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"I Could Express Feeling Completely": Inviting L2 Writers to Use L1 in Peer Responses

Bee Chamcharatsri
University of New Mexico

Peer response is one of the most important activities in writing classrooms because it provides a sense of audience to students. At the same time, students also receive feedback for revision. Asking L2 writers to use their L1s in providing feedback to their L1-speaking peers helps them gain confidence in peer response activities, which in turn gives them self-confidence in their writing proficiency. In this small-scale pilot project, L2 students were asked to reflect on their use of L1s providing both oral and written feedback. They reported that students felt they could express their feedback in a more meaningful way. The article concludes with pedagogical implications in teaching writing in both ESL and EFL contexts.

Keywords: L1, oral, written, feedback, affects

Introduction

Peer response is an important activity in composition classrooms as it provides students with a chance to interact and revisit their written texts (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). In L2 writing classrooms, students usually assume that they have to use the English language to participate in peer response activities. While using English is helpful for students in improving their language skills, they may face challenges in providing written responses to their peers. Yu and Lee (2014) pointed out that “the use of L1 and L2 in peer written comments has been under-explored” (p. 29). In responding to this under-researched topic, the following pilot project argues that second language (L2) writers should be allowed to use their L1s with their first language (L1)-speaking peers, when appropriate, in the writing classrooms in the United States.

In peer response sessions, students read and respond to their peers’ written texts; they discuss their feedback with the student writers. During the feedback sessions, students are required to use language in providing and discussing feedback with their interlocutors, which is considered “collaborative dialogue . . . in which [students] are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building” (Swain, 2000, p. 102). Such collaboration between student writers could promote metalinguistic awareness, which Karmiloff-Smith, Grant, Sims, Jones, and Cuckle (1996) defined as an activity that “involves conscious reflection on, analysis of, or intentional control over various aspects of language—phonology, semantics, morphosyntax, discourse, pragmatics—outside the normal unconscious processes of production or comprehension” (p. 198). Especially for L2 writers, Yu and Lee (2016) argued that peer feedback was a collaborative learning space for learners to engage in negotiation of meaning in writing classrooms. In ESL contexts, the negotiation of meaning is generally performed through the English language, which is seen as a mediating tool in peer interactions (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In the ESL context, little research has been conducted with peer feedback in the L1.

Several studies have discussed the use of student’s L1 in peer interactions in both oral and written feedback (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996, 2006; Yu & Lee,

2014, 2016). Antón and DiCamilla (1998) conducted their study with five pairs of English-speaking adult learners of Spanish as a foreign language by asking them to complete a writing task. Their research study demonstrated that the student’s L1 was used for completing the task and maintaining interest. Their results were similar to those in Storch and Wigglesworth’s (2003) study in which they asked six pairs of students who shared the same L1s to “complete two tasks together: a text reconstruction task and a short joint composition task” (p. 762). The study revealed that L1 was used in providing meanings of difficult vocabulary and negotiating certain grammar points. They also found some pairs who were reluctant to use L1s in their tasks even when they were allowed to. This may reflect the learners’ attitudes toward their language learning (Kormos, 2012).

DiCamilla and Antón (2012) conducted another study with a class of beginning learners and fourth-year Spanish majors with a total of 22 participants who were English-speaking adult learners of Spanish as a foreign language. Their results indicated that beginning Spanish language learners used L1 (English) more to solve problems, create, and translate content than the fourth-year Spanish majors. The results of their study were similar to Villamil and Guerrero’s (1996) that L1 was used in “making meaning of text, retrieving language from memory, exploring and expanding content, guiding their action through the task, and maintaining dialogue” (p. 60). DiCamilla and Antón (2012) concluded that L1 was helpful for students who were at the developmental level.

In the EFL contexts, Yu and Lee (2014) conducted their research study focusing on the use of L1 and L2 in peer written feedback with 22 Chinese students. They reported that their participants used “feedback in L1 focused more on content and organization [while] feedback in L2 focused more on form” (p. 36). Because of the limited number of studies focusing on the use of L1 and L2 in peer written feedback, Yu and Lee (2016) conducted another study in China through the lens of activity theory. Through multiple sources of data, they reported that L1 was used in negotiating meanings from reading texts and facilitating group interactions (Yu & Lee, 2016). Overall, results from these limited studies suggest that the use of an L1 can be helpful in peer review interactions. The following pedagogical action research was undertaken to investigate how students felt about using their L1 in an ESL peer review session.

Action Research

The present study is not a traditional research study but rather a pedagogical action research meant to share insights from teaching, not necessarily research findings. The aim of the present pilot project is to investigate the perceptions of L2 writers in providing oral and written feedback to their peers' written drafts using their L1s.

Context

The context of this current project was conducted in a first-year composition (FYC) course, which was designated for L2 writers at a large public university in the southeastern part of the United States. The course curriculum was adapted from the mainstream composition courses. Because this was a college class, the average age of students was 21 years old. Twenty-two L2 students, 10 male and 12 female, in this class came from the following countries: China, Ecuador, Japan, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, and Venezuela. The instructor of this class was a trained teacher-researcher in the field of L2 writing and an L2 writer. The class met three times a week with a 50-minute period for each class. The first written assignment that students worked on was a literacy narrative. The following diagram reflects the peer response trainings:

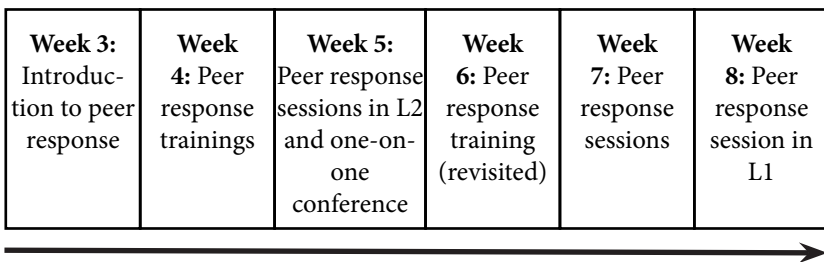


Figure 1. Peer response training

In Figure 1, the peer response training sequence is presented. During week 3, the instructor used a short video clip, *No One Writes Alone* (MIT, 2011), to introduce the peer response activity to L2 writers. After watching the video, students were asked to summarize and discuss what they learned from the video. Then on week 4 the class started the peer response trainings by discussing different types of written feedback (explicit, implicit, questions,

statements, etc.) and their impacts on revisions of subsequent drafts. During week 5, L2 students provided written feedback on their peers' drafts. The teacher collected students' drafts and randomly distributed them to their peers. Students provided their written feedback anonymously. After they finished, the instructor collected their drafts and returned them to the student writers. While students were writing their feedback, the teacher monitored the types of feedback provided by students. Many students reported that they provided little feedback or focused only on grammatical feedback. During the one-on-one conferences with students, students were asked about written feedback they received and how helpful the feedback was. Some students showed the author the feedback they received from their peers, in which the feedback was not helpful in revising their papers.

In week 6, the peer response training was revisited with another set of examples. After the second session of training, the feedback students provided to their peers was more helpful for future revisions; students provided more content feedback by asking questions or clarifications from the writers. By the time the class reached week 7, students were asked to sit in small groups, read their peers' papers, and provide written feedback for 15 minutes. After the written feedback, students were asked to provide oral feedback for 15 minutes to explain their written feedback to their peers. Students found this to be extremely helpful when they worked in smaller groups when both written and oral feedback was provided. During the students' interactions, the author noticed that some students used their L1 in explaining their feedback. Therefore, the author decided to try pairing students who shared the L1s on week 8. Some groups had more than two people. The instructions for the students were to encourage them to use their L1s in providing written feedback for 15 minutes, and then another 15 minutes would be devoted to the oral feedback. After that, students were asked to reflect on their use of L1s in providing both oral and written feedback on their peers' drafts.

Students' Voices

The teacher asked 22 students to reflect on their experiences of using their L1s in providing feedback to their peers, both in oral and written formats. All names used in this publication were pseudonyms. The questions that the teacher asked them to reflect on are the following:

1. How did you feel when you provided oral feedback in your L1?
2. How did you feel when you provided written feedback in your L1?

Oral feedback. Overall, these L2 students felt that they were able to convey the oral feedback easily and with confidence because they received more explanations from their peers. The following were some statements of students' reflections:

- I can explain my ideas and feedback better and it was funny (Maran).
- It was easier because I can explain myself better, but also I felt more confident with my friend (Kong).
- I can tell what I want to tell exactly and we can talk with fun (Osha).
- It was fun. I could express feeling completely (Estaban).
- This was the most effective peer review we ever had (Chatree).
- It's easier to tell something in my friend language than using English (Priti).
- It was very nice activity to provide oral feedback in my first language because we sometimes cannot express what we are trying to say in English (Frida).
- I feel more comfortable than giving feedback in English (Xi).

From the statements above, it appears the L2 writers felt confident and more comfortable in their use of L1s to provide oral feedback to their peers, which supported Storch and Wigglesworth's (2003) and DiCamilla and Antón's (2012) studies that the use of L1 helped students extend their thoughts in providing feedback to their peers. One point to note was that these students were not in their developmental level as in DiCamilla and Antón's (2012) study, but L1 was found to be helpful to them in their peer review activity. Many students also pointed out that they enjoyed using L1 in providing oral feedback. This may be one of the reasons that scaffolding written feedback with oral feedback was extremely helpful to students

for their future revisions. One emergent theme that stood out from these statements was the emotional engagement in the activity. They felt that they could express their ideas and comments freely to their peers. They also felt more confident in using their L1 to provide oral feedback to their peers.

Written feedback. In contrast to the use of L1 in oral feedback, not every student preferred to use their L1s when providing written feedback on their peers' drafts.

- It was fun and felt easy to give feedback. For me, English would be concise though (Banjo).
- Oral feedback was more better [sic] than written feedback (Chatree).
- It was interesting to see how one of my classmates directly translated an expression used in (a language) in the English paper, which makes it hard to understand (Frodo).
- I think I can write more feedback in my own language than in English (Osha).
- I think giving feedback in English is easier (Mustafa).
- It was weird. I am used to write [sic] feedback in English so it was a little harder (Ipu).
- Kind of awkward since you need to criticize one language in another language, not very good (Xi).

As Karmiloff-Smith et al. (1996) pointed out, asking students to reflect on their use of L1 in peer review activity helped them gain awareness of control over their command of languages they know. From the statements above, L2 students had mixed feelings about using their L1s in providing written feedback on their peers' drafts. This may be because of the trainings the students received in the English language. It may also be that they had to translate their written feedback from their L1s into English. One surprising comment was from Frodo, who noticed the negative language transfer from L1 to English. That said, this could be an additional advantage of asking students to use their L1s in providing feedback as it raises their metalinguistic awareness while reading their peers' drafts. To elaborate, these students reflected on their use of L1 in providing feedback in English as an L2; they realized that they did not have many words in their L1s in providing feedback. Others noticed that they preferred to use

English in providing feedback because they were taught to use English, instead of their L1s, in giving comments on their peers' drafts.

Conclusion

Although the use of L1 in the L2 writing classrooms is a controversial issue, we can observe from this action research that L2 writers in this context felt that they could confidently express their ideas and comments. Instead of discouraging students to use their L1s, we need to look at their L1s as another linguistic resource. By scaffolding the peer response activity, students learn what their peers thought of their papers, where and why they needed to revise, and how the revision could be done. Another point is the emotional aspects of the peer response sessions that Yu and Lee (2014) briefly mentioned in their study regarding the affects in peer interactions. As presented in the reflections from students, many discussed that they felt confident and at the same time enjoyed providing both oral and written feedback to their peers.

Pedagogical Implications

Although this is a small-scale pilot project and the result may not be generalizable, this pilot project shows that it is important to invite students to use their linguistic resource (L1s) in peer feedback. Some teachers may feel that asking students to use their L1 could slow down the learning process. The author believes that students should use their own agency in their learning. By offering the options for students to use their L1s, students can decide which language they feel appropriate to use in providing feedback to their peers.

Teachers need to provide different peer response activities to students. By asking students to work in small groups, they could scaffold both oral and written feedback for their peers. Based on the insights of this investigation, it could be said that the use of L1s in peer response helps students provide and negotiate feedback beyond the sentence level. This means that teachers could encourage students to use their L1s where the English language becomes a barrier in providing both oral and written feedback.

Finally, this study discussed the effects of the use of L1 in providing written and oral feedback on multilingual students' drafts in a writing class. Writing in English can be an anxiety-inducing activity for many L2

writers. By asking students to use L1s in different stages (e.g., brainstorming, free writing, working on the first draft, providing peer responses), students may feel empowered and confident in their writing. This could be an approach to change perceptions of multilingual students and motivate them to become more competent L2 writers in the future.

Limitations

This pilot project is focused on the perceptions of students when using their L1 in peer review sessions, but does so with a limited number of participants. In order to conduct a more rigorous research study on this topic, more participants are needed. Also the use of recording devices to capture interactions during the peer review activities is encouraged. Students can then be asked in a simulated recall to watch the video interactions and remember what they were thinking at the time.

A drawback for those who would like to utilize L1 peer reviews is the possibility of having students who do not share L1s in the writing class. Instructors could potentially ameliorate this by reaching out to the Global Education Office to find out whether there are other students with this language background. If possible, the instructor could arrange a 15-minute meeting as a pedagogical exercise for the student writer. The student who is willing to help could be recognized as a guest lecturer or speaker role for the course. Other, perhaps more creative options may be available in individualized contexts.

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