Peer Review in Teaching Research Paper Writing

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Abstract. The paper sets out to examine the effectiveness of peer review in teaching research paper (RP) writing for non-native speakers of English in Vilnius University. Students were exposed to three types of peer review tasks, each of them involving an increasing amount of individual work. The task arrangement was based on a dependency principle. Constrained by some cultural prejudices at first, in the long run the approach turned out very effective in developing students' skills in RP writing (identifying structural / notional parts and tracing the linguistic peculiarities of its relevant parts, working on the individual projects). In broader terms, peer review contributed to the development of students' individual working skills and responsibility.

Introduction

Teaching writing is both: time and energy consuming and is generally taken by many students as extremely boring. As admitted by Jordan, the difficulty of helping students in this area is well known (1989). RP writing is a specific area of writing concerned not only with the accumulation of a substantial amount of knowledge and expertise in the relevant field, but also with mastering the general and specific writing skills, knowledge of the genre conventions etc.

In this paper teaching RP writing is seen, on the one hand, as a synthesis of different approaches to writing, i.e. writing as a product, writing as a process and writing as a genre. From the point of view of writing as a product, it could be described as 'assisted imitation' (Pincas, 1982: 24 quoted in Badger and White, 2000: 153-4). If viewed as a process (for the overview of process approaches see ibid.), RP writing has to do with all stages of writing; of particular relevance is its cyclic character. Within writing as a genre, which is usually the most complex of the three, RP writing is seen as aimed at fulfilling a definite social purpose.

On the other hand, RP writing is concerned with pursuing specific aims in one's individual investigation on a specific topic. The specificity of the topic presupposes the specificity of the subject taught, as each student is involved in his individual project, and, differently from the essay writing course, classroom discussions that follow can hardly be based on one topic.

The present investigation focuses on peer review/evaluation, one of the techniques implemented when assisting students in writing their own RPs. Peer review and afterward class discussion has turned out to be very effective when teaching Lithuanian learners of English, third-year students at the English Philology Department of Vilnius University, how to write a RP throughout all of its stages.

Peer review has been quite extensively studied (as pointed out in Cresswell 2000). However, the relevance and niche of the present paper is seen in its specific cross-linguistic aspect, since students have to master genre conventions of a RP, and thus, conventions of the academic discourse community. Even though discourse community is not constrained by any specific language (as pointed out by Swales 1991), RPs are produced in a particular language with its linguistically and culturally predetermined conventions (some cross-cultural aspects of writing have been discussed in Connor 1996).

In addition, peer review fosters the learner-centred approach, which is quite problematic with non-native students of English in Vilnius University. With the focus on the learner, s/he is sensitised to the learning process, and the teacher is not seen as the final arbiter of the written work (cf. THAW 1999: 78-9). Ford and Ford (1992: 401) point out that peer evaluations are important 'to develop a more objective perspective on one's RP's strengths and potential weaknesses'. In many modern textbooks peer review activities are seen as a resource of various in and extra classroom activities. As pointed out by Flowerdew (2000), it can serve as a source of classroom exercises or the basis of further development of the students' skills. In Lithuania, a post-totalitarian country in transition, whose mental and spiritual capacities are now oriented towards Western framework, student-centred approach and developing students' individual skills and responsibility are seen as one of major aims to be pursued. Consequently, the focus on the teacher-as-the-authority and centre-of-the-learning-teaching-process approach has to be gradually abandoned.

Method and materials

The present investigation is based on action research, which is seen as a tool in changing the situation in a student group (see Nunan, 1992: 17-20). In this case, it is aimed at improving students' skills in RP writing.

The materials (RP parts) of this investigation were produced exclusively by the students.

The initial task set forth for the students was on the basis of the theoretical model of a RP structure elaborated by Swales (1990) and adjusted for classroom work by Swales and Feak (1994) to gradually develop and write a RP in parts: *Introduction, Methods, Results* and *Discussion* (IMRD). All student papers were from the field of linguistics or culture (British or American) studies.

At each stage there were 4 groups of third-year students, each of about ten people, exposed to several types of peer review tasks, namely:

1. Each peer reads and orally reviews one and the same randomly selected RP introduction/methods/results/discussion part of the group; afterwards there is a group discussion held on whether or not and in what respects the sample RP conforms to the requirements set forth in Swales (1990) and Swales and Feak (1994).

2. Each student reads an RP of one of his peers and comments on its structure, development of ideas and language use. The RP authors respond to the oral review/evaluation by accepting or rejecting the expressed opinions/ criticism.

3. Each student reads everybody else's paper in the group and produces comments on each of them. This approach is a blending of the other two and is the most complex and time consuming.

The model works exclusively on the assumption that the first type precedes the second; the second is seen as involving a larger amount of individual work and individual decision taking. All three types of tasks could be termed as simulation of peer review; there is no written review produced afterwards. In addition, each peer review type is fostered by one task leading to another type (task dependency principle)[1] with the second draft to be produced on the basis of the first one taking into consideration peer review results (peer commentary).

Results and discussion

The tasks are arranged in the order of increasing amount of individual work to be put into them. This way students gain skills in performing individual tasks.

In the first type of peer review tasks, students were supposed to produce oral response to a sample RP or its part. Technically it was realised in the following way: each student was given a copy of the sample piece of writing of one of the peers or somebody from another group after first removing the name of the author. So all students had to review a single anonymous piece of writing. They were asked to give commentary on whether the paper was in conformity with the structural and linguistic requirements set forth for RP parts written in English. Students were supposed to identify prototypical moves in the RP structure (obligatory and optional) and comment on the language use (absence/ presence of passives, avoidance of negatives, prevailing tense forms and their distribution; etc. (see Swales & Feak 1994)) in introduction, methods, results and discussion parts.

For educational purposes, they were asked to produce positive evaluations first and criticism afterwards. In the group discussion that followed, students pooled their ideas

and freely discussed their findings. It is indicative that as a group they tended to quite actively participate in this activity from time to time referring to the teacher for advice. These tasks involved a comparatively small amount of individual and creative work.

The teacher in this situation usually monitors/manages the situation by making the task clear and controlling that the model is followed. S/he is only exposed to the oral reviews/ annotations of RPs or their parts. The resulting review/annotation evolves in the group discussion and is quite loose in form. Sometimes after the discussions students are asked either to improve the sample or at least suggest what and how it should be improved. Then comes the second cycle of the teacher's activities – to read and mark the improved draft.

The model seems to work very well in local context since it is based on collective rather than individual responsibility. In addition, the task is very good when controlling whether the students learn from their own mistakes (by producing an improved version of the paper) and whether the teacher in the previous stage was able to produce unambiguous commentary and provide sufficient advice. Moreover, anonymous papers seem to arouse unconstrained appreciation and criticism. On the one hand, students appreciate greater spoken interaction, and on the other hand, however, some less initiative students in group discussions are even less initiative because of the reduced individual responsibility when performing the task.

The latter can be improved after the other two stages of peer review are carried out.

In the second type of peer review students have to read somebody else's paper. In this case, papers are not anonymous any more, which removes a possibility of harsh criticism, and each student is asked to express his/her own point of view. Classroom discussions, in this case, become like conferencing since the oral review/group discussion in many cases arouses the author's response, especially towards any criticism. Like in the first case, the 'visible' role of the teacher is limited, s/he is not exposed to the original draft; students are expected to make use of one another's commentary. In many cases, however, they refer to the teacher for commentary. Apart from the general instruction, the teacher may also offer some guidance into the main points to be considered when reviewing RPs. Students have also to be encouraged to speak and express their own attitudes, especially at the beginning. After the discussion, papers have to be improved and handed in to the teacher.

The second type of peer review seems to pose several problems. At the beginning students tend to abstain from expressing individual attitudes, especially pertaining to the most controversial issues or criticism. They usually express some generally positive views and praise the papers more than criticize them. Like in some oriental cultures, they are 'hesitant to offer comments on their fellow students' papers for fear that they might hurt other

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[1] The approach was amply demonstrated by Mr Don Dunmore during a series of workshops (February 2000) within the Project *English for Academic Purposes* launched by the British Council Lithuania in Vilnius.

students (Connor 1996: 114)[2]. However, the task dependency principle (one task leading to another, like in the task when the second draft should be produced on the basis of the first one considering the peer review results) at all stages of RP writing[3] usually raise their motivation and encourage them to offer some criticism, too.

One of the shortcomings of this type of peer review is that the author might be misled by his/her peer's commentary or have some of his/her major errors skipped. This might be a result of different academically able students working in the same group and each paper being reviewed by one reviewer only. That is why in some cases much depends on the learner's ability to benefit from the group discussion that follows individual reviewing or to have the third type of peer review implemented.

In the third type of peer review, the volume of individual input is much greater. However, it is only effective after the first two types have been already mastered. When the students realise that they are supposed to write their second drafts on the basis of the one under review, they tend to produce reviews/oral annotations of high quality and thus, gradually gain skills of individual work.

Technically, the third type of peer review is realised in the following way. All drafts are attached to the classroom walls with a scotch tape. Students go around the classroom, read the drafts and take notes. Afterwards they revise their notes and get ready for the oral review.

One of the advantages of this type of peer review is that students receive commentary for their paper from different people, possibly, of different academic abilities. Peer pressure is much less probable.

Among the disadvantages of the task is that it is time consuming. It takes up much more creative energy and work, too.

It should be noted in this context that the authors might question the validity of their peer's comments and take the final decision whether to make the changes or not.

The role of the teacher, in this case, is minimised in that he/she does not interfere in the process, but is rather observing it. The patronizing pattern is gradually dropped.

To sum up, an attempt to consistently implement peer review in RP writing in English by non-native speakers has proved to bear fruit. Considering the cultural background, it is not surprising that initially it was not too effective and not too smooth. By diminishing the amount of patronising

guidance of the teacher and his/her interference into the learning process, peer review has finally turned out to be effective not only in reviewing 'global' aspects of content and organisation (as pointed out by Cresswell 2000: 236) but also in observing the consistency of using tense forms, passive forms and other linguistic features. Of course, this might have been due to the fact that I worked with students of languages who are more sensitive to linguistic information in the text than any other students.

In the three models described above, the role of the teacher could be roughly likened to that in the cycle described in Cresswell's self-monitoring model (2000: 239), where students' reviews and the teacher's response follows one another and is recycled at a higher level. As a result, the student produces a further draft based on the previous. The scheme amended for classroom activities only includes the spoken element instead of the written one.

Conclusions

More specifically, the investigation has shown that peer review is effective in several aspects, namely:

- The theoretical model is mastered with the purpose of realising one's individual project. When reviewing the peer's paper, the student has to see whether it conforms to the model requirements.

- Reviewing the peer's paper on the above theoretical model develops one's skills in writing a RP in general in that the skills become transferable to writing RPs on a number of other research questions.

- After the RP model becomes interiorised, the acquired skills raise the writer's awareness of the genre conventions.

- Peer reviews are effective in chain-type tasks with the second task based on the first one.

- Group discussion provides an opportunity to see many more interpretations of the paper and to benefit not only from the peer's remarks, but also from the discussion when working on the second draft.

Peer review/evaluation, if applied in English as a second language learning/teaching context, fosters a more individualistic approach and develops one's personal initiative, responsibility and involvement in the learning process and could be well spread in writing RPs in other disciplines, too.

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[2] I would tentatively assume that the principle holds good for the (post)-totalitarian society as well.
[3] It is particularly effective in writing RP introductions, which has three moves with each of them split into several optional and obligatory steps. To produce a coherent introduction, it is written in steps. For example, in Move 1 (establishing a research territory) there are two steps: claiming centrality (optional) and review of previous research (obligatory). The students are first asked to produce literature review. After the peer evaluation in class they work on the second draft of their literature review and alongside, include claiming centrality, which is an optional but frequent step. Afterwards they proceed with the other two moves (establishing a niche and occupying the niche).

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Recenzavimo metodas mokslinio darbo rašymo kurse

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamas studentų darbų recenzavimo (*peer review*) metodas, taikytas dėstant mokslinio darbo rašymo kursą Vilniaus universiteto anglų filologijos specialybės trečiojo kurso studentams. Metodas buvo taikomas trimis pakopomis, kurios aprašomos straipsnyje. Recenzuojant atsižvelgiama į keletą aspektų: straipsnio struktūrą, minčių dėstymo nuoseklumą ir logiką, kalbos ypatumus. Metodo efektyvumo buvo siekiama kartu diegiant grandininių užduočių principą, kai antroji užduotis atliekama remiantis pirmosios rezultatais (*task dependency principle*). Recenzavimas ypač efektyvus ugdant studentų atsakomybę už mokymąsi ir diegiant besimokantiesiems individualaus darbo įgūdžius.

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