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PEER FEEDBACK: A COMPLEMENTARY INSTRUCTION FOR EFL STUDENTS' WRITING IMPROVEMENT

Sudiyono
sudiyono07@gmail.com

Faculty of Languages and Arts
Yogyakarta State University

Abstract: This paper discusses pros and cons of teachers' and peers' feedback on students' writing. Strength and weaknesses of feedback from teachers, advantages and hindrances of peer feedback are disclosed. In spite of weaknesses of teachers' feedback and hindrances of peers' feedback, both teachers and peers can be useful resources to improve students' writing. This is because both teachers and peers complement each other. Therefore, peer feedback can be a complementary instruction for students' writing improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) that language learners must acquire. In EFL context, writing is considered difficult by many EFL students because it involves many complex factors. As opposed to speaking for example, - as both speaking and writing are productive skills, - writing demands more knowledge of grammar and orthography or spelling. In speaking, for instance, grammatical mistakes are tolerated more than in writing (Harmer, 2004). This is because when spoken language is used, the interaction between the speaker and the listener is direct. It means when the speaker makes mistakes or when the listener does not understand the message, the listener can ask for clarification directly from the speaker. This is different from written language. In written language, the interaction between a writer and a reader is indirect. Here, a reader cannot directly ask for clarification or confirmation when he or she cannot understand the message in the text. That is why correctness and clarity are very important in writing.

In a teaching and learning process of writing, feedback plays very important roles for writing improvement. From feedback, students can learn and realize their mistakes and correct them to make a better piece of writing. In a writing process, feedback can come from teachers or peers. Usually teachers are the main source of feedback because teachers are considered experts or knowledgeable people about writing (Miao, Badger, Zhen, 2006). Tsui and Ng (in Miao, 2006) who studied about the impact of peer and teacher feedback on
the writing of secondary school EFL students in Hongkong, stated that "All students addressed a higher percentage of teacher feedback than peer feedback" (Miao et al., 2006 p.181). In those studies, it seems that students trust teachers more than peers. But in another study, teacher feedback or correction is useless (Chavarria, 2004). According to Chavarria, students make the same mistakes after the mistakes were corrected by her teacher. The mistakes that have been corrected appear again and again. Yet in another study, peer feedback has been effective in helping students' writing development. (Berg, 1999 in Miao et al., 2006). Berg also says that "peer feedback encourages critical thinking" (Miao et al., p.181). From this statement it can be inferred that peer feedback is important to improve students' writing competence. Related to the information above, it seems that teachers' feedback has deficiencies, and other resource of feedback, such as peer feedback is needed as a complementary of teacher feedback in learning instruction.

DISCUSSION

In the teaching and learning process, teacher's feedback is not always beneficial. Some studies show that teacher feedback does not always work in helping students improve their writing. As mentioned by Chavarria (2004), students make the same mistakes after the teachers corrected those mistakes. Other researcher, Truscott, (cited in Bitchener et al., 2005, p.192) also found results similar to Chavarria. Truscott said that "grammar corrections by teacher should be abandoned". "Grammar correction has no place in writing". He said "There was no convincing research evidence that error correction help student writers improve their writing". According to him, grammar correction is harmful because it diverts time and energy away from the more productive aspects of a writing program. Thus, he suggests that it is not necessary for teachers to correct students' grammatical errors. Similar to Chavarria and Truscott, Semke (in Diab, 2005) also questioned the usefulness of teachers' feedback. He said that "corrections did not increase students' writing accuracy, fluency, or general language proficiency" (Diab, 2005, p.29). Other researchers who find that teachers' feedback does not really help students improve their writing are Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (in Diab, 2005). They say "Students' writing improvement was independent of type of feedback and that correction of surface level error was not worth teachers' time and effort even if students claimed to need it" (p.29).

Effectiveness of teachers' feedback is also questioned. Another researcher who sees ineffectiveness of teachers' feedback is Rollinson (2005). He says that "teachers' feedback is not as effective as what has been believed". According to Rollinson, there are many deficiencies in written comments from teachers. He states that teachers' comments are criticized of being "unspecific, incomprehensible, contradictory, inconsistent, inaccurate, and meaningless to
the students, vague, over-general, abstract, formulaic, and idiosyncratic" (p.25). This negatively perceived written teachers' feedback is that because there is no direct interaction between teachers and students so that there is no opportunity to make clarification and negotiation. Students receive written feedback and try to understand the feedback, and then make revision based on their understanding of the teachers' feedback. The revisions that were made by students could be different from what was meant by the teachers. Here, misunderstanding between teachers and students happened.

Another problem related to teachers' feedback is the ratio between a teacher and the students. In classes where the number of the students is too big, it is very difficult for the teacher to give optimal feedback for the students. Miao et al. (2006) gave example about this problem in Chinese university where one class consisted of forty until a hundred students. According to Miao et al. this caused the teachers' feedback became ineffective. Such problems also happened in Indonesia. Because of these weaknesses of teachers' feedback, other alternative ways are needed to help students improve their writing. One of the alternatives is peer feedback.

The second reason why teachers should include peer feedback in their instruction is based on the social constructivism learning theory. According to constructivism, human being learns in the socially situated activity (Storch, 2005). People learn when they interact with others. One of the ways to apply the constructivism learning theory in a teaching-learning process is through pair or group work because in pair or group work students interact with the others. When students interact with others, they get input from one another. Tarnopolsky (2005) who conducted research about creative writing found that the students improved their writing when they worked in groups. In his study, Tarnopolsky asked the students to write a free essay, then they commented on their friends' work in groups. They also had to write a review about their friends' work. When students criticized others' work, they compared others' work with their own work. When criticizing and comparing their work, students learned from others, and used the good points they found in their friends' work to improve their writing. So, pair or group work provides students a chance “to take and to give”.

There are many other benefits of pair or group work. According to Rollinson (2005), when students work in pairs and give feedback to each other, they develop critical thinking because they evaluate others' work. It consequently helps students improve their own work. In his paper, Rollinson mentioned 4 reasons why peer feedback, as a form of collaborative work, gives many advantages to students. First, “peer readers provide useful feedback”. Second, “peer writers revise effectively on the basis of comments from peer readers”. It happens because students consider the peer feedback is “valid” so they are
willing to use the feedback in revising their writing. Another reason why peer feedback is beneficial for students is that it is considered different from teachers' feedback. Peer feedback is usually a result of negotiation between students, while teacher's feedback is usually one way. When students work in a group or a pair and give feedback to one another, they are equal or in the same position. No one is more superior to others, and it makes students feel free to exchange their ideas and to negotiate. This is different from the relation between students and a teacher, where the teacher is superior to the students. The last reason is by “becoming critical readers for others’ writing, students become more critical for their own writing and become revisers for their own work”.

In accordance with Rollinson (2005), Tang and Tithecott (1999), who studied peer response in ESL writing, there are five reasons why peer feedback or group work is beneficial. First, in group work, process in writing is more emphasized than product. This phase gives students opportunities to “get starting...for drafting...for revising...and for editing” together. Students share ideas to evaluate their own works as well as other’s. Second, in communicative language learning, the class activity is student-centered. This is different from traditional method which is teacher-centered, where students are less active. When students work in pairs or groups, they actively learn. Third, when appropriately prepared, peer feedback provides both “comprehensible input and output”. Fourth, peer feedback group, as a cooperative language learning, benefits students in term of “academic achievement and language development as well as in social relation and self confident” (Tang and Tithecott, 1999, p.21). Finally, learning is a result of social interaction. Peer feedback or group work provides opportunities for such interaction. In their study, Tang and Tithecott (1999) found that during working in groups or pairs, students engaged in “the sociocognitive activity of reading, evaluating, pointing to the trouble sources, writing comments, and discussing task procedures” (p.32). In Tang and Tithecott’s research, reading was the first step that students did in peer response session. During the reading session, some students stopped, and acclaimed because they were aware of the problems. They evaluated others’ work and this can make them more aware of the trouble sources. When a student gave comments to one’s work, the others made notes about “the good points, the ideas that did not work, the areas of confusion, and their first impression of the text being presented”. All the activities mentioned above are evidence of sociocognitive activities that are prompted by peer response group as an application of constructivism learning theory that help students improve their writing.

Other benefits of pair or group work were shown by another researcher. Storch (2005), who conducted research on collaborative writing, also found the advantages of peer feedback. Storch carried out her research in ESL writing class in an Australian university. Her respondents were twenty-three ESL
students whose English language proficiency was in the intermediate level. The procedure in this research was, first, students were given a graphic prompt and asked to compose a short text. Students could work in pairs or individually. Students who chose to work in pairs were given a tape recorder for each pair to record their talk when they completed the task. Then, the students who chose to work in pairs were interviewed individually about their experience to write collaboratively. From the study, Storch found some interesting points. The first point is, texts which were produced by pair work were shorter than those produced by individual work, but they are better in term of grammatical accuracy and complexity. Texts produced by pair work have fewer grammatical errors than those produced individually. Pairs also tended to write sentences which were more complex than individual students. Students who worked in pairs used more compound and complex sentences than students who works individually. The second point was students’ perceptions toward pair work and collaborative writing. Most students thought that collaborative writing was a positive activity. Even though there were two students who thought that pair/group work was more suitable for oral activities than writing activities. They thought that writing was individual activities. Another point that Storch found was that collaborative writing provided students opportunities to give and to receive immediate language feedback that students could not get when they worked individually.

Group or pair work create mutual benefit between less-able and more-able students. Im and Chang (1999) found that cooperative learning where students in small groups interacted to discuss problem and exchange information provided less-able students to learn from more-able students. In return, the more students feel successful in helping others, the more confident they write. Another mutual benefit that can be obtained from group or pair work in writing class is from teachers’ side. According to Im and Chang (1999) by grouping the students, “the teacher has several groups rather than fifty individual students to monitor and can spend more time on groups”.(p.139).

Students’ language proficiency in peer feedback attracts attention for some researchers. Kamimura (2006) examined the effects of peer feedback on EFL students with different level of English proficiency. He conducted his research in a Japanese university with two groups of freshmen students majoring in English. Group A was students with high-level of English proficiency, while group B was students with low level of English proficiency. Each group consisted of 12 students. Both group received the same treatment. First, the students were asked to write an argumentative essay as a pre-test. The second step, they were asked to write another argumentative essay as an original draft that would be commented. The third step, the students got training to give peer feedback. The fourth step, the students give verbal peer feedback for the draft made on the second step. The last step, students rewrite argumentative essay
that had gotten peer feedback. After that students were given post test to write another argumentative essay. From his study, Kimamura found that both group got significant improvement in the quality on the post-test. Based on the data analysis, Kimamura noted that group A, who had higher level of English proficiency, tended to make more content and global, discourse-level feedback of the essay, while group B, that had low-English proficiency, tended to make feedback which was more specific and on sentential level. Peer comments led low-English proficiency students produce longer revising essay than the draft. From this study, Kimamura concluded that peer feedback had positive effect on students' writing improvement in term of quality.

The third reason why teachers should elaborate both teachers and peer feedback as complementary in their instruction is that because both sources of feedback, -peer and teacher,- have strength and weaknesses. If previously some studies indicate the advantages of peer feedback, some studies bellows show the contradictory. Some researches show that besides giving advantages to students, peer feedback also has weaknesses. One of the weaknesses of peer feedback comes from cultural aspects. According to Nelson and Carson, ESL/EFL "students who come from countries with large power distance are less likely to value their peer review than students who are from countries with lower power distance, such as students from the USA". (as cited by Miao et al., 2006). Students from China and Indonesia, where "group harmony" is important, tend to be reluctant to criticize their peer. They prefer to keep "face-saving to maintain the state of cohesion" (Miao et al., 2006, p.182). For students from this cultural background, criticism is considered embarrassing. They tend to be over-generous to their friends. Consequently, peer review is unlikely to work in such condition.

Another aspect that may hinder the application of peer feedback is concerning students' language proficiency. Most of the research of peer feedback on ESL involved students with intermediate or high level of English proficiency. Students with low level of language proficiency are considered not capable to give feedback. They have no skill, experience, and knowledge. As Saito and Fujita said"...students are incapable of rating peers because of their lack of language ability, skill, and experience" (as quoted by Miao et al, 2006). Even though in Kimamura's (2006) finding both low- and high level proficiency students got benefit from working collaboratively, Kimamura reminded that the results had limitation concerning the participants of his research and the topic of the essay of the research.

The data above show the weaknesses of teachers' feedback, the advantages and the weaknesses of peer feedback. The next data will show the advantages of teachers' feedback for students. Ferris, as quoted by Bitchener et al. (2005) said that teachers' effective error corrections help student writers. This finding is
contradictory with Truscott's finding mentioned above which said that teachers' error correction was useless. Another positive point of teacher feedback is related with students' belief. Many students think that teachers are more professional, experienced, and trustworthy, and because of this students adopted more teacher feedback (Miao, 2006). Even in some studies, teachers' feedback and corrections are considered as an indicator of teachers' credibility. ESL teachers who do not make corrections are considered not credible by their students (Diab, 2005).

As the research findings show that both teachers and peer feedback have advantages and disadvantages, teachers should implement both feedback in their instruction so that they can complement each other. The ineffectiveness of teachers' feedback which is caused by the number of students which is too big may be solved by group work. As Im and Change (1999) said in the previous paragraph that by grouping students "the teacher has several groups rather than fifty individual students to monitor and can spend more time on groups" (p. 139). Students' unwillingness to criticize and students' lack of experience and skill can be overcome by giving them training. Rollinson (2005) states that "practical and pedagogical" problem of peer feedback can be "alleviated by properly setting up the group and establishing effective procedure, and adequate training" for students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, peer feedback and teacher feedback should be applied in EFL writing class because both complement each other. As Miao et al. (2006) say "The impact of teacher feedback is different. Teacher feedback is incorporated than peer feedback and lead to greater improvement, but peer feedback appears to bring about a higher percentage of meaning-change revisions while most teacher-influenced revisions happen at surface level" (p. 193). Miao et al. also say that peer feedback can "encourage students' autonomy and can be seen as a useful adjunct to teacher feedback, even in cultures which are supposed to grant great authority to the teacher".

REFERENCES


