

Peer Editing and Improved Classroom Relationships in an ESL Writing Lesson

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ABSTRACT

Writing lessons in East African ESL contexts are characterized by among other things, teacher-centeredness and one-way communication from the teacher to the students resulting in gaps in classroom relationships. Similarly, student-student relationships also exhibit detachment arising from lack of trust in the linguistic ability of peers, competition among students and lack of interactional skills. However, research and literature show a link between classroom relations and a student's academic achievements. This paper is a report of findings of a study which I conducted in a Form three class in a rural secondary school in Western Kenya, as part of my MEd dissertation that focused on improving students' compositions using peer editing. As I introduced peer editing, I was also able to observe the classroom relationships. Data for the study was gathered mainly using observation and interviews. Analysis of the findings revealed improvement in student-student and, student-teacher classroom relationships that led to increased interest in writing tasks. The findings suggest that peer editing, which introduces collaboration in a writing task, could be a means of bridging the gap among students and in student- teacher relationships. (188 words)

Keywords: Peer Editing, Classroom Relationships, Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Research and literature point to the fact that classroom relationships are fundamental to instruction and student achievement (Good & Brophy, 2008; Singer, 2003). This view is informed by the fact that social relationships in a classroom cultivate a positive learning environment that has two major benefits: firstly, it enables teachers to discover what students are thinking, their concerns and what has meaning to them (Coombs, 1995). Secondly, it helps students to build relationships of trust and enables them to be actively involved in the learning process. This view of social learning is also supported by studies on second language writing (Storch, 2007; Archibald, 2001; Villamil & de Guerrero, 2000; Russo, 1987) which concur that writing is a social activity that takes place in a social setting, with the intention to communicate with others. This implies that the process of writing and the resulting written work in a classroom situation, should bring the reader and writer into a relationship where the writer understands the expectations of the reader and the reader understands the writer's flow of thoughts. In a classroom situation, this would imply that the audience of a student's writing should not be limited to the teacher and so the involvement of other students should be considered. According to Rivers (1978), learning of writing can be an active, vibrant process depending on the classroom atmosphere that the teacher creates and perpetuates. Consequently, the teacher needs to provide opportunities for interaction that leads to positive relationships that will provide the support that the L2 learner needs in order to mitigate the challenges of writing in a second language.

However, the scenario in the Kenyan context reveals that students are encouraged to write individually and without assistance from peers (Mujidi, 2008). This means that the student has no opportunity to understand the potential in peers or to even tap into the linguistic abilities of peers through classroom interaction. This situation is not helped by the education system that rewards best performers, resulting in competition among students who therefore view any sharing of information as a means of losing to a competitor. In addition, the writing lessons are centered around the teacher who provides directions about the topic, marks the compositions and assigns a grade or, comments on the student's script. This situation means that the communication between the teacher and student is top-down and leads to minimal exchange of information, clarification or provision of explanations. This situation leads to what Coombs (1995) calls "...a gulf, a wall, a barrier between teacher and students" (p. 51), a factor that has considerable effects on what teachers know about students and what students know about each other and writing.

Relationships in a classroom are supported by interaction which Guon-Chen and Ming-Li (2008) define as the collaborative exchange of ideas, thoughts or feelings between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect. While the effect could be cognitive in terms of acquisition of knowledge and language, it is also social, resulting in relationships of trust because both the students and the teachers have each others interests at heart. In the area of writing, interaction is a key aspect of the writing process that recognizes that students can be involved in making each others' compositions better. Writing instruction that focuses on the product demands that students write individually to produce a single final draft, and error correction is done by the teacher who also gives summative comments. On the other hand, the process approach focuses on collaboration among students in the pre-writing activities, drafting, seeking feedback and publishing the final draft that is of better quality than a single draft (Graves, 1980; Archibald, 2001). Interaction in a writing lesson happens when learners are allowed to share ideas and even provide each other with feedback on the composing process and to what level the final written product communicates.

Literature indicates two fundamental things about feedback in writing: first, feedback can also be formative and secondly, providing feedback is not the preserve of the teacher alone (Hyland & Hyland, 2009; Zheng, 2007; Ferris & Robert, 2000). These views are informed by the increasing need to involve students in their own learning and in collaborative construction of knowledge (Glasgow & Hicks, 2003). In addition, it is intended to develop students' abilities to detect and correct errors and so create effective self editors of their own writing (Kroll, 1991). While it is true that teachers are best placed to provide feedback, the reality of the developing world contexts is such that teachers are challenged by heavy workloads making them ineffective in providing prompt and individualized feedback. Consequently, literature proposes the engagement of students in peer editing, which Keh (1990) defines as the process of correcting student essays by fellow students, without assigning a grade. Literature and various studies support the use of peer editing for potential social, cognitive, affective and methodological benefits for the learner (Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006; Coleman & Klapper, 2005, Glasgow & Hicks, 2003). The re-drafted compositions can then be marked by the teacher.

This paper argues that the editing process which demands for collaboration among students and consultation with the teacher, has the potential to improve and consequently minimize gaps in classroom relationships.

The Study

This was an action research study that explored how peer editing could improve classroom relationships among students and, between the students and the teacher. The study was conducted in a rural public secondary school in Western Province of Kenya. In rural schools, students come into contact with English much later than their counterparts in urban areas, use English minimally within and without the classroom and due to low language proficiency, are likely to be more 'silent' in the language classroom.

The research participants for this study were students in Form three. These were purposefully chosen because it was presumed they would have undergone two years of learning writing in secondary school and therefore familiar with creative and functional compositions which would be used during the study. Secondly, it was assumed that the students would have developed a level of linguistic competence that would allow them to communicate/write in English which is their second language (L2), as well as assist each other to identify errors and attempt corrections. Though a whole class of 40 students was taught, six students were purposefully

selected with the help of the collaborating teacher. These students formed the focus group which was closely monitored for in-depth insight, because it might have been unrealistic to observe the whole class during teaching. The group consisted of six students, two of high, two of medium and two of low performance in composition writing, so as to ascertain if their performance had an impact on their relationship with the teacher and peers. The researcher also worked in close collaboration with the teacher of English, who observed the lessons and engaged in reflective conversations after the lessons. She was also interviewed to provide insights into the way she perceived the classroom relationships before the intervention and after.

The Study Implementation

The study happened in three phases namely: pre-intervention, intervention and post-intervention.

Pre-Intervention

The pre-intervention was a situational analysis to establish the nature of relationships between students and their teacher of English in my research site. To get insights, interviews were held with the collaborating teacher and the focus group of students to get their perspectives on how they relate with each other and with the teacher. The data revealed that each student worked individually and submitted to the teacher their compositions for marking. The students had no trust in each others ability to offer useful guidance during the writing lesson given that they believed their linguistic competence was at the same level. The students also felt that it was the teacher's job to correct their written work, while they wrote in silence. On the other hand, the teacher described her students as withdrawn, not friendly to one another and therefore unable to work together in a writing lesson. After gathering this baseline data, the researcher then reflected on it and planned to engage students in peer editing with a view to establish if it would bridge gaps in classroom relationships.

Intervention Phase

This phase happened in two cycles that were dictated by the emerging issues that presented themselves in the course of the study. The first cycle had three lessons each lasting 40 minutes, aimed at establishing interaction in the writing lesson and developing peer editors. The second cycle had three lessons of 40 minutes each, in which the first one was an intervention lesson on punctuation and the other two were opportunities for students to engage in the practical peer editing process as they develop their interaction skills. In this phase, data was gathered using classroom observation of interactions and information that emerged during reflective conversations with the collaborating teacher.

Cycle One

To establish interaction, the following strategies were used: involving students in a whole class discussion on their performance in composition tasks. Students were asked to volunteer answers about their experiences with composition writing. Initially, the students did not seem enthusiastic to respond, prompting the researcher to ask them to share with a peer before giving answers to the class. Through a whole class discussion, students were able to identify the causes of poor performance as: mistakes in punctuation, spelling, tenses, poor handwriting, irrelevancy and poor choice of words to use in expressing themselves. This session provided an opportunity for the researcher to raise their awareness about the value of assisting each other with error correction before handing in their drafts for marking by the teacher.

The second and third lessons were planned with the collaborating teacher, who in the reflective conversations had expressed surprise that her students knew their common errors and possible solutions to the error problem in compositions. Students were engaged in a whole class activity of editing dummy compositions which the researcher had re-written from their compositions and manipulated by inserting errors of punctuation, spelling, preposition, missing articles, tenses and pronouns. Observation revealed that more students volunteered answers and during the whole class discussion, more gave corrections of spelling, punctuation, inserted missing articles and other errors. In the pair work, a few of the pairs had dominant-passive peers while most pairs had passive-passive peers. To enhance their participation in group and pair work the researcher planned to teach them interactional skills.

The four interactional skills introduced were: turn-taking, respecting the views of others, making a contribution to the task and focusing on the peer while discussing. These four skills were driven by our observation that in some groups where discussion was going on, there was competition by members with each keen to share some information, while in those pairs with passive members, students did not seem to be bothered that they were losing anything. Before the lesson on learning interaction skills ended, students were asked to suggest topics for a creative composition and more participation was observed. A few topics were picked, which the class discussed and settled on two to ensure uniformity. The students were encouraged to share initial thoughts with the desk mate as they created a plan for the composition. The individual students were to make notes in their books, to form their plan for the composition of between 200-250 words, on their selected title.

Cycle Two

This cycle aimed at further examining interaction, as well as addressing the gap in the students' knowledge about the comma, full stop and the hyphen, through a remedial lesson. It was hoped that the knowledge gained would enable students to discuss knowledgeably with a peer during the peer conferencing session. The first lesson provided students with information about the purpose and position of full stops, commas and hyphen in a sentence. Many students were involved in providing answers and when I asked them to revisit dummy two and identify errors of omission or misplaced commas, full stop and hyphen, there was more discussion and consultation with the teacher. However, they called out more for the researcher's attention, but not that of their regular teacher. Reflecting in action, the researcher asked those near the teacher to make use of her and consult her over areas that were contentious.

In the next two lessons, students engaged in editing compositions of peers, providing a summary of errors identified at the end of the composition and then engaging in a peer conference to discuss the errors. In these two lessons, there were animated discussions and seeking for the teachers' attention, where there were contentious corrections. This time even the collaborating teacher was consulted, as a number of students sought clarification. Throughout this cycle, students seemed to participate more in the peer editing activity than initially and this could be associated with the new knowledge on how they were expected to behave in a group task. The collaborating teacher was also excited about her students consulting her about contentious spelling and choice of words. This implied that the gap that existed between her and her students was slowly closing, to form what she described as "warm and cordial relationships"

Post-Intervention Phase

The post-intervention phase sought to establish the effectiveness of using peer editing in improving classroom relationships. The students had initially felt that their peers did not have the goodwill to assist, given that they are in the same class, could be jealous and may not want competition for the best positions in the examinations. Using interviews for both the teacher and focus students, the researcher was able to establish the change of perceptions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing process done each day after fieldwork, so that the information gathered was used to inform the next cycle. To begin the analysis, data was transcribed from the interviews and read together with observation notes and document analysis to identify similar patterns, which were then coded and categorized into themes before being given meaning and conclusions drawn.

FINDINGS

Data from interviews showed that students initially exhibited reservations in dealing with each other. During the pre-intervention interview, the focus group concurred on the views that fellow peers were not to be trusted, for several reasons: Firstly, they cited lack of goodwill and jealousy by fellow classmates, arising from competition among learners to be the best in the class. A student asserted, "it can lead to increase in mistakes as the other student, he does not like the way you are performing, he can lead you to do many mistakes so that he can do better than you". In this claim, the student seems also to allude to the fact that the error problem

could be made worse by peers who may purposely mislead others, so as to put themselves in a better position. Secondly, students expressed lack of confidence in the linguistic abilities of their peers, given that they were in the same class and therefore, the assumption that the class had a uniform linguistic competence. This is evident when one student said, "Me I think some students feel jealousy of people who pass, so if you go to them for correction, they tell you they do not know and this will lead to poor performance" This claim revealed the concerns those students whose writing was good comparatively, being affected by those with a low proficiency and thus resulting in a lower performance for the class. Thirdly, students did not have any experience with a writing lesson where they are expected to discuss and so they were unsure of what to expect from peers. One student said, "...I had never known that in a composition lesson, you can actually discuss...". From observation, writing instruction was teacher-centered and therefore meant minimal student interaction, a factor that meant, students could not understand the potential in their peers. Additionally, students' inability to consult could be explained from the way in which writing lessons are conducted, with the teacher providing instructions and the student expected to write individually and not in collaboration with others.

Interview with the teacher revealed that she interpreted the gap between her and her students as part of the school culture where students were not 'free' with teachers. She also associated the gap with her students' being reserved and not 'free' and therefore she did not expect them to collaborate in any activity, let alone a writing activity. She did not even expect to be consulted, giving an example of the times when she writes in students' books 'see me' and they do not turn up. This view seems to have been adopted by her students who although fully aware of her presence in the class, sought to catch the attention of the 'new' teacher. Even after encouraging them to consult her, she actually had to move to the pairs, since no one was consulting her. This could be interpreted to mean that apart from the novelty of the researcher, the students were not used to a close interaction with their regular teacher and were finding it strange to go to her for assistance. Later in the reflective conversations, the teacher associated the students' behavior to the fact that the teachers in the school are not free with students because "...there is a gap between us..." This statement revealed that the existence of such gaps in the relationship between teachers and students is one way in which the two miss out on sharing information.

The teacher also indicated in the post-intervention interview that the bridge between her and her students was closing, evident in the fact that they could consult her over contentious issues in their compositions. In addition, improved relationship had enabled her to know the challenges faced by her students after listening to them list the causes and possible solutions to these challenges. This is captured in this excerpt, "I was shocked that they could cite so many mistakes...according to me, they did not know those mistakes and that is why they made them". Reflecting on this lesson, the researcher noted that the writing lesson was becoming increasingly interesting and 'noisy', with students negotiating meaning, seeking clarification and generally explaining to their peer what they found out. Throughout this cycle, students seemed to participate more in the peer editing activity than initially.

Findings from observation of peer conferencing showed that students were keen about the corrections made by a peer and included them in the second draft. This was most evident in the compositions of the weak writers, who initially exhibited many errors of elementary language structures and that had less errors in the second drafts. The uptake of corrections could be an indicator that students had confidence that their peers gave them constructive advice. Data from interviews further revealed that error reduction resulted because the students were more concerned about what their peer was going to read and so efforts were made to self-edit. This is as a result of the desire to present one's best product to a peer. This is captured in the remarks of one student who said, "I think it has helped me because when I am writing, I try not to make many mistakes, so that my peer will not underline a lot. I also want him to read my good work....so I go through my work and also correct before class time"

Findings from classroom observation and post-intervention interviews showed perception change, perhaps aided by the interactional skills that required each student to respect the views of a peer. This was evident in the views of a student who said, "It has been beneficial because even now I can be able to correct my friend, previously, I could fear that he may feel bad" The teacher also agreed with this view, having observed the interactions during the lessons and during peer conferencing. This is exemplified in her views, "so after

introducing the technique in class, they have been able to share..they have discovered each other in the sense that they can actually say something to each other..."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Findings from the study showed collaboration in the peer editing process. This collaboration resulted in increased participation in error identification and peer conferencing, a factor that could possibly have arisen due to improved relationships in the writing lesson. This agrees with Ferguson-Patrick (2007) who asserts that, collaborative learning allows for enjoyable learning, promotes positive views about others and self, involves students and, provides a sense of belonging.

Findings from observation showed that student participation in the writing lesson gradually improved from what it was at the intervention phase. At the pre-intervention phase, students were reluctant to participate in group activities, something that the collaborating teacher linked to the fact that some students felt they had nothing to say. This was evident in the first cycle that aimed to engage students in classroom discussion and pair work. Observation of classroom interaction showed detachment, evidenced by reluctance to raise hands, passive waiting for others to make contribution and many passive pairs, during initial paired activities. This is perhaps because writing lessons in both my context and the study context, are teacher centered and therefore involve students minimally, while encouraging more of writing than speaking.

Further findings from observations of peer conferencing showed improvement in the way students treated one another when discussing errors. Initially, students seemed to seek for areas where they could put down their peer. This led to arguments as they sought to find out the meaning of sentences and confirm whether a certain word was an error or not. However, data from the second lesson of the second cycle, showed animated discussions and consultation of the teachers, as students sought explanations for contentious corrections, negotiated meaning, sought clarification and generally explaining to their peer what they found out. This could mean that students were increasingly gaining confidence from the sharing of ideas. This view resonates with Guon-Chen and Ming-Li's, (2008) definition of interaction, as the collaborative exchange of ideas, thoughts or feelings between two or more people, has effects on participants. This effect is evident over time and is gradual, therefore the teacher should provide more opportunities for students to interact and learn from each other. While reflecting on this cycle, the researcher realized that the knowledge of interactional skills could have equipped the students with the correct way of behaving in a group and encouraged tolerance with one another's views. This was important in this classroom, given that students seemed to be at various levels of linguistic competence and perhaps, some felt intimidated and shy to use their low level of language proficiency, in class discussions. It was therefore important to teach the students to value a peer's contribution.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated improved classroom relationships in a writing lesson. Findings from the three phases of the action research study revealed evidence of gradual behavior change that resulted in animated conversations during the writing lesson, increased trust in the ability of a peer and consultation of the teacher about contentious issues. It is important to note that an interactive writing lesson requires extra preparation against the demands of syllabus completion, the challenges of learner language proficiency and the time required to allow meaningful interaction. However, the benefits are long term and include collaboration on tasks, good interaction skills and increased interest in writing tasks. This paper therefore recommends that the teachers of writing explore interactive means that allow students to participate in the writing lesson, if they hope to make composition writing an interesting task.

Authors' Bio-data

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