GREATER EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER REVIEW: APPLYING MIN'S 4-STEP PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

The peer review process is expected to raise English as a second language writers' awareness of higher order issues in organization and content. However, multiple obstacles, not the least of which are the linguistic limitations of writers of English for Academic Purposes, commonly interfere with good results from peer reviews. Min's system of peer review leads to significant improvements. The process begins with instructor modeling. Learners then identify problems in peer drafts. For each problem, they are expected to explain the problem or offer a suggestion for improvement. With its 4-Step process, Min's system of peer reviewing enables learners to apply their critical thinking skills in a way that generates significantly more meaningful comments and improves revision results.

Keywords: peer review in ESL writing, improving peer review in ESL Writing, Min's 4-step processes

Despite the recognized benefits of the peer review process in writing classes, its often ineffective application among English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners of academic writing can frustrate both instructors and students. Instructors are discouraged when peer reviews fail to produce the types of comments that inform the revision process. Likewise, students question the purpose of peer reviews when faced with their inability to give or receive constructive criticism.

Peer reviews in EAP academic writing are challenging for a number of reasons. First, EAP writers are prejudiced against the peer review process due to their perceived and actual limitations in both linguistic and rhetorical skills. Not only are they grappling with language acquisition on the level of grammar and vocabulary, but they are also not yet confident in the use of structural and organizational conventions of American academic writing. Also, skill differences between more and less proficient English as a second language (ESL) academic writers pose a unique challenge. If a lower level writer is paired with a higher level peer, the lower level writer may not have the critical thinking skills necessary to comment on what appears to be the more polished work of their higher level peers. They might think, "This paper is perfect. I don't know how to comment." At the same time, the higher level writer, who may otherwise welcome constructive feedback, may find him or herself shortchanged in the process. Another compounding issue may be the quality of peer review guides supplied in EAP writing textbooks. These guides tend to use questions like, "Do the body paragraphs have topic sentences?" This type of a leading question allows students to circumvent critical thinking that produces substantive feedback. When combined, these challenges can lead to perfunctory peer comments that leave the peer review process unproductive for students and disappointing for instructors.

THE ROLE OF PEER REVIEW

Peer reviews in EAP academic writing instruction are a great way to develop emerging writers' skills in two ways. Traditionally, peer reviews have been expected to support and enhance revision skills through the generation of meaningful feedback. Even more important, however, is the role of the peer review process in developing EAP learners' ability to apply their critical thinking skills to the higher order aspects of writing such as content, organization, unity,

and coherence. The peer review process demands of a writer to step out of the argumentative environment of their own work and become a constructive critical reader for someone else. By doing that, they are spontaneously put in a position to question their peer's content and logic. The hope is that, if EAP learners are able to question why something in a paper doesn't work, they might also be able to offer a suggestion for how to make it work. It is anticipated that this level of critical engagement with a classmate's paper will help EAP writers transfer the same process of constructive criticism to improving their own work. Cho and Cho (2011) have demonstrated a link between peer reviews and the writers' ability to self-evaluate and revise their own work. Therefore, it is worthwhile to pursue peer reviewing strategies that position EAP writers to offer a substantially higher quality of feedback. Applying Min's 4-Step peer review process (2016 & 2006) is a significant step in that direction.

APPLYING MIN'S 4-STEP PEER REVIEW PROCESS
Training

One class session of 75 minutes combined the modeling and the first student application of Min's 4-Step process (2016, 2006). Students were asked to bring two handouts. One handout outlined descriptions and examples of the four types of comments that the peer reviewers should generate. The other handout was the guide sheet for the structural and content areas that the peer review should address. Given the need to prioritize developing EAP writers' critical thinking skills for higher order elements of academic writing, students should be reminded not to comment on grammar. The peer review guide listed the areas of focus without relying on guided questions. For example, instead of asking, "Is there a thesis statement?" the guide sheet instructed, "Comment on the thesis statement. Explain your comment". This leaves the possibility for giving affirmative feedback, which recognizes what the writer is doing well as

well as constructive feedback, which suggests what to improve. The modeling of the process

uses examples of student work and applies Min's steps to one or two questions on the guide

sheet before inviting students to work individually. The modeling stage of the training can take

30-40 minutes (or more if time allows).

Four steps, three processes

The following are the four steps developed by Min (2016, 2006) with my examples of

possible comments.

Step 1: Clarifying the writer's intention

Is something missing in the thesis?

What is the topic sentence?

Step 2: Identifying a problem

The thesis is incomplete.

There is no topic sentence in this paragraph.

Step 3: Explaining the nature of the problem

The preview portion of thesis doesn't include the main idea of the 2nd body

paragraph.

Without the topic sentence, the paragraph is confusing. I'm not sure if the

purpose is to discuss history or if it's to explain the effects.

Step 4: Offering a suggestion for revision

Add idea ___ from paragraph 2 to your thesis.

This might be a good topic sentence ___ .

Min's 4-Steps can be understood as three critiquing processes. Even though steps 1

(clarifying intention) and 2 (identifying a problem) have somewhat different objectives, I have

grouped them into one process of identifying a problem. This identification can be expressed in the form of a question that aims to clarify the writer's intent or in the form of a comment that identifies an issue. The choice between steps 1 and 2 as a process of identifying a problem leaves room for students to work within their comfort zones around giving feedback while also accounting for different levels of critical thinking skills. The question form in step 1 allows the reviewer to express uncertainty and give the writer the benefit of a doubt. Given the potential for lexical ambiguities of EAP writing, this is an important option. For example, in an attempt to clarify vocabulary use, a reviewer's comment for step 1 (clarifying intention) may be as simple as "Did you mean _____ ?" Step 2 (identifying a problem) is more direct in naming a problem. Comments for steps 1 and 2 in and of themselves can make a marked improvement in the overall quality and results of the peer review process.

The second process is based on step 3, explaining the nature of the problem. This step allows students to build on their initial perception of a problem by explaining why it's a problem, which naturally leads to the third process, which comprises step 4, offering a way for improvement.

Upon completion of the modeling part of the training, students were asked to exchange their drafts with a peer. While Min (2016, 2006) asks students to produce all four types of comments for each "problem" they encounter, I have simplified the process by asking students to generate two comments for each of the questions on the guide sheet: one comment that identifies a problem (Step 1 or Step 2) and one comment that either explains the nature of the problem (Step 3) or offers a suggestion for revision (Step 4). The reason for lowering the required number of comments is to make it possible for students to complete the first peer review during the initial class session. The number of required comments can later be expanded if peer reviews are

assigned as an out-of-class activity. It also helps if the writing sample is short (about a page) when students work on this type of peer review for the first time. Allowing reviewers to choose between steps 3 and 4 increases the flexibility of applying their critical skills and reduces potential anxiety around the expectation that they come up with an effective suggestion. Also, steps 3 and 4 require more cognitive processing, so some students might not have quite enough time to think their way through step 3 and effectively explain why something is a problem. It generally seemed easier for students to generate comments for step 4 rather than for step 3.

Upon completing the peer reviews, students submitted their work to the instructor (as well as the peer) and were graded for quality and completion by the instructor. Grading added the element of accountability by assigning points based on whether the reviews responded to guide questions and whether they included the correct number and types of comments. A part of a subsequent class session was used for students to discuss and clarify the feedback.

EAP CONSIDERATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

Min's model (2016, 2006) stresses the importance of training and teacher modeling for the effective implementation of the four steps. It is important to note, though, that both Min (2016, 2006) and Lam (2010) have used this process in year-long academic writing courses for English as a second or foreign language learners. They dedicated up to three class hours to training and modeling. Following the in-class training, they also met individually with peer reviewers to go over drafts as well as peer comments and suggest idea for writing better comments. The amount of time recommended by Min (2016, 2006) posed a challenge for applying this in a semester-long EAP course in the US. In this EAP application, training time was significantly reduced, the drafts used for the peer review were short, and the number of questions on the guide sheet was limited to four so that students could comfortably read the draft

and write a pair of comments for each question. Including these adaptations made the peer review training and application manageable while producing the anticipated improvement in the overall quality of peer comments as well as attention to incorporating peer feedback in revision.

RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS

The systematic approach of Min's 4-Steps (2016, 2006) produced a significant improvement in the quality of student comments. This process was applied to the first draft of an assigned paper that was followed by two more revision drafts. The review of students' drafts and peer comments revealed that student comments were usually focused enough and substantial enough that no additional comments from the instructor were needed for revision. Furthermore, the second draft did in fact incorporate feedback from peers, improving the quality of revision and giving the instructor higher quality of writing to comment on before assigning the final draft.

CONCLUSION

As EAP writing instructors continue to look for ways to improve the effectiveness of peer reviews, Min's 4-Step Process offers a promising option. Given greater student engagement with the peer review process as well as the marked improvement in the quality of comments and revised drafts, this style of peer review merits application and continued trial and adaptation to various ESL writing environments.

THE AUTHOR

Once an international student herself, Anna-Maria Cornell has experienced the challenges of attending an American college as a speaker of English as a Second Language. Her mission is to support her students in acquiring language proficiency necessary for success in college and beyond. She teaches English for Academic Purposes at the University of Iowa with a special focus on grammar and writing. Anna-Maria was born in Croatia, where she began learning English at the age of eight. After graduating from college, she lived in Los Angeles where she worked as a film production assistant, film reviewer, novelist, and a script analyst at a top-ranked script consulting company. In her free time, she enjoys watching movies, creative writing, and long walks on scenic trails.

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