Introducing Peer Collaboration in a Networked English Writing Class

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter proposes a model of introducing networked peer assessment to an online course. In the organisation background, the benchmark model of peer assessment is introduced in terms of its theoretical and empirical bases. The discussions about Dadaelous Integrated Writing Environment (DIWE) and empirical studies on its use in language classes set the stage of the model of networked peer assessment. The model is then described in detail in terms of its structure and its use within DIWE. Challenges for using networked peer assessment are then discussed in the light of learners' technological skills, online collaboration skills, and shifted teachers' and students' role in online learning. This chapter ends with solutions and recommendations in dealing with the three challenges mainly in terms of training students in technological use and in developing online collaboration skills and training teachers in using networked peer assessment.

ORGANISATION BACKGROUND

In the past decades, peer assessment has been increasingly used and extensively examined in the field of second language (L2) writing, mainly through the lens of socio-cultural theory. In this theoretical framework, human activities, including language learning, is suggested to be socially and culturally mediated via tools such as language, external sources and others (e.g. peers and teachers) (Vygotsky, 1978). Further, socio-cultural theory suggests that social mediation is most conducive for learning when it is provided within a learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994; Guerrero and Villamil, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Weissberg, 2006). ZPD refers to "the distance between the actual developmental level determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development determined through problem solving in collaboration with more capable peers or seniors" (Vygotsky, 1978, pp.86). In the field of L2 learning, ZPD was adapted by Foster and Ohta (2005) as "the distance between the actual developmental level determined by individual linguistic production, and the level of potential development determined through language produced collaboratively with a teacher or peer" (p.144). As far as peer assessment in L2 writing is concerned, ZPD "recognises the importance of peer assistance in the solutions of tasks and, consequently, in learning" (Villamil and Guerrero, 1996,pp.54) and thus is presented as the concept that best explains social interaction and social mediation in peer assessment for the development of an individual's writing skill (Villamil and Guerrero, 2006). The discussion of ZPD indicates that collaborative peer assessment could assist L2 learners to achieve a higher developmental level of writing skills than that determined by an individual writing activity. This has been substantiated in empirical studies on peer assessment.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarise key studies on the use of peer assessment in L2 writing classes, based on literature search of key journals on L2 learning and teaching. The scope of the review was narrowed to those published after 1990, four years before the special issue on peer assessment in Modern Language Journal (1994, winter) which seemed to launch increasing discussions about peer assessment. Key words used to search the literature included peer feedback, peer response, peer review, peer interaction and peer revision.

From Tables 1, 2, and 3, we could observe the following key findings of peer assessment for L2 writing:

1. L2 learners were capable of providing feedback on both local and rhetorical areas (e.g. Mendonca and Johnson, 1994; Hu, 2005).
2. Peer assessment played a complementary role to teacher assessment by focusing on different language aspects of writing and covering areas unaddressed by teachers (e.g. Caulk, 1994; Tsui and Ng, 2000).