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The CATESOL Journal

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Potential Problems with Peer Responding in ESL Writing Classes

Many native speaker composition classes and increasing numbers of ESL composition classes use small group work and peer responding to improve writing. Teachers who have used peer responding are generally convinced of its usefulness, but many are unaware of the special problems ESL writers and readers face when asked to comment on a classmate's writing. These problems stem partly from ESL students' lack of experience in using techniques like peer responding and partly from the varying rhetorical expectations that readers from other cultures bring to a text. This paper discusses the issues surrounding the attempt to bring ESL writers into the American academic discourse community through the use of peer responding in ESL writing classes.

Few teachers who have used peer responding in their writing classes would be willing to do away with the undeniable benefits of this technique, one that has been with us since at least the last century (Gere, 1987). In the late 60s and early 70s a spate of doctoral dissertations on native speaker writing classes reported research investigating which classes made greater gains in writing ability—those which employed peer responding, with or without teacher responses, or those which employed only teacher response (Ford, 1973; Lagana, 1972; Pierson, 1976). Some findings showed greater gains among the classes which employed peer responding. Other findings showed no difference between the experimental classes and the control classes. But all the studies concluded that peer responding is superior to teacher response alone since it produces results at least as good as, if not better than, teacher response classes and has the additional advantage of reducing teacher work loads.

Peer responding came somewhat later in ESL writing classes, but the same kinds of results came from research on peer responding in ESL writing classes (Chaudron, 1983). Furthermore, teachers who use this technique often comment on its ability to promote a sense of community in the ESL writing class, to help students develop a clearer sense of audience, to make real the idea that writing must communicate a message, and to encourage a willingness to revise.

Student Reactions

Student testimonials abound as well. The following are student reactions to an ESL writing class which used between-draft peer responses for all assignments. The student comments are reproduced here in their entirety because they are typical of ESL students' reactions to peer responding and because they raise certain important issues about this technique. (Simple spelling and morphological errors have been eliminated; otherwise, the original responses are reproduced.) The students responded to two questions.

Q1: How useful was it to you to read other students' papers?

S1: It was very useful when they wrote about the same thing as I did.

S2: Sometimes it (reading and responding to a classmate's paper) helped me to get more ideas and find out about the points I had not thought about before.

S3: We can help each other.

S4: Very useful. In this way, I can also help my peers in their paper, with whatever knowledge I have of English.

S5: Yes, I realized my own mistakes when I find out about other people's mistake.

S6: That was good because (a) you get to know how the other students write and what is their levels in writing English; (b) makes you look at the paper critically; (c) indicates the style of writing in different new points.

S7: Help to explore more ideas. Learn from the mistake others made.

S8: It helped me to arrange my own essays. At least I saw how other people think and write about a particular subject.

S9: Very useful. By doing this I can conclude best topics and right structure in presenting my next papers.

S10: It was very useful because first you can see other people's way of thinking and writing. Also, seeing other people's errors makes me realize my own mistakes.

S11: It was useful because it gave me the opportunity to evaluate and give my opinion about other papers. It also makes me be familiar with other writing styles.

S12: I learnt how the others organize their essay and sometimes different view they took even we wrote the same subject. I enjoy learning the culture of other countries from essays such as special item/concept and educational system.

S13: Some of the things that I think was important did not seem important from my responder's view. Sometimes it was hard because I know something is wrong or missing but I can't seem to tell what it is. But it is easier to correct other people's mistakes and not knowing that I've made almost the same ones.

S14: Reading other students' papers, I realize one mistake which I used to make that is going round the bush. Whenever I write I always remind myself to be specific and clear as what other students did.

S15: It was very useful. It made me realize the mistakes that I have made on my paper.

S16: I can steal (?) good expressions, or find unclear expressions. I can analyze why it sounds so good or strange if I were he/she, I would change like...

S17: I do not find this extremely useful to me. But still I can learn from this. This helps me to know how others think about perhaps trigger me to think of more ideas.

Q2: How useful was it to you to hear/read other students' comments on your papers?

S1: Students' comments on my paper were usually vague and I didn't find much help with them.

S2: Not as much as reading other people's papers.

S3: It was useful that you learn from other students' comments and you can improve your essay.

S4: The coments are helpful to improve my writing.

S5: Very useful. It helps me know my mistakes before I actually hand in for grading. It also helps me to know where I stand/my standard of English.

S6: Very helpful. You can at least know what others think/respond to your writings. This also helps one to correct his mistakes.

S7: Yes. Constructive criticism are very helpful. However, some sarcastic remarks made by fellow students are uncalled for.

S8: I found it very useful. So many times they directed me to the right point.

S9: Very helpful to improve my paper.

S10: Sometimes it was very useful. Something might be clear to me but not for others. In this sense it was helpful to get comments about my papers from classmates.

S11: Very useful. The comments had helped me realize my mistakes and I can correct them when I write my last papers.

S12: It depends on who the responder is.

S13: Sometimes it was helpful, but sometimes it was confusing because I didn't know whether to consider the student's comments for my final draft or not.

S14: Yes, it was very helpful because you have to know what the other thinks about what you wrote. Because maybe there might be unclear points that you think are clear because you know the subject.

S15: It is helpful sometimes but I think some readers are sometimes afraid to point out the mistakes that I make. They might afraid that means criticizing my papers.

S16: It was real helpful because there were somethings that seemed important to me but was not so from the responder's point of view.

S17: I like this very much because I can learn my mistakes from here and learn some other ways of writing a good essay from other students.

S18: Very useful. I improved quite a bit after reading the comments and suggestions on my papers.

S19: I could find my weak points. When I am writing, I understand what I'm going to say, but my words, sentences, and paragraphs cannot always bring my thoughts to the reader. If someone asks what I will say by this word, sentence, or paragraph, I know that part must be changed more clearly, directly or somehow. To read other papers is very interesting and helpful. Also that others read my papers and comment is very helpful. *But to comment for others to improve the writers is extremely hard because I have to be a good reader.*

S20: At least I can know how others evaluate my papers. It is sometimes very useful to me.

Discussion

The responses to the first question (How useful was it to you to read other students' papers?) were overwhelmingly positive, with only S1 and S17 suggesting some misgiving. The answers to the second question, however, (How useful was it to you to hear/read other students' comments on your papers?), while still decidedly positive, included negative reactions, highlighted above. These students raise questions about the quality of responses (unspecific or simply unhelpful), the destructiveness of critical responses, the action to take based on the responses, and the honesty or frankness of responses.

Writing teachers have experienced other problems with peer responding as well. While those who use peer responding in their classes remain committed to the idea, it is important to determine what peer responding can do and what it cannot do for our ESL writing students and to consider what sorts of approaches teachers might take to ensure maximum benefits for ESL students in light of their special needs in writing for the academic community. This paper will explore some of the pitfalls of this technique for ESL writing classes and suggest ways to avoid them.

Responding Versus Editing

An initial problem with peer responding in the ESL writing classroom is that ESL students new to the practice nearly always confuse responding with editing. Instead of engaging with the text they are reading and responding as real readers, they are likely to respond to surface concerns of grammar, mechanics, spelling, and vocabulary, taking refuge in the security of details of presentation rather than grappling with more difficult questions of meaning. In this they may well be imitating responses they have received to their own papers, particularly in ESL language classes not focused so much on writing as on practical applications of grammar lessons. Certainly, peer editing has a place in the writing classroom, but peer editing is an activity

distinct from peer responding, and students need to be made aware that an initial focus on editorial concerns is probably misplaced and may inhibit the perception of ideas. This tendency to edit rather than to respond is fairly readily discouraged by directions to attend initially to the ideas of the text rather than to the form.

Inappropriate Responses

A stickier problem, one not unknown in native speaker writing classes, probably also results from ESL students attempting to imitate their teachers' responses to their writing. Pushed by this peer responding activity to say something, and at a loss as to what to say, students often resort to exhortations like "Be specific" or "Give some examples." It is not unusual to see labels like this stamped in the margin of a paper at a spot where it is difficult to imagine what an example might be or how an example might clarify an assertion. (Excerpt from a student's paper: "In the spring young people from the surrounding villages gather at X (a village in China) to prepare for the traditional singing contest." Comment in the margin: "Give some examples.") Students who write this sort of comment reveal their confusion about its meaning, perhaps because of the way it has previously been applied to their own work. In all likelihood, these students have, at some point in their English writing careers, been asked to supply an example at a spot in their texts where they themselves perceived no need for one and have come to think of examples as inherently good or necessary rather than as aids to understanding.

Overly Direct Responses

The complaint of S7 about sarcastic responses to her work is echoed by researchers. Acton (1984) complains about the bluntness, rudeness, and even sadism his ESL students display when they comment on the papers of their classmates. Hawkins (1976) calls native speaking student responders "cruel taskmasters and rigid conformists" (p. 5). Where have students learned to respond this way? In their usual interactions with each other, they are not so quick to display exasperation. These types of responses may again be modeled after the way students have seen their teachers respond, presumably in classes which take a product-oriented single-draft approach to teaching writing or in ESL classes where, again, the focus is actually written grammar practice rather than composing. Peer responding cannot function properly if students feel that their efforts will be met with sarcasm or criticism from their peers; few people are willing to expose themselves to such abuse. However, the problem of teachers modeling these types of responses has been fading as more teachers turn away from a writing-as-grammar-practice approach, in which students are expected already to know what they are supposedly in the class to learn, and toward a more student-centered orientation. Nevertheless, keeping in mind that students feel exposed and vulnerable in their written texts, teachers do well to reiterate to peer responders that the purpose of the activity is to help, not criticize.

Validity of Peer Responses

The problems mentioned above are mainly the result of certain characteristics of ESL writing courses and as such dissipate (or increase) as the character of these courses changes in response to the tenor of the times. There are also, however, problems inherent in the peer responding approach itself. Expressing a concern common to native and nonnative writers, S13, for instance, voices uncertainty about altering his text to accommodate his responder. On the one hand, such uncertainty reflects the positive and appropriate need for this writer to make his own decisions about whether and how to alter a text and works against the appropriation of this student's text by anyone else, particularly his teacher. On the other hand, the student's concern is legitimate. How can an inexperienced ESL writer know what to accept and what to reject from among the comments made by another inexperienced ESL writer/reader?

Foreign Accent When Reading Aloud

Elbow (1973), Ponsot & Deen(1982), and others working with native speakers assert that nonjudgmental observations by several responders allow writers to witness the effect of their pieces on readers. Writers can use this information to compare the actual effect with the intended effect of the piece and modify the piece however necessary to bring these two effects in line with each other. These authors suggest that the best way to provide writers with enough input to delineate clearly reader reactions is to have writers read their pieces out loud to their peers. This technique, however, poses a real problem in ESL classes. Native speakers can eventually learn to accommodate an enormous variety of accents and even speech defects (Ponsot & Deen, 1982, p. 54). But nonnative speakers not only have less linguistic flexibility as listeners but (particularly international—that is, nonimmigrant—students) sometimes feel little need to develop oral skills and speak with accents which are very difficult to understand and defy the abilities of even ESL teachers, many of whom have become adept at understanding nearly any version of spoken English. It is even possible that in ESL writing classes of both international and immigrant students, the oral fluency itself, as well as the speed of delivery and colloquial style, of some immigrant students will impede the international students' ability to understand.

It would seem such a problem might be solved by having the teacher read the writing to the class. But this solution has the psychological drawback of disconnecting the writers from their own texts and of seeming to give the teacher more authority over the

writers' texts than desirable in the type of classroom that would use peer responding. Another approach to this problem might be to project the text as the writer reads so that ESL students can make use of visual support to supplement listening. But here again native speakers are at a decided advantage since the ability of nonnatives to follow such a reading can easily be derailed by such basic and surface distractions as lapses in vocabulary. Since ESL students are slow readers, the goal of exposing a piece of writing to a large peer audience is difficult to attain within the typical limits of institutional time constraints. It is not unusual for an advanced ESL student to require an entire class period to read a classmate's 500-word paper. Thus, while the idea of exposing student writing to a large audience is appealing, in practice in an ESL writing class, this solution is less feasible than it at first might seem.

ESL Students' Rhetorical Expectations

Instead, the usual practice in ESL writing classes is to have one or perhaps two students read a classmate's paper and respond in writing or both orally and in writing. This practice raises the most knotty of problems with ESL peer responding—the expectations which nonnative speakers bring to a text. Given findings of contrastive rhetoric (Collado, 1981; Eggington, 1987; Hinds, 1980, 1987; Kaplan, 1983; Matalene, 1985; Oliver, 1971; Ostler, 1987; Prothro, 1955) and the insights of schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983), we have every reason to assume that these expectations are likely not to be exactly the same as those of native English speaking readers, not to mention those of the American academic community. Students who are accustomed to a style of rhetoric which argues by assertion, or a style which discourages the author's drawing conclusions for the reader or generalizing from specific instances, or a style which requires heavy reliance on the words of revered philosophers of the past, all of which are legitimate in one culture or another, may bring these same expectations to their reading of texts in English.

These kinds of expectations have two problematic consequences. First, as readers these students have a more difficult time understanding, and remembering, texts which do not meet their expectations for rhetorical development (Connor, 1984; Connor & McCagg, 1983). As a result, they are more likely than native speakers to interpret a text incorrectly. Second, since these readers' expectations of a text do not correspond to the expectations of native speakers of English, their responses to a text may well lead the writer in a totally inappropriate direction, not because the responses are those of inexperienced writers or readers, but precisely because the responders are experienced and educated in a different rhetoric. The more literate students are in their own languages (graduate international students, for example), then, the greater the potential difficulty. This mismatch of expectations, it would seem, is the crux of the theoretical problem with using peer responding in ESL writing classes and accounts for the greatest potential limitation of this technique.

While this problem is perhaps less acute for immigrant students who are not literate in their native languages (ironically, perhaps an advantage in this instance), we know little about how oral L1 patterns of discourse are transferred to writing and therefore must at least entertain the idea that oral L1 patterns will also affect readers' expectations of texts.

In commenting on the importance of feedback for writing development, Moffett (1968) makes an analogy between playing tennis and receiving feedback on writing. Tennis players receive immediate feedback on the success or failure of their serves or strokes from observing physical objects: the ball, the lines around the court, the ability of the opponent to return the ball. In order to be able to modify what they do, writers also need feedback on the success or failure of their work to produce the intended effect. But, of course, success or failure in writing depends on the writing context, the purpose of the writing, and the intended audience. If the audience is operating under different rules for the game, they are in a difficult position to determine the success or failure of an effort. To some extent, all inexperienced writers are unfamiliar with the rules of the academic writing game. The additional problem for ESL students who are experienced writers in their native languages is that these students are also familiar with rules for a different version of the game.

To combat this problem of disparity among the versions of the academic writing game, some rules of the U.S. version can be directly imparted to these ESL students. But the rules that can be imparted in this way are extremely limited in scope. Much like the limitations of the grammatical monitor in Krashen's (1981) monitor model of second language acquisition, it would seem that the rules of writing which can best be taught and learned are strictly formal: Papers should be double spaced, typed on one side of the page, include a bibliography, and so forth. The really important skills of conveying and gleaning meaning are acquired or absorbed slowly through exposure to the very successes and failures which, I would argue, these ESL students are not yet able to recognize.

Writing for the American Academic Community

With the advent of the communicative approach in ESL and the process approach to teaching ESL writing came a humanistic, student-centered classroom and the assertion that a reader need not be an expert in writing in order to be able to respond to writing. However inexperienced a responder might be or however different the rhetorical expectations of a nonnative reader might be, responses which are supportive and nondirective allow students to find their own

voices, to experience pleasure and success in writing, and to gain confidence as writers. In native speaker classes even responses limited to "I understand this, but I don't understand that" have a positive effect (Butler, 1980).

Here again the issue of what kind of response is necessary for a writer to be able to improve is complicated by another essential difference between native and nonnative writers and perhaps between immigrant and international ESL students. While native speakers and immigrant students are likely to write for many different contexts in the course of their professional lives, international ESL students, particularly undergraduates, often insist that when they finish their studies abroad, they will return to industries, ministries, or companies at home where they are unlikely to need to write in English ever again. Like the other conventions of life in the U.S., the conventions of academic writing are merely temporary and serve no purpose beyond allowing these ESL students to function within their current environment. These students agree that they need to learn to write in English, but their need for written English is limited since the only audience they will have is the professors in their classes in the U.S. For these students, writing in English is likely never to become the means of self-exploration and empowerment that it can become for native and near-native speakers.

If these students' perception is true, then the only writing community which they aspire to enter is that of their academic discipline. A criticism of the process approach in ESL writing, and with it such techniques as peer responding, has been that this approach does not prepare students adequately to write for that academic community because it focuses too exclusively on the writer and on affective domains (Horowitz, 1986). "A basic dogma of process-oriented teaching is that good writing is 'involved' writing, that students write best when they care about their subject. It is assumed that students who choose their own topics and answer the questions they are truly curious about will be more highly motivated, better writers" (p. 142). Yet many actual academic assignments not only prescribe the subject of the assignment but also even require students to follow an established outline to complete the assignment, giving students little leeway for choice of topic or presentation. The gentle peer responses characteristic of process-oriented writing classes which focus on what students have succeeded in doing well may support the writer as a person but, it is argued, do little to prepare those students to write for examiners who will not be judging the writer as a person but rather only the writing (Horowitz, 1986).

A further criticism of peer responding is that it takes for granted that the students' peers are their natural audience (Newkirk, 1984). But the goal of writing instruction classes at a university is not to enable students to write for each other but eventually to permit student writers to develop a sense of the academic community as audience. The peer audience is not yet the academic audience; it is still only an apprentice audience. In an attempt to determine how effectively native English speaking students had absorbed the criteria an academic audience uses in evaluating writing, Newkirk asked 10 freshman students and 10 teachers of composition to read, evaluate, and rank four freshman compositions. He found the student readers were willing to view the text as transparent, supplying from their own experiences the examples or elaborations needed to understand the writers' claims for generalizations. In other words, if the writer did not make explicit the explanation of a point, the student raters were willing to make that point explicit themselves in order to be able to understand what the writer was saying. As long as they could bring to bear on their reading of the text similar experiences in the world and could therefore understand the text and sympathize with the content of the essay, they did not demand of the writer that he or she make those points explicitly in the text; the readers were willing to do that work. The teacher raters, on the other hand, viewed the text as opaque, less as message than as object which intends to produce a certain effect, and judged the texts on the basis of how successfully they produced their effects. As in most academic settings, these English teachers were not doing personal readings, trying to get something for themselves out of the text; rather, they viewed the texts through the filter of their roles as representatives of the academic community with its expectations of explicitness, clarity, and substantiation. Newkirk argues that while a peer audience is not yet a member of the academic writing commmunity, writing teachers can effectively represent that community, with its standards and expectations.

But Newkirk's assertion about writing teachers' ability to play that role is problematic. A study of ESL students (Leki, 1989) designed to determine how well they could predict the criteria their English and content area professors used in evaluating writing showed, not surprisingly, that these students were unable to predict how their teachers would evaluate a group of essays and that their own criteria for evaluating writing differed substantially from that used by their professors. More troubling, however, the study also compared evaluations by the English faculty to evaluations done by the content area faculty. While the findings showed some agreement on what constitutes good writing, the English faculty and the content area faculty did not agree on which essays displayed those abstract qualities of good writing. This research calls into question the degree to which even writing teachers, not to mention students, can represent the rest of the academic community.

The argument has been aptly made (Spack, 1988) that English teachers cannot be expected to have absorbed the various conventions and criteria for good writing prevailing in all other disciplines. She

argues that certain characteristics of the written presentation of ideas underlie all academic writing, such as the synthesis of information from disparate sources or presentation and support of a position and that these skills can be sucessfully taught in writing classes. Ponsot & Deen (1980) too advise teachers not to teach the peripheral, the unessential, in writing (p. 66). Both these authors consider the writing demands typical of specific disciplines to be specialized forms which students can master after they develop ease in, presumably, a kind of general, educated written English.

Again, while this may be an argument for teaching "general English" writing to native speakers, who will be using English all their lives to communicate in writing for a variety of contexts, purposes, and audiences, there are those in the ESL profession who maintain that, especially for nonnatives, no such thing as general English even exists (Johns & Connor, 1989) and that to try to teach general English or general writing is wasting students' time. Many in ESL, particularly in higher education, argue for discipline-specific writing classes and assignments. Presumably if peer response played a role in such classes, the students would need to be carefully trained to recognize writing which meets the criteria of the discipline. Whether or not such training is practical depends at least in part on the characteristics of the class (graduate or undergraduate, with all the same majors or not) and in part on the experience and training of the teacher.

In the meantime and despite doubts, we continue to function as though ESL writing teachers can in fact represent the general academic community and its responses to writing. Whether or not they can, if we use peer response groups, certainly ESL students need initiation into peer responding, and there are several tactics a teacher might employ to guide students toward helpful responses. First, given that cultural differences in rhetorical patterns exist, it makes sense to spend some time discussing what those different tendencies might be and pointing out to ESL students examples of how an idea might be presented in "typical" American academic rhetoric as opposed to the styles of several other cultures. Next, the most obvious way to initiate students into writing appropriate responses is to model responses to several texts before asking the students to respond on their own. One way of doing this is by preparing response guide questions to a text, allowing each student to answer the questions alone and perhaps compare answers with other students, displaying the teacher's responses for the students to compare with theirs, and eventually discussing what differences there might be. Finally, a useful technique which seems to be little employed entails the teacher monitoring responses from responders to writers. Such monitoring functions as a modeling technique also in that the teacher comments on the responder's written answers to response guide questions, primarily encouraging what the teacher regards as helpful responses. Both the responder and the author of the text need access to the teacher's reactions to the responder's answers so that both know what may be expected of responders and so that both may judge whether their instincts about a text are in line with those of the teacher and perhaps with those of a broader academic community.

Conclusion

What one initiate into the academic discourse community can actually do to help another initiate through peer responding may be limited, perhaps especially in ESL classes. But both initiates do gain experience in reading, in recognizing academic writing patterns, and most importantly in manipulating text to respond to a reader's needs. This last should help prepare ESL student writers to make whatever alterations in their approach to writing might be called for in the disipline-specific discourse of the academic commmunities they hope to enter. ■

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