



Assessing peer reviews in a Japanese classroom

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As writing instruction has shifted from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented approach, the peer review activity has become a staple in many writing courses. While most research supports the peer review activity, it is clear that simply using it is not a guarantee for success. Many variables can influence the efficacy of the activity, and instructors need to address the variables particular to their situation. This paper investigates the use of the peer review activity in a university level Japanese writing course, specifically examining how peer reviewers' improvements in essays compare to self-editors and teacher conference participants and what the learners' perceptions are in regard to the peer review activity. The results show that the peer-reviewers improvement in their essays was significantly more than self-editors and not significantly different than teacher-conference participants.

指示を書くことへの過程アプローチで、ピア・レビュー活動は多くの書くことのコースで主要部分になりました。ほとんどの研究がピア・レビュー活動を支持しますが、単にそれを使用するのが、成功のための保証でないことは明確です。多変数は活動の効力に影響を及ぼすことができます。そして、インストラクターはそれらの状況に特定の変数を記述する必要があります。この論文は大学のレベルの日本語の書くことのコースでのピア・レビュー活動の使用を調査します。随筆における同輩評論家の進歩がどのように自己エディタと教師の会議の関係者と比較されるか、そして、学習者の知覚がピア・レビュー活動に関する何であるかを明確に調べます。結果は、それらの随筆における同輩評論家の進歩が自己エディタのものよりかなり多くであって教師会議の関係者のものとかなり異なっていなかったのを示します。さらに、学習者はピア・レビューに関してさまざまな知覚の否定的で積極的な両方を言い表しました。

Starting in the 1970s, second language writing instruction mirrored the earlier paradigm shift in first language writing instruction, changing from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented approach (Susser, 1994). The process approach stresses the steps in the act of writing. As Zamel (1976) states, writing instruction needs to focus on "the expressive and creative process of writing" (p. 74). The process approach emphasizes teaching invention strategies and encourages the use and analysis of intervention and revision processes.

One activity that fits nicely under the process-oriented approach is the peer review activity. Basically, the peer review activity consists of learners reading each other's paper and giving each other feedback. Of course there can be variations on this, such as working in pairs or small groups, giving feedback in writing or face to face, and so on. However, the basic precept is giving and receiving feedback from peers.

The claimed benefits of using peer reviews are many. For example, Hafernik (1984) and Tsui and Ng (2000) state peer reviews can focus learners on communicating with their audience. Mittan (1989) says that peer reviews encourage learners to use many skills in negotiating meaning, which will allow learners to improve their communicative abilities in more than just one area. Chaudron (1983) points out that peer feedback can be more relevant than teacher feedback, and that peer reviews can save teachers time from personally responding to every draft, thereby allowing teachers to focus more on other areas of instruction. Allaei and Connor (1990), Peterson (2003), and Tsui and Ng (2000) state that by doing peer reviews, learners can become better at the overall writing process. Min (2005) conducted research that shows that learners who did peer reviews became more positive in their views toward writing.

Despite the fact that most studies seem to support the peer review activity, some research casts the peer review activity in a negative light. For example, Zhang (1995) conducted research which showed that learners' attitudes towards peer reviews were negative. Chou (1999) and Paulus (1999) found that learners ignored their peers' suggestions a majority of the time. Also, Carson and Nelson (1994) point

out that learners from cultures such as China and Japan might have difficulty in expressing anything but positive feedback to their peers for fear of making their partner lose face.

Purpose

One conclusion that can be drawn from the literature is that while the peer review activity appears to be a viable way to help learners improve their writing skills, it is not a given that it will succeed. There are many variables which can influence peer reviews, thus each classroom instructor must prepare the students and the peer review appropriately in order to facilitate the efficacy of the activity. With that in mind, this paper should be read as action research, meaning the systematic inquiry into teaching practice in order to ascertain the efficacy of the practice in question, to understand more deeply the practice in question, and to bring about awareness in the specific institutional context as well as the overall educational context (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

Study

This paper investigates the use of the peer review activity in a Japanese university writing course. Specifically, two areas are examined:

1. Do peer reviewers improve their papers, and how does this improvement, or lack thereof, compare with self-editors and teacher conference participants?
2. What are learners' attitudes towards the peer review activity?

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 48 3rd-year university students enrolled in two separate intermediate-advanced writing classes with an identical curriculum. Twenty-four learners from each class were randomly selected to participate in the study. The main purpose of this course was to develop learners' skills in writing standard five-paragraph essays. In order to take the course, the students had to have passed a prerequisite course which covered effective paragraph writing.

Procedures

The instructor initially explained to all the learners what peer reviews consist of and what the supposed benefits are, and then gave an example of how to do it. After this, the learners were given two open-ended questions which asked them to list any worries they had about using the peer review activity and any reasons why they would want to do a peer review. The responses to this questionnaire were then used, following the Delphi method (Linstone & Turoff, 1975), to generate items for a new questionnaire (Appendix A). This new questionnaire was given to all of the learners before they submitted their first drafts.

The learners were instructed to write a standard five-paragraph essay in which they had to compare two things of their own choosing which seemed to be quite different, yet find ways in which they were similar. After the learners submitted their first drafts, two independent raters scored each draft using the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, & Hughey, 1981). Next, from the 48 learners randomly selected for inclusion in this study,

16 were assigned to a peer review group, 16 to a self-edit group, and 16 to a teacher conference group. Each of these three groups then used the same list of guidelines for editing their papers in class. The self-editors used the guidelines by themselves, the peer review group used the guidelines to give written and oral feedback, and the teacher conference participants met individually with the teacher. After all the students revised their drafts, they were once again given the questionnaire regarding their beliefs about peer reviews, and their revised essays were again scored by the two independent raters. When the scores had been compiled, all of the learners were shown the results and once more given the questionnaire in regard to their beliefs about peer reviews.

Results

Table 1 shows the mean improvement from the first draft to the next draft for each group of writers, the level of significance of the improvement within groups, and the level of significant difference between the groups in regard to the improvement of their respective essays.

Table 1. Intra- and inter-group significance

Type of revision	First draft mean	Average change in mean score	Significant improvement within groups $p < .05$	Significant difference between groups $p < .05$
1. Self-edit N = 16	69.50	+5.50	yes	1 & 2 - Yes 1 & 3 - Yes
2. Peer review N = 16	69.38	+11.62	yes	2 & 1 - Yes 2 & 3 - No
3. Teacher conference N = 16	69.94	+12.56	yes	3 & 1 - Yes 3 & 2 - No

As would be expected, all the groups increased the mean average on their essay scores. In addition, the results of a series of paired samples *t* tests ($N = 16$) that were conducted to evaluate whether scores differed significantly from the first to the final drafts within each group show the mean scores between first draft and final draft for self-editors ($t = 8.521$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$), peer reviewers ($t = 10.885$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$), and those who received teacher feedback ($t = 10.064$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$) all increased significantly.

As for differences in mean score between groups on the final draft, the results of a series of independent-samples *t* tests that were conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that

there would be significant differences in final draft scores between those engaging in self-editing, peer review sessions, or teacher feedback conferences show the mean score of teacher conference participants ($M = 82.50$, $SD = 8.66$) is significantly different ($t = 2.630$, $df = 30$, $p = .013$) than those who self-edited ($M = 75.00$, $SD = 7.43$). However, the mean score of teacher conference participants is not significantly different ($t = .511$, $df = 30$, $p = .613$) than those who did peer reviews ($M = 81.00$, $SD = 7.92$). Finally, the mean score between self-editors is significantly different ($t = 2.211$, $df = 30$, $p = .035$) than the mean scores of peer reviewers.

Table 2. Negative beliefs about peer reviews

Questions	Total N = 48			Self-edit N = 16			Teacher Feedback N=16			Peer Review N = 16		
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd
The teacher is better at helping.	48	47	42	16	16	15	16	16	16	16	15	11
I can't give helpful suggestions.	40	37	34	12	12	11	15	14	14	13	11	9
I don't want to criticize my classmates.	39	34	27	13	12	10	12	13	10	14	9	7
I won't get helpful suggestions.	34	33	24	12	12	9	12	12	10	10	9	5
We'll learn each other's mistakes	33	29	27	12	11	11	10	11	11	11	7	5
I don't want others to see my writing.	21	20	14	7	8	6	8	8	7	6	4	1

Table 3. Positive beliefs about peer reviews

Questions	Total N = 48			Self edit N = 16			Teacher Feedback N = 16			Peer Review N = 16		
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd
I want to read my classmates' essays.	44	44	46	15	15	16	15	15	15	14	15	15
I can make friends with classmates.	37	39	40	12	13	13	14	13	14	14	13	13
I can get ideas from classmates.	31	34	39	11	11	11	10	11	12	10	12	16
I can become better at self-editing.	30	33	40	10	10	13	9	10	12	11	13	15
Peer reviews can improve my writing	29	31	36	10	10	11	9	8	10	10	13	15
My classmates can find mistakes I miss.	28	33	36	9	9	11	11	9	10	11	9	15
I would like to do a peer review.	27	30	37	10	11	12	9	8	10	8	11	15

Table 2 shows learners' responses to the questionnaire in regard to their negative perceptions of peer reviews before the activity (1st), after the activity (2nd), and after the scores of their essays were presented to them (3rd). The total responses of all 48 learners as well as a breakdown of each groups' responses are shown.

As can be seen, the learners believed their classmates and they themselves would not be able to be helpful. They were also worried about criticizing their classmates' papers. Overall, the learners' negative thoughts concerning peer reviews decreased with each administration of the questionnaire. However, this decrease was smaller for the self-editors and the teacher conference participants than for the peer reviewers.

Table 3 shows learners' responses to the questionnaire in regard to their positive perceptions of peer reviews before the activity (1st), after the activity (2nd), and after the scores of their essays were presented to them (3rd). The total responses of all 48 learners as well as a breakdown of each groups' responses are shown.

Table 3 shows that the learners wanted to read each other's papers, were excited about the social interaction, and thought they could get ideas and become better writers by doing peer reviews. Overall the learners' positive thoughts increased with each administration of the questionnaire. However, this increase was smaller for the self-editors and the teacher conference participants than the peer reviewers.

Pedagogical implications

In general, the results of this study support the notion that the peer review activity is a viable classroom tool. The learners who did peer reviews were able to improve significantly. The improvement in the essays of the learners who did peer reviews was significantly better than that of the self-editors and equal to that of the teacher conference participants. Finally, the learners' negative attitudes towards peer reviews decreased as their positive attitudes increased.

The fact that the peer reviewers' improvement was significantly higher than the self-editors and, statistically, not significantly different than the teacher-conference participants could hold implications for feedback. As Chaudron (1983) stated, one of the possible benefits of peer reviews could be that the teacher does not have to respond to every draft a student writes, thereby freeing up time to concentrate on other areas of instruction. This study supports that notion. For these students it appears that it would be appropriate for the instructor to perhaps monitor students' peer feedback, but not necessarily respond to every draft personally through a teacher conference or a meticulous review.

This study's findings concerning learners' perceptions regarding peer reviews also have pedagogical implications. Initially, many of the learners showed some skepticism toward the peer review process. By specifically addressing these areas beforehand, the instructor may be able to increase the efficacy of the peer review process. For example, this study's findings agree with Carson and Nelson (1994) that Japanese students might be hesitant to say anything but good things, which is anathema to the peer review's purpose. As

Berg (1999) and Stanley (1992) found, learners who were prepared by the instructor to do peer reviews had much more successful peer review sessions than learners who were not prepared. Therefore, it would behoove an instructor of Japanese students who plans on using peer reviews to thoroughly prepare the learners before the activity by explaining about the peer review process, mentioning its possible benefits, doing one together, and giving examples of good and bad suggestions. In addition, research done by Min (2005) indicates that meeting with learners for additional training after they had done the peer review activity resulted in the learners producing significantly more, and better, comments in later peer review sessions. Reinforcing good examples of suggestions by pointing them out either individually or to the class and discouraging unhelpful examples in the same manner until the learners become proficient are possible ways to further the efficacy of the activity.

The learners' responses regarding their positive perceptions of the peer review activity also have some implications, particularly in taking advantage of intrinsic motivation they might have for doing peer reviews. For example, the learners overwhelmingly want to see their classmates' writing and many of them recognized that they can improve content by getting ideas from their partner that they hadn't thought of themselves. An instructor could take advantage of this natural motivation by stressing these points and again perhaps by showing them specific examples of helpful content suggestions.

Conclusion

As previously stated, all classroom situations will vary widely. Whenever peer reviews are used, the teacher will need to tailor the activity to match the situation, addressing such variables as the writing context, the learners' culture, institutional restraints, and on and on. Keeping that in mind, this study indicates that peer reviews can succeed in a Japanese classroom and can be as effective as teacher conferences. Initially, learners may have low confidence in themselves and their classmates in regard to their ability to successfully help one another. However, if concerns such as these, and any others particular to the given situation, are addressed, the instructor can enhance the possibility of the peer review being a successful experience for the learners.

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Appendix A. Peer review questionnaire

Please check which of these you agree with.

- 1. The teacher is better at helping.
- 2. I can't give helpful suggestions.
- 3. I don't want to criticize my classmates.
- 4. I can't get helpful suggestions.
- 5. We'll learn each other's mistakes.
- 6. I don't want others to see my writing.
- 7. I want to read my classmates' writing.
- 8. I can make friends with my classmates.
- 9. I can get ideas from my classmates.
- 10. I can become better at self-editing.
- 11. Peer reviews can improve my writing.
- 12. My classmates can catch mistakes that I miss.
- 13. I want to do a peer review.

Please list any additional feelings you have in regard to peer reviews.