

The Significance of Collaborative Learning in Foreign Language Education:

A Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract

Collaborative learning, founded on sociocultural theory advocated by Vygotsky, premises that dialogic interaction with other individuals is essential to human learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, it signifies that learning occurs at a cognitive level, through mediational means and has become recognized in classroom practices across disciplines irrespective of educational level over the past decades. In the literature on English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), a number of studies have reported the benefits of collaborative learning. Subsequently, there are very few researchers who question the effect of collaborative learning. However, despite the popularity of the notion, there has been a dearth of research on the effect of this practice. Therefore, this dissertation aims at investigating whether collaborative learning has a positive effect in EFL context. Specifically, the research aims to investigate collaborative learning that takes place in peer feedback exchanges during writing tasks at the secondary school level. Hence the research question of the thesis is:

Does collaborative learning in the form of peer feedback, have a positive effect on the improvement of students writing skills at the secondary level of education in EFL context?

Is there a condition where collaborative learning in the form of peer feedback gain positive effect on writing skills development?

More specifically, the study poses the following six questions:

1. Does process-oriented writing lead to an improvement in students' writing performance in quality and/or quantity?
2. If so, how and what improvements does it lead to?
3. Is there a relationship between student attitude toward peer review and improvement in student writing performance?
4. Does peer review help improve students' writing ability?
5. If peer review helps improve students' writing ability, in what way does writing ability improve?
6. If peer review helps improve students' writing ability, under what conditions does improvement occur?

As this study aims to examine the effect of collaborative learning in a specific form and within a specific educational context, this is not a laboratory experiment but rather an action research-based study. The thesis includes three sets of action research conducted in academic high schools in Japan. The research investigated the impact of this form of collaborative learning by adopting it in the classroom instruction. Chapter 1 provides an introduction and overview of collaborative learning and sociocultural theory. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to the definition of sociocultural theory, collaborative learning, feedback as collaborative work, and peer feedback in particular. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are the action-research-based studies.

Chapter 3 presents the study that investigated the impact of collaborative work implemented in the classroom in the form of teacher feedback and peer feedback. This research is a longitudinal study that looked into changes in learner attitudes and achievement through the adoption of a process-oriented approach to writing. At an exam-oriented academic high school, a class of second-year students experienced essay writing regularly, followed by peer and teacher feedback, and revision process. While this experimental group went through the process-oriented approach in addition to the more conventional writing instruction, another class of students, a control group, had no essay writing practice. Both groups used a textbook, the majority of which provides grammar and structure exercises, in addition to translation exercise from Japanese sentence to English. The study was conducted over one academic year. Pre- and post- essay tests were administered both to the experimental group and the control group to assess the development of students' writing skills over the year. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted at the end of each school term in order to examine student attitudes towards feedback. The results indicate that the experimental group showed a statistically significant improvement in the quality and fluency of their writing. Although the impact of teacher feedback was found to be stronger when the project started, students' focus shifted from teacher feedback to peer feedback over the year. Students deepened interdependence among peers, increased self-correction, and assumed a sense of writer responsibility by the end of the project.

Chapter 4 describes the study that examined the impact of peer feedback from the viewpoint of the learner. Specifically, it looked at the learners' attitudes toward peer feedback and the relationship between their attitudes and improvements in writing. It also examined student perception of peer feedback in comparison with that of teacher feedback. The participants engaged in peer reviewing over a 12-week period in an academic high school in Japan, and pre-and post-writing tests were conducted to determine whether it had a positive effect on their writing performance. Students' attitudes to peer reviewing were also investigated through questionnaires and interviews, which was conducted after the post-test. The findings indicate that students' attitudes toward peer review influenced their revision process and thus had a major impact on the development of their writing. Regardless of their English achievement levels, students who trusted the validity of peer comments showed improvement in their writing performance, and those with little trust showed no significant improvement.

Chapter 5 describes the study, which focuses on the impact of peer feedback and compares the performance of two groups: one with the treatment of teacher feedback alone and the other with both teacher and peer feedback treatment. The study further investigates the relationship between the act of peer reviewing and its impact on writing performance; it looked at the interaction by the learners during the peer feedback sessions and made an analysis. The study was conducted over a 12-week period in an exam-oriented high school in

Japan. In order to investigate the effects of peer review on the development of writing abilities, pre-and post-essay tests were administered. In addition, the researcher conducted a delayed posttest to examine whether the improvements in writing were retained.

Questionnaires and interviews were conducted to examine the relationship between the writing development and student attitude. Further the relationship between peer review and the improvement in students' writing abilities was investigated by looking into peer review sessions that were audio-recorded to determine which aspects of reviewing might affect the students' writing development. In addition to this, whether and how students' responses to peer reviews affected their writing abilities was ascertained through interviews and comparisons between students' drafts and revisions. The findings indicate that there was a positive effect of peer feedback on learner writing performance. The results further uncovered the correlation between the areas of feedback interaction and the writing improvement. It was also revealed that the frequency of interactions regarding specific aspects of writing during peer reviewing influenced the process of revision, which might have led to the development of their writing ability. The study analyzes the writing performance of the learners on different writing areas and determines the influence of peer reviewing on their revisions, and discusses the implications of peer reviewing at the high school EFL context.

Chapter 6 discusses the results of the studies presented in the previous chapters and the pedagogical implications for writing instruction through the application of peer feedback. It

also considers the possible application of peer feedback in the secondary education as a form of collaborative learning and provides some suggestions for future research. Moreover, it proposes a new perspective that were drawn from the findings, a potential optimal application of sociocultural theory into the classroom practice.