

A Teacher's Perspectives on Peer Review in ESL Classes

Oksana Vorobel and Camilla Vásquez

Abstract

Studies of peer review in ESL classes typically focus on student attitudes and experiences. In contrast, teachers' perceptions of and experiences with peer review have not been the focus of much scholarly attention. This case study explores one experienced teacher's perspectives on peer review sessions in ESL classes. The study was conducted in the English language institute at a large urban university in the southeastern United States between Fall 2009 and Summer 2010. Shelley, the focal ESL instructor, was selected purposefully for her extensive use of peer review sessions in academic reading and writing classes. Classroom observations and interviews were subsequently analyzed using the direct interpretation method (Creswell, 2007). The findings of the study shed light on the process of peer review sessions and their advantages and disadvantages from an experienced teacher's point of view. Triangulation of the data, thick description of the context and procedures, a detailed discussion of the results, and the researchers' reflexivity contribute to the reliability of the findings. With its focus on the teacher's perspective and experiences, the findings of this study may inform educators about the process of peer review and its pros and cons in ESL classes.

KEYWORDS: PEER REVIEW, ESL, TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVES, CASE STUDY

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Introduction

Peer review is an activity that has captured the attention of many researchers due to its complexity and controversial outcomes. Drawing on previous work by Tsui and Ng (2000) and Zhu (2001), peer review is defined by Hu (2005) as “a collaborative activity involving students reading, critiquing, and providing feedback on each other’s writing, both to secure immediate textual improvement and to develop, over time, stronger writing competence via mutual scaffolding” (p. 321–322). Different researchers have used various terms to label this activity, including: *peer evaluation* (Stanley, 1992), *peer revision* (McGroarty and Zhu, 1997), *peer response* (Connor and Asenavage, 1994; Liu and Hansen, 2002), and *peer critique* (Marx, 1990). Because we view this process as a collaborative effort of two or more students who try to help each other with their writing and, at the same time, develop their critical thinking skills, we prefer the term *peer review*. The other terms listed above have additional connotations, such as of assessment (*peer evaluation*), of making changes in the peer’s writing (*peer revision*), of an oral form of feedback (*peer response*), or of negative criticism (*peer critique*). Thus, we consider *peer review* to be a more neutral and general term that best reflects our view of this activity.

In general, peer review is considered an essential and beneficial stage in the writing process (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005; Hu and Lam, 2010). However, as with any classroom activity, there are many factors that may contribute either to the effectiveness or failure of peer review in English as a second language (ESL) students’ learning.¹ For instance, some textbooks mention logistical concerns which teachers may have when planning to include the peer review process in their ESL classes (Ferris, 2003; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005), such as the lengthy preparation needed for peer training in particular, and for peer review sessions in general. In addition, many studies list reasons for teachers to avoid peer review sessions. These include students’ perception of the task of peer review as mainly finding mistakes in writing, the level of feedback that students are able to provide, conflicts that may occur due to cultural differences among students, and students’ preference for teacher feedback rather than peer feedback, to name a few (Carson and Nelson, 1996; Lockhart and Ng, 1995; Roskams, 1999; Zhang, 1985).

In the past, most of the scholarly literature on ESL peer review sessions has focused on students’ perceptions, beliefs, or experiences (Liu and Lin, 2007). For example, Carson and Nelson (1996) conducted a study on Chinese students’ reactions to peer response groups. In a subsequent study, they focused on Chinese and Spanish-speaking students’ perceptions of the interactions in peer review groups (Nelson and Carson, 1998). Zhang

(1995) investigated the affective advantage of peer feedback in a study with participants from various language backgrounds. In contrast, few studies have looked into teachers' perspectives on peer review in ESL classes.

Research on peer review has typically included very little information about the teachers involved in the process. Only a few studies have provided more substantive information about teachers, beyond just their gender, nationality, and teaching experience (exceptions include McGroarty and Zhu, 1997; Saito and Fujita, 2004; Zhao, 2010). However, we believe that teachers' attitudes, approaches, beliefs, and perspectives on peer review sessions play a major role not only in their decisions as to whether to include peer review in their classes, but also in the eventual success of the peer review sessions they conduct. The present study addresses this gap in the research literature by presenting one experienced teacher's perspectives on peer review sessions in ESL classes.

Previous Research

Because of the lack of studies on teachers' perceptions of peer review, the following review of research focuses on those studies which investigated the process of peer review, its benefits, and possible problems. In addition, we discuss one article that includes teacher's perspectives on peer review which motivated us to conduct the present study.

Peer review may be defined as an activity that consists of the following steps: peer review training, students reading peers' writing, and students providing feedback to each other. During peer review training, students learn about peer review and typically practice with a hands-on activity (e.g. reviewing a writing sample chosen by the teacher). In the next step, students read a text that has been written by one of their classmates. Then students provide feedback to a classmate in written and/or spoken form, often discussing and negotiating this feedback.

Several studies which have been conducted with the focus on the training step of peer review shed light on its effect on different aspects of ESL students' writing development. For instance, Stanley (1992) investigated the effects of a relatively long (approximately 7-hour) and thorough peer review training session in one university ESL composition class. Stanley's findings indicated that the ESL students in the experimental group were much more motivated and enthusiastic than their peers in the control group who received a much shorter (i.e. 1-hour) period of training. In addition, they provided clearer guidelines for revising their peer's writing and their comments were of higher quality in terms of: the overall clarity of feedback, the higher frequency of specific responses to problematic

areas in writing, and the quantity and quality of suggestions for solutions to problems.

The quality of peer review training may have an effect on students' development of revising skills and their quality of writing. In Berg's (1999) study, ESL students of intermediate and intermediate-high proficiency levels who received thorough 11-step peer review training (with each step lasting from 5 to 45 minutes) made significantly more changes in meaning in their revised drafts, in comparison to the ones produced by their counterparts in the control group who had received no training at all. Moreover, peer review training resulted in a significant positive influence on the quality of writing, as determined by the Test of Written English (TWE) scoring criteria (http://www.ets.org/toefl/english_programs/scores/interpret/). Similarly, English as a Foreign Language (EFL²) learners at a Taiwanese university could make more revisions of their writing due to thorough peer review training which consisted of two cycles (2 hours each) of in-class modeling of peer review sessions and two half-hour one-on-one teacher-student conferences (half an hour each; Min, 2006). Finally, the peer review training sessions in Min's (2006) study resulted in higher writing quality in terms of development and organization of ideas as well as overall clarity when compared to the prior work of the same students. Thus, after having thorough peer review training, ESL/EFL students became more motivated, provided clear feedback of high quality to their peers, made more revisions, and improved the quality of their writing.

In addition to the studies on peer review training in ESL/EFL classes, several research studies have focused on the effect of peer feedback on ESL/EFL students' writing development. Thus, in Kamimura's (2006) study, as a result of peer feedback, EFL students of high and low proficiency levels in two Japanese university-level classes significantly improved their writing performance based on the holistic scoring of essays produced before and after the peer review. Moreover, both groups significantly improved their revisions in terms of content. Finally, in the Kamimura study high-proficient EFL participants produced longer rewrites compared with their original drafts and focused on the global aspects of writing while low-proficiency EFL participants produced revisions of the same length as their original drafts and focused more on the local aspects of writing after the peer review session.

Peer feedback sessions turn out to be beneficial both for students who give peer feedback and for those who receive it. For example, in a study focused on ESL writers (at beginning and intermediate levels of proficiency), Lundstrom and Baker (2009) offered training on how to provide feedback to the "feedback givers" (in terms of suggestions for improvement) and on how to receive feedback to the "feedback receivers" (in terms of rewriting/

revising an essay). Improvement in participants' writing was determined by pretest and posttest essays, written at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The essays were scored on six aspects of writing: organization, development, cohesion, structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. For beginning ESL students, the study found significant improvement in feedback givers' writing in terms of all six aspects of writing. On the other hand, intermediate ESL students – both feedback givers and receivers – achieved significant improvement in three areas: organization, development, and grammar. In addition, there was a significant difference between the intermediate-level feedback givers and receivers in terms of overall gain scores and in two global aspects of writing – development and organization. Thus, providing feedback can be beneficial for ESL students to improve their English language writing, while receiving feedback may or may not improve writing, depending on the students' level.

Nevertheless, some ESL researchers have claimed that peer review sessions are not as beneficial as others propose because of the tensions that can emerge from the cultural differences of the students participating in the peer review sessions (Carson and Nelson, 1994; 1996). For example, Carson and Nelson (1994) argue that students who belong to collectivist cultures (such as Japanese and Chinese) regard the goal of group work as achieving collectivist success, emphasizing harmony and cohesion within the group, while students from more individualist cultures may instead focus on individual success, even while participating in a group activity. In Carson and Nelson's (1996) study, Chinese students were reluctant to provide negative comments and to disagree with peers and instead focused on trying to preserve a positive and harmonious atmosphere in the group. Although Spanish-speaking students were also concerned about the feelings of their peers in negotiating the feedback in the peer review session, they did not hesitate to provide critique and to disagree, prioritizing the need to help the peer with writing above maintaining the social harmony of the group. Thus, different culturally influenced orientations during group work may affect students' behavior in peer review groups and may even undermine the success of the peer review session as a whole.

Nelson and Murphy (1992) examined two aspects of ESL writing groups: the task dimension and the social dimension. According to the findings of their study, participants stayed on task during peer review and focused on providing and negotiating feedback with one another. However, in each group of four students, one or more participants emerged as the dominant member of the group. In addition, the dominant participants were found to attack other members of the group with negative comments, critical responses, and disagreement to feedback they received. As a result, participants' attitude to the peer review task varied considerably based on

their role within the group: those who had dominant roles saw the peer review sessions as beneficial and necessary in ESL writing classes; those with low-status roles reported their displeasure and discomfort because of the criticism and negative feedback they received. Thus, group-determined roles may contribute to negative perceptions about peer review.

In addition to the above-mentioned factors that may have a negative influence on the success of peer review, students' preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback raises questions about the effectiveness and necessity of peer review sessions in ESL classes. For example, in a study focused on the affective advantage of peer feedback in ESL classes, Zhang (1995) found that a significantly higher number of students preferred the teacher's feedback to a fellow student's feedback. Furthermore, the findings of a number of other studies (Connor and Asenavage, 1994; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, and Huang, 1998; Miao, Badger, and Zhen, 2006; Paulus, 1999; Tsui and Ng, 2000; and Zhang, 1995) all indicated that while students perceive peer review to be an important part of their learning, they nevertheless prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback. In addition, students tend to believe that a teacher's feedback leads to more changes in their writing and, consequently, to improvement of their writing abilities.

A Teacher's Perspective on Peer Review: Motivating the Current Study

Our overview of research findings with a focus on ESL students and their perspectives on peer review highlights the complexity of peer review sessions and its controversial influence on ESL students' writing. It is important to consider that peer review sessions occur in a classroom where all participants influence this process. This includes not only the students but also the teacher's approach and perspectives on peer review sessions. In one article which focuses on the teacher's perspective, Hu (2005) offers a first-person, teacher-as-researcher perspective on the process of peer review. Specifically, Hu (2005) shares his approach of conducting peer review with upper-intermediate Chinese ESL students in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) class in Singapore, analyzing his own experimentation with peer review procedures from 2001 to 2003. The author provides a detailed description of what occurred in his classes every year when he, as a teacher, conducted peer review sessions. Every course lasted six months and aimed to help students develop their writing in order to be ready for university-level writing assignments in English. The students were to write six 500-word assignments and a 1500–2000 word research paper. The author categorizes his pedagogical approach in this writing course as “process-oriented, genre-centered, theme-structured, and task-based” (Hu, 2005: 328).

The article provides a detailed explanation of the procedures used in peer review sessions. In particular, Hu (2005) describes his changing approach from 2001 to 2003 to the peer review training, which evolved from whole-class discussion of peer review and the teacher's explanation of peer review procedures to 15 peer review training activities directed at awareness-raising, demonstration, practice, reflection and instruction, explanation of procedures, and pre-response review. Through the reiterative analysis and reflection on the peer review process and through analysis of students' writing and their oral and written feedback to each other, the researcher found inadequate training and a lack of sufficient teacher follow-up to student work to be the major factors undermining the success of peer review activity in his 2001 class. Such analysis and reflection led to the teacher's improvement of peer review by: increasing the number and quality of activities during the peer review training, revising the order of response modes (the oral feedback preceding the written), assigning students into pairs (students' selecting different partners for each peer review session), and incorporating several teacher follow-up activities.

Hu's (2005) study motivated us to conduct a qualitative study with the focus on the teacher instead of the students during peer review and for inquiry into a teacher's perspectives on peer review sessions in a multicultural class where students do not share the same mother tongue, as is often the case in ESL rather than EFL classes. Although the role of the teacher is mainly "behind the scenes" when peer review is actually taking place, it is important to consider the various dimensions of the teacher's role throughout the entire peer review process. The teacher is the one who plans peer review sessions, who provides students with peer review information and peer review guidelines for providing feedback, who facilitates students' linguistic knowledge of the procedures to use when providing and receiving feedback, and who acknowledges students' participation and the nature of their feedback during peer review sessions. Therefore, the teacher plays a major role in the peer review sessions and, no doubt, has an impact on their degree of success. Other than Hu (2005), no studies, to our knowledge, have investigated teachers' perspectives on the use of peer review in ESL classes. Thus, the present study, a qualitative case study of an experienced teacher's perspectives on peer review and her personal approach to peer review sessions in her EAP classes, will attempt to fill this gap, by providing an in-depth description and analysis of peer review in the context of this teacher's classes. The following research question guided our inquiry: What are an experienced teacher's perspectives on the use of peer review sessions in her ESL classes?

The Research

The present study was conducted over a period of 10 months, from Fall 2009 to Summer 2010. Given the focus on one participant's perspectives and because the study was bounded by time and context, we define the methodology of the study as a single holistic within-site instrumental case study (Creswell, 2007).

Setting

The study was conducted in the English Language Institute (ELI) at a large urban university in the southeastern United States. The language program was selected because of the feasibility of conducting multiple observations and interviews at this site; one of the researchers was an ESL instructor in the program, and both researchers were familiar with the setting and the potential participants for the study. The ELI is an intensive language program with five levels of instruction, focusing on the development of academic English. Typical enrollment ranges from 200 to 250 students, and most students, once they complete their studies in the ELI, go on to attend college or university in the United States. In addition to improving their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English, ELI students develop learning strategies, presentation skills, library research skills, and basic computer skills, as well as knowledge of academic culture. The class size is usually 15–18 students. ELI students are of diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds: the majority of students come from countries in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, and most have some prior university experience in their home countries. The majority of students are in their early 20's.

The class that we observed, Academic Preparation, is a mandatory content-based course that focuses on academic reading and writing and that meets three times a week, for a total of 5 hours weekly. In Fall 2009, our focal participant taught Level 3 (Intermediate) Academic Preparation, and in Summer 2010, she taught Level 5 (Advanced) of this class. Although instructors may conduct peer review sessions in any ESL class, the Academic Preparation class is aimed specifically at development of ESL students' reading and writing. Therefore, peer review is often one of the activities in that class.

Participants

The ESL instructor whom we chose to invite, and who agreed to participate in our study was "Shelley." (In order to protect her privacy, we refer to her using a pseudonym.) Our sampling for this single-case study was purposeful

(Janesick, 2011), meaning that we selected our participant because she is a strong believer in multi-step process writing who considers peer review to be an inseparable stage of her students' writing process. Shelley served as a coordinator of Academic Preparation classes across different instructional levels and had repeatedly taught these classes herself. In addition, she has a strong interest in teaching reading and writing to ESL students. Shelley's use of peer review sessions in ESL classes on a regular basis, her beliefs about its benefits, and her approach to peer review training were all factors in selecting her as our focal participant.

Shelley is a North American ESL instructor in her forties. In one of her interviews, Shelley indicated that she had earned two Associate degrees: an Associate of Arts degree in General Studies and an Associate of Science degree in Sign Language Interpreting. In addition, she holds a Bachelor's degree in Linguistics and a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics/TESL. She has also taken several doctoral courses in Education at her current institution, although she is not currently enrolled in a doctoral program. As for Shelley's professional background, she has taught ESL classes at the ELI for six years. In the ELI, Shelley is viewed as a valuable and experienced instructor, known for her interest in teaching academic literacy. In the capacity of Coordinator for Academic Preparation instructors, she often provides advice and suggestions to other ESL teachers. She has also been involved in mentoring Master's students during teaching internships in the ELI.

Data Collection

This study forms part of a larger project in progress on "Teachers' Beliefs and Perceptions of ESL Students' Reviews of Peers' Writing." The data collected includes student writing: their first drafts of writing assignments, their written feedback to peers, and their revised drafts. The peer review sessions were audio-recorded, and these recordings were transcribed to provide another source of data. We also conducted 8 class observations, as well as interviews with Shelley, the teacher of the classes. For the purposes of this study, we draw primarily on the interview and observation data.

We conducted two semi-structured interviews during Fall 2009 (see Appendix A for protocols of each interview). Individual interviews between the primary researcher and the participant provided rich data for the study and helped us in addressing the research question focused on examining the perspectives of an experienced teacher on the use of peer review sessions in her ESL classes. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed us to modify questions, ask for emergent clarifications, and make other alterations for better understanding of the data (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). For example, when Shelley stated that ESL students could provide

the same feedback as teachers could, the semi-structured format of the interview allowed us to ask her about the nature of such feedback and about the type of feedback she offered to her students on their writing. In addition, the cumulative qualitative methodology of the case study permitted the development of the subsequent interview protocol on the basis of data from the previous interview and observation notes. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place in a classroom setting, which was the participant's preference. Not to lose any of the teacher's insights, we audio-recorded each interview. Finally, we consider it important to point out Shelley's willingness to collaborate and share her beliefs, experience, and perspectives on peer review sessions, which facilitated data collection and ensured the richness of the data obtained.

In addition to the interviews, we observed 8 sessions of the participant's class over a period of 10 months. During our observations, we took detailed descriptive and reflective field notes about the physical setting, the participant's approach to the peer review sessions, and the process of the peer review sessions. Collecting data through interviews, notes from the observations, and recordings of peer review sessions allowed for triangulation, that is, the use of various data collection techniques or methods when examining one phenomenon (Duff, 2008), which enhanced the reliability and credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Data Analysis

In order to begin our analysis, we first organized the data according to the type and time of data collection. We transcribed the data from the interview recordings verbatim, and we read the transcriptions and observation notes several times in order to color-code them as to topic and to further sort them into meaningful units and identify emerging themes (Creswell, 2007). For the purposes of coding, we applied the direct interpretation method (Creswell, 2007), which means that we did not look for recurrent instances of information while coding but instead interpreted every single instance of information that was relevant to our research question. Thus, for example, when coding and interpreting data, we focused on the relevance of each unit of data to the research question rather than considering whether Shelley stated the same information more than once. Though the application of the direct interpretation method might have led to losing information about what the teacher emphasized through repetition, it allowed us to interpret all of the meaningful units of data and provide a rich description and explanation of the case.

As an ESL instructor in the English language institute, the primary researcher had the additional benefit of better understanding the setting,

the peculiarities of classes, and the participant's experiences. This emic perspective is counterbalanced by the second author, who, while familiar with the setting, was not a teacher there. Finally, including rich description of the case, emic voices from the data, and detailed information on the stages of conducting the case study together aim at reaching verisimilitude in the analysis – in other words, creating a realistic and clear description of the context of the study, which allows readers to feel as though they are transported into the setting (Creswell, 2007).

The Peer Review Process in Shelley's ESL Class

In the next section, we first describe the steps in the peer review process that occurred during our study, such as the teacher's preparation for the process, training the students for peer review, and facilitating the actual peer review sessions. Our findings and discussion follow this description of the peer review procedures.

Teacher's Preparation Stage

The first stage in the peer review process, which has not been discussed in previous research on peer review, was the teacher's preparation stage. In terms of material preparation for peer review sessions, Shelley created two handouts, the peer feedback form and a sample descriptive paragraph, and a PowerPoint presentation. Shelley explained that she preferred creating the descriptive paragraph herself (which the students would use during the peer training for practicing providing and discussing feedback) because in this way, she could draw students' attention to the stronger aspects of writing as well as areas for improvement that students needed to focus on.

In addition, Shelley developed a peer feedback form for students to use during the peer review session (Appendix B). The form was the slightly modified grading rubric she would later use to evaluate the students' writing assignments. She explained that providing students with this rubric helped them attend to certain aspects of a peer's writing – such as finding the thesis statement or overall organization of the writing – instead of concentrating only on grammar or mechanics. Students used this peer feedback form for the peer review training as well as for the actual peer review session when they provided feedback to each other in pairs.

Shelley also prepared a PowerPoint presentation as a visual aid for the purposes of the training (Appendix C). Her goal with this visual support was to make the training even more explicit and persuasive. The PowerPoint presentation included a definition of peer review, a brief summary of its advantages from some of the scholarly literature, a discussion of appropriate

language to use while giving peers feedback, and aspects of writing that the students should focus on during peer review.

Peer Review Training

Shelley began her peer review training session by encouraging her students to think and share aloud their attitudes toward peer review, their prior experiences with providing feedback to peers as well as receiving it, their experiences in the roles of both feedback givers and writers, and the way they should provide feedback and receive it. Further, using her PowerPoint, Shelley introduced the students to the definition of peer review by Topping (1995) and a summary of research studies on peer review benefits such as improvement in writing (Lundstrom and Baker, 2009).

Our observation notes indicate that during peer review training, Shelley focused on the procedures of this activity. First, she emphasized the language that students would need to use in order to provide feedback in a supportive and constructive manner. Then, she explained that first students would receive papers without the name of the author on them. Students would have to read the peer's writing and use the peer editing guide sheet in order to take notes for feedback while reading. Afterwards, the students would learn the name of the author from the teacher, get into pairs, and provide and respond to feedback. Shelley's explanation of the peer review procedures was intertwined with students' questions related to peer review.

At the end of the training activities, Shelley asked students to get into pairs and list what students should be looking for while reading their peers' papers. In the subsequent whole-group discussion of the lists generated by students, Shelley highlighted the importance of paying attention to content, clarity, and organization, placing the categories of grammar and mechanics as secondary. In the intermediate ESL reading and writing class, Shelley also distributed a descriptive paragraph and peer feedback forms and encouraged students to work in pairs or groups as they used the peer feedback forms to provide feedback on the descriptive paragraph. In the further discussion, students discussed the writing, incorporating the language the teacher had provided them and covering the categories on the peer feedback form.

Peer Review Sessions

In Shelley's class, the actual peer review session started with an anonymous step, in which the teacher distributed the assigned writings, not revealing to students which authors corresponded to which texts. We observed that

Shelley asked her students to submit the drafts of the writing one class prior to actual peer review session, so that she could pair up students for the anonymous feedback step in the subsequent class. She also provided students with a copy of the same peer editing guide form they had used during the training phase, this time to use for the actual peer feedback. She reminded students about the major points from the training, and she asked them to read their peers' writing at least two times and to provide written comments on the peer feedback form and, optionally, on the written text itself. It took students approximately 30 minutes to complete this step.

Afterwards, Shelley revealed who the authors of each essay were, and students paired up in order to share and discuss their feedback. This step of providing and responding to feedback lasted approximately 30 minutes. Once the student pairs completed the peer review session, Shelley asked the writers to work on the next draft of this assignment and to make improvements incorporating the peer feedback they received. Thus, based on our observations, the peer review process consisted of three stages: teacher's preparation, training, and the peer review session. Each of the stages built on the information provided in the prior ones. The duration of the peer review activity varied based on the students' level of language proficiency.

Findings

Having detailed Shelley's implementation of the peer review process, we now turn to the findings based on our interviews with Shelley about her perceptions of this experience and observations of peer review sessions. In the process of our analysis, two major themes emerged from the data: advantages and disadvantages of peer review sessions in ESL classes. Several categories under both advantages and disadvantages are discussed in detail below.

Advantages of Peer Review Sessions in ESL Classes

During the interviews and observations, we witnessed first-hand Shelley's passionate belief that peer review sessions are beneficial to her students and her conviction that it is her responsibility to incorporate peer review in her classes and to demonstrate its value to students. Among the benefits of peer review sessions, she mentioned in interviews with us the high level of quality of feedback that students are able to provide one another and the time that it saves the teacher in providing feedback. She also explained that peer feedback afforded students multiple opportunities for learning which extended beyond just learning about how to write better. These include learning how to consider issues from a perspective different from their

own, learning how to negotiate with and eventually trust their peers, and learning how to give and receive constructive criticism.

Shelley was enthusiastic about sharing the reasons why she considers peer review to be beneficial for her ESL students in an academic reading and writing class. She explained that their role is not to provide corrections, but rather to comment on strong points in the writing and to identify areas that need improvement. As she indicates in the following excerpt, although the degree of elaboration in a teacher's feedback may differ, students usually have the ability to identify what "works" in a piece of writing as well as what does not.

They [students] are very critical of their partners but not in a judgmental way. They really are looking for specific things. I think they are capable of giving the same type of feedback that I am. And I think it's very good for them to learn that they should depend on peers for that kind of work. I might elaborate and give more feedback on it, give more explanation of what I want them to do, but we have the same ability to identify areas that the writer needs to look at.

Shelley added that although students usually cannot correct grammatical errors, they are nevertheless able to indicate to the writer areas which need to be revised or otherwise addressed (e.g. commenting on what is not clear). According to Shelley, this serves a dual purpose: raising the writer's awareness as well as developing the feedback giver's critical thinking skills.

Indeed, during peer review sessions, students provided feedback on the strong areas of their peer's writing and on the areas that needed improvement. The following excerpt from a peer review session in an advanced ESL reading and writing course shows that the students were able to identify the area of improvement and point it out to their peer during peer feedback (we used underlining to emphasize key phrases and sentences in the interaction of our participants).

Natalia: So the only thing that I want to tell you is here, is like the vocabulary choices.

Bruna: Uh-huh.

Natalia: That's something that I am struggling too. You know, have been studying vocabulary so the people understand what you, what you want to say.

Bruna: Uh-huh.

Natalia: Like, for instance, I said: What do you mean by "age 1." Maybe you could use other words. When I read, when I read your title, I did not, I didn't get.

Having difficulty understanding the meaning of the title of the project as indicated by the underlined portion of the above abstract, Natalia pointed

it out to the peer partner, classifying it as a vocabulary error. The students further discussed this area for improvement and came to a conclusion as to how it could be addressed. Interestingly, although Shelley said that the students' role was not to correct each other's errors, the students did provide suggestions for their peers on how to improve their writing, including corrections of areas for improvement.

Another advantage of using peer review in ESL classes is that it offers students an opportunity to look at writing issues from a different perspective. Shelley explained that when students have an opportunity to look at their peers' writing from the perspective of readers and, at the same time, take it as seriously as if they were the authors of the writing, they become more aware of global aspects of writing such as content, clarity, and organization instead of just focusing on grammar and mechanics. Shelley commented that

...it gives them an opportunity to look at things from a different perspective and there is more awareness maybe on their part of certain things whether it is organization or, not so much grammar, because I do not focus on that as much. From being able to look at it, not their own writing but somebody else's writing, I think gives them a little bit more awareness that they can make a connection with that.

Thus, according to Shelley, having the opportunity to consider a written text from the role of feedback giver raises ESL students' awareness of certain aspects of writing that they might have a hard time attending to while occupying the role of a writer.

During peer review sessions we observed, Shelley's students did take the opportunity to look at their own writing from a new perspective. The following excerpt shows how two ESL students at an advanced proficiency level discuss the clarity of the thesis.

Mariana: Look at this. Now perhaps read you thesis please.

Natalia: OK. I am not telling what I want in my thesis.

Mariana: Yeah. Exactly.

Natalia: Yeah, that is something that I was going to ask. I was going to ask for you get what I wanna say when you read it. I want to ask you if it's clear, the meaning of what I want to say is clear.

Mariana: No, I understand what is your idea. It's only the organization.

Interestingly, Mariana, having identified an area for improvement, gave the author of the writing (Natalia) an opportunity to reflect and identify what she could improve. First, the students discussed the supporting ideas in the writing and the message Natalia wanted to convey in her essay because Mariana had difficulty understanding the main idea and questioned the

clarity of the thesis. Such prior discussion of the clarity and organization of the essay allowed Natalia to look at her writing from a new perspective. This supports Shelley's statement that peer review is beneficial for students because they become more aware of the global aspects of writing.

In addition to considering writing from a different perspective, Shelley explained that during the peer review process, students have an opportunity to voice their feedback and negotiate it with their peers. It is during this phase of oral negotiation, Shelley believes, that writers may be able to elucidate their ideas in a way that perhaps they were unable to do in their writing.

And then there is this negotiation "but this is what I mean" or "this is what I said or I wanted to say." And they have this opportunity, not just written feedback from their partner, but they have an opportunity to talk to their partner. I think for the writer's benefit, it gives them the opportunity to voice things because sometimes when it's verbal it is a lot different from when it is written. It can sort a lot of the ideas out that way.

Shelley's comments here highlight the role of oral negotiation of the feedback for addressing issues of clarity in students' writing.

Indeed, during observations of peer review sessions, students asked each other for clarifications of meaning and expressed their insights and thoughts about each other's writing. The following excerpt shows the ESL students' oral negotiation during peer review session.

Natalia: This one is something that I want to ask. Look. You were saying the whole thing that kids should – it's better to learn English when you are a kid. Right? Then here you said: "It seems that adults go over children in all aspects of second language acquisition." [It] doesn't go against what we, what you said before.

Bruna: Yeah. I was thinking that. What I am trying to say is like they always think that adults are over children like in all aspects but it's not like that.

Thus, peer review allowed students to negotiate the content of their writing with their peers during oral feedback session which complemented the written feedback on the peer feedback form.

Learning how to provide constructive criticism was clearly among what Shelley identified as the advantages of conducting peer review sessions with her students. Shelley believes that the more students learn about giving constructive criticism, and the more they practice it in class, the more beneficial this skill will be for them in their professional futures. In the following excerpt, Shelley highlights the importance of this skill across a variety of domains.

They really can give appropriate feedback and constructive criticism. So in that sense I saw its value. And there was value to me because it was less I had to do if the writers take it more seriously. But, also use it in my professional life. I use it in my academic life as a student and I use it here. If there were thing[s], if we are working on here, we are working on the course guide and a lot of us were exchanging those to give each other feedback. Susan [a colleague] and I do it all the time. We give each other feedback on stuff. She does not edit my stuff but she will read through my stuff and she would give me points.

Of interest here is that Shelley's belief about the importance of giving feedback to peers is rooted in her own experience. Shelley explains that she often asks for the feedback from her colleague, Susan, in order to obtain a "fresh" outlook on her writing before further revising it. She also indicated that one English composition class she took had an influence on her belief about collaborative activities and was instrumental in her being open to process writing and peer review sessions.

I had one class that influenced me a lot. It was an English Comp class that I took as an undergraduate and most of them were not really that memorable. It was a TA that was teaching it. She was teaching and that was her field, I think. And she was really enthusiastic about it and she had great ideas. She was very innovative at that time I thought. And a lot of that philosophy and how she taught it, she did a lot of group work. And at that time hardly [anybody] was doing group work even at the university level. So I would say that particular teacher had a lot of influence in the fact that I could think outside the box in terms of maybe teaching or writing in general.

Drawing on her own educational and professional experiences, Shelley thus grounds her choices and decisions about teaching practices in her beliefs and experiences from the past and the present.

Having elaborated on the time and effort she spends on the preparation for peer review sessions in her classes, Shelley indicated that peer review is beneficial not only for students, but also for her as a teacher because she does not have to provide feedback to every student on her / his first draft. As she explained, "in terms of preparation for it [peer review], it is not really a lot. There is not really a lot of thought that goes into it because it is basically the criteria for what the writing assignment is."

In addition, the peer review training and peer review sessions made students aware of the benefits of peer review and fostered trust by students in their peers in terms of the types of constructive criticism they could provide. According to our observation notes, during the peer training discussion, several students were initially skeptical about their peers' ability to identify problems and provide suggestions. However, after the training,

students admitted that they were able to see some positive influence of the peer review process. In particular, they agreed with the teacher that they were indeed able to identify areas for improvement in their peer's writing. The five topics that the students discussed most frequently were organization of ideas, clarity of ideas, vocabulary, using information from first-language sources in their English writing, and mechanics (Vorobel and Kim, 2013).

Disadvantages of Peer Review Sessions in ESL Classes

Although Shelley is a firm believer in the multiple benefits of peer review sessions in ESL classes, she also shared some negative aspects which teachers should be prepared for when they decide to conduct peer review sessions in their courses. Among the possible disadvantages, she highlighted students' belief that their peers' feedback is not valuable, gaps in teacher preparation, and teachers' beliefs about approaches to teaching writing (i.e. a product versus a process approach).

In Shelley's experience, students' general distrust that their peers can actually provide valuable feedback on their writing represents the major obstacle in how successful this activity can be in a class. For example, during the peer training discussion, Juliana stated: "Why I don't want people to correct my grammar is that I don't think that they are gonna help me." Shelley characterized this mindset as: "The teacher is the authority and nobody else can give me any feedback that is valuable because the teacher is the only authority." Shelley believed that this mindset may be the result of students' cultural and educational backgrounds. Nevertheless, some students were open to the peer's comments and suggestions. Juliana, for instance, shared: "I like that they look everything: the word, the organization of the paper, the ideas, the personal ideas. I really open whatever they want to include." According to our observation data, when students could not agree on certain aspects of the feedback during peer review, we noted their tendency to turn to Shelley, which is in alignment with Shelley's statement about ESL students' preference for teacher's feedback.

In addition to the lack of trust in the benefit of their peers' feedback, Shelley admitted that a possible obstacle to the success of peer review sessions in ESL classes may be gaps in teacher preparation. She admitted that it took a lot of effort on her own initiative to develop her knowledge of how to teach writing.

I think as English teachers, ESL teachers, there are huge gaps in our personal education because our area of expertise is SLA [second language acquisition]. My area of expertise is not teaching writing, you know it's not in teaching reading. So I personally on my own time had to do research and study how do I teach writing, how do I teach reading.

Shelley explained that even after she had completed her formal studies, she had to continue to study independently about how to teach writing so that she could make connections between her knowledge, beliefs, research findings, and actual pedagogical practices.

Intertwined with the problems of gaps in teacher preparation is the theme of ESL teachers' beliefs about approaches to teaching writing – specifically, a product versus a process orientation. According to Shelley, many teachers still focus on the writing product instead of process, which means that they do not see the value of peer review sessions in their classes. She explained:

...if you are focused on process, if you are a process teacher, then you know that it [peer review] is part of the process. If you are a product teacher, you are not concerned about that and I think many people are still product teachers.

Shelley based this statement on her experience of talking with other ESL teachers, as well as her self-described transformation from a product-oriented teacher to a process-oriented teacher. She pointed out that students' views and attitudes may not be the only obstacle for the success of peer review in ESL classes: teachers' beliefs and approaches to teaching writing may also represent an obstacle for the success of peer review sessions in ESL classes.

Discussion

In the following section we elaborate on our findings by discussing the teacher's perspectives on peer review in ESL writing classes. In addition, we extend our discussion to the role of the teacher in peer review sessions. We conclude with some implications related to the findings of our study.

The Teacher's Perspectives on Peer Review in ESL Writing Classes

Among several benefits which peer review may bring to ESL students' writing development, Shelley pointed to ESL students' development of awareness about the global aspects of writing such as clarity and organization if the students received sufficient peer review training. This supports the findings of Stanley (1992), McGroarty and Zhu (1997), Berg (1999), Min (2006), and Lundstrom and Baker (2009), which focused on the effect of peer review on different aspects of ESL students' writing development. Meanwhile, our study complements the previous research findings by highlighting other benefits of peer review in an ESL writing classroom which have not received sufficient attention. For instance, peer review as a collaborative activity allows students to develop critical thinking skills

when identifying strong areas in a peer's writing as well as areas that need improvement. Moreover, ESL students learn how to provide constructive feedback to others both in writing and orally, which is an essential skill for students' further educational and professional lives. Finally, according to Shelley's opinion, during peer review sessions and peer review training in particular, ESL students learn how to trust each other's opinions and knowledge and possibly overcome certain stereotypes and preferences for teacher feedback.

The Role of the Teacher in Peer Review Sessions

Although previous research studies (e.g. Kamimura, 2006; Min, 2006) on peer review with the focus on students' writing, negotiation, attitudes, and perspectives have been valuable in offering insights into the process from the students' perspective, they reveal only a part of the peer review story. Peer review actually represents a larger collaborative effort as well as a complex social activity with many participants – and this includes the teacher. The teacher's preparation and management of the various stages of peer review sessions such as planning, preparation of materials, and, in particular, peer review training, play a large role in the nature of the peer review process, its outcomes, and students' attitudes to peer review.

The complexity of the role of the teacher lies in the responsibility of every decision which a teacher makes in approaching peer review sessions in her / his classes. As we found in observing the peer review sessions and in interviewing Shelley, the planning and preparation stages of peer review sessions are closely linked to the resulting dynamics and nature of peer review sessions in the classroom. As Shelley shared, at the planning and preparation stage, she revisits course objectives, previously discussed course material, students' attitudes and progress in the course, the dynamics of the whole-group setting, and other contextual factors in order to maximize the effectiveness of the peer review training and peer review sessions. Thus, the social activity of peer review starts not at the point of peer review training – as is most often assumed in the research literature – but rather at the planning and preparation stages, which are carried out by the teacher in advance of the training. Furthermore, gaps in teachers' preparation, according to Shelley, can result in teachers believing that peer review is not essential for students' writing development or even further in teachers avoiding this activity all together. Thus, our study brings attention to the complex role of the teacher in the peer review process and highlights its importance.

Implications

The findings of our qualitative inquiry have several implications that we hope may serve ESL and other educators, administrators, and researchers as a starting point for reflection, self-evaluation, and consideration. In this section, we first provide our insights on how teachers can enhance the use and effect of peer review in their language classrooms. Further, we offer our suggestions related to the need for teachers' self-reflection before, during, and after the peer review sessions.

Based on our findings about advantages and disadvantages of peer review from previous literature as well as from our participant's perspective, we see the benefits of peer review not only in terms of students' language learning but also for their future professional lives. According to Shelley's personal, educational, and professional experiences, peer review is an activity that may help students in their future endeavors. Therefore, teachers can enhance the use and benefits of peer review in their language classrooms by setting another objective: having students learn how to engage in peer review activity autonomously, in other words, developing the ability to review other students' writing on their own, without a teacher's direct intervention and supervision. This can be achieved through peer review training by the teacher illustrating the various benefits of peer review, discussing the potential use of peer review activity not only in the classroom but also in future professional contexts, and providing explicit suggestions and strategies on what students should do in order to become successful peer reviewers, collaborators, and autonomous learners.

Language teachers may conduct several peer review sessions with their students throughout the semester in order to give students diverse experiences of peer review, so that they can apprehend and perceive the benefits of this activity on their own. In order to help students see how beneficial peer review can be, we also suggest adding a reflection activity after students have completed the peer review session, revised their drafts, and submitted their final papers. Students may write their reflections in the form of a reflective journal in their notebooks or online (using free Web 2.0 tools such as Diary.com). Teachers may help students become autonomous peer reviewers and learners by gradually making this activity increasingly student-centered, that is, by providing detailed instructions, suggestions, practice, and guidelines during peer review training and the first peer review session, and eventually letting students take more charge of their peer review practices in the subsequent peer review activities. By learning how to become autonomous peer reviewers, the students can learn how to collaborate and be autonomous learners in other domains as well.

In addition, teachers can improve their application of peer review in language classes through self-reflection and reevaluation of their attitudes, beliefs, and approaches to teaching in general, and to peer review in particular. Teachers who self-reflect and reevaluate their approaches to teaching, their decisions in the classroom, and their beliefs about the efficacy of certain activities tend to be open to new ideas, ready to improve their teaching, and willing to consider others' suggestions and research findings in relation to their own work (Richards, 1998). In our study, one experienced teacher, Shelley, shared how her ability to self-evaluate and reflect led to improvement of her teaching and her facilitation of students' writing development. Therefore, we argue for the necessity of teachers' reflection about peer review and its components. In particular, teachers can reflect on their own beliefs or biases regarding peer review, the needs of their learners, and the quality of peer review training materials. In addition to reflection, teachers can keep current by reading research related to peer review and engaging in teacher development workshops and conferences. Thus, self-reflection and professional development can open a door to fresh achievements and allow for a shift in teachers' beliefs about peer review and their teaching approaches.

Conclusion

Many studies have been conducted on the process of peer review and its role in ESL students' writing development. However, only a few research studies have looked into teachers' perspectives on peer review in development of ESL students' writing. Our qualitative inquiry into one teacher's perspectives on the use of peer review sessions in ESL classes is, of course, not applicable to all contexts. However, our purposeful sampling of one teacher with experience in conducting peer review in her ESL writing classes allowed us to see the complexity of the role of the teacher within the social activity of peer review. It is our hope that this study may serve as a foundation for future studies on the teacher's role in peer review. Future directions for research on the topic might include the investigation of interactions between teachers and students during peer review training; the extent of the influence of teachers' beliefs on altering students' attitudes on the value of peer review sessions; the impact of teachers' beliefs about peer review sessions on the students' improvement in writing, revising skills, and critical thinking skills; and the relationship between teachers' self-reflectivity and the effect of peer review training on students' beliefs about peer review in general and its value for their writing development. By implementing peer review in ESL writing classes, teachers might enhance their students' language learning and help them become autonomous in future educational and professional lives.

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Notes

- 1 English as a second language (ESL) refers to students' learning or writing of English in a context where English is the native or first language.
- 2 English as a foreign language (EFL) refers to students' learning or writing in English in a context where English is not the native language.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocols

Interview 1 Protocol

1. What is a peer review session?
2. Why do you choose to use peer review sessions in your writing classes?
3. Why do you believe they are beneficial for your students' writing?
4. How do you train your students for peer review sessions?
5. What else do you consider in preparation of peer review sessions and in training?
6. Does the level of students' proficiency matter for peer review sessions? Why? How?
7. What can influence your decision to apply peer review sessions in your class?

Interview 2 Protocol

1. What is your educational and professional background?
2. You said that when you started teaching writing, you used partner feedback sessions because you believed that it was something you were supposed to do in the writing classes. Where does this belief come from?
3. Last time you mentioned that to some extent students were able to provide the same feedback to each other as you as teacher provided to students. Could you elaborate about these students' type of feedback that is the same as the teacher's?
4. Do you remember the first time when you had a partner feedback session in your class as a teacher? If yes, how did it go? How much different are the partner feedback sessions in your classes now? Why?
5. You mentioned that although partner feedback sessions are beneficial, they do not have a major influence on students' writing because students rely on the teacher's feedback too much. What do you think we as teachers can do to make this shift in students' beliefs?

Appendix B

Peer Feedback Form

Academic Prep 5A

Research Paper-First Draft

Peer Edit Guide

Writer's Name _____

Editor's Name _____

Organization

After reading your partner's paper through once, go back to the beginning and look at the organization. Look for the following things:

1. What is the thesis statement? _____

2. How does the writer get the reader's attention? _____

3. What other information is in the introduction? _____

4. How could the writer improve the introduction? _____

5. How is the body organized (what are the points)? _____

6. Are the points discussed in the body related to the thesis statement? Yes No
If not, what improvements could the writer make? _____

7. Does the writer include a conclusion? If so, how is it written (summary of points, restate thesis statement, make prediction, etc.)

8. If not, how could the writer improve this? _____

Clarity

1. Circle or highlight areas in the paper that are not clear to you. Make a note on the paper of any unclear points.
2. When you meet with your partner, explain why it isn't clear and ask for clarification from the writer.
3. Is what the writer explains the same as what is written? Give your partner suggestions to improve these areas.
4. Underline any vocabulary choices that you think are too informal & suggest a more formal choice.

Appendix C

Content of Peer Training PowerPoint

Peer Editing

Academic Prep 5A Summer 2010

What is Peer Editing?

According to Keith Topping (1998), “peer assessment is defined as an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status” (p. 250).

What does this mean?

Peer Editing is an evaluation of your work by your peer(s) (someone of the same status).

This can be:

- summative (peer assigns a grade) or
- formative (peer evaluates with goal of helping writer to improve).

Why do Peer Editing?

“...compared with teacher feedback, revisions based on peer comments can be better in vocabulary, organization, and content” (Hansen & Liu, 2005, p. 31).

“The reliability and validity of peer assessments tend to be at least as high, and often higher, than teacher assessments” (Topping, 2009, p. 26).

More Support for Why!

“...when done correctly, peer review can help students on any educational level improve their written work” (Rieber, 2006, p. 323).

“...L2 writing students can improve their own writing by transferring abilities they learn when reviewing peer texts (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009, p. 38).

What does this mean?

Benefits to You!

- Your writing can be better quality based on the feedback you receive from your peers (better than when receiving feedback from the teacher).

- Your peers can give you feedback that is as good as, or better than, your teacher's.
- Peer editing benefits a variety of levels.
- Editors improve their own writing by learning how to give feedback to others.

How to Do Peer Editing:

- Review the language that is supportive and constructive for giving feedback
- The editor gives written feedback on a partner's paper using a guide sheet
- Partners discuss the written comments and ask questions for clarification
- Writers make revisions based on the feedback from their partners.

Work for the Writer

- Writers make revisions based on their partners' feedback.
- Language
- In groups, discuss the type of questions editors might ask the writer about.
- Writers make revisions based on the feedback from their partners.

Work for the Writer

Writers make revisions based on their partners' feedback.

If you decide not to use a suggestion, you must explain why (justify your decision)

Feedback Guide Sheet

Based on your knowledge of the requirements for the research paper, make a list of what you think the editor should be looking for in the paper. Then, make a list of what you think the editor does not need to look at.

