

THE DYNAMICS OF BLOG PEER FEEDBACK IN ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Over the past decade aspects pertinent to the area of feedback have been extensively explored by researchers. While some of the studies show positive effects of peer review, others discuss its problematic areas. In spite of the controversies the new ways of integrating peer feedback in ESL classrooms are being explored. Researchers show an interest in looking into the possibilities of integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in providing feedback to students.

This paper discusses students' experience of receiving and providing peer feedback using blogs that was integrated into a Life Sciences classroom in a private university in Malaysia in the year 2010. While carrying out the research, qualitative research methods were employed. Data were mainly gathered through interviews, peer feedback questionnaire and students' writings posted to their blogs. Students used their blogs as an online portfolio, where they shared their experiences and posted writing assignments based on lessons and discussions. The findings and discussion of this paper may assist practitioners in implementing blog peer feedback process and designing suitable activities for use in ESL classrooms.

1. Introduction

Peer feedback is also referred to as peer review, peer editing and peer response (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Liu & Hansen, 2002). Peer feedback which involves commenting on each other's work seems to have several benefits. Providing an overview of the advantages of peer feedback, Liu and Hansen (2002) state that peer feedback creates an awareness of the needs of the audience by ensuring a collaborative drafting process and in this way, the learners are able to learn English as a Second Language in a meaningful context.

Over the past decade, aspects pertinent to the area of feedback have been explored by academicians and researchers. Some of these studies describe the benefits of implementing peer feedback activities in the classroom while others discuss the drawbacks and constraints of such processes. However, in spite of the controversies, exploring new ways of integrating peer feedback in an ESL classroom is seen as beneficial to practitioners. These new methods include

the possibilities of integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in providing feedback to students. For instance, teachers and learners are embracing blogs in providing and receiving feedback in language instruction.

2. Literature review

2.1. Peer feedback

Peer feedback has been defined as

the use of learners as sources of information, and interactants 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 in the process of writing.

(Liu & Hansen, 2002, p. 1)

As the authors suggest, in the process of peer feedback the participants interact and comment or critique their peers' drafts orally or in the written form. While carrying out this task, students act as if they were a teacher or an editor. Providing some detailed definition, Topping (1998) asserts that in peer review, individuals at similar status take into consideration the "amount, level, value, worth, quality" as well as the outcome of peers' work (p. 250). In this paper peer feedback is defined as students' engagement in the process of providing and receiving as well as sharing of comments and suggestions for the improvement of their peers' work.

The literature on peer feedback mainly focuses on the advantages and drawbacks of peer feedback. While some of the studies show positive effects of peer review, others discuss its problematic areas. For instance, according to the study carried out by Lundstrom and Baker (2009), both givers and receivers of feedback improved their writing ability and also enhanced their critical thinking skills. On the other hand, while discussing the difficulties in carrying out peer feedback activities, some scholars provide several reasons such as students' inability to provide helpful feedback, uneasiness to provide feedback to their friends and the defensive nature of students (Amores, 1997; Leki, 1990).

On a more positive note, Li (2009) states that peer feedback allows students to gain confidence and reduce apprehension by seeing peers' strengths and weaknesses in writing. Therefore, more positive attitudes towards writing are generated. In addition, providing their

views in terms of contexts in which peer feedback takes place, Liu and Hansen (2002) assert that peer feedback not only increases an awareness of audience by creating a collaborative drafting process but also provides opportunities for ESL students to practice English in a meaningful context. However, Liu and Hansen also state that there are limitations in the application of peer feedback in second language classrooms due to students' cultural backgrounds, level of proficiency and the mode of peer feedback.

Yang et al. (2006) also studied the effects of peer response in an EFL environment. Their focus was on whether peer feedback could be introduced into the traditional classroom where teacher feedback plays an important role while peer feedback plays an insignificant part. The findings revealed that peer response could still be successfully instituted in an EFL environment. Therefore, Yang et al. suggest that it is likely that peer response could also be successfully introduced into the ESL environments, as peer feedback is not affected by the dominant culture. They also found that peer feedback, while not always integrated in later drafts, promotes better self-editing skills, therefore, displaying more autonomous writing skills.

Lundstrom and Baker (2009) carried out a study in a similar context to investigate whether it is receivers or givers of peer feedback who benefit most. The authors point out that although the givers and receivers of feedback benefitted equally, students who gave feedback surpassed their peers in their writing abilities. This strongly implies that students are able to look at their own writing in a more critical manner while they participate in the process of providing feedback.

Another study conducted by Lin and Chien (2009) discovered that collaboration with comrade students increased their motivation and encouragement to write. The authors claim that even though at the beginning of the writing process the number of comments on a paper may not be quantifiable, it will greatly assist the students to develop and organize their work in a better way before they start the actual writing.

While some of the above studies suggest positive aspects of peer feedback, other researchers (Amores, 1997; Leki, 1990) point out that peer review is a difficult task. According to them, this is due to various reasons. First, students sometimes do not focus on in-depth matters (Leki, 1990). They do not pay attention to the revising issues and provide unclear and unhelpful comments. Second, students can be sarcastic and critical in their comments. According to Amores (1997), students feel uneasy when they provide comments on their peers' drafts. Also

students can be defensive when they receive criticism from their peers. They might feel hesitant to accept the comments if they are not sure of the validity of these responses. However, if the process of peer feedback is carefully planned and based on theoretical foundations, it is hoped that the potential benefits can be achieved.

Peer feedback is rooted in several theoretical frameworks. These encompass, among others, the process writing approach, the collaborative learning theory, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and interaction and second language acquisition (SLA) (Hansen & Liu, 2005). According to Warschauer (1997), the potential of collaborative learning within Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is related to Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Approach. Vygotsky (1978) claims that the construction of knowledge is socially oriented and believes that learning occurs through interactions with and within the environment in which these interactions take place and cultural tools influence learning to a great extent. One of Vygotsky's major concepts, ZPD, refers to the distance between the actual development level of a learner and the level of potential development under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). In short, blog peer feedback is supported by these theoretical frameworks.

In addition, new ways of providing and receiving feedback seem to be beneficial and effective as well. With the shift of focus from traditional methods of giving feedback to computer-mediated feedback, the ways of giving and receiving feedback on writing have changed. This shift has brought about significant changes to the pedagogy of writing (Di Giovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Matsumura & Hann, 2004 cited in Morra & Romano, 2009). In view of this, new technologies like wikis, blogs, podcasts, Twitter and online forums are becoming popular in writing classes. Among these user-friendly technologies, blogs appear to have suitable features and characteristics that can fully support peer feedback.

2.2. Blogs in the educational context

Blog (a log of the web) can be defined as a website with dated entries, presented in a reverse chronological order and published on the Internet. Campbell (2003) suggests that a blog is an online journal that can be updated frequently by an individual and used for personal, educational, and commercial purposes. Moreover, a blog is considered as a channel of social communication and a great educational resource. According to Paquet (2003), there are five features of a blog:

personal editorship, a hyperlinked posting structure, frequent updates, free public access to the content via the Internet and archived postings.

Williams and Jacobs (2004) suggest that blogs are able to support the transformational technology for teaching and learning. Among several scholars who claim the strengths of using blogs as a teaching and learning tool in education, Campbell (2003) states that there are three types of educational blogs that can be used in ESL classrooms; the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog. Moreover, blogs allow students to reflect on one's learning in the process of developing an online portfolio.

There is an emerging body of studies and reviews on the use of blog peer feedback in educational contexts (Chen et al., 2011; Gedera, 2011; Dippold, 2009; Wu, 2006). However, further research is needed on aspects related to blog peer feedback such as students' views on experience of blog peer feedback and methods that explain how blogs can be used to plan various activities in the ESL classroom. The following discussion may assist practitioners when planning, adapting and designing effective learning activities with blogs.

3. The study

3.1. The aims of the research

The main objectives of implementing peer feedback process in this ESL class were 1) to help improve one's peer's paper by pointing out strengths and weaknesses that may not be apparent to him/her, and 2) to help improve students' editing skills. As such, the aim of this paper is to discuss students' experience of receiving and providing peer feedback using blogs as integrated into the ESL classroom. In addition, the discussion of the paper suggests different types of activities that can be carried out using blogs in the ESL classroom, indicating how they can be helpful in developing students' writing as well as editing skills.

3.2. Participants

Students enrolled in a Life Sciences Program in a private university in Malaysia participated in this study. They were competent in basic writing skills and computer skills. The students were studying English as a second language for one year before they went to a degree program in Australia. This research was carried out over a period of one semester.

3.3. Design and procedure

A key aspect in qualitative research is to capture the subjectivity of human experiences (Cohen, 2011). Through the multiple voices of participants qualitative research methods allow the researcher to make detailed descriptions of what is happening in natural settings. When carrying out the present research, qualitative methods were employed to collect data. Data were mainly gathered through semi-structured interviews, peer feedback questionnaire and students' writings posted on their blogs. Students used their blogs as an online portfolio, where they shared their experiences and posted writing assignments based on lessons and discussions.

In order to integrate blogs into the ESL classroom all the students in this class were taken to a computer lab and asked to create their own blog provided by free-of-charge *Blogger.com* service. Students created their blogs in three simple steps. They also designed and customized the features of their blogs depending on their needs and interests. All student blogs were linked to the class blog which was created by the lecturer. Students used their blogs as an online journal, a place for publishing their assignments and writings, and most importantly as a space for providing and receiving peer feedback. On the other hand, the class blog was mainly used for sending guidelines, announcements, assessment criteria and resources such as readings, video clips and links to web pages.

4. Results and findings

To start with, the interactive, autonomous nature of peer feedback needs to be stressed. The rich input of the blog makes learners actively participate in the recursive cycle of learning. Students in this ESL class were mainly involved in developmental writing and after completing their first draft of an essay students published their work in their blogs. These essays were based on the course outline and before they started writing their drafts they were given several options of resources such as links to websites, articles, and *YouTube* video clips on the class blog. What follows is a screenshot of the class blog where the lecturer uploaded resources for the essay on global warming.

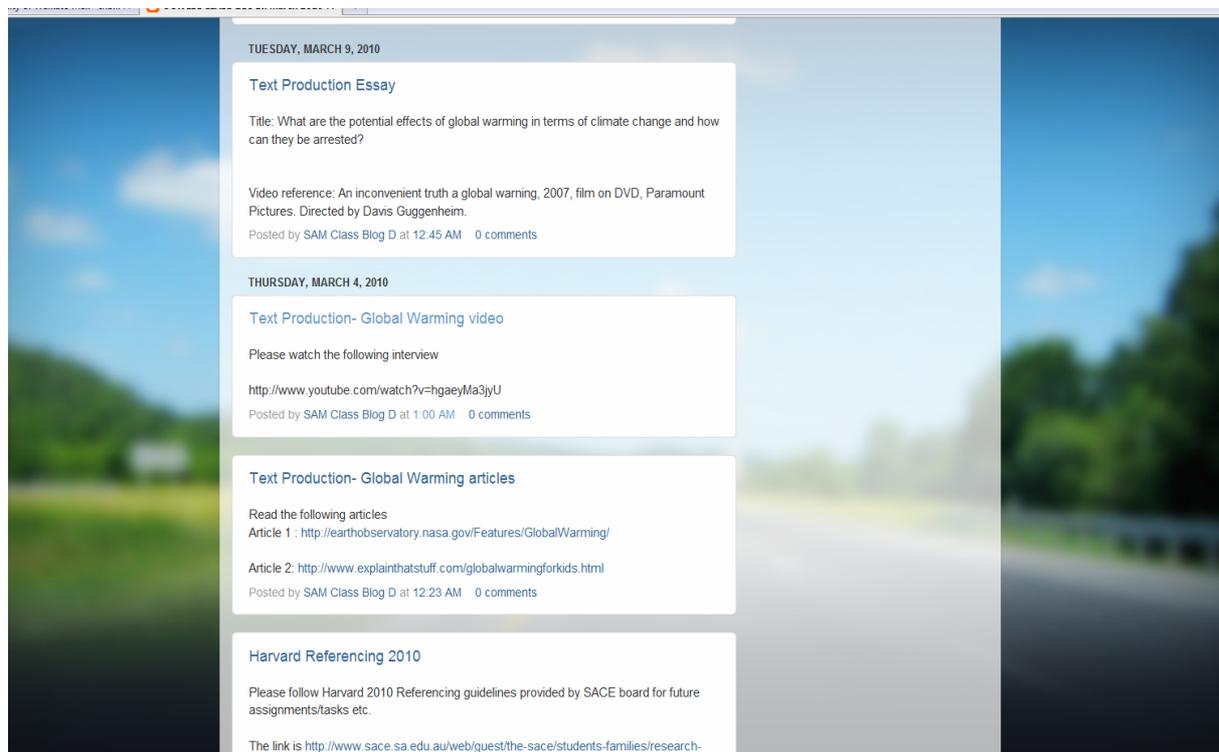


Figure 1: Class blog.

Once the students published draft one of their essay on their personal blog, as the next step, they were asked to provide feedback on their peers' work using the comment feature of the blog. In order to make sure that all the students received feedback, they were given the freedom to appoint two of their friends to provide feedback on their essay. As a lecturer, I believed that allowing learners to choose who they wanted to receive feedback from would make them feel more comfortable. Before the students started providing comments and suggestions on their peers' work, they were given a set of guidelines which could help them to be focused. For instance, they were to check the introductory sentence, the thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting sentences and other grammatical and spelling mistakes that were apparent.

Students were to read the essays assigned to them twice, once to get an overview of the essay, and for the second time to provide constructive criticism for the writer to use when revising his/her work. Figure 2 is a screenshot of peer feedback guidelines posted on the class blog.

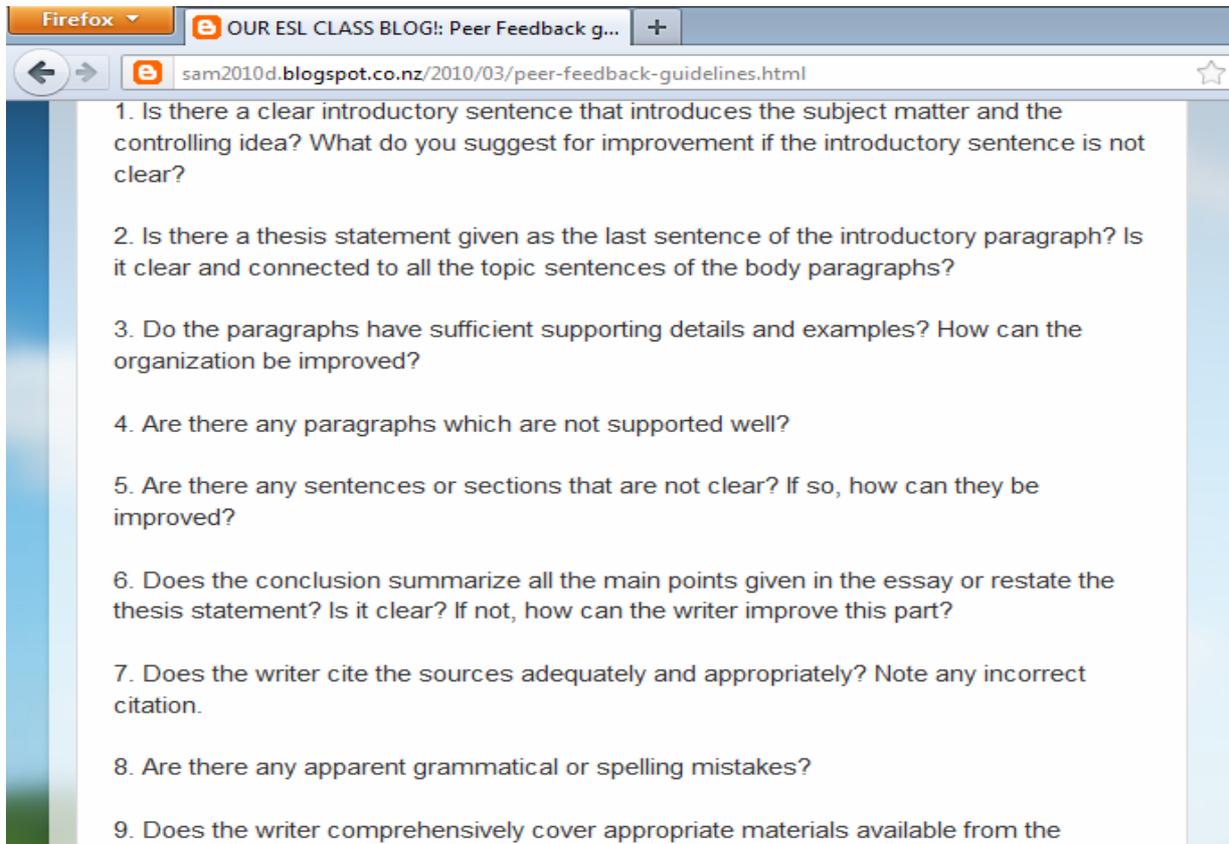


Figure 2: Peer feedback guidelines on class blog.

With the help of peers' comments and suggestions, students were able to revise and edit their first draft and publish the second draft of the essay. Then the second draft of the essay was checked by the lecturer this time and feedback was given to ensure the quality of the essay. As the last step, the final version of the essay was published on their blogs. Figure 3 is a screenshot of peer feedback provided by a student.



Figure 3: Feedback provided by a student on a blog.

Apart from posting their essays on the blog, sending movie reviews to their blog was another activity that was carried out. Students watched a movie that was based on the course outline and they wrote a movie review and posted it on their blog. It was interesting to note that although they were not required to include pictures or movie captions, students had published attractive and interesting postings.

Students were also encouraged to send news summaries every week. Although I did not ask the students to come in and provide feedback or have a discussion on that, it could be seen that the students started discussing the issues mentioned in their summaries. Figure 4 shows such an example.



Figure 4: News summaries and discussions.

The class blog was used to send announcements and reminders to students quite often. It assisted them in organising what they needed to do next and it also provided a place to send important information such as assessment criteria and marking guidelines. Although the number of summaries they were to send to their blogs was specified, they exceeded my expectations.

5. Discussion

The blog feedback questionnaire which was distributed to the students at the end of the semester revealed that 92% of them agreed that peer feedback guidelines were helpful in providing feedback to their peers. All the students followed the feedback guidelines when providing comments and suggestions to their peers. This resulted in fulfilling linguistic as well as pragmatic functions. All the 26 students in the class agreed that posting their writings on a blog is a good idea and 96% stated that receiving and providing feedback helped them to enhance their writing skills. When answering how they felt when they received feedback from their peers, no one claimed that it was embarrassing or they were disappointed and angry. On the other hand, all 26 students agreed that they thought it would be helpful for them to improve their writing skills and they were receptive to constructive criticism.

The activities carried out in the class seemed to be beneficial in many ways. Students' views as well as their writings reflected that sending summaries of news to a blog assisted them in improving their paraphrasing and summarizing skills, as they were to read or listen to news and prepare a summary using their own words. The discussions that took place without the initiation of the lecturer clearly show the autonomous and independent nature that the students developed through the experience of learning with blogs. The vast number of summaries posted on their blogs also reflect the students' enhanced motivation and enthusiasm in engaging in blogging activities.

A comparison of students' earlier drafts and their writings towards the end of the course portrays notable improvement in their vocabulary and grammar. This was also mentioned by the participants of the study.

When stating their opinions about using blogs in the ESL classroom, students pointed out that it is an effective way to receive and provide feedback that assists them to improve their writing skills. Table 1 summarizes the themes that emerged from interviews and blog postings. Students' utterances based on their experiences indicate the ways in which blogs assisted them to improve their writing skills.

Table 1. Themes emergent from interviews and blog postings.

| Themes | Examples |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Interaction/sharing/social skills | “It is a great way to improve my writing skills. It helps to enhance interaction among classmates too. It’s a good way to express my feelings and opinions openly” |
| Motivation/encouragement | “It is interesting. It motivates students to write more, as students now love to access internet” |
| Performance | “It’s a good way of improving students’ performance” |
| Exposure/ audience | “When my friends start posting their essays it reminds me that I haven’t done mine and I do it because if not they will know that I haven’t done yet” |
| Effective/ innovative tool | “A very innovative method of encouraging us to write” |

According to students, providing feedback through blogs also appeared to be less stressful, as they did not need to see the person face-to-face. Generally, if students have to provide feedback orally or in written forms, they do face some unavoidable issues. In some cases, students struggle with their peers’ accents if feedback is oral and they find it hard to read their unclear handwriting if it is written. Carrying out peer feedback process online allows the students to read all their peers’ essays at their own pace, place and time whereas in a typical face-to-face classroom setting they may not get to read others’ essays due to time constraints. Thus, compared with face-to-face feedback, blogs provide more flexibility.

However, a concern brought up by students was that at times they were uncertain about their peers’ mistakes. For instance, one student commented that he was not sure “whether a mistake was really a mistake”. The other concern was that some found it challenging to provide constructive criticism without being rude or hurting their friend’s feelings. In considering these factors, instructors need to be careful when guiding the students particularly at the beginning of the process if their level of proficiency is low. On a positive note, when the lecturer provides

feedback in the next draft, students learn the parts they missed out or they were unsure of. Thus, they are able to learn from their own as well as their peers' mistakes.

6. Conclusions and implications for further research

As research has shown peer feedback is supported by several theoretical frameworks. The collaborative nature of learning through blogs is supported by the Social Constructivist Approach, according to which students learn in social interactions. In addition, using blogs as an online portfolio enables students to reflect on their learning process and provide and receive feedback from more capable peers, thus creating Vygotsky's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). The interactions and sharing of their experiences using blogs enhance the authentic use of the target language, which is highly crucial in the learning process. Most importantly, students can reflect, change or edit what they write as learning is a developmental process and, thus, improve their self-editing skills and become more independent learners.

In addition, blogs facilitate writing to a real audience, hence increasing students' self-confidence and motivation to write more and share their experiences with their peers. Not only students but also teachers and parents are able to monitor and access their work at any time even after months or years, as blogs have a record of what is published in a blog archive. This also helps the students to monitor their own progress and become more reflective learners.

As regards the limitations of the present study, it was carried out only for a period of one semester. Studies carried out for a longer period of time with classes of different proficiency levels would be needed to find out the probable effects of peer feedback on the development of their second language writing. It is also suggested that the teachers should join online discussions students have i.e. on articles, news and steer them towards right directions as well as probe them to view things from different angles. This may reveal whether teachers' presence in discussions facilitated by blogs can make a difference in the quality of feedback they provide to their peers.

In spite of its limitations, the study concludes that blogs facilitate student-centered learning and allow the students to explore and share their learning experiences outside the confines of the classroom.

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