The Challenges of Peer Feedback in EFL Writing Classroom: Viewed from Students' Perspectives

Ummi Salamah Tianotak
Institut Agama Islam Negeri, Ternate
Correspondence author Ummi Salamah Tianotak (Email: ummu1391@gmail.com)

Abstract: Peer feedback has recently become the most popular technique in teaching writing since a large number of research have been conducted to investigate the advantages of it. In contrast, there are numerous studies investigating the drawbacks of peer feedback in EFL students. As debatable concept, peer feedback will always be controversial since various findings are found by the researchers. Therefore, this paper firstly introduces the peer feedback, then, attempts to elaborate the challenges of peer feedback viewed from EFL students' perspectives in learning writing, and finally proposes some recommendations of the effective implementation of peer feedback. To overcome the challenges, there are some things that must be considered such as conducting training for students before the implementation, creating a comfortable environment, and grading the peer reviewer draft.

Key words: Peer feedback, challenges, Writing, EFL classroom

I.   INTRODUCTION

Writing is a skill area in which teachers and students usually find difficulties. Regarding its difficulties, there have been many views of the best approaches to teach writing. In recent years, process writing approach becomes recommended approach in teaching writing. It has shifted from focusing on students' final products to the process of writing. Dealing with the process of writing, there was a large number of studies strongly recommended peer feedback as a beneficial technique. Peer feedback (also known as "peer review", "peer response", "peer revision", "peer assessment", "peer correction") is process in which students respond to and provide feedback on their peers' writing. Bartels (2003, p. 34) says: "… peer response, in which students read each other's papers and provide feedback to the writer, usually answering specific questions the teacher has provided". In addition, many studies about peer feedback had reported that it could improve students' ability in writing, gave more motivation for students to write, and gave behavioral changes which is more in meaning changes than surface changes (Kustati, & Yuhardi, 2014; Shokrpour, Keshavarz, & Jafari, 2015; Wakabayashi, 2008).

Although a lot of research supported peer feedback technique in teaching writing, there still some challenges for students and teachers in applying the technique. As found in her article, Kangni (2015), mentioned that there are some problems of peer feedback in teaching such as less confidence, lack of trust, and lack of positive comments. Furthermore, the writer had also experience in involving through peer feedback. She was assigned by her lecturer to providefeedback for at least 2 peers. This implementation, however, did not give much better improvement to my peers as receivers and me as a provider because of some obstacles.

This paper, therefore, attempts to find out this query: 1) what are the challenges of peer feedback implementation in EFL writing classroom? This paper also provides some recommendations of an effective way to implement peer feedback in EFL writing classroom.

II.   REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As a debatable concept, peer feedback has been mostly investigated to evidence either the effectiveness or the defectiveness of its implementation on students' writing. In this section, the writer reviews three studies which analyzed the problems involving peer feedback.

Kangni (2015) investigated problems and tactics in peer feedback in EFL writing teaching. In his article, he drew up three problems and tactics in peer feedback in EFL writing teaching such as "students lack confidence in whether theycan provide specific and qualified feedback", "students don't quite trust peer feedback", and "positive feedback is absent in peer feedback" (p. 480).

In their study, Deni & Zainal (2011) investigated the benefits and drawbacks of pre-editing practice in writing classroom. Fifteen students majoring at Tourism were involved. The instruments used in their study were students' writing and questionnaires. Both instruments are employed to "analyze the revision and comments" and to "identify the students' perceptions of peer editing practice" (p. 92).

Those two studies have similar purpose with what the writer is proposing. However, in Kangi study (2015), he only listed three problems related the peerfeedback. Yet, in this study, the writer draws five challenges which will reveal theobstacles mostly found by the student involving in peer feedback activities. Whilein Deni & Zainal (2011), they

investigated the pre-editing practice not the implementation. The studies described above give support to the writer that there actually challenges in the implementation of peer feedback itself which is focused on the process.

III.   DISCUSSION

The Challenges of Peer Feedback in EFL Writing Classroom

Implementing peer feedback in EFL writing classroom seems to be a challenge. It contradicts with the culture of EFL students which are not accustomed to giving and receiving comments. Although, a great number of studies have reported the advantages of peer feedback, the writer believes that it is more suitable in the native speaker leaner while in EFL learners, it might be more complicated. Dealing with the challenges, furthermore, various studies have already discussed the drawbacks of peer feedback implementation. The writer, then, attempted to elaborate the challenges based on the combination of her experiences involving in peer feedback and her independent analysis of some literatures: (1) students always feel less confidence in providing feedback; (2) receivers are doubtful when the providers have less knowledge; (3) feedback is unhelpful; (4) students tend to be more focus on sentences' errors than contents or ideas; (5) peer feedback consumes much time and is just as time-wasting.

(1) The position of teacher as the person who has power to give more valuable feedback has caused students lack of confidence and doubtful in giving feedback to their peers. The students are skeptical whether they are able to substitute their teachers' position since the peers always perceive that teachers' feedback is the one that can be counted on. Similarly, in his brief study, Sultana (2009) stated that one of the problems of peer correction is:

> *"Students might feel reluctant about giving their work to their peers for correction because they do not want their classmates to know about their errors. To such students', peer correction exposes them to their community and therefore, it affects their self-esteem" (p. 13).*

Furthermore, Biggs and Tang (2007) as cited in Pearce, et. al (2009) note that students dislike to be asked to correct their peers' writing as they believe that giving feedback is the responsibility of the teacher. Consequently, either the providers or the receivers do not feel comfortable in involving in the peer feedback since they are not confident to provide the feedback or give their writing to other students because of lack of skills, motivation, and

knowledge.

(2) When students receive feedback from their peers, the question always arises is whether the feedback is valid or not. Each student has different language proficiency that will affect the quality of feedback. The students, then, may be doubtful with the competence of their feedback providers. They do not believe in their peers' feedback because they tend to rely on the teachers' feedback (Kangni, 2015; Saito and Fujita, 2004 in Binjami, 2013; Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006; Zhang, 1995 in Shzh & Lee, 2007) and because teacher is "the expert whereas their peers might not be knowledgeable enough to diagnose their problems" (Sengupta, 1998 in Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 85). In addition, Leki (1990) further posits that students who lack communication and pragmatic skills may not be able to convey quality peer responses. In situations where students are from different cultures, cultural misunderstanding may occur. Some cultures may refuse to accept student-centred activities. This happens because they have known their competence each other. In result, "sometimes students do not value their peers' knowledge, and therefore they do not revise their written works based on their friends' feedback. But the same comments coming from their teachers are taken into consideration while revising" (Macdonca & Johnson, 1992 as cited in Sultana, 2009, p. 13).

(3) In some cases, feedback is unhelpful. Students may produce "rubber stamp advice", imitating their own teachers' feedback to their writing (Leki, 1990; Min, 2005). This happens when the teachers randomly paired the 'strong' students with the 'weak' ones. Students who are low in language proficiency may derive useful feedback from their strong peers. Despite they can receive helpful comments, some students may be disoriented with such feedback because it is too critical for them and they do not know how to revise it. In contrast, strong students tend to receive unhelpful feedbacks since the peers' competence is low. Those feedbacks will not be taken into consideration. In such cases, students will see teachers for confirmation or prefer to be corrected by the teachers.

Similar to this, Rollinson (2005) stated that students sometimes feel that only a writer better than themselves could possibly assess their own writing, making peer response difficult to implement as students in the same class often are more or less on the same level of language proficiency. Besides, when students with low language proficiency read their friends – which they know have higher English proficiency – writing, they are reluctant to provide any negative feedbacks but only give short comments such as "good" or "I like your

story" instead. Apart from the different competence of each student, peer feedback still becomes useless if the feedback provided by the peers is few. The expectation of conducting peer feedback is there must be an improvement on the final draft of the students being corrected. Thus, providing inappropriate feedback surely cannot give any useful changes on their works and it is just considered as a time-wasting activity.

(4) When involving in peer feedback, the students tend to correct their friends' mistakes in surface level not in-depth one. They may find difficulties in giving comment regarding the contents and ideas or they "might not be able to go beyond surface level problems" (Ekşi, 2013, p. 35), and they may often fail to respond to problems in meaning (Stanley, 1992). Surface level revision focuses more on sentence-level revision; changing words so that a sentence is clearer, it includes "spelling, punctuation, format and problems of verb tense, agreement, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, wrong use of collocations, parts that need rewording for better expression, omission of unnecessary parts and so on". While deep level revision involves the big picture of your essay. It relates to ideas, purpose, evidence, and organization. "These were minor revisions in meaning and macro-structural changes such as deletion of irrelevant sentences, joining sentences for better expression, pointing out incomplete ideas needing more support, reordering sentences or longer text segments" (Ekşi, 2013, p. 37-38).

Therefore, deep level feedback must be expected to be revised by the students so that the feedback is more valuable. Yet, surface level is also needed since many EFL students tend to make mistakes regarding in the surface level errors. Nevertheless, giving feedback only in surface level is not recommended if it is not added by in-depth level revision. This surface level feedback, unfortunately, always appears in students' revision.

(5) One of the challenges involving the students in peer feedback is that such activity is not more than a time-wasting activity. This is as the result of students who are still dependent on the teacher. Moreover, if that activity is new for the students. When conducting peer feedback activity, teachers assume that it can help them minimize the time-consuming which they do not need to check the students' works for whole classes. Even though, teachers need to check for last assessment, but they expect a high result from the activity. However, students who are not familiar with this activity are confused and end up with useless feedbacks which do not contribute to the improvement of students' works. Thus, teachers work twice because they need to recheck students' works whichpractically have been reviewed by the peers.

In addition, for un-trained students, peer feedback is such a burden. They might feel

that it is a demand from their teacher and must be completed in such way. However, they have already known that at the end of the lesson, teachers do the revision. Consequently, the students might feel that this activity is neithereffective nor efficient. In addition, "there is the mismatch between the time taken to write comprehensive feedback and the time allocated by the payment system" (Muir, et. al., 2013, p. 15). Therefore, there must be an additional time to let students provide useful feedback which this consumes much time. Yet, the result of feedback might be unworthy. Nevertheless, peer feedback might be effective in certain situation with specific treatment.

Recommendations

As have been discussed so far in this paper, there are a lot of advantages of peer feedback in EFL writing classroom as well as the drawbacks. To ascertain thatthe students could take the benefits, there must be ways on how this peer feedback technique is implemented appropriately. In this section, therefore, the writer will briefly list the recommendation encountering the challenges that have alreadybeen mentioned above.

First and the foremost, since most EFL students are not familiar with the peer feedback, it is suggested to train them. As had been agreed by some researchers that training students to give feedback before the real implementation could develop their sense of awareness and confident either for peer feedback givers or receivers (Cheng & Warren, 2005; Hu, 2005; Min, 2005; Rollinson, 2005; Zhao, 2014). In addition, teachers should make students understand that they do not give feedback to their peer as a teacher but as a reader. Thus, they will feel more relax in commenting their peers' works and are able to provide useful feedbacks.

Secondly, teacher must be able to create a comfortable environment for thestudents. Students must not feel that such activity is a burden because of the responsibility they hold. Teacher must ensure the students that the feedbacks from their peers are valuable and should be considered. Thus, they have belief in their peers' feedbacks and can contribute to the development of the peers' works.

Lastly, dealing with the implementation of peer feedback, the providers must be graded / valued so that the students are encouraged to do the feedback. Moreover, feedback providers will be appreciated and can give useful contribution to their friends' drafts. Besides grading the feedback providers, the group division must also be considered. Since the students work collaboratively, the number of group members should be paid attention.

Formally, each student will have more than one peer to comment on their work which is selected randomly or based on the students' competencies. This might be a good way, but it just needs to vary the member of the group. If one student gets two peers to give feedback, then the peers must be various in term of competency. There must be consisted of stronger and weaker students. Therefore, the student will get advantages from both reviewers since the peer reviewers are balance.

IV.   CONCLUSION

As a collaborative technique, peer feedback is believed by many researchersas the appropriate technique in teaching writing process. However, it cannot be denied that during the implementation, there have been many challenges faced by the students that might cause the ineffectiveness of the technique itself. This is caused by the experiences of students involving in peer feedback. Therefore, to overcome the challenges, teacher must conduct training to introduce the purpose of the feedback clearly so that the students have good understanding on why they should involve in such activity; try to create a comfortable environment in order to make students feel less anxious about their peer feedbacks; then, grading the peer reviewer can be a fair assessment that can contribute to development of the draft. Additionally, group division must also be balanced interm of competency so that the students can share each other.

V.   REFERENCES

Aoun, C. Peer-assessment and learning outcomes: Product deficiency or process defectiveness?. Retrieved January 3, 2016, from http://www.iaea2008.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/138393_Aoun.pdf

Bartels, N. (2003). Written peer response in L2 writing. Germany: English TeachingForum.

Bijami, M., Kashef, S. H., & Nejad, M. S. (2013). Peer feedback in learning English writing: Advantages and disadvantages. *Journal of Studies in Education*, *3*(4), 91-97.

Cheng, W., & Warren, M. (2005). Peer assessment of language proficiency. *Language Testing*, *22*(1), 93-121. Retrieved January 12, 2016, from http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/0265532205lt298oa

Deni, A. R. Md., Zainal, Z. I. (2011). Peer-editing practice in the writing classroom:Benefits

and drawbacks. *Advance in Language and Literary Studies*, *2*(1), 1-16.

Ekşi, G. Y. (2013). Peer review versus teacher feedback in process writing: How effective?. *IJAES, 13*(1), 33-48.

Hyland, F. & Hyland, K. (2006). Feedback on second language students' writing. *Language Teaching*, *39*(2), 83-101. Retrieved Januari 8, 2016, from http://epi.sc.edu/ar/AS_4_files/Hyland%20and%20Hyland,%202006.pdf

Kamimura, T. (2006). Effects of peer feedback on efl student writers at different levels of English proficiency: A Japanese context. *Tesl Canada Journal, 23*(2). Retrieved January 3, 2016, from http://www.teslcanadajournal.ca/index.php/tesl/article/viewFile/53/53

Kangni, W. (2015). Problems and tactics in peer feedback in EFL writing teaching. Paper presented at the 2nd International Conference on Education, Management and Information Technology. Retrieved January 10, 2016, from https://www.atlantis-press.com%2Fphp%2Fdownload_paper.php

Kroll, B. (1991). Teaching writing in the ESL context. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (pp. 245-263). Boston, MA: Heinle& Heinle Publishers, Inc.

Kustati, M., &Yuhardi. (2014). The effect of the peer-review technique on students' writing ability. *Studies in English Language and Education, 1*(2), 80-90.

Leki, I. (1990). Coaching from the margins: Issues in written response. In B. Kroll (Ed.). *Research insights from the classroom* (pp. 57-68). London: Cambridge University Press.

Min, H. (2005). Training students to become successful peer reviewers. *System*, *33*(2), 293-308. Retrieved January 11, 2016, from http://search.proquest.com/docview/61925306?accountid=11162

Mosher, J. (1998). Word Works: Responding to Student Papers. BSU Center.

Pearce, J., Mulder, R., & Baik, C. (2009). Involving students in peer review: Case studies and practical strategies for university teaching. The University of Melbourne.

Shokrpour, N., Keshavarz, N., Jafari, S. M. (2015). The effect of peer review on writing skill of EFL Students. Unpublished journal. Retrieved January 3, 2016, from http://jhss-khazar.org/wpcontent/uploads/2010/04/0003Shokrpour_Keshavarz_-_Jafari_the_efect_of_peer_feedback-docx.pdf

Shzh, N., Lee, C. (2007). Written peer feedback by efl students: Praise, criticism and suggestion. K*omaba Journal of English Education.* Retrieved January 15, 2016, from http://park.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/eigo/KJEE/001/129-139.pdf

Stanley, J. (1992). Coaching student writers to be effective peer evaluators. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. *1*(3), 217-233. Retrieved January 17, 2016, from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/1060374392900049

Sultana, A. (2009). Peer correction in ESL classroom. *BRAC University Journal*, *1*(1),11-19.

Wakabayashi, R. (2008). The effect of peer feedback on EFL writing: Focusing on Japanese

university students. *OnCUE Journal*, *2*(2), 92-110.

Zhao, H. (2014). Investigating teacher-supported peer assessment for EFL writing. *ELT Journal*, *68*(2). Retrieved January 12, 2016, from http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org