

Making the most of peer review: Is going anonymous the way forward for Asian learners of English?

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Incorporating peer review into the writing process is popularly practiced in English writing courses both in English as a second language (ESL) and a foreign language (EFL) contexts. While a majority of research investigating the effects of peer review claims that it positively affects student writers' writing performance, some studies suggest that Asian students exhibit difficulty in criticizing others' work for cultural reasons that value group consensus over verbal negotiations (e.g., Allaei & Connor, 1990; Carson & Nelson, 1996; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Nelson & Carson, 2006). Since these studies were undertaken in an ESL context with a relatively small number of participants, this study set out to verify and extend the previous findings. A total of 114 EFL college students—57 from Japan and 57 from China—participated in the study. They engaged in peer review in both face-to-face and anonymous review modes and responded to surveys administered at the beginning of the semester (the pre-review survey) and after the completion of the last peer-review session (the post-review survey). The survey items were designed with a specific aim to examine the participants' attitudes toward writing in English, the importance of writing successive drafts, competence in the target language, the level of trust toward peer reviewers, and the value of peer review in the writing process. All survey items in the pre-review survey were included in the post-review survey to track the changes in attitude after the participants took part in peer-review sessions over a semester. The post-review survey asked additional Likert-scale questions concerning their preference for the face-to-face or the anonymous mode as a reviewer and a writer, respectively. At the end of the semester, approximately 30 percent of the participants were randomly chosen for semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in the interviewees' L1s to elicit in-depth responses about their peer-review experiences and perspectives. The collected data were analyzed using (1) a *t*-test to examine whether there is a significant difference between the pre- and post-survey data and (2) an exploratory factor analysis to detect associations among the observed variables (answers to individual survey items) that form a latent variable (factor). The results of the data analyses did not support the previously held views that Asian learners are predisposed to be reluctant peer reviewers. Rather, a majority of the participants responded that they preferred the face-to-face mode because it was easier to give honest feedback and they could work collaboratively to make corrections. It was indicated that EFL learners' preference for a certain peer-review mode interacts closely with a number of factors, such as self-assessed target language competence and learning style. Chinese students, in particular, were shown to be overly conscious of the correctness of the feedback they provided and, consequently, kept seeking confirmation and oversight from an authoritative figure (the teacher) rather than taking initiative. Possible pedagogical implications are discussed in relation to ways to better implement peer-review sessions in EFL contexts.

References

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