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著者	HIRATA, Yoko
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Improving Writing Skills through Peer-assisted Activities

Yoko HIRATA*

Abstract

This paper outlines collaborative writing activities in which pairs of students work together to compose an essay for their intended audience. The aim of the activities implemented in a writing course was to encourage students' active participation in the learning process and to improve their writing skills. This paper focuses on the student's perceptions and the instructor's observations of the activities. The students' comments show various benefits of the activities such as improving critical thinking skills and taking more responsibility for the writing process. The results also suggest that the instructor should monitor students' writing behaviors and be sensitive to any problems that arise during the writing process to meet students' various needs.

1. Introduction

Despite various developments in teaching writing methods, writing in a foreign language have given EFL students a lot of problems and pressure no matter what they are required to write¹⁾. The majority of those students have little idea of how to prepare their points or even how to write an opening sentence. Traditionally, the product approach to writing, in which the main focus of a written task is on the final product, has been widely used in the classroom. One of the problems of this approach is that writing is not regarded as being performed interactively²⁾. Students are not encouraged to be aware of the purpose of writing and, as a result, their audience is often invisible^{2,3)}. In addition, not much emphasis has been placed on the writing process that students have gone through. In the secondary education, in particular, since teaching of writing is often examination-oriented, more focus has been placed on language form and accuracy rather than self-expression⁴⁾. The instructor corrects errors in students' final pieces of writing, while only paying close attention to grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It is also the fact that students complete their writing tasks alone in the classroom or at home as homework in unsupported conditions⁵⁾. These factors tend to prevent students from improv-

* Department of Electronics and Information Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, Hokkai-Gakuen University

ing writing skills and make them perceive themselves as unsuccessful writers⁶⁾.

2. Process Approach

Recently, it has been widely acknowledged that writing is a process, which involves brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing^{1,7,8)}. This approach requires exploration and awareness of what writers think and evaluate during the writing process⁹⁾. For students from non-English discourse communities, however, it can be difficult to understand that the writing is a process of organizing and communicating your ideas. Another challenge of this approach is that developing a discovering and decision-making process is only applicable to highly proficient students⁹⁾. This approach has also been criticized because students are often required to compose a text without understanding the importance of the purpose of writing or linguistic knowledge¹⁰⁾. In Asian educational settings, the process approach of writing is often viewed as impractical and too time-consuming⁸⁾. A major reason for this negative perception is that, although this approach requires students to take a responsibility for their own writing, the students are often neither independent nor self-motivated writers¹¹⁾. As a result, product-based approaches are still predominantly used and the instructor revises every single paper and provides students with written comments¹²⁾.

As for students in Japanese educational settings, Kamimura claims that in order for them to become skilled English writers, they need to “pay more careful attention to the planning and rereading process” while making positive efforts to generate ideas and do revising exercises¹³⁾. Sasaki and Hirose also point out that, compared with skilled Japanese EFL students, unskilled students are more aware of overall organization of a text¹⁴⁾. It is important for the instructor to develop writing approaches which enhance students’ active involvement in writing, while encouraging them to pay more attention to organizational features of texts in each step of their writing process.

3. Peer-assisted Activities

In the process approach to writing, small group activities and peer response have been regarded as playing an important role in the development of students’ understanding of writing as a process of discovering and revising ideas^{8,15,16)}. Research has shown that there are several advantages of using feedback and response from peers. Hansen & Liu claim that feedback and response increase students’ motivation for writing¹⁷⁾. Mittan points out that they assist students in evaluating what they write more critically¹⁸⁾. In the traditional teacher-centered educational contexts, however, students, who are not used to a collaborative and student-centered classroom, are often skeptical about relying on feedback from peers and, therefore, do not believe it to be effective¹⁵⁾. Through further examining students’ ex-

periences and perceptions about feedback from peers, the instructor should be careful in selecting activities and introducing them into the classroom.

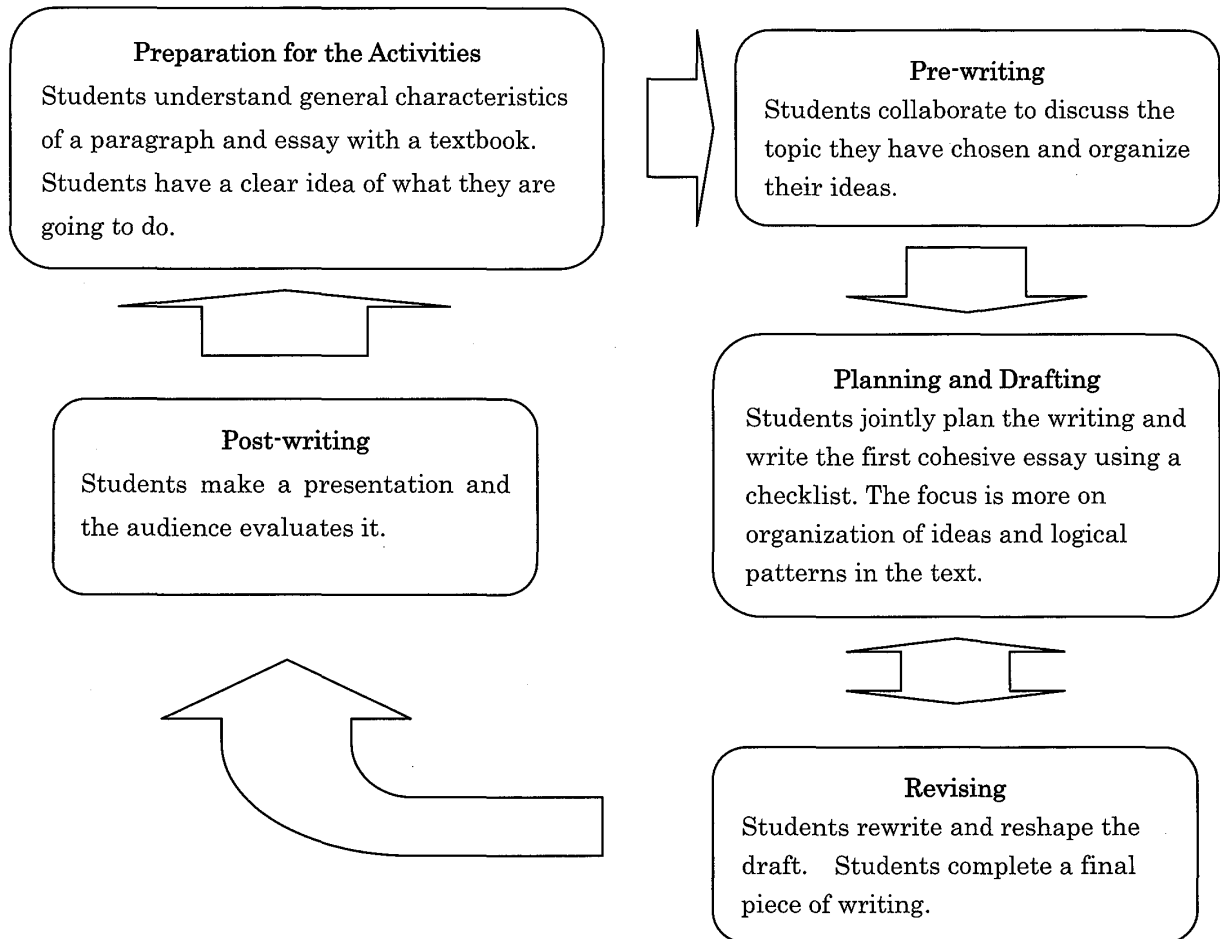
Although different terms are often used to refer to this approach, for example, peer response, peer reviews, peer editing, and peer evaluation^{8,15)}, the term 'peer-assisted activities' is used in this paper. This is because, instead of reviewing and evaluating other students' writing, more emphasis is placed on discussing and making decisions about writing based on peer support and encouragement¹⁹⁾. The following section outlines a writing process based on peer-assisted activities and describes students' perceptions and attitudes toward the implementation of these activities.

4. Methodology

Peer-assisted writing activities were implemented in an English writing course to facilitate students' writing in a class of thirty-six Japanese university students. They had attained at least an intermediate level of proficiency and were accustomed to the traditional teacher-directed language learning approach taken in a large lecture-type classroom. All of their writing experiences during secondary education were examination-oriented and the focus was on structural features such as grammatical accuracy, word choice, and spelling, etc. At the end of the semester, all the participants completed a survey concerning their attitudes and perceptions of implementing peer-assisted activities in the classroom. The students' comments and instructor's classroom observation were also utilized to investigate students' attitudes toward the implementation of the activities.

5. Activities

The activities, which were adapted from Raimes³⁾, were divided into the following five stages : preparation, pre-writing, drafting, revising, and post-writing. Figure1 illustrates these five stages, followed by a short description of what happened in each stage.

Figure 1. Outlines of Activities***Preparation for the Activities***

In the first seven weeks of the program, before students participated in the activities, they had been taught how to organize a paragraph in English by using a textbook. The textbook illustrates structural features of sentences and different types of paragraphs and essays. Emphasis at this point should be on familiarizing students with general characteristics of a paragraph and essay, such as “how to develop the topic sentence and improve the flow of ideas” and “how to create comparison & contrast paragraphs”, etc. Then, the instructor paired students up and provided them with a list of topics that students were required to choose from. With explicit guidelines, instructions, and examples regarding the organization and layout of texts, the instructor also explained what students were expected to do at each stage of the activities throughout the writing process.

Pre-writing

In this phase, students worked in pairs and collaborated to discuss the topic they had chosen from the list. At the beginning of the two-week session, they were encouraged to work together and brainstorm on the topic they had chosen and wrote down all the ideas which were associated with the topic. Students were asked to put their ideas together and decide what they were going to write and how to organize their ideas. For the purpose of focusing on the specific points that should be covered, students spent a lot of time composing their ideas and jotted down them clearly and precisely. Students were allowed to consult some reading materials and other sources in order to gain some knowledge necessary to write on the topic. The instructor monitored their work and consulted their comments.

Planning and Drafting

In this phase, based on the pre-writing activities, the same pairs of students were encouraged to plan the writing. An example of the plan that the students wrote is as follows.

Topic: People go to university for various reasons.

- A. Broaden your knowledge
 - a. Study and degree
 - b. Resources and facilities
- B. Having a better career
 - a. Qualifications
 - b. Future livelihood
- C. Meeting new people
 - a. Many student profiles
 - b. Making social connections

After the students planned their writings, the instructor collected them and provided the students with comments and constructive feedback. The comments focused on the logical sequence and overall organization of the plan. Then, the instructor displayed one or two pieces of student's writing as examples and asked students to identify disordered structures and to propose remedies with the whole class. Based on the plan, students jointly wrote the first cohesive essay of about 500 words. In order to provide students with opportunities to utilize what they had already learned and to reinforce their knowledge of the structural features of paragraphs, students used a self-editing checklist of questions

(see Appendix) to examine their drafts. The checklist assisted students in focusing on what is important about organizing sentences and writing paragraphs.

Revising

Students were encouraged to examine the content and the organization of the first draft and edit it. It was also emphasized to the students that the focus was still on organization of ideas and logical argument in the text, rather than on grammar rules and spelling. The focus was placed on an objective writing and they revised their writing until they were satisfied with it. The instructor's role was to work closely with students to assist them in writing their jointly constructed text. The instructor answered the questions concerning sentence structure and lexical items when necessary. Based on the comments and feedback given by the instructor, students rewrote and reshaped the draft until they had completed their final piece of writing. Students went back and forth between drafting and revising stages, and were asked to put their writing aside for a while, if necessary, until they had reached a final product.

Post-writing

At this stage, the instructor first gave students guidelines by offering a handout which would be necessary for students to make a presentation in English. Based on the final generated text, pairs of students made a presentation in front of other students, followed by a question and answer session. The scripts were distributed to the students to help them clearly understand the structure and organization of the speech. Giving and receiving feedback between the presenters and the audience also promoted speaking and listening. While students were making their presentations, the audience evaluated them with an evaluation sheet.

6. Students' Reactions to the Activities

The students' reactions to the activities have been largely positive. The most significant benefit mentioned by the majority of students is that, compared to the product-oriented independent approach, collaborative activities helped students to organize an essay more effectively and efficiently without feeling unsupported. They stated several advantages of going through the stages of the activities with their partner as follows.

"I found the activities generate more ideas than the typical individual work. With my partner's help, it was relatively easy for us to rearrange ideas and compose an essay."

“The activities were effective in that I could always consult my partner to decide how to write an essay. They helped me understand how to generate ideas, how to compose them in a coherent way, and how to revise and edit our writing.”

The second most important benefit mentioned by many students is that the post-writing activity encouraged students to have a clear purpose of writing and to develop a sensitivity for their audience.

“Because I was used to being given specific instructions from the instructor, this approach was completely new to me. I think this is a good way of writing, since while I was writing with my partner and listening to other students’ presentations, I always thought about what, how, and for whom we were writing.”

“Compared with working alone, I felt less pressure when working with my partner. And because of this, we were able to pay more attention to what we were writing.”

Other benefits mentioned by students were as follows.

“I think the activities were good for me because I can put into practice what I have learned with the textbook. The activities also improved not only my writing skills, but also my other language skills.”

“After I finished my presentation, I had a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

In addition to the benefits of the activities, the students identified some challenges. Some students mentioned that discussing and evaluating a text requires a lot of compromise between the two students.

“Because both of us provided a lot of different opinions and comments about how to organize various ideas, it was difficult for us to reach a consensus.”

“In order to avoid confrontations with my partner and save time, I had to make a compromise.”

Other problems mentioned by small number of students included a partner’s lack of commitment, insufficient time to complete a final draft, and difference in proficiency levels.

7. Implications and Recommendations

From the results of this study, several pedagogical implications are suggested. First of all, with the aid of mutual and collaborative activities, students were given plenty of opportunities to explore the topic and brainstorm ideas with each other. Compared with the traditional product-based approach, the activities implemented in a ‘recursive process’^{6,9)} encouraged active participation on the part of the students throughout the writing process. At the same time, the activities eliminated the fear of being left alone during the writing process and therefore reduced students’ anxiety of being unable to write a text without making any errors.

Secondly, by assigning presentation tasks with an authentic audience and the purpose of writing,

students have increased their motivation and developed a sense of responsibility. Unlike writing tasks in which the audience is not present, the activities helped students imagine what background information would be needed and how best to express their ideas to the audience. Making a presentation helped students share their writing with others, and feedback from the floor encouraged students to reflect on their own work. Also, encouraging students to retain and use what they had been taught in the regular classroom was also effective in implementing peer evaluation activities.

On the other hand, some students had a problem during the activities. One of the problems was that, although most of the students were mutually responsible for the writing, some students claimed that they had difficulties in reaching a decision between the two. This may have resulted from the fact that they had little experience in working on a single task and arriving at a final decision in a collaborative learning environment. In addition, there were cases in which the activities were hampered by an unequal participation or difference in levels of commitment. In order to improve this situation, the instructor should ensure that pairs of students are offering helpful feedback and suggestions to each other. The instructor also needs to be sensitive to any problems that arise during the writing process.

8. Conclusions

Although the number of students who engaged in the activities was limited, their comments suggest that the peer-assisted activities have made valuable contributions to the active participation in the learning process and the development of students' writing skills. It is also important to note that the activities have eliminated the students' anxiety and enhanced their confidence. In this non-threatening environment, students were encouraged to see the writing process as an interactive activity. The activities outlined in this paper can be modified to suit any other language classroom situations for any proficiency level.

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Appendix Checklist Sheet

Use the checklist below to guide you in revising your essay. Answer each question with your partner. If you answer *No* to any question, then revise the essay to solve the problem.

- (1) Do you understand how much information the audience already has? Is the purpose of the essay clear?
- (2) Does the paragraph include a clear topic sentence that states the main idea?
- (3) Is the flow of the ideas logical? Is the organization consistent, moving from top to bottom?
- (4) Does the essay include clear explanations and examples?
- (5) Does the paragraph have unity, cohesive devices, and transition words?