

Developing Peer Review Skills in EFL Writing

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Abstract

The use of peer review in EFL writing helps develop analytical skills and a greater sense of agency in foreign language students. Many EFL students lack peer review skills and so teachers need to encourage the development of these skills in their students. One way is through the use of rubrics, or component-based analysis, and checklists of common student errors. Peer review skills allow students to become better writers through increased exposure to the writing of others as well as pushing students to take on a more teacher-like role in assessing writing. In addition, increasing peer review in the writing classroom demonstrates a more social nature of writing, rather than simply performing for a teacher. The peer review process develops a more student-centered classroom as students create greater student-to-student interaction through, in this case, a three-draft cycle. This research project tracked a first-year writing course at a university in Japan as the teacher and students went through six rounds of peer review over the course of three writing assignments. This project seeks to demonstrate the development of peer review skills through the use of rubrics and document the relationship between the students' and teacher's evaluations.

Key words: writing, peer review, student agency, rubric, foreign language teaching, assessment, student-centered learning

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Introduction

Peer review in EFL writing develops students' analytical skills as they read their peers' drafts. It also encourages students to reflect on and improve their own writing. A third and pivotal benefit of peer review is that it de-emphasizes the role of the teacher and allows students to take greater control over their own learning (Benson, 2013). A key issue with peer review is that many EFL students may have little to no experience with peer review and may lack the critical skills required (Hyland, 2014).

Use of Rubrics

This research project used component-based rubrics for peer review sessions. The use of rubrics by both teacher and students creates a more transparent classroom paradigm as the students see and use the same evaluation criteria as the teacher, thus demonstrating the grading process (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). The specific rubrics used listed the criteria to be evaluated (organization, language and content) and three grade ranges by which the students could evaluate their peer's drafts.

The two first-year writing classes were given two different rubrics. The first class was given a rubric that listed the criteria and grade ranges (shown below in Figure 1).

	>80%	70-80%	<70%
Organization			
Language/ Accuracy			
Content			

Figure 1

The other rubric used in the second class contained explanatory text of the criteria and grade ranges (an abbreviated form is shown below in Figure 2). The first research question posed by this project is what (if any) difference in peer review quality can be seen between the two classes and if the explanatory text in the second rubric helps the students make more effective evaluations or if the "blank" rubric allows students to create their own values in evaluation.

	>80%	70-80%	<70%
Organization	All major parts are fully developed.	Some parts have problems.	There are major problems.

Figure 2

This project also seeks to track the difference (if any) between students' and teacher's evaluations of drafts. As the first-year students are assumed to have essentially zero experience at evaluating other students' writing, the difference and potential progress over the term may be used to track the development of peer review skills in contrast with the teacher's evaluations. This is the second research question of this project and will be addressed in the final section of this paper.

Methodology

This project tracked the progress of two first-year writing classes at a university in urban Japan. Over the course of the 15-week term, the students wrote two paragraphs and one essay, each with a three-draft cycle. The students were given in-class instruction on how to write a paragraph and then expand their writing into a full essay, the third assignment.

Peer review sessions were conducted on the second and third (final) drafts. The students submitted two anonymous copies of these drafts: one for peer review and the second for the teacher. Students were arranged into small groups of 3-4 individuals and then provided with the appropriate rubric. The students were instructed to keep each draft together with the same rubric, with each member of the group providing evaluation and feedback on the same rubric. Students were instructed to read and review each draft and then rotate through the entire review group so that each student would read the drafts and each writer received more feedback from more peer reviewers.

Students in both classes were instructed to mark which grade range of each criteria they thought corresponded to the draft read. They were also encouraged to give more explicit feedback in the form of comments (in the blank spaces on the first rubric and at the bottom of the rubric in the second class).

The final task of the reviewers was to provide a hypothetical grade to the third drafts. The teacher instructed the students that variation in feedback and grades was natural and acceptable. The hypothetical grades were averaged together and recorded by the teacher and then physically removed before returning the drafts and rubrics to the original writer. This was done as the students' grades could possibly artificially encourage or discourage the original writers. After class, the teacher's and students' grades were recorded and compared for the purpose of this project. The results will be presented and interpreted in the next section.

Results

Looking at the chart below (Figure 3), it is apparent that the teacher's assessment was consistently lower than the students', or the students consistently assessed their peers' drafts as being of higher quality than the teacher did. Having said that, the variation over the term and between the two classes is quite strong and appears to follow divergent trajectories.

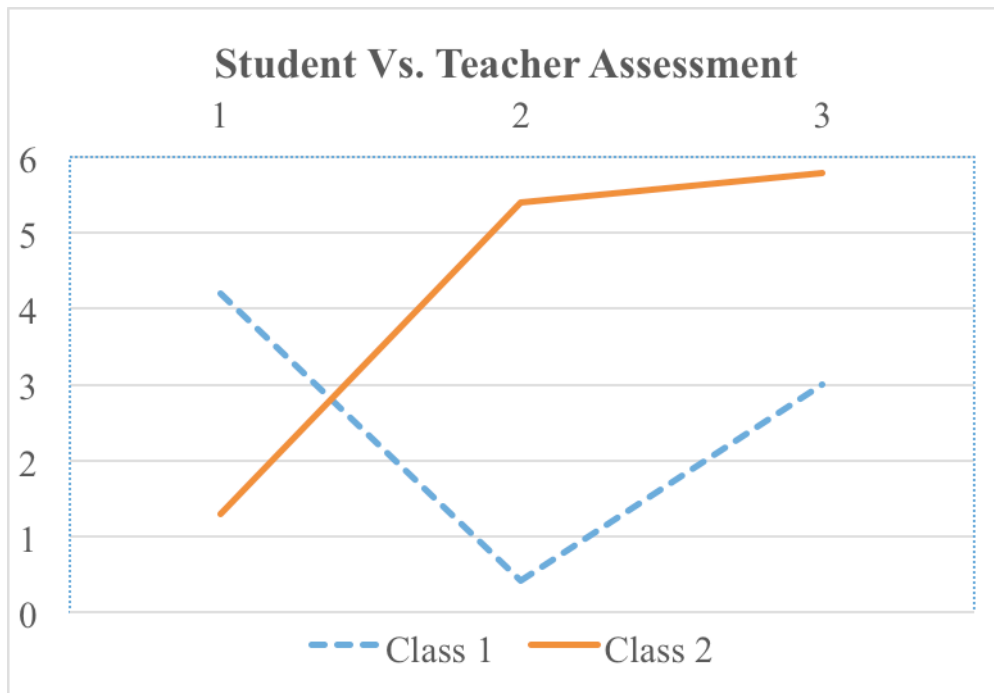


Figure 3

The first class (with the no-text rubric) started the course with a significantly higher assessment than the teacher (average 4.2 points), then moved to almost equal with the teacher (average 0.4 points) on the second unit and finished the course with slightly higher assessment (average 3 points) on the third and final unit. While it was predicted that students' assessment would move towards the teacher's (indicating development of peer review skills), the first class does not show steady progress and in fact appears erratic and unrelated to the teacher's assessment. This erratic behavior may be due to variation within the individual students and their interactions with the drafts.

The second class (with the full supporting text rubric) showed a more consistent pattern, but moving away from the teacher's assessment. With the first unit, the students were only mildly higher (average 1.3 points) than the teacher, while in the second and third units, the students moved sharply away (average 5.4 and 5.8 points, respectively) from the teacher's assessment of the drafts. This pattern, while counter-intuitive, may be due to students' misunderstanding of the rubric and peer review process or variation on the part of the teacher.

The first research question regarding variation between students' use of the two different rubrics can be answered in the positive as the graph in Figure 3 indicate two divergent paths of student/teacher evaluations. The results are puzzling to this researcher as they do not indicate students' peer review skills are improving and approaching the teacher's evaluations of the drafts. As such, the second research question should be answered in the negative as the data from the first class do not show any relationship between the students' and the teacher's evaluation and the data from the second set in fact demonstrates a negative relationship as the students' evaluations moved away from the teacher's.

Conclusion and Implications

The data resulting from analysis of the rubrics do not demonstrate a strong pattern of students developing peer review skills. The data from the rubrics seem erratic and discouraging, while the data from the informal text comments on the rubrics indicate that students appreciate and understand peer review and its purposes. This alone should encourage teachers to continue using rubrics in future classes.

Future courses and research could include more teacher-directed instruction and use of rubrics and other peer review instruments, with more explicit instruction on the skills and functions of the instruments. Another opportunity for future research could involve more formal gathering, coding and interpreting of students' comments. This mixed method of research could provide greater insight into the development of students' peer review skills as they achieve greater understanding of process writing and take a more assertive role in the writing classroom (Noels, 2013).

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