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Improving Students' English Writing Competence by Implementing Peer-assessment

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Abstract. The aim of this innovation project is to find out whether the implementation of peer-assessment can effectively improve the students' competence of writing in English. Several kinds of leadership are applied into this research. The researcher revised the research plan as a democratic/participative leader. Staff members are invited into and share the responsibility in the research, which shows the invitational and distributed leadership in certain degree. The research was carried on a pilot group, which have the same characteristics with its reference group, to check the intended outcomes. According to the evidences collected through questionnaires and interviews, peer-assessment does play an active role in stimulating students' deep learning, hence improving their learning.

1. Aim

College English is a required module for every non-English major undergraduate student in YAU (Yunnan Agricultural University, China), which covers the learning and practicing in all the basic skills of English language, such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Confined by the limited spaces, facilities, and staffs, the continuous enlarged enrollment of the university can only result in the large-scale classes for this module. Usually, every teacher of this module in YAU is supposed to teach at least two classes at the same time, with about 60 students in one.

As an English teacher in YAU for more than 10 years, I have always been "suffering" from the large quantity in my classes of this module, especially when assessing the essays written by students. The students in this module, although in the same class but from different backgrounds, could be categorized into different English levels: some of them have occupied certain vocabulary, grammar and so on; some are so poor even in correctly expressing the most simple sentences. But in general, most of them are still struggling with expressing their ideas naturally and correctly when writing in English. More often than not, I have to spend at least 5 minutes marking each article written by them so it is kind of a nightmare when it turns out that most of the students can not actually learn more from my hours of work.

The aim of this project is to find out whether the implementation of peer-assessment can effectively improve the students' competence of writing in English. I am introducing peer-feedback into my teaching because I suppose students can achieve deep learning during the process of giving feedbacks to each other. "The deep approach arises from a felt need to engage the task appropriately and meaningfully…"[1] At the same time, I would be able to focus more on the structure and contents of their articles, which will do more good in improving their writing competency as well as save me from being a frustrated mistake-picker.

As an innovation towards my usual teaching, this research is carried out in one of my two 60-student class. I keep the original and usual way to give feedback in another class, so that there will be a comparison on students' achievement to prove whether the peer-feedback can be practical and effective. The difference between the original and new way in teaching English writing can be illustrated by the following two figures.

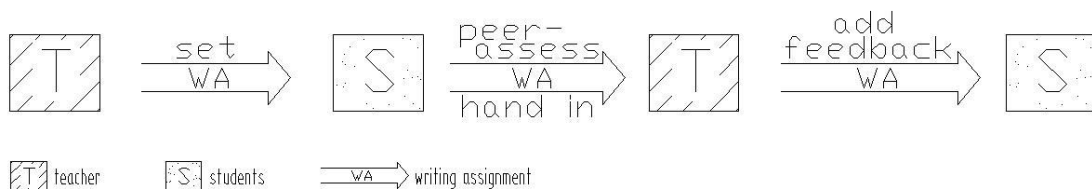Fig. 1: my usual approach in teaching English writing

Fig. 2: the innovated approach in teaching English writing

The experimental research was planned to be accomplished within 1 month since the improvement would be checked as a process. The two classes, the pilot one and the reference one, get a similar age range (18-20), and an average entrance-exam grade. So there should be no big difference in their basic English competency.

These students were in the same Module and level, so the textbook, learning hours and so on are all the same, even the subjects and topics of their written assignment. The innovation project involved other 6 colleagues of mine. They are all my fellow English teachers in the same module and delivered different contribution to the innovation research.

As a democratic leader, I held a group discussion with two of them, to revise my research plan before its application. They participated in the innovation at the planning stage to contribute their experiences and ideas. We are doing the discussion more like partners and they also played the role of critical friends.

The effectiveness of the innovation is planned to be measured by the students' writing exercises and interviews with students in the pilot group. Being an invitational leader and distributed leader, I asked four other colleagues to give me a hand in collecting these evidences in order to make them more objective and authentic: three are invited to assess some sample students' writing exercises and finish a questionnaire hereafter while another one helped me to interview students for their opinion. When carrying out their different tasks, my colleagues are working as my assistants but no hierarchy involved so they are freer in the process, hence brings more objective outcomes.

I have been teaching this module for over 10 years. With the experiences gathered in all these years, I am familiar with the usual problems students would have in their writing, which facilitates me to build up a set of criteria for students to give peer-feedback easily. Being a tutor of two similar classes in the same Module also bring convenience to check the effectiveness of the research.

Since the research is expected to find out the effectiveness of peer-feedback in improving students' writing skills, it will be further applied to and practically improved in my future teaching. I plan to disseminate my research result by sharing it at the module team meetings so that, hopefully, it can be taken into consideration by more tutors, who have the same large-scale classes and problem therewith, and at last be agreed by the policy-makers and stakeholders.

2. Literature Review

"The aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible" [2] In order to realize this possibility, the teacher's role should naturally transfers from "lecturing" knowledge into "scaffolding" students' learning. Under this point, "teaching" should serve for "learning". It is reasonable to adapt the lecturing method into creating a more learning-friendly environment and making learners take a more active part in their leaning.

Biggs's 3P model of teaching and learning [3] elaborates that each student has different motivation to study, different interest in the topic, different ability, different commitment to university, etc. So it is unreasonable to expect all the students to accept the same teaching activity in the same way and get

same learning outcomes. But no matter what and how the students are going to learn, a qualitative teaching should always encourage deep learning. That's why Biggs also points out a direct relationship between the appropriate/deep learning-focused activities and the good learning outcomes. [4]

When teaching writing skills in the Module of College English, my original teaching outcome is to aid students reinforce what they have learnt, develop their language competency and, most of all, to use English to express ideas freely. So when a student hands in his/her writing, the most important thing I should think about is its content, then the organization and presentation, and the language forms come at last. But somehow, most of the time is spent on correcting the basic mistakes about spelling or grammar and only a few comments about the structure will be given at last. I always found myself away from the original teaching outcomes. Then it is not strange that students can not achieve their learning outcomes well. In order to change this situation, the teachers should stay away from the interference of those surface mistakes and keep focus on the more important parts. Involving peer-assessment in could be a good solution to it.

"Learning is most meaningful … when the students themselves are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge" [5]. Understanding how students learn is very important, if the teacher designs activities that encourage a surface approach [6], the students are more likely to choose a surface approach, with students engaging in inappropriate and low-order learning activities [7].

Prosser *et al.* talk about the relationship of "surface approaches with perceptions supporting surface approaches, and deep approaches with perceptions supporting deep approaches"[8] When students are required to assess their peer's works, they are more likely to, sometimes have to, choose a deep approach in learning.

It is definitely true that "It is impossible to overstate the role of effective comments on students' progress in any discussion of effective teaching and assessment." [9] "Feedback on performance is arguably the cornerstone of all learning, both formal and informal." [10] But it is all need to be clarified that feedback is not something only the teacher can do. When introducing peer-assessment into the learning approach, "students can learn more deeply when they have a sense of ownership of the agenda." "The act of assessing is one of the deepest learning experience." It also "allows students to learn from each other's successes…weaknesses." [11] Obviously, peer-assessment can not only encourage students' deep learning, but also stimulate their motivation and confidence.

When implementing peer-assessment into the learners, the teacher is more like a supportive leader, who stands outside of the learner's behavior but can be always turned to for support. He/she can also be looked as a distributed leader since the task of assessing are distributed to the learners after the criteria and requirement have been clearly explained. On some degree, the teacher and the learners are working like a team to achieve better learning outcomes. The learners are also contributing their knowledge and experiences into the learning process.

3. Research Method

3.1 Phase one: Getting Started

When thinking about implementing an innovation in my usual teaching, the first important thing in my mind is to find an appropriate way to delivering feedback to my students for their written assignments. Acting like a participative leader, I held a group discussion with two of my colleagues, who helped me narrow down the core of my research: effectiveness of peer-assessment in teaching English writing. My colleagues are more like my critical friends in dong this. They listened to my research plan, gave feedbacks but not got involved in making the final decision. So I am not in the highly participative stage. The English entrance-exam grades of students of my two College English Module classes were collected and analyzed through Microsoft Excel. The result shows that the two classes almost got the same level in general, which is fortunately convenient for the contrast study.

3.2 Phase Two: Research Process
3.2.1 Assign a writing exercise to students (both classes get same topic).

All the students were required to write the article in class period and finish writing within 30 minutes. So they will all be under the same conditions, without dictionary, internet and "helper".

3.2.2 Introduce the peer-assessment into the pilot class

After students submit their articles, I handed out the assessing-standard leaflets in Class 17 and gave necessary explanation in the following class period. The students then were asked to give peer-assessment to their fellow classmates. In this stage, I hand out the articles to them randomly to avoid they only choose to give feedback, usually only praise, to their "best friend". I was walking around to deliver support if they were confusing on some points. The articles written by Class 41 students were assessed by me one by one as usual: the spelling and grammar were checked; structure and contents were commented, which spend me about five hours in total.

3.2.3 Assign another writing exercise to all students and assess their performance

This writing activity was also finished in one class period. Three fellow English teachers were invited to help me assess the sample papers (six papers from each class), which were chosen based on the same entrance scores and belonged to the three different competency levels(proficient, average and weak) .

3.3 Phase Three: Collecting Data

A questionnaire was used for the three teachers who helped to assess the students' writings. This is just a simple questionnaire with several open-ended questions, which is intended to get more details about their impression. Although it is not suggested to use too many open-ended questions in the questionnaire because they "take too much time to answer properly, and too much time to analyze" [13], I still think it is a good method to get thoughtful comments and will not be a problem since only three questionnaires need to be analyzed.

Several interviews were held by my colleague, Vivian, who is also in the same Module, with students in the pilot class. Students will feel freer to express their thoughts on peer-assessment when talking to an "outsider", especially one good at communication. Interview is "a very useful technique for collecting data which would likely not be accessible using techniques such as observation or questionnaires." [14] Vivian was asked to do the face-to-face interviews without taking notes and records, because I did not want to make the interviewees feel nervous and talk as few as possible.

In this phase, I am taking the roles of invitational leader and distributed leader. My colleagues invited in supporting my research were distributed into different tasks. We are working together towards the final goal.

4. Results

4.1 What Is Found From Staff Questionnaires?

Two of the three teachers are saying that they focus on the content of the writing more while one teacher thinks the structure is more important. No teacher put the spelling and grammar (s&g) into first consideration. Two teachers will correct the wrong s&g directly when finding them. The other will circle the wrong spelling and underline the mistakes but make no correction. They all need 3-5 minutes for marking one paper, and the correction on s&g is most time-consuming.

It is kind of relief to find I am not the only person struggling with the frustration in correcting the spelling and grammar mistakes in students' writing, although we all know it is not the most important part. Penny Ur suggests this is because "mistakes in spelling or grammar catch the eye and seem to demand to be corrected; they are very difficult to ignore" and "language mistakes are far more easily and quickly diagnosed and corrected than one of content and organization." [15]

All of the three teachers are certainly sure that the papers from the pilot class are better than their reference substances in their own group. The pilot ones obviously have fewer mistakes in language than the reference ones, especially in words spelling and verb tenses. But there is no big difference in

the content and structure. Anyway, in the pilot class, the students' competency of English writing is proved to be rising.

4.2 What Is Found From Interviews?

Vivian held 5 interviews with the student in Class 17, the pilot class. The interviewees were chosen arbitrarily from the name-list. From what she found out, 4 interviewees like the opportunity to assess their peers' works because "it is fun to be a teacher" "I feel responsibility in doing this so I really get into it, then I found I can learn more" "it is a good feeling to find out something wrong by myself, especially when I find I have made the same mistakes myself, which means I can avoid such things next time." The other one doesn't like this way because he thought it was too challenging for him to assess another one's work. Two good points should be noticed is that nobody thinks assessment is only the teacher's job and that no one feels offended being assessed by their peers.

Five interviewees all agreed that when doing the peer-assessment, they had to check carefully on the language, which could remind them some easy-neglected mistakes. And they all told Vivian that they read their own writings more attentively because they were curious to what their peers did on their work: "Can they find and correct my mistakes accurately?" "Do they like my work?" Undoubtedly, this is a proof to show the learners were engaged in deep learning through doing peer-assessment. "Learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge."[16]

As Ellen *et al.* suggests "for students, a high quality learning environment at universities confronts them not with missions impossible but with safe challenges" [17]. When doing peer-assessment, students feel "safer" because they are assessed by their peers, not by their "boss".

Students can also learn more through the assessing process because it is also a reinforcing process to develop their language competency. Then the intent outcome of teaching English writing can be achieved at some degree by the learners themselves. When teaching writing in the Module of College English, the intent teaching outcome is to aid students reinforce what they have learnt, to develop their language competency and, most of all, to use English to express ideas freely.

4.3 Further Developments

Although the innovation has proved that the implement of peer-assessment can actually improve students' English writing competency, there are still several things worthy of further research. Firstly, the peer-assessment is a fresh experience for the students in this project. The freshness may contribute to the good result of the research in certain degree. Will it still be so effective when keeping implement in a long period? Secondly, only five representatives gave their opinions in this project. More evidences should be collected to make the research results more reliable. At last, the innovation is only carried on in a small scale and for fresh students. The effectiveness should also be checked in a larger scale.

5. Conclusion

Implementing peer-assessment in teaching writing in English can motivate the learner's deep learning so that it can effectively improve learners' competency. Besides, it can also bring some side-benefits. At first, it may save teachers' time, enabling then to concentrate on more helpful instruction. Then, it may promote students' interests (motivation) for fulfill the assignments. And at last, learner can get more sense from more than one reader, the teacher.

But when doing this innovation, the teacher's role and responsibility were not emphasized. The teacher's assessment is also significant in improving students' writing ability. The most ideal way should be to ask students to revise their writing again after receiving their peer-assessed works back, and then submit to the teacher for further feedback on the content and structure. Then the teaching process would become:

"Good teaching is open to change." [18] Further study on the effectiveness of the second draft written after peer-assessment should be carried out in the future.
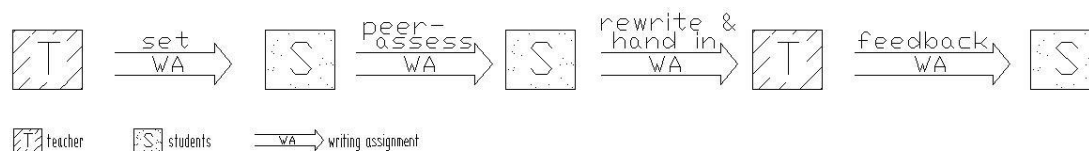
Figure 3: A to-be-improved approach in teaching English writing

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