

Students' Roles during Peer Response Sessions

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the types of roles played by students during peer response sessions and investigated how the students' roles facilitated learning. This qualitative case study involved six Grade 10 mixed-proficiency level students from a secondary school in Malaysia. Data were collected through multiple sources. The findings indicated that the students were engaged in multiple roles during the interaction sessions which stimulated their thinking skills and led to mutual learning. The findings suggest that English language curriculum needs to give due attention to students' role in the 'student-centred learning approach' to empower them with independent learning.

Keywords: *Feedback; mutual learning; peer response; students' roles*

INTRODUCTION

Peer response sessions promote team co-operation and sharing of ideas among students of different proficiency levels within the group to reach mutual understanding of a given task. This is because peer readers can provide constructive and useful feedback (Rollinson, 2005) to assist student writers in the process of writing. With the help from their peers, students can use their multiple talents and abilities to gain creative and multidimensional views of realities (Matthews, 1993). This will give them the opportunity to exercise leadership over their own writing.

Thus, in order to know and understand how much students can gain through peer interactions, it is important to examine the roles played by students during peer response sessions and how the students' roles facilitate learning. Understanding and knowing how student-student interactions work will help educators engage students in a more meaningful dialogue to share and discover meanings in order to gain ownership of their writing.

A number of studies on peer response groups involved students from higher institutions of learning (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Chen & Hird, 2006; DiPardo & Freedman, 1988; Hyland, 2000; Jayakaran & Vahid, 2011; Zhu, 2001), but few have focused on secondary school students (Komathy, 2000; Sim, 1998). Past research revealed that peers play various roles during peer response groups but few studies examine how students facilitate learning when they work within their peer response groups. For instance, in Mendonca and Johnson's (1994) study, the reviewers assumed the role of a tutor or teacher whereas the writers assumed the role of a student. In De Guerrero and Villamil's (2000) study, the student readers took the role of a mediator. An earlier study conducted by Daiute and Dalton (1993) indicated that the young peers modelled as 'teachers' or 'experts' during the peer discussion. Similarly, Mitchell's (1992) study revealed that the students learnt to be 'experts' in a particular type of writing for their final project. The students learnt from each other through the peer reviews in which they provided feedback and critiques for each others' initial drafts. Likewise, Jones et al. (1994) stressed that in engaged learning, students play important roles as 'explorers' and eventually, as 'teachers'. Besides that, Reid (1994) advocated that students as writers play multiple roles as "readers, responders, coaches, and expert members of the academic discourse community" (p. 289). Thus, this shows that peers play pertinent roles in assisting their group members to improve their writing skills.

In contrast, findings in Chen and Hird's (2006) research yielded behavioral differences due to group and individual differences in talk within the group. Hence, an in-depth analysis of the student-student interactions during peer response sessions is imperative in order to understand how students' talk facilitates learning.

This present study is based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning that a learner would be able to attain a higher level of performance with guidance from adults or more capable peers. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that individual consciousness is the result of the collective activity of people. Learning is the result of mediation through interaction between learners. During interaction, learners are actively engaged in exploring, discovering and constructing meaning from new information by reflecting upon their prior knowledge and experience. As such, the present study addressed two research questions: (1) What are the roles played by the students during the peer response sessions? (2) How do the students' roles during the peer response sessions facilitate learning?

THE STUDY

The participants in this study comprised three high and three intermediate-proficiency level Grade 10 (Form Four) students in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class of 44 students in a secondary school in Malaysia. The students were selected based on their English paper results at Grade 9 National Examination¹. The six students were Ann, Ben, Cindy, Doris, Ema and Faye (not their real names). Ann, Ben and Cindy were placed in the high-proficiency level category (HP) as they obtained Grade A for their English paper at Grade 9 National Examination; while Doris, Ema and Faye were placed in the intermediate-proficiency level category (IP) as they obtained Grade C for the same examination.

This study primarily adopts a qualitative approach. The various methods used in this study include observations, interviews, and documentary records (transcripts of student-student interactions and writing tasks). Four expository writing tasks were assigned to the mixed-proficiency level students to work in groups. For each of the compositions, students were required to write two drafts (first draft and final draft). Four peer response sessions were observed in a naturalistic classroom environment over a period of five months. The students responded to the individual first drafts of four compositions which were of different topics related to social issues.

The data collected through the various sources (transcripts of student-student interactions, students' first and final drafts, interview transcripts with the students and class teacher and field notes) were analysed and triangulated. Data-driven categories of the types of roles played by the students and the pattern on how the students' roles facilitated learning were drawn from analysis of the transcripts of student-student interactions during the peer response sessions.

Two raters were engaged to independently code and classify 10% of the student-student interactions which were randomly selected for the types of roles played by the students. The inter-rater reliability for categorization was assessed using Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960). High kappa values of 0.83 and 0.85 were obtained from the first and second rater respectively indicating the reliability of the classification of the types of students' roles during the peer response sessions was adequate, thus, enhancing the credibility of the case study findings (Gall et al., 2003).

FINDINGS

Roles of Students

The findings in this study revealed that the students played various roles during the peer response sessions to the individual first drafts of all the four compositions. Table 1 displays a list of descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of the students during the peer response sessions.

It was found that as the student-student interaction progressed from one peer response session to another; both the high and intermediate-proficiency level students played multiple roles to assist one another in the revision of the individual first drafts of their compositions. The predominant roles played by the students were modelling like 'teachers', 'facilitators', 'advisors', 'examiners', 'experts', 'evaluators', and 'team-players'. This is akin to the findings in research on appropriation of student texts which reported that students as writers assumed numerous roles as "readers, responders, coaches, and expert members of the academic discourse community" (Reid, 1994, p. 289).

Table 1. List of Descriptions of the Roles and Responsibilities of Students during the Peer Response Sessions

Role of Peers	Tasks/Responsibilities
Advisor	Gives advice, especially somebody who is regularly consulted.
Evaluator	Assesses and compares the appropriateness of words, terms or ideas used.
Examiner	Inspects closely and carefully the errors made by somebody.
Expert	Possesses special knowledge or skill and is competent in a particular field.
Facilitator	-Eases the flow of the discussion, or guides and gears the group members towards the focus of the discussion. -Makes something easy to understand or less difficult.
Teacher	Teaches, is knowledgeable and knows how to identify errors and correct them (Student modelling like a teacher).
Team-player	Collaborates with the group members to help the writer finds solution to a problem.

The most interesting phenomenon gathered from the findings in the present study is the students modelling like 'teachers'. They had taken over the task to model like 'teachers' (especially, the high-proficiency level students) to guide the less competent ones (the intermediate-proficiency level students) during the peer response sessions to the individual first drafts of their peers' compositions. This act of teaching by the more competent students has led to learning among the peers. This is because they were given the freedom to handle the peer response sessions within their own group without the overt presence of the class teacher as the latter trusted the students' capabilities.

Generally, the high-proficiency level students (especially, Ann and Ben) played leading roles in guiding the group members throughout the peer response sessions to the individual first drafts of the students' four compositions. Among the six students, Ann, and Ben played the most predominant roles in modelling like 'teachers', 'facilitators' 'advisors', 'examiners', 'experts', 'evaluators' and 'problem-solvers' in guiding the less proficient ones during the peer response sessions. The other group members were found to collaborate and work closely with Ann and Ben as they emulated the various roles played by them to help one another as a team.

How students' roles during peer response sessions facilitate learning?

It was found that in modelling the various roles during the peer response sessions, the students were capable of identifying and correcting errors mostly at the sentence level. The correction of errors by the students led to mutual learning between the high and intermediate-proficiency level students as well as among students of the same proficiency level.

To illustrate, the following are examples of some instances of the multiple roles played by the students as observed during the peer response sessions to assist the group members in the revision of the individual first drafts of their compositions. The examples below also showed that there was collaboration and team work amongst the students as they were actively engaged in lengthy discussions throughout the peer response sessions.

(a) Identify and correct grammatical errors

It was observed that the students played multiple roles as they collaborated with one another to identify and correct grammatical errors when responding to the first draft of Faye's Composition 2. For example, excerpt 1

exhibits the various roles played by the students which include modelling like a facilitator, teacher, team-player, an expert, an advisor, and an examiner.

Excerpt 1: 'Awareness of Action'

613.	Ben:	Last paragraph.		Facilitator
614.	Ema:	Last paragraph.		Facilitator
615.	Ben:	First sentence, 'In conclusion, if humans', 'humans// (changing the singular form of the word 'human' to the plural form 'humans' in the sentence which read 'In conclusion, if human still not aware from their action').	Identify-correct	Teacher
616.	Ann:	//are still unaware of their action// (adding the word 'are' in front of the word 'still' and changing 'not aware' to 'unaware of').	Identify-correct	Teacher/Expert
617.	Ema:	Not 'not aware'?	Inquire	
618.	Ann:	Maybe, we should change it to 'unaware'.	Suggest	Advisor
619.	Ema:	'unaware'.	Reiterate	
620.	Ben:	'if humans are not aware', 'unaware'.	Confirm	
621.	Ann:	'if humans are unaware of their actions, the world will end one day'. (adding the plural form to the word 'action', joining two sentences into one and deleting the words 'of the' in front of the word 'day' in the first and second sentences of the last paragraph which read 'In conclusion, if human still not aware from their action. The world will end one of the day').	Identify-correct	Teacher/Expert
622.	Ema:	Maybe before 'the world', we put 'maybe'.	Identify-suggest	Advisor
623.	Ben:	Can also. 'maybe the world will end'.		Team-player
624.	Ema:	'maybe the world will end'.		
625.	Ben:	Think so, right?		Team-player
626.	Doris:	'one day', should cut the 'the', right?	Suggest	Examiner
627.	Ema:	'one of the day'.	Accept	
628.	Ann:	'one day'.	Accept	
629.	Cindy:	Cut off the 'of' and 'the'.	Accept	

As shown in excerpt 1 (lines 613 to 629), the high and intermediate-proficiency level students helped to correct the first and second sentences in the last paragraph: 'In conclusion, if *human* still *not aware* from their action. The world will end one *of the* day'. An analysis of the final draft confirmed that Faye had adhered to the feedback given by her peers. Hence, the amended version of the sentence read 'In conclusion, if *humans are unaware* their action. *Maybe* the world will end one days'. This indicates that when both the high and intermediate-proficiency level students were engaged in the peer response session, they played numerous roles to collaborate as a team in assisting Faye in the revision of her errors. Although those sentences in the revised version still contain grammatical errors and should be joined as one sentence, what is more important is that by playing those roles, students were able to learn to correct some grammatical errors, rephrase words and sentences.

It is interesting to unveil in this present study that learning was driven by the high-proficiency level students as they had taken control over the task of the teacher as 'young experts' in initiating, facilitating and maintaining the student-student interaction. They took various roles to assist the less competent learners in their writing. What is of import is how interaction shapes learning as the role of the 'young experts' seemed to multiply among the less competent learners as the peer response sessions progressed along. Thus, this created a community of 'young experts' working together through student-student interaction to share their knowledge, explore and discover new meanings in their writing. This finding is in concordance with the findings yielded in Daiute and Dalton's (1993) study which indicated that "novices can be masters" (p. 322) as the young peers acted as 'teachers' during the peer discussion. Akin to Daiute and Dalton's (1993) and Jones et al.'s (1994) findings that the young peers were engaged in generative and reflective processes; in this present study, the group members were found to collaborate and work closely with Ann and Ben (the more capable ones) who provided guidance to help them to understand, internalise rules; and eventually, to perform at a higher level. In other words, the less competent learners were able to use the knowledge gained from the more capable ones to help their other group members improve the first draft of their compositions. This finding also conforms to that of Mitchell's (1992) study which revealed that the students learnt to be like 'experts' in a particular type of writing.

(b) Identify and insert missing words

It was found that by assuming different roles as 'examiners' and 'teachers', the high-proficiency level students were able to help their peers to identify and insert missing words in their first draft. For instance, excerpt 2 below illustrates how Ann modelled like an 'examiner' and Ben modelled like a 'teacher' in helping to improve the last sentence of paragraph 4 in the first draft of Cindy's Composition 2: 'Media should write more on environmental issues on newspapers and school magazines'.

Excerpt 2: 'Media'

477.	Ann:	'write more on environmental issues', 'write more', 'the media should write//	Identify-correct	Examiner
478.	Ema:	//more about//		
479.	Ann:	'The media should write more on environmental issues'.	Correct	
480.	Ben:	Wait, wait, wait. They should write the issues on the newspaper or in the newspapers?	Inquire	Teacher
481.	Cindy:	Ya, just now.		
482.	Ann:	'should write more on environmental issues//	Correct	
483.	Ema:	// in the newspapers//	Confirm	
484.	Ann:	'The media should write more articles concerning the environmental issues in newspapers and internet'. I don't agree with 'school magazines'.	Identify-correct	Examiner

A check of the final draft found that Cindy had taken into consideration the above feedback given by Ann, Ben and Ema. However, Cindy did not change the word '*school magazines*' to '*internet*' as advised by Ann. Thus, the altered version of her sentence read '*The* media should print more articles on environmental issues in *newspapers* and school *magazines*' (italics added). Nevertheless, this shows that by having Ann and Ben who acted the roles as examiners and teachers, Cindy learned the importance of inserting the article '*The*' in front of the word 'media'. Hence, this indicates that the peer response session served as a platform for the students to play various roles in assisting one another in their revisions.

(c) Apply knowledge learnt

The findings in this study indicated that learning had taken place as a result of the interaction and feedback

given by the peers. It was found that Ema had learnt and internalised the rule on the usage of the article *'the'* from the feedback given by Ann and Ben during the previous peer response session to Cindy's Composition 2 (see excerpt 2 which has been discussed earlier). This is manifested in excerpt 3 (line 326) in which Ema could apply the knowledge on the usage of the article *'the'* when she identified and inserted the missing article *'the'* in front of the word 'government' (in the second sentence of paragraph 3 in the first draft of Faye's Composition 3: 'Government should also organise campaigns for youth so that they would not become part of bully').

Excerpt 3: 'Campaigns'

326.	Ema:	Next paragraph, second sentence, 'Government'. Before 'Government', 'The'. (adding the article 'The' before the word 'government' in the second sentence of paragraph 3 which read 'Government should also organise campaigns for youth so that they would not become part of bully'.)	Identify-correct	Teacher
327.	Ann:	'organise campaigns for youths so that they will not become part of bully', 'part of bully', 'part of bully'.	Identify-correct	Teacher
328.	Ben:	'become a bully'.	Identify-correct	Teacher
329.	Ann:	'become a bully' (repeating after Ben).		

It is interesting to note that Ema had understood the rule on the usage of the article *'the'* as she explained in an interview, "... *'media'*, ... it's specific, must put *'the'*." Ema also quoted other words in which the specific article *'the'* is needed in front of them, "Like *'government'*, *'environment'*, ...".

Upon analysis of the final draft, it was found that although there was a slight grammatical error in the phrase *'part a bully'*, Faye had utilised both Ema's and Ann's feedback as mentioned above. Therefore, the corrected version in Faye's final draft read *'TheGovernment should also organise campaigns for youths so that they will not become part a bully'*.

This shows that learning had taken place as Ema (see excerpt 3) was found to have learnt and internalised the rule governing the use of the article *'the'*; and thereby applied that knowledge when responding to the first drafts of Faye's Composition 3. This concurs with Vygotsky's (1978) theory in which learning takes place first in the inter-psychological plane and then it moves on to the intra-psychological plane.

In other words, with the guidance from the more competent writers (specifically, Ann and Ben), the less competent writers (especially, Ema) could operate beyond her 'zone of proximal development'. This claim is substantiated by the class teacher's positive view about the peer response session as she remarked:

"..., it's [peer response session is] a good idea because it encourages students to speak more ... so that they can assist one another, cooperative learning ... to enhance peer relationship, and they can learn. The good ones can assist the weak ones so that the weaker ones can learn from the better ones".

(d) Mutual learning

It was found that the various roles modelled by the students led to mutual learning. The findings from this study revealed that not only the high-proficiency level students were capable of modelling leading role but the intermediate-proficiency level students were also skilful in emulating their counterparts as they could even play the role as 'evaluators' when responding to their peers' composition. For example, as shown in excerpt 4 below, Doris demonstrated her ability to evaluate the relevancy of content when she responded to the first draft of Ben's Composition 1:

Excerpt 4: Ways to attract tourists to Malaysia

581.	Doris:	Ben, Ben. Ben essay.		Facilitator
582.	Ema:	Only can say one thing. It is too long.		
583.	Doris:	Too long.		
584.	Doris:	This is not how to attract the tourists to Malaysia. This is attraction of Malaysia.	Evaluate-suggest	Evaluator

As exemplified in excerpt 4 (line 584), Doris evaluated and voiced out her opinion on the need for Ben to relate his points to the topic of the composition. The lack of relevancy of points was also highlighted by Ben during an interview as he pointed out that "... they [peers including Doris] said that my first draft was not the way how to attract the tourists to Malaysia but it is the attractions in Malaysia. So, basically I was out of the theme.". Ben emphasised the usefulness of his peers' comment as he uttered, "..., their comments allowed me to stick to the theme and not stray away from the theme".

This shows that not only the intermediate-proficiency level students benefited from the peer interaction but the high-proficiency level students also gained from the session. In other words, there was mutual learning taking place among both the high and intermediate-proficiency level students as they modelled different roles during the peer response sessions. This concurs with Azmitia's (1988) assertion that collaboration can facilitate learning because each individual brings different skills to the task. The students were also found to have learnt from reading each others' writing, a finding which confirms Yang, Badger and Yu's (2006) study. Likewise, this is in accordance with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that with the guidance from more capable peers, a learner will be able to function beyond his or her 'zone of proximal development'.

It is noted that in this present study, the students were empowered to respond to each others' first drafts, a finding which is similar to that of earlier studies done by Mitchell (1992) and Yang et al. (2006). According to Carroll (1996), Messer (an expert teacher) agreed to this freedom accorded to the students as she opined that "it helps students assume responsibility for their writing, and it, along with oral reading of their work, helps ... students become more effective editors of their own writing" (p. 29). The present study also found that by allowing students the opportunity to undertake leading roles, it helped to build confidence and to have a sense of ownership of their writing. This is evident from the responses given by the students during an interview:

"I found that I can give freely my ideas".

"I feel more confident with them [peers] helping me in doing my essay"

"I give them [peers] feedback on my opinion but if they don't want to accept my feedback, it's okay because everyone has their own ideas".

"We are all students, so they may know something I do not know and I may know something that they do not know. So, it's good to exchange feedback with my friends".

"As you can see I improve from my first draft to the second ... And the improvement was very great. It was a balance piece between the attractions in Malaysia and ways to attract tourists to Malaysia".

The class teacher also mentioned during an interview, "... they [students] do, ... they give ideas. They may not be good in sentence construction or grammatically correct sentences, but then in terms of ideas, I think they are able to contribute as well".

CONCLUSIONS

The study examined the types of roles played by students during peer response sessions and investigated how the students' roles facilitate learning. The finding in this study revealed that students play a vital role during peer response sessions to facilitate learning. The various roles played by them are modelling like 'teachers', 'facilitators', 'advisors', 'examiners', 'experts', 'evaluators', and 'team-players'. The intermediate-proficiency level students were

found to have learnt grammatical rules, add missing words and to correct their sentence structure from the high-proficiency level students to improve their revisions. Besides that, it was found that there was mutual learning as both the high and intermediate-proficiency level students learnt from each other to improve the final drafts of their compositions. They were able to point out the lack of relevancy of points and this helped the writer to think and revise his point in order to relate to the topic of his composition.

There are several implications from the findings of this study. The first implication is that students are able to assume leadership roles when given the opportunity to respond to their peers' compositions during peer response sessions. Thus, in knowing the various roles of the students, ESL teachers can plan appropriate strategies to better equip themselves and to train students on how to work effectively in peer response groups. The second implication is that policy makers need to re-look at the English Language Curriculum so as to incorporate peer response session in the teaching of writing. Instead of clinging to the centre stage in the traditional 'teacher-centred approach' to learning, ESL teachers need to recognise the importance of the role of peers in the 'student-centred approach' to learning. This is to ensure that the task of learning is ultimately turned over to learners as they become empowered in independent learning. The third implication is that engagement with peers of the same social status provides the context for shared understanding which is essential to enhance mutual learning, sharpen their critical thinking skills and the mastery of the writing skills.

Since this study focused on the roles played by only a group of six students, future research can consider an extension of this study into a longitudinal research involving a larger sample size. This would provide educators with a wider perspective of what actually happens when students work in groups to respond to their peers' essay. Besides, future trends can compare the similarities and differences in the roles of the class teacher and students during peer response sessions.

NOTES

¹ All Malaysian students at Grade 9 are required to sit for a National Examination known as Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) as a pre-requisite for entrance into Grade 10.

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