

Responding to second language poetry: Critical self-reflection on peer review activities in the Japanese EFL classroom

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Abstract

Peer review is regarded as one of the useful activities in the L2 composition classroom. However, peer review seems to be a challenging task to Japanese college students and it does not work very well in the Japanese EFL classroom. The aim of the current study is to explore how teachers can involve second language (L2) writers in peer response in order to polish their L2 poems. This article begins with the reviewing the literature on peer review in L2 contexts and describes some challenges and issues of the activity while critically reflecting on the author's approach to incorporate peer response activities for reviewing L2 poems into the first-year college English classroom. It also proposes practical guidelines for teaching poetry review in groups in the Japanese EFL classroom.

Issues of peer review in second language writing research

A controversial issue in second language (L2) writing research is how the writing teacher responds to student writing (Casanave, 2004; Ferris 2002, 2013). L2 writing scholars have discussed the issue from different aspects: treatment of student errors (Ferris, 2002); teacher and peer feedback (Leki, 1992; Truscott, 1996); direct and indirect feedback (Mirzaii & Aliabadi, 2013; Paltridge, et al., 2011); oral and written feedback (Telçeker & Akcan, 2010; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Paltridge, et al., 2011).

One of the crucial perspectives in this area of research is how teachers can help students to improve their writing (Casanave, 2004). Some L2 writing scholars believe that peer review (also called peer response and peer feedback) is an effective approach for improving L2 learners' writing skills in the composition classroom (Fujieda, 2007; Zhu, 2006). According to Liu and Hansen (2002), peer response refers to

“the use of learners as sources of information and interactions for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other’s drafts in both written and oral formats” (p. 1).

This is a type of collaborative learning through which one writer respects and empowers other writers, responds to their own writing pieces, and provides some feedback to improve their writing.

Paltridge et al. (2011) assert that there are three advantages of peer review in L2 contexts: raising awareness of writing issues, developing language proficiency, and community building. The first benefit is to build the sense of audience in L2 writing. A peer response activity allows L2 writers to receive immediate responses from actual readers. The second merit is that L2 writers can develop language proficiency in the target language. The task of giving and explaining comments in the target language to peers enables students to use English in authentic contexts with consideration to how they can communicate their messages to an audience accurately and appropriately. The third advantage is the building of community. Since a peer response activity is conducted with classmates either in pairs or groups, students are encouraged to work closely with their classmates. They can also get help, advice, and feedback from others in class and perhaps outside the classroom.

While previous studies have described some positive impacts of peer review on written performance in the ESL/EFL writing classroom, this activity seems to be challenging to Japanese college students and it does not really work well in the Japanese EFL classroom. There can be some assumptions of why a peer review activity among students does not work well. The first assumption is that Japanese students are unfamiliar with the notion of peer response; in this case, they do not understand the purposes, benefits, and reasons of engaging in peer preview. The second assumption is that Japanese students, in general, have a faulty assumption that the first draft of their papers is the final one; in other words, they do not understand the value of revision. What happens in this context is that they are inclined to submit their papers as soon as they finish writing. The third assumption is that Japanese students are not good at critiquing other students’ papers. They may be afraid of bothering their classmates by providing critical (or negative) comments as their responses. This results in students simply praising peers’ texts and the writer

has no idea of how to use feedback for the revision. The fourth assumption is that L2 writers are heavily dependent on their teachers or tutors to improve their writing (Ferris, 1995). In this situation, they do not take peer feedback seriously as a form of literacy practice nor do they use it for their revision. Overall, L2 writers' lack of knowledge and experience of peer review may result in the failure of the language activity. From this perspective, it is crucial for the writing instructors to teach what the concept of peer review is and how to do it. However, how can they train L2 writers to make a peer review activity effective and meaningful?

The aim of this article is to explore effective ways for teaching and involving students in peer review in the Japanese EFL classroom through which students read their classmates' L2 poetry and provide feedback for the revision of their poems.

Critical self-reflection on peer review activities in the Japanese EFL classroom

This section is based on the author's critical self-reflection on his teaching practice of peer review activities in the Japanese EFL classroom. A personal narrative is used to analyze and piece together what was happening in my peer review sessions. The theoretical and methodological underpinning behind this narrative inquiry is the usage of personal stories as a tool for constructing meaning (Pagnucci, 2004) and "hearing voices and appreciating the diversity of lived experience" (Hanauer, 2010).

I have taught English to first-year engineering students in a coordinated program at a national university since 2011. As a course requirement, I assign my students to create a book of haiku in English. The series of processes to create the booklet is as follows: understanding the concept of haiku by reading a Japanese traditional haiku; reading English haikus written by both ESL and EFL learners; composing haikus in English; revising the poems; designing the book of haiku. In order for the students to revise and polish their haikus, once a semester I have a teacher-student conference to meet each of my students and discuss their own haikus. In addition, I incorporate a peer review activity into my 15-week lessons.

In the 2011 spring semester, which was my first-year teaching in Japan, I held a peer review activity in class. I explained the concept of peer review and described a step-by-step process for the activity on PPT slides before my students actually did so on their own. The description of the peer review activity was as follows:

Make groups of 4-5 students. Swap your notebook in your group. Now, you have a classmate's notebook. Choose one haiku and then read the poem carefully. Then, write YOUR UNDERSTANDING or INTERPRETATION of the poem in Japanese.

(My PPT Slides, May 19, 2011)

I walked around the classroom to check how my students were working in groups. I checked from one group to another and I realized that they were literally doing peer review but their approaches were different from what I had been expecting: one student corrected misspellings or grammatical mistakes; the other gave such comments as “This is great!” or “I like it”; still others read the haiku, but left no comments in their notebook. I just wondered what was going on in the classroom. In this lesson, the peer review activity did not really work out.

After the lesson, I reflected on my pedagogy. There were three possible reasons why the peer review activity had not worked well: my students were not familiar with peer review and did not understand what they were supposed to do; it was difficult for them to read haiku critically and give constructive feedback; and they might have misunderstood that they had to write something good for the poems as their responses. There might be other reasons that made the activity unsuccessful, but I believed that my explanation was not clear enough and I should have provided more explicit instruction with examples.

In the 2012 spring semester, I had a chance to teach the same course again. I designed exactly the same lessons as in the previous year: a peer review session was incorporated into the course after my students finished writing their first haiku. Reflecting on my experience of conducting a peer review session, I added a few slides to illustrate beneficial and weak examples of feedback. I defined a “beneficial” comment as one which helps a student (or writer) to revise and polish a haiku. Some examples of beneficial comments were as follows:

- *This poem is nicely described, but it may be better not to use a word “happy” directly in order to express your feeling.*
- *This haiku describes the situation when you are very surprised to watch Tsunami on TV and it frightens you.*
- *This haiku is too general, and you should focus on a particular moment. For example, you describe the moment when you look at the ocean in Okinawa. Is Okinawa’s ocean different from the one in Niigata? If so, describe the difference.*

(My PPT Slides, May 23, 2012)

On the other hand, I defined a “weak” comment as one which is useless in revising a haiku. Weak comments were as follows:

- *This is a good haiku.*
- *This is perfect!*
- *No mistakes!*

(My PPT Slides, May 23, 2012)

After teaching the concept of peer review with some examples of feedback, I explained what my students were supposed to do in the activity. This time, I prepared the following description to make a peer review session successful:

Make groups of 4-5 students. Swap your notebook in your group. Now, you have a classmate’s notebook. Choose one haiku and then read the poem carefully. Then, complete the following two tasks:

1. *Use a dictionary to check the syllables and count how many syllables are used in each line. Write down the number of syllables in your notebook.*
2. *Read the haiku again and write YOUR UNDERSTANDING of the poem in Japanese. However, don’t correct grammar or any mistake. Focus on the content: What is your interpretation? What FEELING or EMOTION does the writer try to express in the text?*

(My PPT Slides, May 23, 2012)

Some students still wrote judgmental comments such as “This haiku is good,” but contrary to the activity in the previous year, their comments mirrored their own responses for the haiku they read and could probably be used to polish the poem. However, in general, their feedback was very short, about one or two lines long. It does not necessarily mean that longer comments are always better, but writing our own interpretation may be longer than that. This peer review activity somehow worked out in terms of being able to draw their attention to content rather than grammatical accuracy in the poem, but it was not up to my expectations. I wondered how I could have my students provide longer and more meaningful comments. I thought it might be better to hold a peer review session all together in class before they were divided into groups: in other words, perhaps I needed to guide and lead my students in a peer review activity. More

specifically, by having students read a haiku, review it and discuss what comments could possibly be provided, in this way they could gain a better understanding of peer review.

Practical guidelines for reviewing L2 poetry in the Japanese EFL classroom

Various approaches for teaching peer review can be applied in the Japanese EFL classroom depending on the purpose of the writing activities. One of the key perspectives in the teaching of poetry writing is to put the writers and especially their voices at the center of the writing process (Hanauer, 2011; Iida, 2012). In addition, poetry writing enables L2 students to pay more attention to content than structure (Chamcharatsri, 2013). In this sense, a peer review, especially a poetry reviewing activity can provide opportunities for L2 writers “to see how an audience interprets and reacts to their voice and intent” (Iida, 2010, p. 32). Of particular importance in this activity is for the instructor to have students focus more on content than on grammatical items. Taking haiku as a genre of poetry writing, a peer review session is served in the following three steps.

Step 1: Instruction of peer review:

A peer review workshop starts with the discussion of the concept and purpose of the activity. As discussed above, just teaching the notion of peer review is not sufficient for Japanese students to engage in reviewing a haiku; instead, the instructor should train students in the review process by presenting a haiku such as the one below:

A bright red maple

Whispering among green leaves:

A start of new life

(Iida, 2010, p. 32)

The instructor asks students to spend 10 to 15 minutes doing the following tasks:

1. Count how many syllables are used in each line. Write down the number of syllables in your notebook.

2. Write down your interpretation of the haiku. The following questions may guide you to explain your understanding of the poem:
 - What is the season? What is a seasonal reference in the haiku?
 - What is a theme of the haiku?
 - What emotion does this poet try to express in the haiku?
 - What is the story behind this haiku?

After each student finishes reviewing the above haiku, the instructor explores it and discusses the poet's voice and intent. Doing so helps students to understand what is really meant in the poem. Then, the instructor asks them to work on the follow-up activity:

“You understand the poet’s voice and intent. Go back to your notebook and carefully read your interpretation of the haiku. Compare the poet’s voice and your interpretation. How different are they? If you find out any difference, how can you modify the haiku in order for the poet to express and communicate his voice more accurately? Write down your concerns in your notebook.”

Once students write their own thoughts in their notebooks, the instructor leads a class discussion to have them share their own comments for revising the above haiku. The purpose of this activity is to show students what can be changed and how to revise the haiku reflecting on peers’ comments. The instructor also reminds them to provide constructive feedback consisting of their descriptive comments rather than judgmental responses. As Gebhard and Oprandy (2004) assert, taking a prescriptive and judgmental stance prevents teachers from exploring and improving their language teaching (and/or learning). This perspective is crucial in developing students’ L2 literacy skills and it can be applied to peer review activities in poetry lessons. Descriptive and nonjudgmental comments provide students with ample opportunities to polish and improve their poems while exploring how to express their emotions more accurately. It is, therefore, necessary for the instructor to teach students to provide descriptive and nonjudgmental comments as their responses in the peer review session.

Step 2: Peer review in groups

As discussed above, the poetry reading activity involves textual analysis and meaning construction (Hanauer, 2004). In addition, it is important to incorporate structural analysis into

the peer review activity, because haiku is a three-line and seventeen syllable poem in which the first line has five syllables, the second line has seven syllables, and the third line has five syllables.

First of all, students are divided into groups of four, and two pairs are formed in each group. After they swap their notebooks, students engage in both structural and textual observations to understand the writer's voice represented in the haiku according to the following instructions:

1. Prepare a (electronic) dictionary and check how many syllables are used in each line. Write down the number of syllables in each line.
2. How do you interpret this haiku? Write your interpretation from the following aspects:
 - What is the season? From which word(s) can you determine that season?
 - What is a theme of the haiku?
 - What emotion is contained in the haiku?
 - What does this poet want to express in the haiku?
3. Next, a pair of students explains why they feel the way they do about the haiku. In so doing, they have opportunities to receive both oral and written feedback and understand how his or her voice is interpreted by a reader. This activity helps students to develop "a strong sense of writer-reader interaction" (Iida, 2010, p. 32). During this discussion, it is also necessary for the instructor to have students discuss and clarify how to revise the haiku to express and communicate their voices more accurately.

Step 3: Revising haiku

Once students finish discussing their own haiku, the instructor gives them 10 to 15 minutes to revise or rewrite it. During this process, the instructor reminds them to use some comments from their classmates for the revision. When students finish revising their haiku, they conduct another round of peer review with a different student in the group. The instructor may ask them to choose and read a haiku that is different from the one chosen in the first round of peer review.

Conclusion

The current study has explored effective ways to conduct a peer review activity by reflecting on the author's teaching practice in the Japanese EFL classroom. There can be various

teaching approaches for peer review sessions depending on the tasks and genres of L2 writing. One of the successful approaches for the peer review activity is for the instructor to explicitly teach the purpose of peer review and demonstrate how to review poems before students actually start to work on the activity in groups. More importantly, this study suggests that the instructor needs to counsel students to provide nonjudgmental and descriptive comments which can possibly be used to polish their poems in order to make peer review more effective and meaningful.

Author note

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