

# Cultural Dimension of Network-Based Peer Review in Business Writing Courses

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated students' perceptions of their interactions in peer review groups in an ESL (English as a Second Language) business writing course supported by network platforms: QQ, Tencent Classroom and Tencent Meeting. To eliminate the reluctance in commenting on peers' writing under Asian culture context, 21 EFL (English as a Foreign Language) junior English majors were trained to conduct peer reviews using both asynchronous and synchronous network-based methods. Four review activities were observed. The result shows that a writing task turns out to be a process of collaboration rather than simply independent efforts. Peer review training and the practice break the "deadlock" and set students free from the fear of hurting peers' feeling. ESL students acquire the way to make judgment according to accepted criteria, and grow up to be autonomous learners.

**Keywords:** Peer review, Network, Business writing, Cultural dimension.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In pedagogical practices of business writing, the process-focused approach, which emphasizes writing process, including prewriting, multiple drafting, and revising, is considered important in helping learners develop their skills (Ho and Savignon, 2007, p. 269). Now commonplace in Business Communications courses, culturally diverse students' interaction styles and reactions to the adopted pedagogic techniques have been investigated by researchers, but the situation in a monoculture class is rarely studied or concerned from the cultural dimension. Researchers rightly assume that the students are in a homogeneous group, so little consideration is given to the demand of the same cultural background. In Asian culture, students are expected to work hard at essay writing instead of revising, as reviewing the essay is mostly considered to be the responsibility of teachers. However, the U.S. instructional version of hard work in writing classrooms more often focuses on the hard work of planning, writing, and revising, and not on the hard work of memorizing and learning the forms (Carson, 1992, p.54). In business education at university, materials for essays are just a case adopted, not what students have experienced

in reality. So the process to negotiate with others is necessary to collect and check the ideas. In a sense, collaboration in business writing is more significant than in other compositions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Peer Review

Assessment, in higher education, is one of the most important factors; it drives students' learning by providing them with insight into their learning progress as well as information about the intended learning goals and how those can be achieved (Leeuwenkamp et. al, 2019, p.72). According to contemporary concept, learning at university is a process where individual learners are constructively involved. Teachers and students play different roles today from what they did in the past. Teachers are charged with the responsibility for creating an environment that develops students' capacity to undertake the role (Hawe and Dixon, 2016, p.1). This teaching environment includes traditional classroom and virtual classroom on the Internet. And assessment can contribute to the main aim of education, which is to develop in students the capacities of independent, effective and responsible

learning (Black 2015, p.175). In evaluating students, summative assessment as a periodic activity is motivating students externally. However, formative assessment aims to improve learning while it is happening in order to maximize success rather than merely determine success or failure only after the event (Keith Topping 1998, p.249). In this sense, formative way is internalizing the learning process. Among other formative methods, peer review is a collaborative learning process with students commenting on other students' works and being commented by other students. Such assessment is intended to help students plan their own learning systematically, know their own strength and weakness, identify areas for remedial action, and develop their personal and professional transferable skills.

The terms peer review is often used interchangeably with peer assessment. However, peer assessment is mostly used to mean peer grading, a process in which students individually, or in groups, evaluate and assign grades to other students' work, while peer reviews are most often 'used to refer to a formative evaluation done by peers' (Rieber, 2010, p.322). According to Rieber (2010), student peer review has proven an effective technique for improving students' writing in both English and business communication classes. Peer review demonstrates its positive effects in four aspects: students complete the writing assignment ahead of the due date leaving time for the peers to read; students review the assignment directions again when reviewing another student's paper; students submit better writing if they know peers will read their work; students react better to peer comments than they do to teacher comment because peers do not grade and only comment about what they do not understand of ways they think a paper does not meet the assignment guidelines (Rieber, 2006, p.323).

But there exist researches showing the negative effects of peer reviews. Based upon researches about the affective values of teacher-, peer-, and self-directed feedback, Zhang (1995) studied the relative appeal of the three types of feedback in eighty-one academically oriented ESL learners, of whom 86.4% had originated from East or Southeast Asia. The results show that ESL students overwhelmingly prefer teacher feedback (Zhang, 1995, p.209). The learners' unfavorable attitudes towards peer reviews are analyzed and further researched. Asian learners may feel very uncomfortable commenting on peers' writing. So they would therefore hold the negative attitudes

toward peer review (Ho and Savignon, 2007, p.272). Accordingly, cultural background should be considerably taken into account in deciding on the application of peer reviews.

## **2.2 Research Questions**

In contrast to pre-network computer-assisted language learning (CALL), the theoretical foundations for network-based language teaching (NBLT) are social as well as cognitive. While both involve interaction, the interaction in CALL is with a computer; in NBLT, the interaction is with people (Savignon and Roithmeier, 2004, p.266). So inspired by the pedagogical practices during the period of the pandemic COVID-19, the present study records and analyzes both asynchronous and synchronous network-based peer reviews in a business writing course. The following research questions are formulated.

- What types of negotiations do students use in network-based peer reviews?
- What kinds of training do students need for network-based peer reviews?

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

A case study method is adopted to discuss the effect of network-based peer review in the business writing course.

### **3.1 Participants and Setting**

The present research involved 21 EFL junior English majors, four of whom are male, and 17, female. The course is arranged in a public four-year engineering university in an Asian country. All the students are Asians with Chinese as their native language. The 21 students had already taken some courses in linguistics, literature and translation. And the course of Business Writing is a compulsory course for 32 teaching hours in sixteen weeks. The objective of the course is to train students to write business inquiry, replies, claims, adjustment, proposals, reports, and other business documents so as to prepare learners for the employments in business environment. The students are supposed to finish the writing of business document on assigned topics or materials, finally acquiring language skills, learning autonomy and responsibility.

Due to the unexpected occurrence of COVID-19, the teaching couldn't be conducted in traditional classroom, so the electronic classrooms were

organized. To support the teaching practice, several network platforms are chosen: the QQ Group, Tencent Classroom, and Tencent Meeting. QQ Group is used for daily teaching management and communication; Tencent Classroom is only for lectures; Tencent Meeting is chosen to hold video conferencing and presentations.

### **3.2 Procedure**

Before the course, the researcher sought approval from the English Department and designed the course. The regular teaching hours are divided into three sections: peer review training, lectures on basic writing skills and course projects. The present study mainly focuses on the peer review training and course projects.

Liou and Peng (2009) studied the effect of peer review training in four writing assignments with the second and third assignments supplied with peer review training to facilitate the collaborative process. The researches indicate that the students made more revision-oriented peer comments and had more success in revising their compositions. This study benefits from the research result and incorporates peer review training to the writing projects to guarantee the teaching effects. A two-phase training (adapted from Min, 2005) is taken up, with Phase 1 Teaching students how to make comments on essays by former students on Tencent Classroom; and Phase 2 for teacher–student conferences outside of class on Tencent meeting. Guided by the instructor, students work through idea formulation, the first draft, peers conferencing, revising the first draft, and submission for teacher's summative assessment.

Nelson and Carson (1998) investigated students' perceptions of their interactions in peer response groups in an ESL composition class. Under culturally diverse context, they found that the need for consensus, for agreeing with each other, was part of the Chinese students' perceived need for a positive group climate and maintenance of group harmony (p.126), and the Chinese speakers frequently refrained from speaking because of their reluctance to criticize their peers, disagree with their peers, and claim authority as readers (p.127). To eliminate the reluctance in commenting on peers' writing, students do not grade their peers' writings, and all the peer reviews are only for formative assessment in order to relieve students of the worry for relationship.

To prepare students for the peer reviews, asynchronous and synchronous network-based procedures are arranged. The whole class is divided into groups, 5-6 students in one group. After the first draft, each member reads two peers' writings, and feedbacks are given by annotating on the files. The synchronous step is then conducted on Tencent Meeting by playing the annotated writings and exchange ideas at the same time.

After the negotiations and revising, students are asked to submit the final edition of the writing accompanied with a project report to the instructor. The project report covers items like concrete writing skills used in the assignment, the reflection on solutions to difficult parts in the writing and also how the peer review help to finish the assignment.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

Higher value placed on group over individual achievement makes Asian learners reluctant to comment on peer's writing (Ho and Savignon, 2007, p.272). The network-based peer review alleviates the reluctance and paves the way for students to offer constructive comments to other learners. After the training phases, students are clear about the goal of review: to facilitate their peers for a better submission of writing. This is especially true in business writing course, for innovative ideas requires more minds to work together. The pedagogical practice demonstrates advantages in the following aspects: No one is alone in completing the assignments, so collaborative learning environment is fostered by reviewing each other's writing; the reviewed writings mirror the reviewers' weakness and strength in business writing; and the reflection promotes the acquisition of writing skills.

This current study presents the way and effects in coaching students to learn by commenting on peers' writing. The two-phase training was offered concerning the way to give feedback and new ideas on the reviewed writing and to prepare students psychologically ready for the process of peer review in Asian culture.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The present study aims to find out whether network-based peer review activities would have effect in business writing course. We found that under the Asian cultural context, offering comments to each other face to face could bring embarrassment and hence reluctance. This

inclination prevents ESL learners to share ideas and point out each other's errors in writing. But with network-based peer review approach adopted, completing a writing task turns out to be a process of collaboration rather than independent efforts. In fact, participation in networking will not automatically result in increased proficiency, but the peer review training breaks the "deadlock" setting students free from fear of hurting peers' feeling. ESL students acquire the way to make judgment according to accepted criteria, and grow up to be autonomous learners, which is key to lifelong learning.

### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Guiqin Qi.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Financial support from the "The 10th Foreign Language Education Foundation of China (No. ZGWYJYJJ10A044)" is gratefully acknowledged.

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