Use of Peer Revision and Editing in ESL / EFL Writing [1]

MARY MEINECKE, UNIVERSITY OF MONTERREY

Introduction

The concept of peer editing is not new. In Dunning and Redd's (1976) summary of their fifty years of writing research, they identify six tenets of writing instruction. One of these tenets is: 'Students need help during the writing process' (p. 2). This help may come in the form of feedback to the students on their writing. It may seem that having to write feedback to the thirty or forty students we have in each class is a titanic task, but feedback does not necessarily have to come exclusively from the teacher; it can also come from other students in the form of peer revision and editing. By implementing peer revision and editing, the teacher is encouraging the students to give, solicit, and respond to feedback in their writing. Additionally, peer editing can be used for any level of English; this is not a tool for exclusive use at the advanced level (Byrd 1994). Obviously, the tasks done by the students in this activity will vary according to their level and fluency in English.

This article aims to address the following points:

- · The nature of peer revision and editing
- · Advantages of peer revision and editing
- · Some practical tips for classroom use
- · Keys for making peer revision and editing work in the classroom

Peer Revision and Editing

Writing is a process of starting out with an idea, writing it down on paper, and then revising, editing, and correcting the written work to make it clearer and more understandable. The process involves continuously writing, reading and rewriting until in the end you have the draft which best expresses your original idea as closely as possible. Indeed, this process of improvement and correction is true of any language learning activity. Accepting the widespread idea in education and ESL that the teacher has the role of a facilitator, teachers can turn their classrooms into collaborative communities of self-sufficient learners. Grant-Davie and Shapiro (1987) suggest that the teachers need to re-evaluate their role as examiners who spend great amounts of time evaluating each students' writing, and to assume that of facilitators who help and encourage students to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses and then improve upon their strengths and overcome their weaknesses. In addition, many respected teachers and writing experts have recommended the use of peer revision and editing in teaching writing in both L1 and L2. According to Villamil and de Guerrero's study (1998) on the impact of peer revision at the university level, 74% of the writers incorporated the comments and changes from peer revision in their final drafts. Additionally, Joyce (1997), in her study evaluating the use of specific teaching techniques for improving the writing of 7th grade ESL stu-

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dents, found significant improvement in students' writing due to the use of peer editing.

However, while many investigators mention only peer editing, I will take the process one step further and call it peer revision and editing. Why? Because in the revision stage the editor offers comments and additional information or examples that could be included to clarify and support the main idea, looks at unclear sections, and offers comments about the organization and sequence of ideas in the written work. Once the writer has read the editor's comments and rewritten the work, the editor checks the writing again and corrects the spelling, punctuation, grammar, and transition and signal words. This review of the text is the editing stage of the process. In other words, revision checks the content while editing checks the mechanics or syntax of the writing (Gaudiana 1981). In each stage of revision or editing, the editor will review or read the text several times to look at specific areas.

I define peer revision and editing as the correction and feedback of written work carried out among classmates. Students can simply exchange their own texts or the teacher can give out an anonymous sample for students to revise and edit. In this paper, the student who wrote the piece of writing is referred to as the "writer" and the student who will be revising and editing, as the "editor". The revision and editing part of the writing process is done in class under the supervision of the teacher while the rewriting of the text can be done outside of class.

Advantages of Peer Revision and Editing

The advantages that editors, writers, and teachers receive from this process are:

The Editors:

1. Develop tools for the evaluation of written work

2. Learn critical thinking skills

3. Learn to recognize errors such as misspelled words, grammar errors (e.g. subject-verb agreement), etc.

4. Learn to correct errors and identify problems in their peers' writing as well as to transfer these skills to their own writing.

5. Learn how to evaluate both the form and the content of the writing, thus giving the students a much more developed sense of the writing process, and a better awareness of spelling and punctuation rules, etc. This, in turn, helps the students understand how they, themselves, will be evaluated later on by the teacher.

6. Are made more sensitive to the grading process.

7. Can use their peers' work as a source of ideas and vocabulary.

The Writers:

1. Receive feedback on the form and content of their work

2. Are given an opportunity to correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation mistakes, clarify unclear language and improve their writing.

3. Get ideas and suggestions for content.

4. Are made aware that other students have similar writing problems (Hafernik 1983).

5. Are made more sensitive to the grading process.

6. Can use their peers' revisions as a source of ideas and vocabulary.

7. Are helped with their language acquisition and development.

8. Learn to deal with and accept constructive criticism and suggestions.

The Teachers:

1. Play their role of facilitator by providing the students with practice to fully develop their writing and language skills.

2. Save time with their own revision of students' work because many errors will be corrected before the final written draft reaches them.

3. Allow their students to become more self-sufficient learners and writers.

4. Receive fewer student disputes over the grade assigned to their written work (Johnson 2001).

5. May see an improvement in the classroom atmosphere because students learn to depend on each other for help and support (Hafernik 1983).

As can be seen, this approach is beneficial for both the teacher and the students, "because the process teaches [students] many things better than [teachers] can" (Kirby and Liner, 1988: 230), and it allows students to become more self-sufficient and not to have to depend on the teacher to correct every error.

Some practical tips for classroom use

1. Have the students bring a rough or first draft of their written work to class. It is preferable that the rough draft be handwritten to avoid problems with plagiarism and to encourage creativity. Have the student-authors write their names on the texts.

2. Have the editors write their names on the written work too. Explain to the students that all great writers give their rough drafts to their editors for correction and feedback several times before the manuscript is published and the same will be true in this class.

3. Have students exchange papers. Tell the students they will be the editors of the particular written work they have received. The teacher may need to supervise the appropriate exchange of papers.

4. Give specific instructions as to what the students are revising or editing for. First comes revision, then the editing. The editors check for things the writers should already know or have specifically learned in the class. A clear focus is central to the process so that the students know exactly what they should be concentrating on.

5. In addition, students should use all available resources, i.e. other students, the teacher, a dictionary, a grammar book, a guide to punctuation rules, etc., to achieve better, clearer, more coherent, and more comprehensible writing.

For example, with beginner students who have written a paragraph about what they did the previous weekend, the editor would be checking for, in the first

phase of revision, the organization and sequence of ideas and the clarity of the content (See Appendix A). In the second, editing phase, the editor would circle and correct any misspelled words and check that all verbs are in the appropriate tense. (See Appendix B) Students should have access to an English-only dictionary during the editing process. By using an English-only dictionary, students are forced to think in English which is actually the idea or point of the class. Many times when students use an English-Spanish dictionary, they try to directly translate from Spanish to English with the end result being a text that sounds strange and in addition, the author's original idea has been changed or lost. There are clear differences between written work in Spanish and in English, e.g., the length of sentences in written Spanish is much longer than in written English.

With an advanced group that has written a five-paragraph essay on "the effect of movies and television on people's behaviour," the editor would underline all the topic sentences in the first stage of the revision; second, verify that all supporting sentences relate to the topic sentence of each paragraph; and third, give suggestions on any details or specific experiences that could help make the essay more convincing and complete. In the fourth reading of the text, the editor would circle and correct any misspelled words. In the fifth stage, the editor would circle the signal words (e.g., in addition, on the other hand, etc.) and would suggest any other signal words that could be included. Once again, students should have access to an English-only dictionary and a list of signal words during this editing phase.

At the end of the revision or editing period, have the editors return the written texts to the writers. Then the writers read the comments and take them home for a rewrite. At the end of several rounds of peer revision, editing, and rewrites, the writers turn in all their revisions or copies for evaluation by the teacher. The teacher only glances at the revisions to verify that the student has been constantly working on the written text. Only the final revision is looked at in detail.

Variation

Omaggio has suggested that "the class editing process may be most effective if students work on anonymous writing samples provided from outside their own group, thus eliminating any reluctance to critique the samples for fear of hurting someone's feelings" (1993:339). Hafernik (1983) has also recommended using anonymous writing samples. These samples can come from previous semesters or from another group in the same semester. The teacher could identify the writer by assigning random numbers to the papers or by using the students' identification or student numbers. Thus, the editors only see a number instead of a name. Using this approach, each student works with a different text.

Another option, which is excellent for first-time practice in the classroom, is for the teacher to choose one written work and mask the student's name. The sample can come from the teacher's classes of previous years or another class. The teacher photocopies the sample and gives it out to the class to revise and edit together. This is an excellent activity for the students to get training in using the peer revision and editing process. If the teacher has access to an overhead projector, I highly recommend making an overhead transparency of the written sample, as this truly facilitates the process, because the students can clearly see the specific suggestions for changes they decide on as a class.

Keys for Making Peer Revision and Editing Work in the Classroom

1. Present the peer revision and editing activity in a positive way to the class.

2. Students need to understand that all edited drafts and rewrites will be turned in and evaluated by the teacher on a specified date.

3. Students need to feel comfortable knowing that they will be exchanging, revising, and editing each others' work throughout the semester. Think of your classroom as a collaborative learning environment.

4. Designate a time each week for this activity, as feedback and correction are an essential part of the writing process.

5. Students must be coached on the methods (Hafernik, 1983).

6. Students should be encouraged to pay particular attention to edit what they should already know or have studied in class.

7. Give students a checklist or specific questions to help them focus on specific points.

8. The teacher needs to direct, guide, help, and answer students' questions during the peer revision and editing process. Several students will probably need help with editing. It is most helpful if the teacher randomly checks the editors' work during and after the editing phase.

From my experience, when first implementing this activity in the classroom, students usually feel self-conscious and possibly threatened by the criticisms and suggestions of their fellow students. Some students will not be critical enough at the beginning to avoid hurting other students' feelings. However, as the students gain more experience and learn that the criticism and suggestions actually improve their writing and also their grades, they loosen up and become more comfortable and accepting of the peer revision and editing activities. I have even had students demand peer revision and editing. They do not just want to turn in their writing to the teacher directly without having received some feedback from their classmates first.

In addition, the practice of changing editing partners every week or month allows the students the opportunity to work with editors with different skills and fluency levels in English and in writing. Secondly, each new editing partner brings a new perspective and ideas for improving the content. Furthermore, some students tend to work well together while others do not. In conclusion, by rotating the pairs of writers and editors, the student has the opportunity to receive different ideas and perspectives on topics, be exposed to a larger variety of English skill levels, and get to know more of their fellow students.

Conclusion

Peer revision and editing can be beneficial for both teachers and students in the language learning process. Application of this approach in the classroom shows that peer editors help their classmates detect problems in order for them to improve their writing. Moreover, this approach helps teachers save time and allows their students to become self-sufficient writers and learners, which is actually the "true goal" of teaching and learning a language.

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Appendix A

List of Possible Peer Revision Tasks (Content)

1. Underline topic sentences
2. Check clarity
3. Check coherence
4. Check logical order
5. Check that all supporting sentences relate to the topic sentences.
6. Offer suggestions for improvement
7. Circle any parts that are not clear or understandable
8. Give feedback on …….
9. Write comments on ….
10. Offer suggestions on…..

Appendix B

List of Possible Peer Editing Tasks (Syntax)

1. Correct misspelled words
2. Check subject-verb agreement
3. Check for appropriate verb tense
4. Check transition words (first, second, then, after, before)
5. Check signal words (for example, in addition, on the other hand)
6. Check format (format given by teacher)
7. Correct run-on sentences
8. Correct punctuation