



Training effects on computer-mediated peer review

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Abstract

The interactive functions of weblogs facilitate computer-mediated peer reviews for collaborative writing. As limited research has been conducted on examining the training effects of peer reviews on students' peer comments, their revision quality, and their perceptions when composing in weblogs, the present case study aims to fill the gap. Thirteen freshman students participated in an EFL writing class, in which they wrote four formal assignments in weblogs. Peer review training was conducted in the second and third assignments to facilitate the collaborative process. Comparisons between reviews without and with training (i.e., the first and the fourth assignments) indicate that the students made more revision-oriented peer comments and had more success in revising their compositions, although they adopted less than 50% of the comments for revision. The students' perception data show that blog-enhanced instruction stimulated their interest in improving their writing. Yet, not all of the participants felt confident about providing useful peer feedback. With the empirical evidence presented in the study, blogs could serve as a suitable platform for EFL writing instruction concerning giving opportunities for interaction. As training is essential to make computer-mediated peer review effective, the study supports the crucial role played by language teachers when incorporating Internet technologies into writing instruction.

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1. Introduction

The world-wide growth in Internet technologies has attracted researchers to explore their impact on various aspects of writing instruction (Ciekanski and Chanier, 2008; Ho and Savignon, 2007; Liu and Sadler, 2003; Warschuer and Ware, 2006). To illustrate, Ciekanski and Chanier (2008) designed an experiment based on a synchronous audio-graphic conferencing tool with 16 false beginners in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. To analyze the video data which represents user actions and speech acts that occurred in the various modalities of the system (aural, textchat, text editing, websites), they developed a coding scheme. The relationship between how the learning tasks for collaborative writing were designed by tutors and how they were implemented by learners was examined. The authors argue that the evaluation framework provided

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can increase our understanding of multimodal communication structures through learner participation and learning practices. With succinct features of archiving, hyperlink, comment, and instant/self-publishing, several projects have been conducted on the use of weblogs for second language writing (Bloch, 2007; Wang, 2007). The commenting functions of blogs are particularly worth examination since they make blogs a promising environment for peer review activities in the L2 writing classroom, helping students interact with each other and refine their writing. A number of studies show the benefits of peer reviews for classroom-based writing instruction and such an activity involves complex factors for their success. Among the factors, the existing literature deemed peer review training as crucial (Berg, 1999; Min, 2005, 2006; Stanley, 1992; Zhu, 1995). Logically, training should be held more thoroughly, particularly in the context of computer-mediated peer review (Ware and O'Dowd, 2008) when technology familiarity and its function add additional dimensions in the complex peer review process. Limited weblog research has been conducted in EFL contexts concerning mainly students' perceptions regarding online participation and student perception (Wang, 2007), leaving revisions and the training effects untapped. It is argued in this study that students' revision, online negotiation and their perceptions toward the review task as influenced by training should be examined altogether in order to precisely pinpoint how computer-mediated peer review can facilitate EFL writing instruction.

2. Literature review

Peer review for L2 writing has generated increasing research interest recently (e.g., Liu and Hansen, 2002; Lockhart and Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger, 1992; Wang, 2007; Zhu, 2001). With the interaction it sparks among students, peer review is claimed to assist continued development of communicative competence, inspire more learner participation, create an authentic communicative context, and help writers gain more understanding of reader needs (Hyland, 2003). Traditionally, studies on peer review generally fell into three categories (Ferris, 2003): the nature of interactions taking place during peer review sessions, the impact of peer review on student revisions and usually overall writing quality, and student attitudes towards peer response.

Studies that have linked peer response characteristics with learning outcomes and students' affective responses are instructors' prime concerns but they did not always yield satisfactory results. One finding is that the participants may not adopt peer feedback. In Mendonça and Johnson's study (1994), although 53% of peer comments were incorporated, the ESL students in their study were quite advanced with their writings and discussions centering on their specialized field, making the condition in the study unlikely to appear in most general purpose EFL composition courses. In another study, Connor and Asenavage (1994) found that very few student revisions were the direct result of peer response (only 5%). Peer reviewers had the tendency to focus on surface forms (i.e. grammatical errors) while teacher comments covered idea development and organization. A related study was conducted by Paulus (1999), who examined the impact of peer review on eleven international students' revisions in a pre-freshman course in a university. Overall, peer revision influenced 13.9% of all revisions, whereas teacher feedback influenced 34.3%. Peer feedback's contribution to the improvement of revisions was much smaller than that of teacher feedback or other-influenced feedback.

Another finding for the failures of peer review is that some students gave overly critical comments (Leki, 1990) or complimentary feedback since they were reluctant to criticize their peers (Carson and Nelson, 1996). To make students more effective reviewers and thus enhance the effectiveness of peer review on student writing, some researchers have suggested training be crucial with empirical evidence (Berg, 1999; Min, 2005, 2006; Stanley, 1992; Zhu, 1995). Berg's (1999) participants made more meaning-changing revisions after receiving training. In Min's (2006) study, not only did students' writings comprise a significantly higher percentage of revisions from peer responses (from 68% to 90%), the number of revisions and the quality of them were also enhanced due to her training. This specific line of inquiry seems to suggest that training is essential to make peer review effective.

2.1. Computer-mediated peer review (CMPR)

A number of researchers have conducted studies that compared face-to-face and computer-mediated peer review (Ho and Savignon, 2007; Liu and Sadler, 2003; Schultz, 1999; Ware and O'Dowd, 2008). Computer-

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