or pair activities in order to encourage peer support. This also helps to develop an environment wherein students feel more comfortable to engage in negotiation of meaning, and to provide each other with linguistic content, and rhetorical expressions and knowledge (i.e. scaffolding) when necessary.

Select the mode of peer response. With the increased access to computers and technology, teachers have more options for the modes of peer response: 1) oral (read the paper and then orally give suggestions); 2) written (read the paper and write comments to give back to the writer); 3) written plus oral (write comments and then orally discuss the comments with the writer); or 4) computer-mediated (read papers on-line and respond either asynchronously or synchronously). Many teachers have begun trying computer-mediated communication (CMC) for peer response, through either asynchronous (delayed time frame) or synchronous (real-time) modes. If teachers and students have access to computers in and/or outside of class, and a software program such as Microsoft Word, then students can comment on their peers’ drafts via an exchange of computer discs, and therefore via an asynchronous mode of CMC rather than a traditional pen-and-paper format. If the software (e.g. Daedalus InterChange or Blackboard, a web-based program available at www.Blackboard.com) and technical support are available, teachers can also have students engage in a synchronous discussion of their peers’ papers rather than an oral format. Trying new modes may increase students’ participation and interest levels, and motivate them to spend more time and energy on the task.

Create purposeful and appropriate peer response sheets for a given task, genre, and purpose. For example, a peer response sheet for a comparison/contrast paper will differ from a sheet for a process paper, and for each of these, the peer response sheet will differ depending on whether the focus is on the content, organization, or word choice. It may be even more effective to have the class create their own peer response sheet for a given

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task and topic, which can then serve as review. For example, if the genre is a process paper and the task is to review for content and organization, the teacher can have students brainstorm on important criteria their papers should have (this is also a good preparation for having students create a grading rubric for the paper, an example of which is given below in Table 1). If the task is to respond to stylistic and grammatical concerns, the sheet can also be whole class generated based on: 1) previously covered grammatical and stylistic areas (also serving as a review), and 2) grammar problems they have difficulty with (serving as a mini-lesson on a specific grammar point that may not otherwise be covered in class).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Grammar/Wording</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Thesis statement</td>
<td>Solutions</td>
<td>Clearly restates problem and effectively summarizes solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Clearly indicates problem to be addressed</td>
<td>Three relevant well-supported solutions</td>
<td>Transition words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Needs to be more precise in indicating problem to be addressed</td>
<td>Three relevant solutions but requires some additional support</td>
<td>Slight reorganization required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Does not indicate problem to be addressed</td>
<td>Three solutions that may not be relevant and/or may require more support</td>
<td>Not logical nor effective. Major changes need to be made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No clear thesis statement</td>
<td>Fewer than three solutions are presented</td>
<td>No clear conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammar/Wording</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Few, if any, minor errors that do not impede comprehension</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some minor errors which occasionally impede comprehension</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some major errors which often impede comprehension</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major errors greatly impede comprehension</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1**

Example of a grading rubric created by students for a problem-solution paper

It is also effective to leave blank spaces on the sheet for students to fill in, based on their own grammatical/rhetorical/content concerns (e.g. use a sentence like ‘I have difficulty with _______. Please let me know if you find any problems with this in my paper.’). Then students can get specific comments based on their needs, and if their peers do not have the information, this can lead to a discussion with the entire class, or provide a specific concern for the teacher to address. This type of activity also fosters collaborative learning and scaffolding among peers.

An example of a grading rubric created by students is given in Table 1, and an example of a peer response sheet for a problem-solution paper for intermediate level writers with questions on content, rhetoric, organization, and wording is given in Table 2 (note: on an actual peer response sheet, adequate space between questions would be provided, which is not given here because of space constraints).
Model the peer response process. To do this effectively: 1) teachers can show students their own work, and how peer commentary has helped them make revisions (especially useful if teachers can show their own drafts); 2) with the guidance of the teacher, students can work together to revise a paper; specific revisions can be generated from students, and these comments can then be incorporated into the paper; 3) students can work together in groups to make revisions on a paper, and the whole class can discuss different revisions suggested by each group, and the results of these comments on revision. These tasks can be done sequentially from one to three, so that students are scaffolded in the process of learning how to carry out peer response.

Give students enough time to become familiar with peer response procedures. This is especially important if computer software is used. Students should be encouraged to ask questions about the process, and allowing them to establish their own rules (e.g. time limits for reading each other’s papers, reading papers pre- or during class, what to do if a student is late or does not have her/his paper for review), and individual student roles within groups (e.g. time keeper, discussion leader) may help them be more invested in the process. If computer software is used, it is especially important to have practice sessions with the software so students are not intimidated by this mode of response. Students who are more experienced computer users can also serve as helpers for other students, thereby reinforcing the importance of collaborative learning.

Let students decide on grouping and group rules. If appropriate, given the context of language teaching, students can decide how groups should be formed (self- or teacher-selected), how groups should be managed (e.g. a rotating group manager may be assigned), what types of communication rules (e.g. turn-taking) each group wants to establish, etc. The more concrete the suggestions are, the more easily the groups will move through the activity. Students can also set rules for how to handle the following situations: 1) a student is late for class on a day when there is peer response; 2) a student forgets her/his paper or does not have a complete paper; 3) a student is absent on the day of peer response. Letting each group (or the whole class) work together to make these rules serves not only as a ‘warm-up’ and practice activity, helping students get to know one another better, but also makes the rules more meaningful.
Discuss strategies for turn-taking. Turn-taking encompasses speaking/typing turns (the latter if using synchronous CMC) as well as whose paper is discussed first, second, etc. The teacher can list each of these areas on the board (e.g. 1. paper turn-taking and 2. speaker turn-taking) and ask students to suggest different ways for each (e.g. for paper turn-taking, students may choose to volunteer or go alphabetically forward or backward while for speaker turn-taking, the options may include having each speaker talk for 5 minutes about the paper, or having the speakers take turns on a particular topic, etc.).

Provide students with linguistic strategies. As the students are language learners, they may not have the necessary expressions to communicate their opinions clearly. Additionally, as the L2 classroom is still a language classroom, these expressions may enable students to extend their linguistic repertoire. For example, if a point is not clear, or if the reader has perceived that the writer has made an error, rather than saying ‘This is wrong’, which may offend the writer and create a hostile atmosphere, the reader can soften the expression by saying ‘I am not sure if this is right’, or ‘Could you explain what you wanted to say here?’ These expressions can be generated in class through a brainstorming activity (e.g. How can you tell someone you don’t understand what they mean? How could you say it more politely? What expression(s) do you think would be best to use in class?). They can also be practiced in mock-peer response activities; it might also be useful to model the more inappropriate comments in a mock activity in order to discuss the effects of these comments on the activity and on the writer. Learning these expressions, even though they may be formulaic in nature, also helps to extend students’ language competence and ability to engage in negotiation of meaning.

Instruct students in how to ask the right questions. Students may not have a clear idea of what they should look for, and may have few comments to make unless they are directed to ask specific questions, or look for specific issues that are problematic. It is important to train students to ask questions that generate a response from the writer, and that are revision-oriented so that there is a meaningful discussion about the content, rhetoric, or grammar of the paper, depending on the purpose of the activity. Asking clarification questions (‘I’m not sure what this means. Can you clarify this?’), or elaboration questions (‘Could you explain this point in more detail?’), will be more likely to lead to a meaningful discussion, negotiation of meaning, and revision, than making evaluation statements (‘This is not a clear thesis statement.’).

Set up a mock peer response activity. During these mock peer response sessions, students are also able to practice turn-taking strategies, and appropriate questions and linguistic expressions.

Encourage students to negotiate meaning on the various peer comments. Since students have been trained in asking the right questions, to encourage this behavior during the actual task, a group member can be assigned to monitor the phrasing of comments/questions, and students may be given a list of the types of questions to ask to refer to during the task.
Monitor student and group progress. This can be done in several ways: 1) the teacher can serve as a peer in the activity (especially useful in the initial peer response sessions), though he/she has to be careful to remain in a ‘peer’ rather than a teacher role; 2) the teacher can sit in with each group for part of the session in order to provide support, and to remind students of appropriate linguistic expressions and sociocultural communication patterns; or 3) a group manager (a rotating position) can be appointed to monitor group progress and raise issues with the teacher.

After peer response

Get students to list all of their comments on a piece of paper, and then indicate whether they will revise based on each comment and why. While this may be demanding for students initially, our practice has shown that they can do it effectively if it has been modeled first by the teacher and/or done initially as an in-class activity. This can also be linked to other classroom activities, such as keeping a log and/or journal in which students are required to record organization/wording/stylistic problems in order to determine patterns, and to develop a checklist for them to use for subsequent writing tasks. This can also be done orally in a conference with the teacher, which may be most effective for the first peer response session, since the teacher and student can discuss the different comments together. If pressed for time, the teacher could also do this in a conference with the peer response group. If it is done in a written format, then the sheet could be handed in with the revised draft. This procedure makes students more involved in understanding their peer comments, which may lead to better discussion in the peer response session. It will also hold students accountable for each comment, as well as serving as an important consciousness raising activity for grammatical development.

Link peer response to other classroom activities. It is also helpful to link peer response to other classroom activities in order for it to be a more integral part of the course. Peer response can be linked to class activities in a number of ways: 1) journals and/or ‘language logs’, in which students keep track of wording difficulties, as described above; 2) grading rubrics that can be created as a whole class for each writing assignment (thereby also serving as a review) at the same time, and with similar content as the peer response sheets (see Table 1 above for a sample of a student-generated grading rubric); 3) self- and peer-assessment by having students use their peer response sheets as well as their own assessments of their work in light of the grading rubrics to grade themselves on their writing task, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. This can be handed in with the final paper, and how well the student accomplishes this task can count for a portion of the grade for the paper.

Re-group students in the peer response groups to read each other’s final draft. The purpose of this is to show students how their comments helped their peers’ papers become more effective, thereby reinforcing the process nature of writing and the value of peer response. The reading can be done orally as well, or if pressed for time, students can give a summary of the changes they made to their papers based on their peers’ comments.
Discuss the peer response activity. Students can discuss the nature of the procedure, the actual events that took place, how students perceived that they benefited, what worked and did not work, and what they would do differently for the next activity.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined principles to guide teachers to develop effective peer response activities before, during, and after peer response. These suggestions expand the notion of peer response beyond an ‘editing’ and ‘review’ activity to a language development activity that spans all four skill areas, i.e. reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and helps learners to develop communicative competence by addressing sociolinguistic, linguistic, strategic, and discourse aspects of communication. Effective peer response activities are not just a stage in the writing process; they are an integral component of promoting language development in an L2 writing class.

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