Shared writing:
Students' perceptions and attitudes of
peer review

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The purpose of this study is to consider the effect of the peer review process on writing anxiety. Does peer review foster a feeling of equality between the writer and reader and thereby reduce the writer's apprehension, or does it actually have the reverse effect–increasing anxiety due to the tension created by showing a paper to someone other than the teacher?

Introduction

Much has been written regarding writing anxiety (Raimes, 1984; Gungle & Taylor, 1989) and its effect on the writing process. Similarly, peer review has garnered its share of attention (Fox, 1980; Holt, 1992; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Mittan, 1989). Much of the research has indicated the positive effect of peer review on the writing process and ultimately, the writer's product. In Fox's study (1980) of first-language (L1) writers, he noticed a substantial reduction of writing apprehension as a result of student-centered writing instruction. Mittan (1989) notes peer review's impact on students' confidence in their writing. By working together, students realize the similar problems and difficulties that their peers share and feel less isolated. In Mangelsdorf's study of peer review in the ESL composition classroom (1992), she explores its value from the students' viewpoint. Her data revealed that most of the students viewed the process as beneficial, specifically to content and organization. However, 77% of the negative reactions were concerned with the limitations of their peers and lack of trust in their peers' abilities to critique the papers. She suggests careful organization and preparation of the review session by the teacher might prove helpful.

There is very little research, however, regarding the possible negative effect of peer review on writing anxiety. In a diary study done by Winer (1992) on graduate students in a teacher training program for ESL writing, we see a number of comments indicating a sense of apprehension at the idea of sharing writing with peers:

> I for one didn't take too kindly to the idea of some 'stranger' looking and making comments at my work....It's one thing to be labeled stupid by the teacher...and quite another to be ridiculed by a fellow classmate. (65)

> I despise having other people (peers) critique [my work]... (69)

Winer notes the students' "fear of exposure of one's work to peers" (65), but also the sense of unease at having to give criticism. George notes that peer pressure establishes an "unwritten code based on mutual protection [which] will inhibit honest, productive evaluation" (in Harris, 1992:48). Considering these aspects, (i.e. concern about being embarrassed and the subsequent pressure to keep back negative evaluation so as not to embarrass), it seems important to study students' perceptions of peer review.

The Study

The study was conducted at a weekly writing workshop. The three-hour workshop began with a one-hour writing seminar. The seminar dealt with a particular aspect of writing each week, such as doing research, organization, brainstorming and editing. The students were then divided into two groups. One group consisted of those students who had brought outside work with which they needed one-on-one help. These students met with a tutor for a one-on-one writing counseling session. The other students, meanwhile, worked through writing a draft on a topic of their choice. Usually these students brought the essay back to the workshop on following weeks and continued working through the various stages of writing: choosing a topic, free writing, developing a draft, and so on.

The workshop consisted of, on average, five to ten non-native English speakers, most of whom were graduate students or professionals. The number of students varied as the same students did not come all the time; perhaps two to three of the same students were consistently present. The workshop was run by a facilitator who conducted the seminar as well as led the free-writing and conferencing sessions. Occasionally a guest lecturer would present the seminar. An average of two to three native English speaking tutors were on hand for specific questions during the free-writing or for individual conferencing sessions.

Methodology

In order to elicit student views on peer review and writing conferencing, a questionnaire (Appendix) about student opinions and feelings was given. Over the course of two weeks, 29 questionnaires were handed out to all present: participants, tutors, lecturers, and the facilitator. Though they were filled out at the workshop, only 19 of these questionnaires were returned. The responses came from twelve NNS participants, two NS participants, three NS tutors, one NS lecturer, and one NS facilitator. The NNS participants included four Japanese, four Brazilians, two Chinese, one Mexican, and one Israeli.

Results

Questionnaire

The responses to the questionnaire showed some interesting patterns. When rating comfort level in writing in first and second language, 79% of the students ranged from comfortable to very comfortable in their first language; and, 74% ranged from middle to uncomfortable in their second language.

Table 1: Comfort Level in Writing

	very comfortable			very uncomfortable			
	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total
L1	8	7	2	1	1	0	19
L2	0	1	8	6	1	3	19

It would seem that most students are comfortable when writing in their first language, yet this comfort level decreases noticeably when writing in the second language.

When asked which aspects of writing were easier and which more difficult, "getting started" was listed by 53% of the participants as the most difficult. Forty-seven percent of the participants listed "organization" as the easiest task, while 38% listed it as the second most difficult aspect of writing. While there was no difference between NS and NNS writers in the ranking of "organization" and "getting started," the 21% of the participants that chose "conclusion" as the second easiest aspect were all NNS.

Other difficulties listed were doing research, discussion sections, spelling and grammar, and for one student "everything" was difficult. A total of 25 comments were listed under the question of difficulty, as opposed to the 17 responses for the question

of ease. In general, students were aware of more areas of difficulty than of ease in both L1 and L2 writing. Through the wide range of responses to the question, it is clear that writing is a very individual process where areas of ease and difficulty vary greatly.

Table 2: Aspects of Writing

| | EASY | | | DIFFICULT | | |
	L1	L2	Total	L1	L2	Total
organization	5	4	9	2	4	6
getting started	1	0	1	5	5	10
conclusion	0	4	4	0	2	2
other	2	1	3	3	4	7

With regard to peer review, 44% of the L1 writers asked peers to check their papers, and even then, most felt anxious or embarrassed, but found it helpful and necessary to get someone else's feedback. Those who did not use peer review cited a lack of confidence in their own writing as the reason. Ninety-two percent of the L2 writers used peer review, but noted more negative feelings about it than positive: "I feel depressed since I am confident in my own language"; "I feel anxious, embarrassed and delicate"; "not comfortable, really"; "even though it's corrected, I don't feel that's the best description of my idea." One student expressed decidedly positive feelings toward peer review: "English is no problem. Since my English is not my mother tongue, I can make excuse even if I make grammatical mistakes or I write awkward expressions. So, I feel relaxed."

Those NNS writers who did not use peer review, listed a lack of confidence as their reason. As one writer said, "Absolutely not, for I am little confident in writing." This echoes the sentiments of the NS writers whose lack of confidence in their own writing was the reason for not using peer review. This lack of confidence defeats the purpose of peer review: to encourage a writer's development in the relative security of one's peers. It would seem that the problem here might not be the lack of confidence in writing, but the fear of being ridiculed by peers.

When asked if participants found peer review to be helpful, 100% of both NS and NNS writers answered in the positive, even those who vehemently refused to use peer review. Each participant seemed to understand the value of the process, citing grammar and vocabulary as specific areas where it could be helpful:

> A second person can catch some minor mistakes (grammar, vocabulary) that I may have skipped. (L2 writer)

...because of my weak grammar knowledge... (L2)

...to catch surface errors... (L1)

I always need spelling correction. (L2)

...they help me regarding the specifics of English...(L2)

Participants also expressed the benefits of different perspectives and objectivity that peer review provides as well as help with clarity:

...different perspective to consider... (L1)

...they can see it from my side, but be more objective than I am...(L2)

...helpful to clarify overall organization...(L2)

Finally, discussing a piece of writing with a peer was seen to help in the development of new ideas:

...to further my ideas... (L1)

...it is helpful to get a second opinion, new idea, a start when I'm blocked... (L1)

Similar to the wide range of perceived difficulties in L1 and L2 writing expressed earlier, the uses and benefits of peer review are interpreted very differently. While some saw it as a more technical tool to aid spelling or grammar, others saw peer review as a joint process in the understanding of content.

The final question asked whether they would rather review their writing with a peer or with a tutor or teacher. This question elicited a wide range of answers. Twenty percent said they would rather review with a peer. They listed a variety of reasons. One L2 participant felt that "a tutor/teacher might not be able to see the sort of problems that a peer would." An L1 writer noted that her peers were fellow "professionals" who would be experienced in the field. The trust of a good friend also seemed to be a factor when choosing a reviewer for L1 and L2 writers. Another 20% would prefer to review a paper with a tutor or teacher because they "respect [the teacher's] knowledge of language better than with a peer" (L1 writer) or because "he can explain me in technical grounds" (L2 writer). Forty percent said either peer or tutor/teacher was acceptable:

if the peer or tutor are knowledgeable on the topic and have an interest in reading my paper, then I'm happy to have them read it. Expertise and

interest are more important to me than whether it's a prof or a tutor/peer. (L1 writer)

Both would be fine, if they are willing to comment on my writing. (L2 writer)

The final 20% noted that they would not review their writing with anyone. One L1 participant explained, "I like to do my own reviewing. I occasionally will discuss my paper topic but I never have anyone review it once the writing has begun." Another L1 writer expressed her discomfort: "I hate reviewing my papers with anyone—I am extremely self-conscious about writing. Writing is extremely painful for me—to the point of physical illness."

In analyzing the varied responses to the questionnaire, it seems all participants were aware of the benefits of peer review, whether or not they used it, but each approached it with different expectations, with varying levels of comfort, and with distinct opinions as to its applications. The responses to the questionnaire showed that while all students recognized the value of peer review, most felt nervous about sharing their writing. Considering the level of anxiety expressed in this small survey, writing teachers might want to conduct a survey of their own students before implementing peer review.

This topic is open for a great deal of further research. This study involved only graduate students who all were in different fields and for whom we can assume a certain level of writing proficiency both in L1 and L2. Also the writing workshop was a voluntary situation. The students *chose* to come; this already suggests a certain willingness to work with others on writing. The tutors were interested volunteers. As one student noted, expertise and "an interest in reading my paper" were important factors when deciding a reviewer. It would be interesting to see a similar, and more detailed study done on high school students where the competition among the students might be higher. A study where peer review is obligatory for the writer and the reader would also be interesting.

I also would suggest a further distinction be made between L1 and L2 writers and the anxiety involved in their writing. A study on whether L2 writers used a native speaker or a non-native speaker to review their papers, might shed some light on the reviewer selection process. Is a NS friend considered removed from the peer circle as a result of his/her language knowledge? Does a NNS choose a NNS reviewer because of the empathy a fellow L2 writer might feel? Does the purpose of peer review differ between L1 and L2 writers? Additional research into which aspects of peer

review create the most anxiety for L1 and L2 writers would be helpful for ESL writing teachers.

In this study, techniques such as audio tape of peer reviews and observations might have been more suitable, but were not employed because the facilitator never used peer review in the workshop during the three months I attended. Further research into peer interaction (additional interviews, observations and audio or video taping) during the review process might prove valuable.

Appendix

Questionnaire

First Language: _____

1) How do you feel about the writing process?

	Very comfortable			Very uncomfortable	
In your first language	1	2	3	4	5
In your second language	1	2	3	4	5

2) What part of the writing process do you find the easiest (e.g. getting started, organization, introduction, conclusion, editing, etc.)?

_____

_____

The most difficult?

_____

_____

3) Do you ever ask a friend/peer to read or check your writing?

First Language:_____   Second Language:_____

If yes, how do you feel about it?   _____

_____

If no, why not? _____

_____

4) So you find this process helpful? Why or why not? _____

_____

_____

_____

5) Would you rather review your paper with a teacher/tutor or with a peer? Why?

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