The Significance of Peer-Editing in Teaching Writing to EFL Students

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This study set out to investigate the effect of peer- editing as a metacognitive strategy on the development of writing. It was hypothesized that peer-editing could be used to raise grammatical and compositional awareness of the learners. Forty pre-intermediate sophomores at Islamic Azad University-Tabriz Branch participated in the study, taking the course Writing I. To warrant the initial homogeneity of the groups, a nonequivalent pretest –posttest design was selected and the groups were randomly determined as the control and the experimental groups, each with twenty subjects. The treatment following the pretest involved a three-phase planning procedure including: consciousness awareness via error recognition activities, error categorizing activities, and self/peer editing. Statistical analysis of the post-test composition did not reveal any significant difference between the two groups. It seems that peer-editing entails a firm grammatical foundation which needs to be formed early in the process of language learning. The results underscore the need to reorient the method of teaching grammar at university level in a way to accommodate a task-based approach to cognitive and metacognitive strategies-based training.

Keywords: Metacognitive Strategies, Peer-Editing, Grammatical Knowledge, Organizational Skills

Second language instruction has always had two sides: the teaching side and the learning side. These complementary facets have received various degrees of emphasis according to the research findings and the intellectual climate of the time. Learner-centeredness might be regarded as a response to the mismatch between teaching and learning marking a shift of emphasis away from teaching to the learning process. Learner-centered education is subject to different interpretations regarding how it should be implemented. Nunan and Lamb (2001) claim that in an ideal learner-centered curriculum learners play important roles in planning, implementation and evaluation stages of the curriculum. Two major directions in learner-centered instruction might be discerned from this statement: the broad curricular orientation and the narrow learner-orientations also referred to as learner-centeredness and leaning-centeredness (Nunan, 1999; Nunan and Lamb, 2001). In the broad curricular orientation, learner-centeredness applies to curricula and selecting content for instruction through needs-analysis (Breen, 1987) as well as involving the learners in content specification in the form of negotiated syllabus (Clarke, 1991).

The curricular orientation, however, has been criticized by the proponents of the learning-centeredness position who assign a different goal for learner-centered education. Wenden (2002) proposes that the only way of implementing learner-centered instruction is practice in helping learners learn how to learn. In the narrow sense, learning-centeredness applies to particular techniques for involving the learners in the process of language learning or for raising their awareness of how to improve their learning through strategic investment. This relates to the learner roles at the implementation and evaluation stages of curriculum where attempt is made to utilize the findings as a basis for learner development proposals through training learners and helping them learn how to learn.

The recent upsurge in the popularity of strategic-based instruction came about as a natural consequence of restrictions of pedagogical resources in terms of time and facilities on the one hand and the growing need for efficient second/foreign language

learning on the other. Styles and Strategies-based instruction (SSBI) refers to a form of learner-centered language teaching that incorporates, explicitly or implicitly, styles and strategy training activities into everyday classroom language instruction (Oxford, 2001; Cohen and Dörnyei, 2002). Learning styles are important in their own right and in the sense that "they often help shape the learner's choice of learning strategies" (Nam and Oxford, 1998, p. 53). However, strategies-based instruction (SBI) has received more attention partly due to the problem-oriented nature of various learning strategies and their utility in assisting learners overcome their learning and communicative problems. Strategies have been defined as "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information… specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8).Strategic investment has been advocated as an effective approach to educate autonomous learners who can make and carry out the choices which govern their own learning. The application of this general goal to language pedagogy has brought about a growing consensus over the best methodology in language teaching: a methodology that furthers autonomy by increasing the active involvement of the learners through strategic investment.

The need to help students develop and improve their self/peer-edit skills, as part of their leaning strategies, has been recognized by various specialists and is based on the recognition of the significant role of grammatical accuracy in academic success (Janapolous, 1992; Vann, Lorenz, & Meyer, 1991; Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984, as cited in Ferris, 2002; and Santos, 1988). Another impetus comes from the researchers and language teachers who have become aware of the need to help students self-edit their writing (Ascher, 1993; Fox, 1992; Bates, Lane & Lange, 1993; Raimes, 1992). Writing specialists have thus conducted research to evaluate the impact of process-oriented writing instruction and of various self and peer-editing techniques on the development of self/peer editing in students at different levels (Seow, 2002).

Ferris (2002) suggests both a whole-class instruction and an individualized editing instruction with editing handbook. Following Bates, et al. (1993) and Hendrickson (1980), who advocate teaching students a discovery approach, Ferris (2002) used a semester-long editing process approach in which advanced ESL writing students became more sufficient self-editors. The results of Ferris projects (1994) showed that nearly all students made significant progress in reducing their percentages of errors in five error categories over the course of a semester. However, their degree of improvement varied across error types, essay topics, and writing contexts. She then modified her instructional approach to allow for a more individualized treatment of student editing problems by giving them individual editing assignments from a textbook (Fox, 1992) when each essay draft was returned. Although research on this change is ongoing, preliminary results indicate that student improvement was even greater than with the in-class instruction approach.

Theoretically, process-writing approach and strategies-based instruction seem to have been approximately effective in raising learners' grammatical consciousness in ESL environments. Yet, it is not known whether the same discovery approach can be applied to teaching writing in EFL contexts particularly when learners' exposure to the target language is significantly restricted owing to various social and political factors. Thus, the present research was conducted to estimate the effect of this approach on the development of writing skill in Iranian university students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

The research executive had two options: either to add a final phase to include both sentence formation and text organizational features. That is, simultaneous with teaching different types of writing, students' attention could be focused on error types and grammatical accuracy through in-class error recognition and categorization activities. Meanwhile, students would realize the significance of the correct forms through categorizing errors into types and doing some grammatical exercises. They were further assigned to write a paragraph on a relevant topic by following different stages of process writing and to self/peer edit it.

The other option was to split the method and to administer each at a different level. In Grammar courses I and II, the first stage of the method could help students recognize errors and realize the change they make to meaning. Further, in Basic Writing students would have opportunities to both recognize and categorize errors into types and subsequently learn to go one step beyond error recognition to producing their own sentences and editing them in writing courses.

The present study took the first option and attempted to assess the effect of self/peer editing on the development of both grammatical and compositional skills in English students taking Writing Course I.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study included forty pre-intermediate sophomores majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at Islamic Azad University-Tabriz Branch. It was a classroom experiment and the subjects were naturally assembled. The participants in the study were taking the course Writing Course I. They were selected out of a population of 80 TEFL sophomores at the same level and taking the same course each term. While sex and age were not used in the selection procedure, the ratio of female to male and the age range, from 19 to 35, are representative of student enrollment at the university.

Design

An intact between-groups pre-test post-test design was employed because random assignment of subjects to experimental and control groups was not possible. Meanwhile, the groups were randomly determined as the control group and the experimental group to reduce threats to internal validity caused by selection bias.

Moreover, a pretest was administered to both groups to ensure the initial equivalence of the groups.

The Pre-test

The course objective was to improve students' writing ability, so it was essential to determine the equivalence of the groups as far as their grammatical proficiency was concerned. To do so, the structure section of a TOEFL test was modified to reflect objectives of Grammar Courses I and II. This grammar test was administered to both groups simultaneously. The test included two sections: the first section including 20 multiple-choice items, and the second one including 15 error-recognition items. Both parts contained clear directions. Questions 1-20 were incomplete sentences, with four words or phrases, marked (A), (B), (C), and (D). Students were asked to choose the one word or phrase that best completed the sentence. Questions 20-35 had four underlined words or phrases marked (A) (B), (C), and (D). Test takers were required to identify the one underlined word or phrase that needed to be changed in order for the sentence to be correct.

Research Hypothesis

The present study intended to estimate the effect of the independent variable: peer/self editing on the dependent variable: the writing skill in the following research hypothesis:
Self/peer-editing is effective in teaching editing to TEFL students at Islamic Azad University-Tabriz Branch

Procedures

The treatment following the pretest involved a three-phase discovery procedure of error recognition activities, error categorizing activities, and self/peer editing. It was applied in the research group while the product-oriented approach was used in teaching writing to the control group. In order to minimize the effect of subjects' knowledge of participation in an experiment,

both groups were given some general information about process writing approach and were informed about the necessity to follow the steps. In the experimental group, there was strict control over the completion of different activities, while, such control was missing in the control group and the class was practically conducted in the traditional manner. The course started with an introductory stage of making students aware of the communicative nature of writing and different steps involved in it. Moreover, the format of the materials to be presented, the significance of the techniques to be employed, and the course expectations and standards were introduced.

Simultaneous with teaching each chapter of the course book, students' attention was focused on error types and the significant role of grammatical accuracy through some in-class error recognition activities. This was done after the students realized the significance of the correct forms, through categorizing errors into types and doing some grammatical exercises. Subsequently, students were taught how to find and correct error types both in their own and peers' written texts.

The same process was followed in teaching higher-level skills of organizing and joining sentences and observing principles such as unity, coherence, and cohesion in writing. Although the syllabus was centered on different forms of paragraphs, it seemed impossible to write without following grammatical rules and structures. Achieving organizational adequacy was closely dependent on knowing and applying grammatical rules, and since students' productive performance was characterized by grammatical inadequacy, the first phase of the approach was devoted to activating their existing grammatical knowledge through consciousness-raising, doing grammatical exercises available at the end of the book, and finally in the form of peer-editing.

The second phase of the research focused on consolidating organizational skills through self/peer editing. The order of presentation and practice was determined by the syllabus. That is to say, when the teaching point was to present "Paragraph Structure", the focus was on the organizational features such as

unity, coherence, and the like. Then in order to strengthen the theoretical knowledge, students were given a peer-editing form to complete while editing their own writing and their peers'.

Since the book was concerned with different types of writing, the structure of the intended paragraph was always presented and practiced via the same procedure: the activities were sequenced in a way to lead students from recognition of paragraph organization to guided paragraph writing and to self/peer editing of the paragraphs. Having followed the necessary steps in the process of writing, self/peer-editing and revising, students would submit the revised form of their assignments to the teacher for final correction.

Materials

The course book used was *Developing compositions skills*: *Rhetoric and grammar* (Ruetten, 1996). It included eight chapters, the first four of which were to be taught in Writing Course I, e.g. introducing the paragraph, narrating memorable events, describing important places, analyzing reasons (causes).

The Post-test

At the end of the term a composition test was administered to see if the experimental group could perform differently from the control group on a composition test. The selection of composition as the test method was based on the conviction that it was the best method to elicit students' grammatical and organizational knowledge.

The scale offered by Hughes (1989) was used to quantify and scale observation of the learners' grammatical knowledge and compositional skill. The scale was selected because it seemed to represent defined levels of language performance. On the grammatical scale, the levels were defined in terms of the frequency of grammar and word order errors, whereas on the organization scale, the levels were defined in terms of the degree of organization and linking of ideas. The original scale included

five various writing components: Grammar, Vocabulary, Mechanics, Fluency, and Organization, each with 6 levels of ability from one to six. However, the sixth level was omitted because none of the subjects could approximate that level. From these only grammar and organization components were taken into account because they were highly underscored during the treatment and were supposed to have a direct bearing on the final attainment.

To minimize scorer unreliability, two independent scorers were asked to correct the papers and the means of the two sets of scores were used as a basis for further statistical analysis.

Results

The data obtained from the pre-test and the post-test were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences version 12 (SPSS, 12). Since the standard deviation of the original population was unknown and the sample was small in size (n=20), a t-test was run and the *t* distribution was used to find critical values and probabilities. The between-groups experimental design was selected to test the hypothesis and the two-conditioned experiment began with a parametric test for the between-groups experimental design with the objective of assessing the homogeneity of the samples. The results of the post-test were also analyzed using the t-test.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of the pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	St. dev.
Control	20	13.3000	4.58946
Experimental	20	10.7500	4.06364

A t-test was run using the total score of the students of the two groups on a grammar TOEFL test adapted from original TOEFL tests and adopted to conform to course objectives. The data analysis of the pre-test using SPSS is summarized in table 1

and that of the t-test is presented in table 2. The homogeneity of the groups was confirmed at (.05) significance level.

As the table 1 reveals there is no significant difference between the TOEFL test score means: the mean of the control group was 13.300 and that of the experimental group was 10.7500. Table 2 shows that the difference was not significant at (0.05) significance level (p>.05). It confirms the homogeneity of the groups. In other words, the null hypothesis of no difference between the groups could not be rejected.

Table 2
Independent samples t-test for equality of means

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.617	.211	1.860	38	.071	2.55000	1.37070	-.22484	5.32484
Equal variances not assumed			1.860	37.451	.071	2.55000	1.37070	-.22617	5.32617

Having confirmed the initial homogeneity of the groups, it was possible to proceed with two different treatments: the experimental group exercised peer-editing as an indirect strategy in consciousness raising while the control group received no treatment in this regard. An analysis of the post-test results, in the form of a composition, was done using the same procedures to find any significance difference after the inter-rater reliability of the test scores, computed through a "coefficient alpha", was acceptably high as follows:

Cronbach's Alpha for the Control group test results = .933
Cronbach's Alpha for the Experimental group test results = .929

Table 3 indicates the descriptive statistics for the total post-test results for the control and experimental groups respectively. As the descriptive statistics indicate, there was a greater variance among the subjects in the control group (2.81864) compared to the experimental group (1.73129), and though not significant, the experimental group's mean (7.9500) was slightly higher than that of the control group (7.4500). The difference may seem meaningful with regard to the initial superiority of the control group on the pre-test of grammar where their mean score(13.30) was higher than the mean of the experimental group (10.75).

Table 3
Descriptive group statistics of the total post-test results

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
control	20	7.4500	2.81864
experimental	20	7.9500	1.73129

Table 4
Independent Samples t-Test: t-test for Equality of Means

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	5.713	.022	.676	38	.503	-.50000	.73967
Equal variances not assumed			.676	31.550	.504	-.50000	.73967

Table 4 presents the results of the t-test analysis. As shown in the table, the obtained t value (.676) is more than 0.05 (p>.05) and, therefore, the null hypothesis of no difference between the groups cannot be rejected at a =0.05 significance level. In other words, peer-editing did not seem to have played a significant role in the development of writing skill in students.

Discussion and Conclusions

The research findings could not provide support for the alternative hypothesis; self/peer editing did not seem to have considerable impact on the development of the grammatical and compositional skills in English students at Islamic Azad university of Tabriz. The findings could be explained in several ways.

Firstly, the two sets of grammar and composition scores on the post-test were correlated to assess the relationship between grammatical accuracy and writing organization (Tables 5 and 6). As indicated, there seems to be a strong correlation between grammatical accuracy and writing organization in both groups. The relationship may be justified with reference to the fact that learning grammar rules and enhancing the ability to use those rules in production may sensitize students to rule learning of any type on one hand, and provide them with the necessary tools for more fluent expression of ideas on the other.

Table 5
Correlation of grammar and organization on the writing test for control group

	Grammar	Organization
Pearson Correlation	1	.942(**)
Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
N	20	20

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6
Correlation of grammar and organization on the writing test for experimental group

	Grammar	Organization
Pearson Correlation	1	.861(**)
Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
N	20	20

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

However, the initial comparison of the scores on the pre-test revealed that the mean score of both groups on the 35 item grammar test was, in fact, very low: 13.300 and 10.750 suggesting the inadequacy in the prerequisite grammar knowledge that had been obtained in grammar courses. The attempt to develop and exercise such understanding in the research project failed because the subjects had not developed an adequate prerequisite understanding of English grammar and the wide range of the data necessary for writing a paragraph made it impossible for them to monitor what they were to write or to edit.

Secondly, having to pay attention to both grammatical and compositional features seemed to be distracting and to have an enervating effect on the students' ability to attend to either set of features in isolation. The technique might have been more effective had it been introduced in grammar courses in which students had to focus only on grammatical points. As mentioned in the introduction, the other option was to separate the method into two and administer each at a different level. In Grammar courses I and II, the first stage of the method would help students recognize errors and realize the change they made to meaning. Then in Basic Writing students would have opportunities to both recognize and categorize errors into types and would subsequently learn to go one step beyond error recognition to producing their own sentences and editing them in writing courses.

And finally, students were absolutely inexperienced in pair work and cooperative activities and did not know how to proceed. They needed much guidance and help and were at times demotivated. Employing some cooperative activities from early days of education at university could bear considerable impact on the students' ability to rely on their own capacities and on their friends' for more independent language learning experiences.

Further Research

The apparent ineffectiveness of the independent variable might have been owing to the impaired grammatical knowledge students bring to writing courses. It is assumed that further

empirical research in Grammar Courses I and II, which are prerequisite for writing, is required to investigate whether including supplementary communicative tasks in such courses will help language learners to bridge the gap between pure theoretical grammatical knowledge they receive and everyday use of that knowledge to convert their thoughts and ideas both orally and in written form.

The Author

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