Using Peer Review to Enhance EFL Writing via a Web-based System under Cross-Institutional Setting

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Abstract: The researchers of this study self-designed an online writing system, entitled "Collaborative Online Peer Editing and Reviewing (COPER)" in order to investigate EFL student satisfaction and self-efficacy regarding their writing class employing anonymous cross-institutional peer review. The use of COPER allowed the researchers to create a more active environment in which the students received constructive feedback from sources from their cross-school peers. In a cross-campus mode via COPER, a semester long writing project was carried out by 66 English-majored students at the two schools in which two rounds of anonymous peer review tasks (one movie reflection and one news reflection) were accomplished including reviewing and commenting on the reflective writing of cross-school peers. The researchers employed a mixed research methodology, including a questionnaire and open-ended questions to investigate the students' perceptions regarding their satisfaction , self-efficacy, and critical thinking skills resulting from this on-line task.

Introduction

One of the most commonly used strategies in ESL/EFL writing classrooms is peer review, used in order to alleviate the instructors' heavy burden as a result of grading an enormous amount of their students' writing work, as well as to ensure that their students to receive timely, quality feedback about their writing. The recent literature review on the application of peer review in college-level writing [1, 2] supports peer review and feedback as a way to enhance identification and production of writing produced by L2 (second language) learners in local and global contexts as well as to facilitate critical thinking. Anonymous peer review activities not only can serve as a solution to the problems caused by peer familiarity, as mentioned above, but also have proven to be useful in enhancing the quality and amount of critical feedback [3]. In order to maximize the effectiveness of peer review (to avoid peer familiarity while at the same time to guarantee the genuine anonymity of the peer review), a double-level-anonymous (cross-institutional) peer review activity was utilized in this study. In this study the researchers paid special attention to the students' satisfaction and self-efficacy. It was believed by the researchers that an investigation into student satisfaction could indirectly reflect student achievement in the peer review task, as

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well as sustainability, i.e. whether the students would be willing to continue their participation. The researchers were interested in investigating whether the students' self-efficacy (self-confidence) would be elevated as the result of the double-level anonymity featured in the cross-institutional task.

Data collection and experimental procedures

A total of 66 undergraduates participated in this study. They were all English majors registered in required writing classes when the study was conducted. The participants were recruited from two distinct groups—34 from a comprehensive university in central Taiwan, and 32 from a technical college in southern Taiwan. They anonymously reviewed two rounds of reflective writing by the other school's students using the online platform, "COPER." For data collection, a 7-point Likert-scale questionnaire with 43 question items and two open-ended questions modified from papers [4, 5] was used to investigate the participants' perceptions with regard to their satisfaction and self-confidence. Each student in the peer review task completed two rounds of reflective writing, with each round including both drafting and revising processes. A movie entitled "Cry Freedom" was used in the first round of reflective writing; on the other hand, in the second round, the instructors assigned three current news issues from which the students could choose. The students first researched the three news articles on the Internet and subsequently decided which to write about for their reflection.

The Design of the Peer-review System (COPER)

The design idea: The COPER System allowed users to engage into online group discussion by posting their reflective papers for their assigned cross-institutional peers to view while at the same time they review the papers of the other members in their group by providing constructive feedback and comments. An additional function of the system was Facebook instant message notification. The writer was notified of the receipt of the feedback and comments on their writing paper from their anonymous peers when they logged into the System Website. In addition, the writer was also able to discover who had or had not provided feedback. At the same time, those who had given feedback on the assigned paper could also find out who else had or had not provided feedback on the same paper. All of the original reflective papers and revised papers, along with feedback and comments, were stored in the database of the system for ease data retrieval.

The software used to create the system included Html and PHP+MySql. As for the interface of the system, there were two types of user authority, that is the administer and user. At the front page of the system, the status of users was identified first. The log-in pages were separated by the two different types of users. Administrators were able to make use of four features: (1) to view all the group members, their posted papers, and received feedback, (2) to announce updates on the interfaces controlled by the administer, which allowed all the users to view the announced news on their front pages, (3) to add new users manually on the administrator's interface, including student identification numbers, user names, passwords, and groups, and (4) to configure deadlines and starting points for posting papers and providing feedback. Student users were able to view the updates and the articles assigned to them for peer review. During the review time period, they were able to evaluate their assigned papers and, furthermore, provide the writers of the papers with feedback.

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Results and Discussion

The results showed that students were moderately satisfied with the peer feedback they received, with a mean score of 4.35 (M=4.35) measured on the modified 7-point Likert-scale questionnaire. The moderate level could be associated with a perception of incomplete training and insufficient practice on how to generate constructive and critical feedback, even though the students received a series of coaching sessions at the outset of this experiment. Although the quantitative data demonstrated that the students were not extremely contented with the feedback and comments provided by their peers, the findings from the open-ended questions revealed that the participants did appreciate and value the comments from their peers.

The results of this study also showed that the students' self-efficacy sustained a satisfactory level (M=4.89). This finding implied that the students developed self-confidence in executing the peer-review tests because of the anonymous nature of the review. They did not know whose writing drafts they were reviewing and thus were relieved of the concern that negative feedback on their peers' drafts could damage the group harmony of their class. Paper [3] discovered that incorporating anonymity into e-peer review activities increased the amount of critical comments generated by peers as well as the students' self-confidence in reviewing and commenting their peers' writing works.

In addition to quantitative findings, the findings of the open-ended questions also show that the students in the study perceived that their critical thinking was facilitated because they were engaged in several rounds of reviewing and feedback. This echoed the study of the paper [6]. Their discoveries suggested that the givers/student reviewers benefited more than receivers/student writers. When givers of feedback were reviewing and commenting on the writing drafts of others, they kept connecting the critical feedback they gave to others with their own writing in order not to make the same errors.

Acknowledgment

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