

Korean EFL University Students' Evaluation of Peer Review Interactions: A Social Model for Evaluating the Writing Process

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This study investigates the feasibility of incorporating student evaluations of peer review interactions into the course grade for an EFL writing course. The use of such evaluations offers a way to grade the process of writing more directly than using writing portfolios alone. Moreover, evaluating peer review interactions highlights the social aspect of writing, which is valuable in the current post-process climate in writing instruction. The 18 members of a semester-long EFL writing course at a Korean university were trained in peer response for one half of a semester; then performed evaluations of peer review interactions during the second half of the semester as part of their writing course. Student evaluations were examined to reveal whether any bias occurred due to relative age, gender, major, or question type. The results revealed no such biases. Therefore, it is suggested that students are capable of providing fair evaluations of peers, which means the evaluations can be factored into the course grade in order to evaluate the social aspect of the writing process.

[peer review/process writing]

I. INTRODUCTION

Process approaches¹⁾ to writing have been accepted in textbooks and classrooms around the world over the past few decades. Process approaches are characterized by various stages, including prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. A common feature of process approaches is the grading of writing portfolios. Grading a selection of writing over the course of a term allows for students to revise their writing continually. The grading of portfolios is seen, in part, as a way to shift focus from writing products to the writing process.

The problem with this system is that even though the use of portfolios delays the grading of a product, it is still the written product within the portfolio that is often graded in the end. Therefore, methods of assessing the writing process in isolation from written products are required.

Moreover, process oriented writing is now being reconsidered in favor of post-process solutions; namely, genre-based approaches, which consider the social forces which influence the production or revision of texts. As Hyland writes, “Because process approaches have little to say about the ways meanings are socially constructed, they fail to consider the forces outside the individual which help guide purposes, establish relationships, and ultimately shape writing” (Hyland, 2003, p.18). This is not to say that genre-based approaches deny the recursive process involved in writing. On the contrary, they add to that aspect the assumption that writing is a social act.

But when writing is considered as a social act, the society in which the writing is performed must also be considered. This article is situated in Korea, where social status is based to some extent on one’s relative age, even in the classroom. In light of the need to evaluate the writing process and the spreading concept of writing as a social act, it seems necessary to find a way to observe and even evaluate the social aspect of the writing process. Since many process approaches already include social interaction in the form of peer review, this seems like a fertile starting point.

This study intends to implement student evaluations of peer review interactions in a Korean university EFL writing course in order to determine whether students can fairly evaluate these interactions so that these evaluations can be factored into a course grade.

¹⁾ I acknowledge that there is no single pedagogy which can be called process writing. This term is being used to characterize writing instruction which emphasizes the recursive writing process.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Peer Review as a Social Act of Writing

While peer review is only one component of a process approach to teaching writing, it is the most obviously social act in the writing process. Though staunch believers in the author as an individual may wish to argue that drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading are all done by the writer alone, peer review is the one moment when writers do not just consider readers, but collaborate and negotiate with them during the production or revision of a text.

Moreover, peer reviewers assume various roles as they approach a text, as has been documented in several studies (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Lockhart & Ng, 1995a and 1995b; Villamil & Guerrerro, 1996). Some peer reviewers may direct the writer to adhere to the conventions of a particular type of text. For example, they may remind the writer of formatting or style guidelines for a research paper. Peer reviewers may also help the writer to discover ideas or terms that should be clarified or explained for the readers' benefit.

Because such activities deny the autonomy of a writer and prompt the writer to engage with the text on cultural and linguistic levels, we can say that peer review is, in fact, not representative of the process approach to writing, if by "process" we are implying that the writer revises a text in a vacuum. On the contrary, if we understand that texts and the language which constitute them are social constructs, we realize that peer review is an activity which involves the concept of genre.

"Genre" has long been understood to indicate types of literature, movies, and music, based on their characteristics. We use terms like "science fiction" and "thriller" to describe some of these types. But the definition of genre in composition studies is used to highlight the social nature of language. While process approaches tend to be "inner-directed," genre-based approaches recognize that "people don't just write, they write to accomplish different purposes in different contexts and this involves variations in the ways they use language" (Hyland, 2003, p. 19).

There are various approaches to genre-based writing. Some focus on the conventions of texts, while others focus on writing processes; but each acknowledges the social nature of

text construction. Contrary to idealized notions of process-based approaches, genre theories which emphasize writing processes do not refer to a single, typified process of writing which is located within the individual. Instead, they recognize the influence of social factors in the process of text production and revision. “Thus, there is no one ‘process’ for writing, but many, as writers juggle the various responsibilities they have to the genre, to the situation, to their roles, to the language, or to themselves as thinking, negotiating participants in the production and revision of texts” (Johns, 2003, p. 198).

2. Evaluating the Writing Process

Under ideal circumstances, a knowledgeable and dedicated teacher can evaluate some aspects of the writing process through writing portfolios. First, of course, the teacher must collect the appropriate materials.

When the portfolio writing is ready for a response from me, it is always accompanied by evidence of the process....the concept maps, the outlines, the scribbles, the doodles, the drafts that were rejected, and the drafts that were responded to and sometimes corrected by peers. I want the written peer comments, as well as a brief summary of any discussion about the writing, with peers or me, that has taken place. I also want a writer’s memo (self-assessment) that chats with me about the writing, that tells me what the writer tried to do and whether or not the writer thinks his or her intention has been accomplished. (Jones, 1997, p. 258).

With these materials, the teacher can no doubt track revisions, accredit changes to peer comments, and perhaps determine which changes resulted in improvements to the text. But the logistic gauntlet inherent in such an admirable scheme of assessment is daunting, to say the least.

Perhaps due to the difficulty of ideal portfolio assessment, ESL/EFL writing teachers too often emphasize product over process and focus on students correctness of language, though students truly desire in depth analysis of their content and development (Sommers, 1996). “ESL teachers, viewing their students as language learners rather than developing

writers, treat students' texts as final products to be edited" (Zamel, 1996, p.165). Indeed, it is all too easy to ultimately grade writing products instead of process, even in a supposedly process oriented classroom. According to Carbone and Daisley, "[...]there is a schism between process pedagogy and a grading system that in many respects looks at writing in a more current-traditional, product based way" (quoted in Helton and Sommers, 2000, p. 157). Instead of getting students to focus on the writing process, such a schism will actually help to reinforce students' notions of texts as immutable products, which is highlighted by both L1 and L2 students' focus on surface-level corrections when revising (Berger, 1990; Hall, 1990; Paulus, 1999). In other words, mere lip service is paid to the writing process, while the value of written products is underscored.

Clearly, teachers who espouse process approaches need realistic methods of assigning a grade to the actual process of writing. Unfortunately, such models are rare. Peer review is one component of the writing process which has received attention in articles which advocate evaluating the writing process. Articles about using peer revision often describe a process, but fall short of relating any information about how the process could be evaluated. Eades, for example, merely says, "Peer revision is treated as serious enough to factor into a paper's final grade" (Eades, 2002, p. 65), but leaves off without describing how she grades the writing process. Likewise, Ferris (2003) mentions grading the peer review process as she lists ways to make students accountable for their peer response sessions:

Build peer feedback into the grading scheme. For instance, a number of points or a percentage of the grade could be allotted to students making a "good faith" effort to give their peers thoughtful feedback. (p. 174)

But no further elaboration is made on any model of grading the peer feedback.

If we are to design a model, we must consider the possible problems that could be encountered in grading peer review. Peer responses are sometimes phrased in a negative tone and there might be a tendency to critique surface errors instead of deeper issues such as meaning (Stanley, 1992). Additionally, students are not familiar with critiquing other students' writing; students must be held accountable for their participation in the

evaluation process; and students may not know enough about writing to offer helpful advice to their classmates (Ransdell, 2001).

These difficulties can be minimized by training students how to respond to their peers. Studies by Stanley (1992) and Zhu (1995) have shown that instructing students in response can lead to more and higher quality interactions among peer group members. Berg (1999) studied the effects of training in peer response and concluded that “training is important for successful peer response” (230). This is important to the current study, because it was necessary for students to be actively engaged in the review process for their peers to be able to evaluate their interactions. In addition, in order to make students accountable for their participation in the evaluation process, students were graded on the responses they provided to other students’ writings. This aspect of the curriculum is described in detail below. In regards to students’ ability to provide meaningful feedback, several studies suggest that trained peer reviewers are able to offer helpful feedback to their peers (Berg, 1999; Paulus, 1999; Stanley, 1992; Villamil & Guerrero, 1998).

Finally, it has been suggested that Chinese (Carson & Nelson, 1996) and Japanese (Liu & Hansen, 2002) students are more concerned with promoting a pleasant group environment than with providing helpful feedback. Though stereotypes should be avoided, these claims seem relevant when approaching peer review with Korean students. The fact that students in the current study were asked to evaluate the comments made about their papers by their peers should indicate that the focus of the task was primarily on the quality of the feedback.

III. METHODS

1. Subjects and Setting

The university level Advanced English Writing class in which the study was conducted had a total of eighteen Korean EFL students. The students were seniors (12), juniors (4), and sophomores (2) from twelve different majors. A table of relevant student characteristics can be found in Appendix A. English majors in this program were required to complete a one-semester English writing course during their sophomore year, but there

were no prerequisites for the other students. The class met twice a week, for a total of three hours: one one-hour session and one two-hour session.

2. Peer review training and negotiation of grading rubrics

During the first half of the semester, students wrote three papers. None of these papers were graded. However, all of the papers were peer reviewed and received written feedback from the teacher. These papers served several purposes: they allowed the teacher to get used to the students' writing; they allowed the students to get used to the teacher's feedback strategies; and they allowed everyone to practice and get used to peer review.

The first paper-to-be-graded was assigned in the eighth week of class, by which time modeling and practice of the peer evaluation process had been undertaken three times. Considering the three completed papers, the teacher prepared a list of potential criteria upon which the eventual final draft of the first graded paper might be graded. In a seminar-type setting, the students and teacher discussed the criteria. Next, the criteria to be used in grading the paper were selected. These included such items as use of a thesis statement, transitions, proper organizational format, effective introduction and conclusion, comma usage, sentence variety, and diction. Then an appropriate number of points were assigned to each criterion. The criteria and their relative weight in the grade for each paper was influenced by what the class had previously and recently studied. For example, immediately after studying thesis statements, that element of writing would likely be included in the grading criteria, and would likely receive a relatively high number of points. On subsequent papers, a key element such as thesis statements would still be used in the criteria, but the relative weight would decrease as more recently learned elements, such as sentence variety, would receive more attention. With each new paper, the number of criteria grew and the overall weight of any one criterion decreased, so that by the end of the semester the grading criteria represented a comprehensive survey of the elements of an essay, and graded each according to its relative importance in the essay.

By determining their own criteria, as well as the relative importance of each criterion, students achieved a detailed awareness of the expectations for their writing. They determined, for instance, that their final grade on the paper would depend on matters such as organization more than mechanical matters. This knowledge would guide them to focus

on relevant matters during the peer review sessions. By this point in the semester, the evaluation of writing had been demystified and ownership of grades was claimed by the students. During the second half of the semester, there would be three final drafts to turn in for a grade. This same process was refined and repeated with each of those three papers.

3. A Framework for Studying Peer Review in Korean University Classes

On an assigned date, students would bring a completed first draft to the weekly two-hour class period and form a group with two other students. In the case that the number of students was not a multiple of three, each group would have a minimum of three students and a maximum of four. Each member would still only review two other group members. In each group, the papers were to be read once by each reviewer, in turn, without any oral comments being made. However, students were instructed to make their written comments on their classmates' papers at this time. All reviewers wrote their comments on a single copy of the reviewed paper. This was done instead of using a clean paper for each reviewer because it was believed it would add to the social dynamic, as reviewers could comment on previous comments, as well as the text. Each group member used a different colored pen for writing comments, and signed their name with this pen on the first page of the papers they read. If a student received a rank which they believed was unjustified, comments from the reviewer in question could be easily and accurately isolated from those of the other reviewer in order to verify the quality of the comments. However, no one ever expressed dissatisfaction or concern over the scores they received, so it never became necessary to refer to the color-indexed remarks for such a purpose.

After each paper had been read and written comments made, the groups proceeded to the next step, which was an oral review of the written comments. At this time, the original writer would listen to no more than five minutes of explanation from each of the two readers, after which two minutes were allotted for rebuttal or clarification. The reason for the time limits was to ensure that each author had equal time to hear about their paper. In actuality, it was not necessary to be rigorous about the time limits: the students learned how to pace themselves during the first half of the semester, and they monitored themselves effectively throughout the rest of the semester.

Each student was given a peer evaluation sheet for each peer's paper they reviewed. Students were to respond to the following four statements by assigning a rank of 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest) to the two readers who commented on their paper:

1. Reviewer makes specific comments.
2. Comments are related to macro-level aspects of your paper.
3. Reviewer pays attention to the group and stays on task.
4. Comments are constructive, not destructive.

Below each question were blank lines on which this responder was required to write at least one specific example that would justify the rank given to the group member. The evaluation sheets were to be completed during the same class period in which the peer group convened. During the last ten minutes of class, the teacher would inform students of the time and suggest that they break apart from their groups in order to complete the peer evaluation sheets in private. In this way, students were left to assume that everyone else was being fair, and that they should be as impartial as possible in their responses. In addition, peer review groups were never allowed to have any common members from a previous session, so there would be no opportunity for "retaliation" or "back-scratching" in the peer grading process. Even though I had a relatively small class, there was no difficulty in finding different members for each group for three sessions.

4. Peer Review Sessions as a Component of Students' Grades

Components of the final grade for the course included scores for 3 papers and 6 peer review scores (2 each from three sessions). Each of the three papers was worth 100 points (300 total), while each peer review was worth 16 points (96 total). These allotments clearly demonstrate to students the importance of the writing process, manifested as constructive participation in the revision process of group members' papers.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to determine whether relative age, academic major, or gender influenced students' evaluations of their peers, peer evaluation scores were compared based on those aspects. Because the peer review groups changed members and responded to different papers for each session, statistical analysis is problematic. For example, ANOVA analysis of the data related to class year, gender, or major could not be used because the data overlaps: each student belonged to various data sets because age, gender, and major are all relative to the other students in the study. Other statistical methods faced similar obstacles. The measure which presented itself as most feasible and likely to render meaningful results was that of a mean.

Korea is identified as having a Confucian model of social hierarchy in which one's elders are considered one's seniors. The school, where class year is openly known, is one of the most distinct instances of this system. Therefore, peer review scores were compared based on the school year of author and reviewer (See Table 1).

Table 1
Comparison of Class Year

Response type	Cases	Mean
To peer of lower class year	19	3.69
To peer of same class year	37	3.46
To peer of higher class year	19	3.76

These averages suggest that no preferential scoring related to class year occurred, contradicting the assumption that students might be deferential to their seniors, or show a lack of respect to students of a lower class year. This finding is certainly meaningful in the higher education context, where students of various class years often interact in the writing classroom.

Since university students often know people in their own major more intimately than they know students from other departments, the scores based on majors were compared, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Comparison of Peer Review Scores Based on Major

Response type	Cases	Mean
To same major	12	3.56
To different major	63	3.57

As with age, no bias according to major was revealed. Instead of showing preferential treatment to acquaintances, students demonstrated just how objective they can be when they act as evaluators. Moreover, it may be worth noting that English majors neither gave nor received higher scores than students from other majors. One might assume that English majors have an advantage in an English class, but these findings indicate a “level playing field” in terms of peer review evaluation, lending support to the case for using students’ peer review evaluations as a component of the course grade.

The third point of comparison for peer review scores was gender, as reported in Table 3.

Table 3
Comparison of Peer Review Scores Based on Gender

Response type	Cases	Mean
Male to male	29	3.51
Male to female	12	3.77
Female to female	20	3.56
Female to male	14	3.53

Among the four different possible gender interactions, the male to female mean is noticeably higher than the others. In fact, the female students in this class consistently participated more actively and demonstrated more enthusiasm toward writing than their male classmates. So the slightly higher scores seem merely to be indicative of their harder work: there is no convincing evidence that students biased their scores according to gender.

Finally, scores from the four different evaluation questions (above) that students responded to were compared in order to determine whether any particular questions were prone to higher or lower rankings. The findings, based on equal numbers of cases, are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Peer Review Scores by Question Number

Question number	Mean
1	3.41
2	3.43
3	3.83
4	3.61

The most noticeable feature of this data is the relatively high mean for question 3. Of course, it is not hard to imagine that all students performed especially well at staying on task (the issue in question 3), given that a teacher was monitoring the group work and had trained them very specifically for such group work. At any rate, the means of the previous data suggest that while question 3 was scored higher than other questions, the higher score was uniform: it did not occur due to relative age, gender, or major.

The results above indicate that students are capable of providing fair evaluations of each other, regardless of relative age, academic major, or gender. Though this is an admittedly small sample of students, the results do suggest that it is reasonable to include peer evaluations in the overall course grade.

When calculating a course grade for the writing process, it is more relevant to include students' own evaluations of their peers' interactions in the writing process than to use only a teacher's interpretation of artifacts such as peer review sheets to arrive at a grade for the peer review process. Moreover, the use of both of these resources can allow for a more balanced, informed grade. Student evaluation is valuable in terms of establishing a truly empowering classroom: one in which students assume a role of authority at least part of the time. Using student evaluations in grading tells students that the social act of peer review is important in the writing process.

V. LIMITATIONS, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

The movement from process to post-process genre-based approaches in the teaching of writing will likely be accompanied by a greater emphasis on peer review. More class time will surely be devoted to social negotiation of texts, which means that teachers must find

ways to facilitate and evaluate these interactions. With this in mind, this study has considered the social act of peer review in a Korean EFL context to determine whether students can fairly evaluate each other's peer review interactions. The results indicate that Korean university students can, indeed, offer fair peer review evaluation regardless of gender, relative age, or other social aspects.

However, this study is limited not only in its number of participants and lack of statistical accuracy, but also because only one type of writing – academic writing – was considered. Future studies will need to incorporate peer review into a genre-based curriculum. In addition, the highly structured peer review environment detailed in this study is almost surely not the ideal classroom application of peer review. Such structure was used here for control purposes. The findings of this study should encourage teachers and researchers to trust students to conduct peer review responsibly.

Practically countless variations of portfolio assessment have been developed over the past few decades. While portfolios hold promise for teaching writing as a process, they fall short of their potential when they attach grades to products instead of processes. Further models for evaluating peer review and other components of the writing process will surely be developed in the coming years. Student evaluation of peer review is merely one approach to emphasizing the writing process by assigning a grade to the process itself.

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Appendix 1

Relevant Characteristics of Subjects

Student	Major	Year	Gender
1	Economics	4	M
2	Economics	4	F
3	Electrical Engineering	4	M
4	Material Engineering	4	M
5	English Language and Literature	4	F
6	English Language and Literature	4	F
7	English Language and Literature	4	F
8	English Language and Literature	4	F
9	Mathematics	4	M
10	Physics	4	M
11	Civil Engineering	4	M
12	Environmental Engineering	4	M
13	International Relations	3	F
14	English Language and Literature	3	M
15	Korean History	3	F
16	Civil Administration	3	M
17	Legal Administration	2	M
18	International Relations	2	F

Examples in: English
Applicable Language: English
Applicable Levels: Tertiary

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