

Social-Cognitive Dimensions of L2 Peer Revision

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Abstract

Peer review is mainly supported by the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). When this is applied to the interaction between L2 learners, the novice is provided guidelines from the expert. Under the expert's guidance, the novice can gradually master the task independently and the 'scaffolding' can be removed.

Within this theoretical framework, micro-genetic method of research should be adopted. However, the amount of L2 literature that has adopted such approach is scant. Most studies in peer review have merely focused on the effectiveness of peer review on students' revised drafts.

Inspired by the Vygotsky's theoretical framework, I am hereby proposing a new approach which adopts both the social and cognitive dimensions in L2 peer revision. In other words, I am going to examine what actually happens during peer interaction and what constitutes the potential success of it.

In my paper, some previous researches on peer review will be discussed. Then a new approach to examine the effectiveness of peer review will be proposed with detailed description of the proposed research questions and research design. With this new proposal, it is hoped that a new light can be shed in L2 writing research.

Keywords

Zone of Proximal Development, Scaffolding, regulation, micro-genetic approach

Introduction

Since 1980s, there has been a change in the approach of teaching writing. Traditionally, product approach was adopted by which students were given a topic without any instruction prior their writing and teachers were expected to focus on students' final products and assess the final products with detailed marking. Thanks to advocating the emphasis on students' learning process, the focus of teaching writing has now shifted from the writing products to the writing process, with guidelines helping students to go

through different stages: prewriting, writing and revision. By revising multiple drafts, it is argued that the quality of the final products will be improved, both in terms of the content and the accuracy of language. To help students with this process, a frequently used technique is peer review.

1 Theoretical framework

1.1 Zone of Proximal Development

Peer review (also known as peer response or peer revision) has long been advocated as an effective writing technique, both in first language (L1) and second language (L2). Peer review is mainly supported by the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978). According to Vygotsky, humans can consciously control over their biological bodies by using higher-level mediating tools (e.g. language, numeracy, literacy, etc), and these tools serve as a connection between humans and the environment and act to mediate the relationship between humans and the social world. Language is the most powerful mediating tool that humans possess to mediate their connection to the world, to each other, and to themselves. Vygotskian also views that interaction with peers is an effective way of developing learning strategies within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the "distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). For example, during L1 acquisition, "(children) by subordinating their behavior to adult speech, children acquire the particular language used by the other members of community (usually adults and older children) and eventually utilize this language to regulate their own behavior. In other words, children develop the capacity to regulate their own activity through linguistics means by participating in activities (mental and physical) in which their activity is initially subordinated, or regulated, by others" (Gurrero and Villamil, 1994). When this is applied to the interaction between L2

learners, “the less knowledgeable partner (the novice) is provided support and guidelines from a more knowledgeable partner (the expert), which is also referred as ‘scaffolding’” (Hansen and Liu, 2005: 81). Under the expert’s guidance, the novice can gradually master the task on his / her own and the scaffolding can be removed.

1.2 Three types of Regulation

Three types of regulation may occur during peer interaction: object-regulation, other-regulation and self-regulation. An object-regulated learner means that he / she is bounded by the text itself and is not able to revise the task on his / her own; nor is he / she able to do so under the peer’s guidance. For other-regulated learner, he / she is guided by another peer during the revision task. The peer provides scaffolding for the learner to advance towards the completion of the task. The learner is not able to undertake the revision on his/her own but is able to achieve some degree of control over the task due to the peer assistance. Self-regulated learner is capable of independent problem-solving during peer review.

1.3 Micro-genetic approach

Within Vygotsky’s theoretical framework, micro-genetic method of research should be considered. In other words, single record of learner performance does not constitute convincing evidence of learning and development. Development may surely occur over or even years. Moreover, development arises in the dialogic interaction within ZPD. Lastly, evidence of development from this approach is not limited to the actual linguistic performance of learners on spot; rather, the ZPD views what the learners can do today with others’ assistance will be an indication of what they can do independently in the future. In other words, it looks for the change of frequency and assistance needed by a particular learner to perform appropriately in the new language.

2 Previous studies of peer review

Many second language writing studies have been conducted to examine the impact of peer review on students’ revision of drafts. Chaudron (1984); Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) and Paulus (1999) have found that peer comments contributed to meaningful revision in student’s subsequent drafts. Nelson G. L. & Murphy M. J. (1993) also found that students were more likely to incorporate their peer suggestions in their revision when they interact with their peers cooperatively. However, Goldstein and Conrad (1990) and Miao et al (2006) found that students were more likely to incorporate teachers’

suggestions in their revised drafts. Sengupta (1998) conducted an exploratory investigation of a secondary writing class in Hong Kong, in which the interviewed students thought that they were not the teachers and the only real readers can only be someone whose English is excellent. On the other hand, some scholars suggested that the effectiveness of peer review may be enhanced by giving suitable guidelines to learners to conduct peer review. Hansen and Liu (2005) have given some guiding principles for effective peer response, which include planning well beforehand, creating purposeful peer response sheets for learners to follow, providing students with linguistic strategies and instructing students how to ask right questions. Stanley (1992), Zhu (1995) and Min (2006) have conducted empirical studies to examine the impact of training on the effectiveness of peer review and it was found that more responses were given in the trained peer review groups and the number of revisions with enhanced quality was significantly higher than that before peer review training.

All the above mentioned studies have focused on the effectiveness of peer review on students’ revised tasks and how to implement peer review more effectively. None of them have really adopted the micro-genetic approach to examine what actually happens when two L2 students are involved in peer revision of written tasks. In fact, the amount of L2 literature which adopts both the social and cognitive dimensions of interaction in L2 peer revision is scant. The only study that has adopted the micro-genetic approach to examine peer review is the one conducted by Gurrero, M. and Villamil. O (1994), which examines what types of interaction occur between members of a dyad engaged in peer revision and what kinds of social relationships results from participants’ cognitive stages of regulation. Results show an extremely complex and productive interactive revision process among the participants. The types of interaction are highly varied. Of course, the majority of episodes were interactions between reader and writer, evidencing that there were indeed collaborations between peers. Moreover, the students in general displayed movement between self-regulation, other regulation and object-regulation. Self-regulation was dominant among students because of the training session. Symmetrical relationships occurred when peers were at the same stage of regulations and shared control of the task to the same degree. Asymmetrical relationships took place when partners were at different levels of regulation and so one of them had larger control of the task. Lastly, most of the asymmetrical relationships belong to other-regulated / self-regulated and they are collaborative in nature rather than authoritative.

Using the same set of data, Gurrero. M and Villamil. O (1996) have further explored the types of social-cognitive activities that students engaged in (reading, assessing, dealing with trouble sources, composing, writing comments, copying, and discussing tasks), the mediating strategies that learners have used to facilitate the revision process (employing symbols and external resources, using the L1, providing scaffolding, resorting to interlanguage knowledge and vocalizing private speech), and the aspects of social behavior (management of authorial control, affectivity, collaboration, and adopting reader/writer roles).

In 2000, Gurrero. M and Villamil. O recorded 40 dyadic interactions of 2 male intermediate ESL college learners who participated in two revision sessions in an ESL writing course during which pairs of students revised a composition written by one of them and the students this time were explicitly informed the reader/writer role. Results have shown that a huge amount of scaffolding mechanisms is seen between two learners during interaction. The reader showed intention to regulate the task, giving meaningful and contingent response and showing affectivity. Although he was highly involved in revising the text and directive, he stopped at times and allowed writer freedom to express his views. The writer also showed good disposition, openness and willingness to receive help. All these constitute the success of peer review. More importantly, the contingent use of the L1 as the lingua franca throughout the task also promoted communication and achievement of task goals.

3. Proposed research questions

Inspired by the Vygostky's theoretical framework and the above mentioned studies, I have decided to adopt the micro-genetic approach in my research. In other words I am going to examine what actually happens during peer interaction and what constitutes the success of peer interaction.

1. What kinds of social relationship (symmetrical and asymmetrical) appear in the revision process of the trained group, untrained group and teacher-student group? Does the kind of relationship change at the beginning of the course towards the ending of the course?
2. What social activities and mediating strategies do students of the three groups employ in the revision process respectively?
3. Do students successfully incorporate their partners' feedback into the successive revised drafts?
4. Will certain social activities or mediating

strategies facilitate students to incorporate their partners' comments in their revised drafts?

In order to cater to the needs of SLA researchers, who aim to see whether feedback in writing can facilitate long-term acquisition of particular linguistic features, the fifth question is also proposed, which draws upon the result of the comparison of the first drafts and the final drafts of the whole writing cycle:

5. Is there any significant improvement in students' writing performance (esp. accuracy of their tense usage) when comparing students' first piece of writing (pre-test) and their last piece of writing (post-test) among the four groups? (Prolonged impact of collaborative learning)

4. Proposed research design

Forty S.1 students participate in this research project. They are selected to take a 3-month after school writing course. There are 8 lessons altogether, with one lesson each week. The writing course aims to develop students' skills in writing narrative essays. The students will be randomly divided into three groups (trained students, non-trained students and students who are going to interact with teachers).

For the trained group, teacher (the researcher herself) will give a mini lesson before the first formal lesson during which rationale and modeling of peer review will be introduced. Students will be given a sample text and the peer evaluation sheet will be given. Student will be taught how to locate trouble points and give meaningful comments. They will be also reminded to focus on marking errors about tense usages.

In each lesson, teachers will give students a writing topic and some guidelines for them to write. Students will be reminded to use appropriate tenses each lesson. Then, students have to finish the writing in class.

The next day, trained students will be paired up with the trained students; non-trained students will be paired up with the non-trained ones and they will be given 30 minutes to conduct the peer interaction during which peer evaluation form will be given for their reference. The remaining students will conduct a conference individually with the teacher. With the evaluation form, teacher will also give comments to the individual student about their essay. Each conference is assumed to last for 10-15 minutes.

The first and the last pieces of essay will be served as the pre- and post- writing task. Only the interactions in the second and the seventh sessions will be audio-recorded and transcribed to see what sorts of activities and strategies appear during peer

interactions of the three groups and if there are any changes of the relationship between the second and the seventh sessions. Only the essays in the second and seventh sessions will be rated and coded by the raters to examine whether students successfully incorporate their partners' comments and feedback in their revisions.

After the whole course, 3 pairs of students from each group will be interviewed by the researcher, asking them what their opinions and attitudes towards peer revisions (for the 6 students in the teacher-student group, they will be asked about their opinions and feelings towards meeting with teachers).

After the interviews, the students' responses will be analyzed triangularly with the data obtained from the transcripts of their interactions as well as the result of their writing drafts.

5. Conclusion

Many studies in peer review were conducted in the past; however, relatively few studies have really combined both the qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine its effectiveness. By adopting the social-cognitive approach, the current study explore the impact of social relationships (teacher – student vs. student-student) and the task factor (trained vs. untrained) on their ways of interactions during the collaborative learning process and how these differences generate different impacts on students' improvement in their regulation, incorporation of verbal feedback in their subsequent revisions, and if any, improvement in their writing performance as well as language learning. The conduction of the current study will surely shed a new light in the second language writing research as it provides both the social and cognitive dimensions of L2 peer revision and its impact on second language writing.

5. References and appendixes

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