

Cooperative Evaluation in EFL Classrooms

Yoko Ichiyama
Keio University

Reference Data:

Ichiyama, Y. (2005). Cooperative Evaluation in EFL Classrooms. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper suggests one way to implement peer response effectively into EFL writing classrooms by the use of cooperative evaluation. The paper describes the process of developing cooperative evaluation in order to affect change in the peer response classrooms which have several defects with regards to material design. The paper also includes example cooperative evaluation sheets that exemplify the principles of cooperative evaluation and demonstrate how its application has resulted in successful implementation of peer response with EFL students in a Japanese university.

本稿では外国語学習者のアカデミック・ライティングクラスにおいてpeer responseを効果的に導入する1つの方法として cooperative evaluationを利用することを提案する。この方法は学習者が、自分の専門領域に特徴的な英語を他の学習者と協力し合いながら習得すること、またpeer responseの効果を最大限引き出す為に必要な社会的スキルの習得を促すことが望める。Cooperative evaluation sheetを用いて具体的な使用方法とその効果を示す。

Peer response is one of the most favoured teaching options in EFL writing classrooms. A large quantity of research has been carried out to investigate the ways in which this can be successfully implemented (Ferris, 2003; Mangelsdorf, 1992). Not only the practitioners but also the learners who have participated in such activities, however, have reservations regarding the reliability of peer evaluations (Connor & Asenavage 1994; Zhang, 1995). Many students view peer comments as being subjective, unreliable, inconsistent, and lacking in academic validity. Moreover, cultural contexts, especially that of Asian regions are seen to prefer teacher feedback rather than peer response (Zhang, 1995). This has certainly been the case for this researcher. There were enormous difficulties due to the fact that the “science and engineering department” included a wide variety of subjects ranging from applied physics to management engineering. Each course used different forms and styles to write papers in English. There were no general interdepartmental guidelines for writing in English. When students first participated in the process of peer response, they were either at a loss as how to make comments effectively or use the knowledge of their own fields. The results of the evaluation of the initial implementation of peer response generated a lot of reflection about teaching practices and material design. Through this reflection, it was found that many of the procedural deficiencies could be attributed to the defects in material design. As an alternative cooperative evaluation sheets were designed to blend the idea of cooperative learning with peer evaluation. This paper describes the context and the rationale for

developing the cooperative evaluation sheet. Example sheets and the evaluation of the innovation are shown in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of utilizing cooperative evaluation in multi-disciplinary English writing classrooms.

The Context: Initial Peer Response

Subjects

A total of 25 science and engineering majors attending a 12-week English academic writing course at a Japanese university participated in this study. Their average age ranged between 21-24, all of which were undergraduate junior and senior students.

Session

The students were first trained how to use peer response in a 90 minute session. The training was composed of two different elements: modelling and discussing. At the beginning of first session, the teacher played the role of student, making oral peer response comments on the sample text. During the process, the teacher gave some examples to illustrate problems with the essay. After teacher modelling, students read sample texts and wrote their feedback using the Peer response guideline (See Appendix) that gave advice on what to look for as well as how to write.

After finishing their writing, students compared their comments and discussed whether they (1) clearly described their concerns (2) used helpful comments (3) dealt with global issues (such as content and organization) rather than local issues (language), and (4) expressed criticism tactfully. After the group discussion, students presented their

representative comments and evaluations on the blackboard and discussed the appropriateness of the evaluations. Students were also asked to describe strategies they used in writing feedback. They discussed strategies such as writing sensitive but critical comments without being too complimentary or being too harsh; and writing comments that were more encouraging. All of these activities were done in one session.

At the first session of every four/three weeks, the students were required to write an essay of 200-300 words on topics the teacher had assigned. They were asked to submit four copies of the essay before the next session. All students were divided into a group of 3-4 members at the second session according to their level of English. Students were then given copies of essays by their fellow group members and asked to read them silently for 20 minutes. After finishing the reading, they discussed each piece of writing. Students often requested explanation of unclear points, asked why specific phrases or terms were used, and sometimes went further on to evaluate the essays. The discussion phase took up the last 15 minutes when students wrote peer responses. At the third session, comments written by peers were collected and delivered to the writer. The writer put each comment on a peer response sheet (Figure 1) so that they could always see what had been said about each piece of writing. On a peer response sheet, the students were required to reflect upon their participation in discussions, essay and peer response comments, and especially evaluating the effectiveness of peer response comments. At the end of each four-week period, students were reassigned to new teams. This gave the students an opportunity to work with people of different capacity and kept the programme fresh.

Directions:	
Read the group members' essays and get the general meaning of them.	
Begin to peer response on the following points:	
1	What is your favorite part of the essay regarding the content, and why?
2	Are there any unclear/confusing points* you could not understand? What are the problems of such confusion/disorder? For example, organization, content, or language? Please specify the place of your concern.
3	What alternatives do you give for the above deficiencies? .
* You may look into the appropriateness of the following points:	
a.	Did the introduction clearly state (1) topic in the main idea sentence and (2) idea/issues need/solution about the topic?
b.	Did the body of the essay state examples, details, specific information to support each argument clearly?
c.	Did the conclusion clearly express (1) the summary or general statement and (2) final or related thought that grows out of the body?
d.	Did you follow the thread of the composition? (signal words, transition words)
Ask for the intentions, explanations, clarifications for the unclear/confusing points found in members' writings for about 50 minutes.	
Write peer response on the comments card and give them to each author of the essay.	

Figure 1

Instruments

At the end of the first implementation, information was collected by means of the following instruments.

End-of-course Questionnaires

This questionnaire was distributed to all student participants. The questionnaire mainly concerned students' opinion about the usefulness of peer comments, attitudes towards peer response, and the difficulty they faced during the peer response session.

Interviews with Selected Students

Students were asked to indicate on their questionnaires whether they were willing to be interviewed, and those who were available were selected. A total of three students were selected. These interviews were designed to supplement and clarify information collected through the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted in Japanese and English.

Written Language Samples

All the comments on peer response sheets were tallied and classified into two categories: those with a general points and those with a specific points. For each comment, the researcher duplicated the process of classification. If any disagreement in classification was found, the researcher asked the student what their reasoning was behind their response. The number of comments under all classification categories was totalled. The researcher did not attempt an in-depth statistical analysis, because of the limited sample.

Results

Students' Perceptions (Questionnaire)

Table 1. Students perception on the usefulness of peer response

		Yes	No
1	In general, did you find peer response useful?	24	1
2	In general, did you find peer response useful?	20	5
3	Please give reasons to the question above.	refer to Table 2	

All the students' responses to the questionnaire were tallied to determine their opinions on the usefulness of peer review and comments in general. As can be seen from Table 1, almost all the students found the peer response process useful. To the question regarding the usefulness of the peer response, however, several students found that the comments were not so useful.

Table 2 shows the reasons for both positive and negative response to the usefulness of peer response comments. More than 30% of the comments were negative which seemed to indicate that the quality of feedback students produced was insufficient and unsatisfactory.

Table 2 Reasons to question 3

Yes, because peer response helps to		
content	clarify ideas	6
	audience perspective	11
	develop ideas	11
	give new ideas	2
	help delete unnecessary ideas	2
	give different views	1
	help improve ideas	1
organization	improve organization	8
language	improve language	0
	total	42
No, because peer response is		
	too general in meaning	10
	not consistent with other people's comment	5
	too complimentary	4
	total	19

*Type of Comments (Written Language Sample)***Table3. Type of comments**

	1st task	2nd task	3rd task	total
Comments related to general points	71	92	45	208
Comments related to specific points	31	52	35	118
total	102	144	80	326

Table 3 represents the comparisons of types of formats by the 25 subjects. The results indicate that although the number of student comments on a specific point increased gradually, their development speed was not significant because nearly half of the students wrote general comments.

Problems and Reflection

The results of student perceptions to peer response seem to show that most of students see the potential benefits of the practicing peer response. This can be confirmed by the comment given by one of the students who participated in the interview: “I liked the idea of peer response very much, and I think I did pay a lot of effort. I think if I were given more opportunities to continue these kind of activities, I would be more better reviewer.” A closer look at Table 1, however, shows that there are five students who did not find the peer comments useful. Moreover, there are three students who answered “yes” to question 2 but gave negative comments on the usefulness of peer comments. One student

pointed out that some comments were quite valuable while others were too general or too complementary. The main dissatisfaction seemed to come from the lack of communication with the group member. For example, one student wrote that because he did not tell the group members that he majors in mathematics the organization of his paper had been unfairly undervalued as “poor organization.” For him, starting the paper without an introduction and literature review was a quite common way of writing a paper. He stated that he would have felt better if he could explain the reason for utilizing such a “poor organization.”

In many cases, comments that refer to general points exhibited deficiencies in clarifying the place of concern, or suggesting an alternative idea. They were often either evaluating or agreeing to ideas without giving the reasons why. More often comments were short with vague expression, such as, “good,” “I like your idea,” “I have the same opinion,” or “I couldn’t comprehend your writing.” This can be seen in the following two comments made by subjects that are representative (and uncorrected) statements of the groups:

I did not feel that your example was persuasive to support your argument. (Student A)

Well done. I agree to your essay. (Student B)

The two comments were too general for the receiver to know the writer’s intentions and what strength/weaknesses the reviewer himself/herself thought existed in the essays.

In this researcher’s view, one of the biggest obstacles that prevented the students from giving critical and specific comments on peer writing comes from the lack of experience

to learn together. Students were often seen wavering between vocalizing critical opinions on writing and remaining calm and giving positive comments. The problem is that students often choose the latter stance. Informal conversation with some of those students revealed that the students lack successful cooperative learning experiences. One student confessed that he did not want to be seen as impolite by giving an honest opinion. This shows that the student needs to develop skills to be a productive group member. The reservation of opinion, in fact, often resulted in a dispute among the students. Many students claimed that group members were not as hard working as they were because he/she received few comments. At the same time, some students complained about the lack of consistency in peer comments. Although a general guideline was given at the beginning of the session, the diversity in student majors seemed to have added confusion to the process giving consistent and objective feedback to work written by peers. In order to increase reliability and implement the peer response successfully, detailed scoring criteria that are applicable to diverse writing styles and forms seemed requisite.

Innovation: Cooperative Evaluation

In order to mitigate the perceived defects of the present practice, new materials were designed. I found cooperative learning principles, (Sachs, Candlin, Rose & Shum, 2003) in which positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, simultaneous interaction, and group processing are emphasized, and combined these with genre approach. During the evaluation process, group members are encouraged to negotiate, question, ask for clarification,

and discuss the content and the evaluation of written works. This procedure develops awareness to the different writing formats and styles. This enables the learners to become more conscious to various writing styles and formats because of the increased exposure to and repetitive encounter with the writings of their fields (Casanave, 2003). Cooperative evaluation promotes awareness in order to evaluate and provides opportunities to practice the actual social skills needed to be a productive and accepted member in a cooperative learning group.

Procedure

In the cooperative evaluation classrooms, 3-4 students make a group. Before the peer response session, students submit an assigned task and an article from their field. During the session, two examiners evaluate a written work following the instruction of the cooperative evaluation sheet. The sheet gives approximately 3-4 scoring criteria. Students are required to compare peer writing with an academic article from their field. If an examiner sees that the writing followed the field-specific writing styles and formats, he/she would give the maximum of 10 points. Each deficiency results in the loss of 1 point. Group members give an alternative/advice on each defect so that the examinee could revise and redraft their work.

Cooperative Evaluation Sheet 1: References

As can be seen in Figure 2, the examiners compare the styles and format used in the article and in the examinee's written work on the right hand side. The reference section seemed to

be suitable for students who are not used to the peer response procedure and have less with working co-operatively.

Name (examinee)		Names (examiners)		A clip from academic articles in examinee's own field (in this case, the references sections)
Instruction: Give scores on the examinee's references (-1 point for each defect). Check whether the examinee has successfully followed the writing style of the article (right) Scoring Criteria 1 Author's name 2 Title 3 publication/place/etc. Indicate the place of defects Score /10				
line no	exact word	alternatives/advice		An examinee's written work

Figure 2. Cooperative Evaluation sheet 1: References

Cooperative Evaluation Sheet 2: Introduction (organization)

The use of transitions and links are seen as one of the useful organizational tools to write logical introductions. The benefit of comparing an introduction from literature and that of the peer's is that they are exposed to the authentic use of transitions and links (Figure 3). Moreover, the close analysis of the argument in the introduction section enables the students to learn ways to develop a paragraphs logically.

Name (examinee)		Names (examiners)		A clip from academic articles in examinee's own field (in this case, introduction section)
Instruction and Scoring Criteria: Analyse the introduction of the article(right) in relation to transitions and links. Then compare it with the examinee's introduction. Check whether the examinee gave sufficient amount of transitions/links (-1 for each defect) and whether the content of them are effective enough to develop his/her argument logically (-2 each for each defect). Indicate the place of defects Score /10				
line no.	exact sentences	alternatives/advice		Examinee's written work

Figure 3. Co-operative Evaluation Sheet 2: Introduction

Cooperative Evaluation Sheet 3: Introduction (INS)

Figure 4 shows that the examiners analysed the academic articles of examinee's own field first. The process of analysing the articles increases the exposure to different kinds of introductions. Because introduction of academic article has distinctive structure, often called INS (I=issues, N=need, S=solution), the initial analysis of the model article enables the students to encounter an actual example of the structure. The evaluation process seemed quite smooth since the scoring criteria is explicit and concrete. Like the reference section shown above, this seemed to be suitable to be used in the earlier stage of cooperative evaluation classroom procedure so that the students could

develop confidence and experience in giving reliable scores for peer writing.

Name (examinee) Names (examiners)			A clip from academic articles in examinee's own filed (in this case, introduction section)
Instruction and Scoring Criteria: Analyse the introduction of the article (right) in relation to INS(I=issues, N=need, S=solution) Then compare it with the examinee's introduction. Check whether the examiner gave sufficient amount of INS or not (-1 for each defect) and whether the content of them are effective enough to persuade the reader.(-2 each for each defect). Indicate the place of defects Score /10			
line no.	exact sentences	alternatives/ advices	Examinee's written work

Figure 4. Co-operative Evaluation Sheet 3: Introduction (INS)

Cooperative Evaluation Sheet 4: Results and Discussion

Although some textbooks suggest that results and discussion sections should be separated, many of the scientific articles do not follow this rule. These tendencies are justified since many academic papers present the results of successive research and, thus, the discussion sections are either neglected or taken for granted by the writers. This researcher believes that more than two thirds of the academic papers

in this class seemed to adopt this rule. Therefore, students can compare the examinee's field-specific article with their written work in relation to the ways the articles separate and combine the two sections together and make evaluations on the writing with respect to these aspects (Figure 5).

Name (examinee) Names (examiners)			A clip from academic articles in examinee's own filed (in this case, the results and discussion sections)
Instruction: Compare the Result and Discussion section Scoring Criteria: How often / when does the article (right) combine the results and discussion sections. Compare them with that of the examinee and if the number of / quality of such combination exceeds/ is inappropriate, minus 1 point for each deficit. Indicate the place of defects Score /10			
line no.	exact sentences	alternatives/ advices	An examinee's written work

Figure 5. Co-operative Evaluation Sheet 4: Result and Discussion

Evaluation

At the end of the course, information was collected by means of three instruments used in the first implementation: end-of-course questionnaires; interviews with selected students; and written language samples. With regards to the students' perception, more than 90% of the students show favourable attitudes toward the peer response and peer comments.

This seems to indicate that more students see the benefits of peer response (Figure 3). As can be seen from Table 5 below, student gave a wide range of reasons for favourable responses to the peer response which appears to show that students were becoming competent writers. This can be confirmed by the fact that more students wrote specific comments on cooperative evaluation sheets which would be of value and use for the receiver (Table 6).

Table 4. Students perception on the usefulness of peer response

		Yes	No
1	In general, did you find peer response useful?	24	1
2	In general, did you find peer reponse useful?	23	2
3	Please give reasons to the question above.	refer to Table 5	

Table 5. Reasons to question 3

Yes, because peer response helps to		
content	clarify ideas	5
	audience perspective	7
	develop ideas	15
	give new ideas	1
	help delete unnecessary ideas	1
	give different views	2
	help improve ideas	5
	read the literature in dept	1
	develop the arguments logically	1
	write persuasive arguments	1
	describe the details clearly	1
	present the graohs and tables effectively	2
organization	improve organization	12
language	improve language	4
	total	58
No, because peer response is		
	too general in meaning	1
	not consistent with other people's comment	3
	too complimentary	2
	total	6

Table 6. Type of comments

	number of comments
Comments related to general points	32
Comments related to specific points	202
total	234

The results seemed to indicate that students were becoming competent in producing quality feedback while they value and depend on written comments. The interview with five students also confirms my findings since three of them commented that they really enjoyed the process of both writing the peer response and receiving the peer comments. One student commented that she learned to negotiate and communicate with her group member regarding the comments she wrote. In that way she does not worry about becoming “impolite” but is confident about explaining her real intention.

The enthusiasm and willingness the students showed towards comparing and evaluating peer written work in the classroom seems to indicate that the students are not only enjoying the process of becoming “ethnographers” (Casanave, 2003, p. 43) of the field-specific writings but also becoming eager examiners of peer response sessions. I have witnessed frequent negotiation, asking for clarification, and discussion that seem to show that the use of the sheet maximized the effectiveness of peer response and cooperative evaluation in writing classrooms.

The study on the innovative cooperative evaluation shows that the more the students receive feedbacks, the more

they could engage in writing quality feedback. During the session, students often asked for the extensions for handing in their peer response. The point is, that the students became more aware of writing quality feedback. They delved into one specific problem rather than writing all-inclusive but too general comments. The example comments below clearly represent the students’ growth in writing quality feedback:

Although you gave some background information on the use of oolong tea for remedy and I am quite impressed by the fact several research had been done on this area, I suggest that you should give brief reviews on each research you listed so that we could see the weakness of the previous research. In that way, I think we would agree to the reason why you choose this topic as important at this time of the era. I hope to read the following section because I personally feel oolong tea is the most accessible thing for the students like us. (Student C)

I read your result section and thought that you had better add some comments on why you choose some of the reagent although you gave them at the method and procedure section very briefly. I read your model article and saw that the writer starts the nearly all the sentences of result section with the reasons of using the reagent first. I wonder this is the best way to reorganize the complicated research procedure because the reader can always go back to the rationale of the research. Could you not check other more articles of your field of study whether this is a common strategy? (Student D)

Moreover, there seemed to be true collaboration and growth among the students. One student, after reading the examinee's article, quickly assigned the partner to count the number of the results and discussion combined sentences while he courageously took the interpretation role. He and his partner seemed quite comfortable with the dividing of roles because they trust each other's responsibility. This seems to indicate that the preceding cooperative experiences encouraged them to work together as a group.

Conclusion

This paper presented the process of developing cooperative evaluation which seemed to maximize the potential benefits of peer response in multi-disciplinary tertiary level classrooms. The cooperative evaluation provided the students with the opportunities to encounter a wide range of styles and formats of written academic papers in English. They also acquired social skills to work co-operatively so that they could write successfully in their fields of study. The paper involves examples of the cooperative evaluation sheets and show how this was utilized in academic writing classes in a Japanese university. Although the research in the study is organized in one Japanese university by one researcher, and thus the generalization of the findings are by no means appropriate, the process of developing the cooperative evaluation sheet through the reflection and the example sheets would be applicable to teachers who share similar difficulties in implementing peer response into multi-disciplinary writing classes.

References

- Casanave, C.P. (2003). Multiple Uses of Applied Linguistics Literature in a Multi-disciplinary Graduate EAP Class. *ELT Journal* 57 (1), 43-46.
- Connor, U., & Assenavage, K. (1994). Peer response groups in ESL writing classes: How much impact on revision? *Journal of Second Language Writing* 3, 257-276.
- Ferris, D.R. (2003). *Response to Student Writing: Implications for Second Language Students*. Mahawah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kagan, S. (1992). *Cooperative Learning*. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Kagan Cooperative Learning.
- Mangelsdofr, K. (1992). Peer reviews in the ESL composition classroom: What do the students think? *ELT Journal* 46, 274-284.
- Sachs, G.T., Candlin, C.N., Rose, K.R. & Shum, S. (2003). Developing Cooperative Learning in the EFL/ESL Secondary Classroom. *RELC Journal* 34 (3), 338-369.
- Zhang, S. (1995). Re-examining the Affective Advantage of Peer Feedbacks in the ESL Writing Classes. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 4, 209-222.

Appendix. Peer response guidelines

Ask for the intentions, explanations, clarifications for the unclear/confusing points found in members' writings for about 50 minutes.

Directions: Write peer response on the comments card and give them to each author of the essay.

Read the group members' essays and get the general meaning of them.

Begin to peer response on the following points:

- 1 What is your favorite part of the essay regarding the content, and why?
- 2 Are there any unclear/confusing points* you could not understand? What are the problems of such confusion/disorder? For example, organization, content, or language? Please specify the place of your concern.
- 3 What alternatives do you give for the above deficiencies? .
* You may look into the appropriateness of the following points:
 - a. Did the introduction clearly state (1) topic in the main idea sentence and (2) idea/issues need/solution about the topic?
 - b. Did the body of the essay state examples, details, specific information to support each argument clearly?
 - c. Did the conclusion clearly express (1) the summary or general statement and (2) final or related thought that grows out of the body?
 - d. Did you follow the thread of the composition? (signal words, transition words)