Guided Peer Review to Improve Students' Essay Writing Competence: A Classroom Action Research

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Abstract

Feedback in oral as well as written form from both teachers and peers is commonly practiced in language learning at all levels. However, there are a limited number of researches referring to the effect of peer feedback on essay writing competence. Peer feedback can promote independent learning, yet, it may raise questions on its reliability. This study tries to reveal whether guided peer review gives any significant improvement on young adults' essay writing performance on their achievement test. Eight students of the One Year English Program at LIA Pramuka were involved in several sessions of essay writing activities, followed by peer correcting sessions guided by peer review checklist, and revising sessions. Pre-test and post-test were used to determine the improvement on such aspects of essay writing as organization, content, grammar, and vocabulary. It was found that most participants became more aware of how to write a well-organized and comprehensive essay although few still cannot perform well at the post-test. In contrast, this study revealed that peer checking cannot significantly help the students write well-structured sentences and choose appropriate diction. Since this study involves a small number of students, further research engaging more students and in more varied levels are encouraged.

Key words: *peer review, peer review checklist, essay writing, writing competence, young adult.*

INTRODUCTION

The idea that language mastery is a kind of life skill leads today's language learning to treat writing in the target language as an end product which makes it one of the main terminal objectives of the classroom activities. When it comes to adult learners, the demand becomes greater since language learning does not merely aim at learning a language for tests and scores. They need to be able to use the language to fulfill their needs, not only during their process of study in higher education but also at work later. Unfortunately, students still have lack recognition that writing is important in their lives which then leads them to resistance to writing (Martinez, Kock, and Cass, 2011). Thus, for better engagement, writing tasks can be represented in various kinds of such real-life genres as writing a short story to entertain readers, writing a product knowledge as promotion, writing a news article to recount and report current issues, writing a manual to explain how to operate a device, writing an argumentative essay to share certain opinion, and many others.

Since writing is predominantly product-oriented, learning to write in a foreign language indeed involves as much anxiety (Jahin, 2012) either from the internal factors or the external factors (Martinez, Kock, and Cass, 2011). From the students themselves, they may find it unpleasant to express their feeling and thoughts through writing because of a low level of confidence or poor basic writing performance. Then, they choose to withdraw or procrastinate, instead of resolving the matters. Anxiety may also occur because of high expectation for writing across the curriculum which burdens them with tasks beyond their abilities (Martinez et.al., 2011), or even because of inconsistent and vague feedback from the teachers, which later makes the students confused, passive, or frustrated (Williams (2003) in Jahin, 2012).

Therefore, Jahin (2012) highlighted the need for teachers to create a sense of community within the EFL classroom during writing activities to provide sufficient opportunity to cooperate in groups or pairs so that they can overcome their anxiety in doing writing assignments. Theoretically, Jahin (2012) explained that the concept of peer review is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) theory which deemed social interaction an essential element for cognitive learning and accorded great importance to language in human thought development. In the case of the practice among university students, Jahin (2012) reported some previous studies revealing various positive effects of peer-reviewing not only on the writing aspects such as the writing process and the writer's product (Lundstrom and Baker, 2009), new ideas and vocabulary enrichment (Jahin, 2012), and improvement on the content and organization (Mangelsdorf's, 1992), but also on the psychological aspects such as students' confidence (Mittan, 1989), less burden (Kurt and Atay's, 2007), and a sense of audience (Mittan, 1989). Other studies also underlined more benefits of the implementation of peer feedback, instead of teacher feedback, such as enhancing learners' focus on meaning, autonomy, cooperation, interaction critical reading, analysis skills, and involvement in helping each other (Tsui and Ng, 2000, in Zhang, 2008), and Jeremy Harmer, 2007 in Sultana, 2009).

Truscott (1996 in Zhang, 2008) said it will be much effective if the students are actively involved in recognizing their own and also their peers' mistakes so that they can make more comprehensive and grammatically well-accepted writing. As highlighted by Chang (2016), peer feedback activities equally help student writers and student reviewers in vocabulary enrichment, good sentence, logical organization, new perspectives, and self-introspection. Moreover, Tseng (2010, p.24-25) mentions that critics from peers challenge them to explain why they write in that particular way and be aware of presenting facts or arguments logically. Discussion or even debate with peers offers a bargaining situation because there is less threat (Rollinson, 2005, cited in Sultana, 2009). The students may not feel inferior to argue because they think that they have the same level of language competence and knowledge. Paul Rollinson (2005, in Sultana, 2009) adds that peer feedback makes learning more student-centered and more supportive. Furthermore, some studies have revealed that peer feedback had a positive impact on writing skills (Al-Jamal, 2009, in Farrah, 2012), helped students have standards of good writing, and qualified them to be thinkers and writers as well (Yang, 2006, in Farrah, 2012). Besides, the teachers would not have to spend so much time responding to each essay repeatedly.

Despite its benefits, peer feedback is also challenging because as adults develop their self-esteem and self-respect, they become more aware of themselves as individuals, and as a result, they do not welcome critics. Yet, the condition can also turn out differently, as they are getting older and mature, they learn to adapt better with people around them and learn to provide constructive criticisms as well as to tolerate or accept criticisms (Sultana, 2009). Some other challenges that should be overcome are the students' reluctance, low self-confidence, and reliability (Sultana, 2009). Therefore, the students should undergo some training or practices to make them able to conduct peer review fairly well. Some linguists suggest training in the form of watching a video (Zhu, 2001, in Zhang, 2008), using broad categories (Tsui and Ng, 2000, in Zhang, 2008), or in collaboration (Lockhardt and Ng, 1995, in Zhang, 2008). This study uses a peer review checklist to ensure that the students give feedback on the required items correctly and appropriately. Wang (2014, in Chang, 2016) stated that a checklist or rubric in guided review helps raise writer's and reviewers' awareness of the writing criteria and direct the attention to the global writing issues, other than merely grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. By learning to evaluate their peer's writing, students hopefully can internalize criteria of good writing so that they can apply them to future writing situations and can boost their awareness of the importance of writing in their lives.

In terms of genre, essay for adult learners can cover analytical/expository and argumentative essay since it is closely related with their final paper assignment before graduation. Analytical/expository compositions are usually designed to explain, analyze, interpret, speculate, evaluate, persuade, or reflect on certain issues (Olson, 2003, p.161). Some other linguists also add such purposes as to inform, clarify, define, or instruct via logical analysis which can be in a form of comparison and contrast, cause and effect, problem and solution, definition, examples, and logical division (Bander, 1983; Blanchart and Root, 2004; Folse et al., 2001). On the other hand, argumentative writing is meant for writers to embrace a particular point of view and try to convince the reader to adopt the same perspective or to perform a certain action (Nippold, Ward-Lonergan, & Fanning, 2005, in Chase, 2011).

Writing an essay offers learners authenticity in the process and the product as well. Students are trained to organize facts and opinions towards certain topics into convincing arguments to make people believe and follow what they say. This fits the idea of learning a language at the macro level which emphasizes the content and organization (see Ur, 1996, and Lainuddin, 2004). At this level, students are encouraged to express themselves using their own words, to state and achieve a certain purpose, and to specify a particular audience. Paying attention to the content will make the message well-crossed while the organization will put the message to make it easily and appropriately understood.

Regardless of the intention and term, these kinds of composition usually have a three-part structure consisting of an introduction, main body, and a conclusion (Olson, 2003) and its fundamental ground lie on the thesis which all arguments and logical supporting facts focus on to create a strong organization, a logical order, clarity, unity and coherence, and smooth transitions (Olson, 2003). Former insight from Toulmin (1958, in Chase, 2011) proposed a model of argumentation that was not different, consisting of claims, data, and warrants. Yet, however long the format is known, oftentimes the students present the ideas randomly without following any principle of the organization (Tseng, 2010). The organization becomes very important since the different purposes of writing may yield different developments (Folse et al., 2001, in Tseng, 2010). Content is also important because it should be organized in such a way to make it easy for the readers to get the gist of each paragraph and the whole essay. Jahin (2012) even believes that focusing the writing more on the content (rather than on the grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics) can lessen the students' anxiety. Thus, students will write more confidently and willingly. But it does not mean that no attention is given to the grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, since those aspects can also influence the meaning.

Furthermore, writing is not a one-way process activity. A writer might need some time to think of what details he/she needs to include supporting his/her main discussion. For a well-organized and well-structured composition, a writer applies such writing processes as pre-writing, composing, and post-writing, as proposed by some linguists such as White and Arndt (1991) and Tompkins (1994) (see Zhang, 2010). The same thing also applies to students when dealing with a writing assignment. They plan by having some discussion in small groups and writing an outline, then start writing the essay. In some cases, they can get their essay reviewed by the teachers or peers, and finally revise it. This means that well-organized and well-structured writing gets through a cycle of activities before it gets into the final product.

Thus, this study aims to seek how analytical/expository and argumentative essay writing competence of young adult learners at higher education level can be improved by implementing peer review activity guided by a peer review checklist throughout several cycles of the writing process.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study implemented three-cycle Classroom Action Research involving pre-test, essay writing, peer-reviewing, revising, and post-test. The participants were eight students of the second semester One Year English Program at LIA Pramuka aged 18 to 25. Pre-test and post-test were conducted to evaluate the improvement on such aspects of essay writing as organization, content, grammar, and vocabulary. The essay writing session involved a pre-writing session in which the participants discussed and brainstormed on the topics in small groups and wrote an outline individually and a writing session in which they developed the outline into an essay. Participants were assumed to have been familiar with outlining and essay writing in the first semester. In the peer-reviewing session, participants were required to read and give feedback on their peer's essay guided by a peer review checklist which was adapted from Olson (2003) and other related sources. Some notes could also be made on the essay paper for more specific comments. After each peer review session, participants read the feedback and revised their essays based on the feedback and the result of the peer review checklist. Informal discussion and reflection were also done to clarify what was going on throughout the process.

The procedures can be seen in detail as follow:

1. Pretest
   A pre-test of 300-word essay writing was conducted on topic one in 45 minutes.
2. Essay writing on topic one (cycle 1)
   a. Group and class discussions on outlining ideas, writing thesis statements, and elaborating ideas were conducted to help the participants aware of content relevance and organization.

b. Participants read each other's pre-test essay and gave comments, based on the discussion in step 2.a., without a peer review checklist.

c. Participants were divided into two big groups to brainstorm details related to topic one. Finally, they wrote a thesis statement and make an outline based on their discussion.

d. Each participant individually wrote a 300-word essay in 45 minutes based on the thesis statement and outline they had discussed in step 2.c. Changes might apply.

e. Students checked their peers' essays guided by a peer review checklist. They could discuss it with other participants while the teacher only clarified what the questions on the checklist meant.

f. Each participant revised his/her essay based on his/her peers' feedback and comments.

3. Essay writing on topic two (cycle 2)
   a. Pre-writing: Participants worked in pairs to discuss and make an outline on topic two.
   b. Essay writing: Each participant individually wrote a 300-word essay based on the outline in 45 minutes.
   c. Peer reviewing: Peer checking was done using a peer review checklist.
   d. Revising: Each participant revised his/her essay based on his/her peers' feedback and comments.

4. Essay writing on topic three (cycle 3)
   a. Pre-writing: Participants worked in pairs to discuss and make an outline on topic three.
   b. Essay writing: Each participant individually wrote a 300-word essay based on the outline in 45 minutes.
   c. Peer reviewing: Peer checking was done using a peer review checklist.
   d. Revising: Each participant revised his/her essay based on his/her peers' feedback and comments.

5. Post-test
   A post-test of 300-word essay writing was conducted on topic four in 45 minutes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of this section is divided into two. The first one will talk about the participants' essays during the three sessions of essay writing to see the original essays and compare them to the revised versions after peer review was conducted. Since the three sessions of essay writing involved pre-writing activities, participants got the chance to discuss the content with a partner and had enough time to think of what they should write. Moreover, peer review and revision were conducted, meaning that the effect of peer review can be directly seen on the revision. In contrast, the second part will talk about the comparison between the pre-test and the post-test essays to see the changes and improvement if discussion with a partner, peer review, and revision were not conducted. Especially, the post-test can be seen to see the delayed effect of peer review activity.

1. Essays with Peer Feedback

   The essays of most participants throughout all sessions of pre-writing, writing, peer review, and revising showed positive impact, especially to the organization and content, with certain exceptions. This result agreed with the findings reported by Jahin (2012). But the same effect did not appear in the grammar and vocabulary.

   a. Organization

   The analysis of the original essay and the revised version from the three cycles showed that the most improvement happened to the organization of the composition. Of all original essays, three of them missed the concluding part and one person missed one of the details in body paragraphs, either because they did not manage to finish it on time or they forgot to include them all. Peer review activity managed to spot this problem and the writers finally had been able to make a better and complete composition in the revised version of the essay.

   All original essays and the revised version had introductory paragraphs and a thesis statement with clear details, except one. This participant did not specify the sub-topics of topic three on his thesis in his original and revised essays. His peer had mentioned this problem but there was not any change. He did great on the previous topics. This might be influenced by the low level of trust in the feedback or he just did not pay attention to his friend's comment. It was also found that three

revised introductory paragraphs were not getting better since one more sentence was added at the end of the introductory paragraph right after the thesis. This made the composition not in a good flow, starting with general, then going to specific, but then going back to general. This messed up the organization.

Most body paragraphs of all original and revised essays were well divided. Only two of them were originally written in one paragraph but then the writers made a change by dividing it into three paragraphs with more elaboration after the peer review. The peer checking activity influenced this since students admitted they noticed it when reviewing their peers' writing and then checking their essay based on the peer review checklist.

Most original and revised essays had concluding paragraphs. Those who missed this part in their original essay finally managed to write a complete essay after they got some feedback from their peers, except one person. This one person was unable to finish both the original essay and the revised version of the second topic. His peer had commented on this matter but somehow he still could not find something convincing to say. It might be because the participant had poor language competence and knowledge.

b. Content Relevance

Though not significant, content is the next best thing from all compositions. Changes and addition were applied to the content of some essays after the feedback and comments were given, for example, those who could not put convincing statements in the detail part finally provided some related proofs and facts. Some students changed the ideas in the introduction with a more closely related discussion or added some more sentences to make the ideas not jumpy. Some others were also able to identify that some of their ideas in the conclusion part went in contrast with the main discussion, so they changed them with more related and supporting ideas. Yet, there was one composition in which the writer ignored the advice to change the conclusion because the ideas went in contrast, making the concluding paragraph irrelevant to the rest of the discussion. Some participants also found difficulties in explaining the details well and connect one idea to another idea and the main topic.

c. Grammar and Vocabulary

Unlike organization and content which improved during the pre-writing, writing, peer review, and revising sessions (in line with the studies reported by Jahin (2012)), grammar and vocabulary did not seem to be affected significantly throughout the same activities. Students only gave few comments on their peers' grammar or vocabulary mistakes. It is in line with research by Pishghadam and Kermanshahi in 2011 which revealed that there were only 15% of adult learners liked to correct their peers themselves in the first place. In some cases, the mistakes were not well-corrected or the well-structured forms were even deleted instead, leaving the ideas of the whole paragraph or essay dangling. Some persons only wrote that there was something wrong with the sentence but the mistake or the location was not specified so that the writer did not make much improvement. This might happen because they have limited knowledge about such grammar features as an adjective clause, parallelism, and passive voice, the kinds of mistakes the participants made most. In some other cases, some participants did not manage to successfully make improvements on such easy mistakes as present tense, modality, and comparison. Peer review seemed much ineffective.

2. Comparison between the Pre-test and Post-test Essays

The findings related to the comparison between the pre-test and post-test essays of most participants showed improvement, especially to the organization and content, with certain exceptions. This result echoes the findings reported by Jahin (2012) and confirms what Paulus (1999, in Farrah, 2012, p.180-181) found about the process of peer feedback that could enhance the quality of the final assignment. However, the same positive effect did not appear in the grammar and vocabulary aspects.

a. Organization

Analysis of the participants' essays in the pre-test and post-test stages showed that most of them made a significant improvement in the organization of the post-test essay. The pre-test showed that

only one out of eight participants made a clear-cut paragraph of the introduction, body, and concluding parts. He also put the thesis statement at the end of paragraph one completed with the details and he also divided the body part into three different paragraphs based on the details he mentioned previously in the thesis statement. He also had his concluding paragraph. In contrast, some students just put all the things in one long paragraph while some others wrote some paragraphs without any clear division of the ideas which required readers to pay a lot more attention to grasp the gist of each paragraph and its details. Moreover, while that one particular student could write a quite comprehensive introductory and concluding paragraph, the other students just wrote one sentence for the introductory part which was not enough to give sufficient background on the topic, and also one sentence for the concluding part which was also insufficient to conclude the topic.

Positively, the post-test showed that five of them made a better organization in their compositions. All participants' post-test essays included introductory and thesis statements which seven of them had forgotten to write comprehensively back then in the pre-test stage. All of them put the thesis at the end of paragraph one and they also specified the details that they were going to explain. All the completed body paragraphs were also organized based on the details they had mentioned in the thesis statement so that the ideas of the essay were easier to follow. Too bad, only five out of eight persons managed to end the essay appropriately. Out of three participants who did not finish the post-test essay, One of them did not manage to complete the concluding paragraph while the two others only finished the introductory part and half of the body paragraphs. They claimed that it happened because they spent too much time looking for the ideas and this failed them to finish the essay. They realized and admitted this mistake.

b. Content Relevance

A comparison between the pre-test and post-test essays showed that there was an improvement in the content. Since most participants wrote longer introductory paragraphs in the post-test essay, they elaborate the ideas better, making the readers get more picture of what the writers were going to tell. However, only three participants kept the ideas go smoothly while five others did not because their ideas seemed jumpy. For example, one of the participants started with the benefits of having friends but then out of the blue, he stated that he would talk about the benefits of being choosy in picking friends. Another participant suggested not to be choosy but then said that she wanted to talk about the positive sides of being choosy in picking friends. Both students failed to keep the idea go coherently. Fortunately, since all of them included the thesis statement and the details that they wanted to discuss, readers could catch the broad ideas of the essay.

The content of the body paragraphs of the post-test essay also improved. The pre-test showed that they could not explain their position well. Some of them went back and forth saying positive, negative, and positive things again about the topic, or vice versa. Some started with the specific details and then went to the general point of view and then went back again to the specific ideas. Some of them even developed the body paragraphs by narrating stories that did not support their arguments. The post-test essay showed that they finally managed to make better body paragraphs since all of them had a clear stand on what they believed in. Three of them were able to deliver quite strong arguments, four of them tried hard to explain but did come up with a convincing point of view, while one student misunderstood the topic and explained it from a different viewpoint. He explained the effects of choosing bad friends and the tips in choosing friends while his thesis stated that he focused on the negative sides of being choosy in picking friends.

The concluding part of the post-test essay was also getting better because the participants were able to put more ideas although the quality of the idea itself varied. Out of five completed concluding paragraphs, three of them managed to end the essay strongly and convincingly while two others could not put a strong end but restating the previous statements instead. But in general, the content was still in line with the introductory and the body paragraphs.

c. Grammar and Vocabulary

The progress of these items actually cannot be measured solely on the peer correcting activity. It is influenced by their learning throughout the semester in this class and other classes as well and their prior knowledge. In general, there was no much improvement, except for this one participant. He used to make more grammatical mistakes back then in the pre-test essay, though the messages were still understandable. He was able to make better sentence structures with fewer mistakes in grammar and misuses in vocabulary. Two participants could maintain the good quality of grammar and vocabulary use while others made mistakes here and there which ranged from the bearable ones to the confusing ones such as the unclear use of pronouns or the structure of Indonesian English.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

To sum up, peer review on essay writing which is guided by a peer review checklist can mostly improve the organization and the content of the essay. The checklist is useful not only for the students to stay focused when commenting on other people's writing but also for him/herself as a reminder to refer back to his/her writing. Yet, this activity cannot give any significant effect on grammar and vocabulary. Hopefully, this study can give insight that can influence teaching practitioners to apply this method and also can give an idea of how to do this method in the class.

This study is still far from being perfect since it only involved a small number of students. Further studies can be done to check whether it will result similarly if done to a bigger number of students. Inter-rating, which the study could not carry out due to the time constraint, can also be done to get a second opinion and make the study more valid. Studies can also be done to investigate whether the same strategy can be applied to younger learners and whether the same or better result can be gained if peer review to the essay writing is practiced in a longer period.

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