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Peer Editing: Tips for Building an Effective System in University Writing Classes

Renée Renjel

Sophia University

This paper will show how peer editing can be an important feature in university writing courses. Based on the author's experience integrating intensive peer editing into writing classes and on detailed feedback from students, it will be shown that peer editing can offer many important ongoing benefits and can be one of the best ways to make a more enjoyable and meaningful writing class for both students and teachers. The

paper will focus on the benefits and challenges of building an effective peer editing system from the perspective of the writing teacher. The author will offer a list of suggestions for implementing peer editing in writing courses that have proven successful in past classes, along with a timeline of a sample peer editing cycle.

本論文はピアエディティングが大学のライティング講座において、いかに有意義なものとなりうるのかを論じたものである。筆者がライティング講座で実施した本格的なピアエディティングと、そこから得られた学生からの詳細なフィードバックをもとに、ピアエディティングには多くの意義があること、また学生と教師双方にとってライティング講座を、より楽しく有意義にするための最良の方法の一つであることを示していく。また論文ではライティングの教師の視点から、ピアエディティングの利点や有効な導入方法について論じる。さらに筆者の過去のクラスの成功例に基づき、ライティング講座においてピアエディティングを成功させるためのポイントを紹介するとともに、ピアエディティングの実際のすすめ方についても実例をあげていく。

Introduction

We teachers are always looking for ways to make our lives a little easier, especially in large university writing classes which can be quite challenging and time consuming to teach. Also, we are always looking for ways to make class time for our students more valuable and meaningful. I have found that peer editing is one of the best ways to make an easier class for the writing teacher and a more enjoyable and meaningful class for the writing student. I have also found that peer editing works especially well for Japanese learners. In my experience

teaching university writing courses in Japan, peer editing can be one of the greatest secrets to a successful writing class.

This paper will discuss what I have learned about the benefits and challenges of building an effective peer editing system from my personal experience as a writing teacher. I will also share insightful feedback from students, comments that motivated me to choose this topic to explore in greater depth. The paper will conclude with a list of suggestions for implementing peer editing in writing courses that have proven successful in the past, along with a timeline of a sample peer editing cycle.

Background

Peer editing, sometimes called peer reviewing, is generally considered to be any process during which students share their writing with their classmates and then edit, comment on, or discuss their essays. Some teachers may see this as students checking for grammar and spelling mistakes on their partner's paper. Others may imagine a group of students passing around their papers for their classmates to read and discuss. Some may have students write detailed feedback on papers as homework, while others may encourage direct and immediate oral feedback in class. Some may see it as an occasional feature of the class, and others may use it in every lesson. Peer editing includes all of these aspects. The fundamental element of peer editing is sharing, a simple act which can often be the key to powerful writing.

Concerns and limitations

Writing teachers sometimes hesitate to use peer editing in their classes based on a number of beliefs. Among the ones I have heard are:

1. Students are reluctant to share their writing with others.
2. Students do not have the linguistic or grammatical ability to provide valuable feedback.
3. Teachers feel that it may be a waste of class time and it won't help them in marking papers that much in the end.

I believe that these are assumptions that need to be more clearly and deeply examined. By showing some of the advantages I have observed when using peer editing, I hope to show that these concerns are not necessarily accurate and that the reality of peer editing can be much different than many teachers imagine. On the other hand, there are some clear limitations to peer editing. One of the most obvious is the level of the students and their motivation. Another challenge is the length of time it takes to complete a peer editing cycle. It takes time to do it well and some teachers may feel this takes up more class time than they would like. In addition, each essay can take a long time to complete in the peer editing cycle, so students will produce fewer essays.

In response to these limitations, peer editing works best if it is an ongoing process of students teaching and learning from each other by regularly sharing and giving feedback on their essays. The key word for me is *ongoing* because I feel peer editing needs to be a regular feature of the class to be successful. Also, in my experience, peer editing works best at the intermediate level and above. Finally, while I feel quality is more important than quantity, I also know that students need many opportunities to write to develop fluency and vocabulary. For this reason, I suggest doing other types of writing like journals and timed writing to develop these skills.

Key benefits of peer editing

I believe peer editing is important for a number of reasons. Among the benefits I have seen in my own writing classes are:

1. Generally, it creates a positive classroom environment by encouraging meaningful friendships among students.
2. It makes students more active in the learning process and encourages learner autonomy.
3. It teaches students the importance of audience.
4. Effective peer editing leads to higher essay quality.
5. A peer editing system with clear guidelines can save the writing teacher valuable time responding to student essays.

Peer editing in practice

In this section I would like to present some of the concrete details of my own peer editing experiences and discuss what I have found to be the most important considerations for building an effective peer editing system.

Teaching context

The writing courses are conducted at two universities in Tokyo. The writing classes are both required and elective and are made up of low to high intermediate students. Class sizes range from approximately 16 to 20 students and meet once a week for 90 minutes. The courses are all one year long. These classes are usually the students' first experience in a writing class taught by a native speaker. As such, students are quite motivated and curious about writing in English. They are open minded and willing to try new approaches to learning, which may be quite different to the ways they have learned to approach writing in the past. Therefore, they are very open to the idea of peer editing and new learning techniques they may encounter in my class.

Positive student response

Before explaining the details of my own peer editing sessions, I would like to present some feedback from my students. I have found that students love peer editing and are in fact eager to share their writing with others. They greatly enjoy reading the essays of their classmates and have repeatedly said this is their favorite part of the course. They look forward to each time they can read new essays from their classmates and learn more about their lives, feelings, and opinions. Students are very curious to discover more about each other. Sharing writing in class creates a strong bond between students and creates a supportive classroom environment.

I ask students to give me detailed written feedback at the end of the academic year on what they felt about the class and what helped them learn the most. Here is what some students have said:

“ Before I took this class, I just wrote carelessly. I did not consider about the readers. Now, I definitely try to make essays interesting. I could make an effort to make essays impressive because I could know other people's feelings and opinions about my essays in this class. Moreover, I learned a lot from other people's essays, for example expressions, many kinds of adjectives, and so on. Now I realize I enjoy writing” – Haruka

“An important thing is I learned that I could read my essays from the reader's point of view. Before I learned this, I might write essays without thinking of the readers, so it would be difficult and confusing to read. Not only as a writer, but also as a reader, I learned many things in this class.” – Noriko

“I think it was very important to read the essays written by others. The essays written by previous students and students in our class were my favorite materials. They taught me many ways to describe what I am thinking and feeling in English.” – Akiko O.

“If essays had been only by read by the teacher, I would have skimmed writing my essays. I am not vain, but I didn’t want a bad essay to be read by my classmates. I worked hard on my essays in this class.” – Akiko. I.

“I really enjoyed reading the essays of my classmates. They helped me to see things from different points of view and they also gave me chances to know more deeply about my classmates. The comments I got from other students helped me to rewrite my essay and make it more specific and interesting. I really enjoyed discussion with many classmates. At Waseda, even in small classes, we usually have few chances to talk with teachers and other students. As I said, I learned many things from the essays of my classmates and they were the best materials for me.” – Asuka

How to do it – tips

Tip 1: Manage the class atmosphere

It takes a great deal of trust to be able to share writing with others. We leave ourselves vulnerable and open to criticism. Asking students to share their writing with one another is

asking them to trust each other. In order for students to feel comfortable letting others read and comment on their writing, there must be the important foundation of trust and respect in the classroom. This is crucial before any peer editing can begin. At the beginning of the year, I try to include as many introductory and getting to know you activities as possible. As students get to know each other better, they are ready to begin to share their writing. It is important to lay this groundwork through in-depth introductory activities at the start of the year and continue to build this foundation as the year progresses.

Tip 2: Set up the class

I am always surprised when I see a classroom of students sitting scattered around the room, completely isolated, mostly sitting at the back, far from the teacher and far from other students. I have seen this in classrooms of both foreign and Japanese teachers. My solution is simple: move them together so that all students are sitting towards the front of the classroom. The front seats must always be filled. Each student must have a partner to work with. All students should be able to see the board easily and hear the teacher clearly. Finally, all empty gaps in seats must be filled up. I have found this can have a powerful effect on the class dynamics and attitude of the students. It is certainly necessary to help build a good class atmosphere and make interacting with classmates easier. In my experience, a well thought out class set-up has a tremendous effect on class atmosphere and student motivation.

We do a lot of partner rotation in my writing classes. Many teachers do this in conversation classes, but I also recommend this approach in writing courses. This is an excellent way for students to get to know their classmates and be exposed to different opinions and perspectives. It keeps the atmosphere

in class fresh and lively and keeps the students energized. It also gives students the chance to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of many different people. I strongly believe that each student, from the lowest to the highest level, has something to offer and teach each other. There may be a student who is talented at organization, another who is a grammar whiz, another who has a wide and varied vocabulary, and another who is good at finding thought-provoking topics. They may also have very different styles – funny, serious, introspective, or analytical. These same students probably all have different weaknesses too. They can all learn from each other. This is why I feel a good class set-up and ongoing partner rotation is important.

Tip 3: Lay the ground rules

Will the students be able to use any Japanese during the peer editing session? How many partners will they be working with? Will the students work in pairs or in a group? Should they give written or oral feedback – or both? Will they read essays in class or as homework? Is there a time limit? Will the teacher collect all drafts or only the final one? It is good to experiment with different approaches until you find what works best for you and your students, then the ground rules for the class can be established.

In my case, I encourage students to speak as much English as possible, but I do allow students to use Japanese when needed, for example in talking about the difficult nuances of organization and unity. Sometimes hearing an explanation or advice in Japanese from their partner is just what students need and quickly clarifies everything. I have found pairs works best in my classes – students feel more comfortable and are more honest and direct in pairs. I rotate partners, so that students will get feedback from several different classmates. I prefer oral feedback first – it is direct and immediate – and lets the writer

know how the essay has affected the reader. I then have students move on to written feedback – making small comments. When students have multiple partners in one peer editing session, I ask each partner to use a different colored pen to make additional comments. I like to have students read each other's essays in class. In this way the writer can see the immediate reaction of the reader. This can be very motivating, as the writer sees the power his or her words can have on another person – regardless of whether the essay is perfect or not. I don't impose a time limit and let the students work at their own pace. I have had to teach myself to be a patient teacher. As for collecting drafts, I usually collect only the third draft, after the paper has gone through several peer editing sessions. I can then be assured I am going to get a pretty good paper. I then ask students to consider my comments and corrections and submit their final draft.

Related to the teacher's role in this process, I feel the teacher should be involved only after students have done all they can on their own. Sometimes this will be after the second, sometimes after the third draft, sometimes even later. I ask students "Do you want to give me your draft today – or make changes for next time?" Most all say they want to make changes based on the ideas from the peer editing session. This shows me that peer editing is working! I sometimes ask them to staple their new essay on top of the old drafts. I can compare them and can see a significant improvement. And what did I do? Nothing! They did it by themselves. I can also see the impressive effort of other students and the time they took to give thoughtful comments to their partners.

Tip 4: Give clear guidelines for peer editing

In order for students to be successful peer editors and use class time most effectively, the teacher must give very clear guidelines for the peer editing sessions. If the teacher simply

says “Exchange papers, read them, and talk about it” what does that mean? The students will be baffled. I think that many unsuccessful attempts at peer editing are due to a lack of proper training of “peers” and lack of clear guidelines. We can divide peer editing into two broad categories: (a) reader-based feedback which focuses on content, ideas, and how this affects the reader and (b) criteria-based feedback, which focuses on the more difficult aspects of organization, grammar, and mechanics. You will first need to establish clearly which of these kinds of feedback you would like your students to do.

In my classes, I focus first on content only. I ask students to comment on the ideas in the paper and how they were affected by what the writer had to say. This is usually a very non-threatening way to begin a peer editing session. I also have students comment on what they like the most about the paper, what their favorite words or sentences are, and what they want to know more about. The reader is free to ask the author any questions or ask for clarification of any parts that are unclear. It is a time for open questions and discussion on the topic. This is the part of peer editing at which my students excel. Students do have the ability to help the writer with the content of the paper and go deeper into what the writer really wants to convey to his or her audience.

The next step of peer editing can focus on criteria-based feedback. Students can look for specific problems with organization, unity, and coherence. The teacher will need to provide a list of questions to be used in the peer editing session.

The final step of peer editing can focus on mechanics and grammar and for this students will need clear editing symbols that are not too complicated or numerous. If students have clear directions and examples of what to do, and teachers use these

as a regular feature in class throughout the year, students will develop the ability to give useful feedback to their classmates.

Tip 5: Teach language for giving feedback

In addition to clear guidelines for giving feedback – that is, “what to look for,” students then need language for giving this feedback – that is, “how to talk about it.” Students need clear examples for giving positive and supportive feedback. I teach my students phrases such as “Maybe you could try...” or “Have you thought of...?” and “How do you feel about...?” which encourage discussion. I ask students never to say “That’s wrong” or “You should do this.” This kind of language is too direct and critical and puts the writer in a defensive position. The peer reader is meant to be a helper bringing a new perspective to the writing process, not a critic or enemy. Especially in the early stages of peer editing, I encourage students to see the positives in each other’s writing and praise the things they like, rather than saying what is wrong with the essay. That is the kind of critical negative feedback they have traditionally had all their lives in many writing classes and is exactly what they don’t need in the early stages of peer review sessions. I strongly believe students writing in a second language especially need to first hear all the positive things before they start to hear any critical comments. Therefore, we first begin to talk about all the things that are good about the essay, before we talked about what could be improved.

Tip 6: Be patient

One of the greatest gifts writing teachers can give to their students is time. Students need time, and lots of it, to develop their skills as writers and peer editors. Too often teachers rush students through the process of writing so that no real learning is taking place and

no long-term changes in behavior are developed. Time is one of the most crucial supports writing teachers can give to their students. Peer editing requires patience on the part of the teacher to stand back and slowly watch the learning process unfold. Sometimes the peer editing process goes quickly and smoothly, but especially in the beginning of the year, it is often a slow and time-consuming process. Teachers who are by nature not very patient people will have the hardest time implementing peer editing. As the year goes on, there will come a time when students will become quite talented at peer editing and this is the moment when teachers know it is really worth the effort.

Conclusion

In an ideal world we would all have small writing classes where we could spend a lot of time helping each individual student in every lesson. The reality is we have large classes, some far larger than mine, and it is impossible to devote a lot of class time to each student. Peer editing offers one attractive solution to this dilemma. In peer editing sessions, students often gain the same benefits they would if they had a private conference with the teacher in each lesson and sometimes it is even more effective because it is advice coming from another student. Students appreciate another person taking the time to listen to them carefully, focus on their needs, and work closely with them for an extended period in class. Students commented that at the beginning of the year their idea of a writing class was only to turn in papers to their teachers and get them back with many red marks. I hope they have realized that not all writing classes have to be like this. Through sharing their writing with others, my students have come to realize that writing is an ongoing creative process and that everyone has the potential to be a good writer.

Recommended reading

- Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing with Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hansen, J. (2002). *Peer Response in Second Language Writing Classrooms*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Raimes, A. (1983). *Techniques in Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wachs, S. (1993). Breaking the Writing Barrier. Approaches to Composition Class. In Walden, P. (Ed.) *A Handbook for Teaching English at Japanese Colleges and Universities* (pp. 73-90). New York: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

Assignment: Introduction

Title: “My name”

Sample peer editing flow chart – “My name”

This is the first assignment of the year I give to students in April. I have chosen this topic because it is straightforward and has potential to be very interesting. It also helps students get to know each other on a deeper level and begins to build a good class atmosphere. In this essay, students write about the history of their name and how it has affected their lives and their feelings about their identity. Before this assignment begins, students have already studied basic composition format, vocabulary for writing, topic sentences, and the basic parts of an essay.

Pre-assignment

Step1: Begin the topic with journal writing – homework

Students begin by answering pre-writing discussion questions in their journals as homework:

1. Who gave you your name?
2. Why did they choose this name?
3. What does your name mean?
4. How do you feel about your name?
5. What do you know about the day of your birth?

Week one

Step 2: Brainstorming discussion – in class (45 min.)

In the next lesson, students discuss their answers with multiple partners. It is fun and interesting to share their stories with each other and it stimulates a lot of ideas about the topic. I always do this brainstorming activity as part of every formal writing assignment in my class. It gives students direction in their writing and serves as a useful departure point for writing a meaningful essay. Finding a good topic is often the hardest thing about writing for students. After they have found a good topic and know what they want to say about it, things are much easier. By discussing the topic together, they can judge from the reactions and questions of their classmates what might be most interesting to write about. Their homework is now to write the first draft of their essay.

Step 3: Read sample essays – homework

In the same lesson, I also give sample essays from past students for everyone to read as homework. We talk about editing symbols we will use in class. For homework, I ask students to:

- Underline the topic sentence and circle the controlling idea.
- Put a star next to their favorite words and sentences.
- Underline the details.
- Write “more” next to the parts they want to know more about.
- Answer the following “5 key questions” in their notebooks:
 1. What do you like about this essay? Why?
 2. What are your favorite words and sentences? Why?
 3. How does this essay make you feel?
 4. What are the most interesting details?
 5. What would you like to know more about?

Step 4: Write first draft – homework

As homework, students also write the first draft of their essay entitled “My Name.” The essay should explore the story of how their name was given to them, including the details of their birth. They should also consider how they have felt about this name throughout their lives, from their earliest memories until today. They are to have a clear topic sentence with a strong controlling idea, include supporting details, and have a strong conclusion. Since this is the first essay of the year, students are asked to check composition format carefully, including indenting, double-spacing, and rules for punctuation. It is to be a one page essay on A4 paper, typed and proofread carefully.

Week two**Step 5: Respond to sample essays – in class (30 min.)**

Students begin class by learning to respond to and talk about the sample essays. I find it helps to do this before they begin talking about their classmates’ essays. They talk about the answers in their notebooks in pairs.

We conclude by discussing the strong points of each essay and which the students enjoyed the most. The answers are really varied. The purpose of this activity is to get the focus off their own writing, to show good examples from the previous year’s class, and to emphasize that there are many different and interesting styles of writing. I stress that each student has his or her unique strengths and talents. We also practice the language needed to give feedback and discuss the peer editing process we will be doing throughout the year.

Step 6: Peer editing #1 – focus on content and organization – in class (1 hour)

Students work in pairs. I explain that we will be exchanging essays in class today and we will focus on the ideas in the papers. I emphasize that there will be no corrections or red pens allowed.

Partner #1

1. Students exchange papers with partner #1.
2. Students read completely.
3. Students ask their partner the “5 key questions” above. They are free to ask any questions or make any comments on the content only.

Partner #2 – students now change partners.

1. Students ask “What did you write about?” and give a brief summary to their new partner.
2. Students read each other’s essays.
3. After the first reading, students take out a colored pen and underline the topic sentence, circle the controlling idea, put a star next to their favorite words and sentences, underline the interesting details, write “more” next to what they want to know more about, and finally write a “question mark” next to any parts that are not clear to them.
4. Students then talk about the key questions together, this time pointing out the symbols they have written on the paper.

Repeat above process with new partners #3 and 4, time allowing.

New partners each use a different colored pen. The final partner checks for the correct composition format and suggest changes if needed – indenting each paragraph, double spacing, capitalization of the title, etc.

Step 7: Write second draft – homework

The students have homework to revise their essay and write their second draft. They are told they will be sharing this draft with partners again. Students are asked to interview their parents during the vacation and get more details about the origin of their name and the details of their birth. They come back in the next class with impressive details and the content is much more focused. As they get deeper into the topic with their classmates, their essays get stronger and more powerful.

Week three**Step 8: Peer editing #2 – focus on spelling, grammar, and word choice – in class (1 hour)****Step 9: Write third draft – homework****Week four****Step 10: Turn in third draft to teacher – no peer editing in class**

I read essays and make comments, suggestions, and corrections as needed. For this assignment I collect only this third draft and they do not need to give me the others.

Week five**Step 11: Return essays to students – (15 min.)**

Give them time to ask questions if needed.

Step 12: Students write final draft – homework**Week six****Step 13: Share final draft with classmates – in class (45 min.)**

This week all students have their final drafts. They spend time with at least 4 or more partners exchanging papers and responding to the essays. I think this final “wrap-up” stage is extremely important because it is the way for students to build confidence. They are able to see the dramatic improvement in their essays – which came mostly from helping each other. Through this peer editing cycle, they are beginning to be more critical readers and aware of audience when writing. This final peer editing session is for pure enjoyment and for students to have a sense of satisfaction for working through the essay writing process. They respond to each other’s writing as an eager audience member, focusing on the content and impressions it makes on the reader, much as in the first peer editing session of the cycle.

Step 14: Turn in final draft to teacher

Note: Since this is the first peer editing cycle of the year, it is much more time-consuming than subsequent cycles. Also note that in some lessons, the whole class period is spent on peer editing, while in other lessons it is just a part and activities from the textbook would be used. Peer editing is an ongoing thread in the course, which is supplemented by textbook activities and other assignments. Peer editing cycles often overlap so that students may be working on more than one draft or assignment at the same time.