

Developing Peer Review Skills Through the Use of Rubrics in EFL Writing

Steven CHARLES

Introduction

Peer review or peer-to-peer feedback serves a few functions in the teacher/student relationship. Namely, it increases students' experience at analyzing writing, editing errors and builds greater awareness of grammar and essay structure. Peer review also, perhaps more importantly, increases student autonomy as they take a more active role in the writing and editing process (Benson, 2013).

This research project tracks the peer feedback process of two second-year writing classes. Feedback was given through the use of rubrics that break down the segments of an essay (organization, language/accuracy, content, citations and references and rewrite) and allow the students to make comments and even give a grade on the writing of their peers. Also, these are the same rubrics that the teacher uses to assess students' writing and thus provides greater transparency in the teacher/student relationship.

The key point of this project was that the second class was given a rubric complete with text explaining the four grade ranges of each segment while the first class was given a rubric that provided a list of essay segments and grade ranges but did not include supporting text. The question posed by this project is

whether or not students can give more effective feedback with extra explanatory support in the rubric.

This project was conducted over the course of a 15-week term that included three writing assignments. Both the teacher and the students provided feedback on the second and third (final) drafts by highlighting errors and giving suggestions for improvement. In addition, both parties gave grades on both drafts. Grades given by the students were hypothetical and not shown to the original writers while only the teacher's final grades were shown to the writers on the final draft. This was done to track the writers' progress and show any differences between the teacher's and students' assessments of the assignments.

Beliefs about Peer Review, Rubrics and Autonomy

Peer Review Peer feedback can reinforce teacher feedback and increase students' skills simultaneously. It also removes the teacher as the center of attention as peer review sessions focus primarily on students reading and reviewing each other, with the teacher taking a decreased role in the classroom (Hyland, 2014). This symbolizes a shift from a teacher-centered or hierarchical classroom paradigm to a more student-centered or horizontal one.

As students take on the extra responsibility of peer editor, they “develop the critical analysis and reading strategies they need to later examine their own writing” (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). This, in theory, will create a positive feedback cycle as students receive feedback from each other, develop analytical skills, receive feedback from the teacher and improve as writers as they move onto future writing assignments.

The downsides of peer review are numerous and should be mentioned. Many students do not completely trust the feedback of other L2 students, lack confidence in their own ability to give feedback and generally prefer the “expert” feedback of the teacher (Hyland, 2016). As such, students need to be taught how to read critically, how to give feedback (and what to give feedback on) and be

reassured that the teacher (the “expert”) will oversee the process and give the final grades.

Rubrics Rubrics given to students at the beginning of the course and again during peer review sessions serve the above ends. The students have the components of an essay, the criteria to search for and the grade ranges at their disposal as they read their peers’ drafts. This supporting document structures students’ analysis and can also be used outside of the classroom as they write (or rewrite) their own drafts. Finally, this rubric should be the same used by the teacher during grading as it increases transparency in the classroom and allows students to see (and participate in) the grading process.

Autonomy While educational researchers have examined the topic of learner autonomy, the research is largely based on the more individualistic Anglo/Western cultures. As such, these ideas may not be applicable or appropriate in the more collective East Asian societies. How to develop peer feedback skills in Japanese students then becomes an issue for the Anglosphere expatriate teacher. However, if Western societies can be characterized as idealizing self-determination while East Asian societies can be characterized as promoting interpersonal relationships and group responsibility (Noels in Apple, Da Silva and Fellner, 2013), then perhaps the burden of introducing peer review to the Japanese classroom is reduced.

The peer review sessions are presented to students as a means of helping other students as well as improving their own writing skills. Here, both individualistic (Western) and collective and interpersonal (East Asian) goals can be achieved through repeated experiences with reviewing and giving feedback to other students (Gobel, Thang & Mori, 2017).

Methodology

The rubrics used in the classroom were distributed at the beginning of the term and it was explained to the students that these exact rubrics would be used by the teacher to grade students’ writing assignments. On peer review days (on the second

and third drafts of the three assignments), students were given additional copies of the rubric for the purpose of making comments and evaluating their peers' drafts.

Peer Review Organization Students were assigned to small groups (3–5 students) and anonymous drafts were shuffled around the groups. Anonymity was chosen as it was believed that students would be more comfortable giving critical feedback. The teacher instructed the students to read each draft two or three times. The first reading was to find small form errors (spelling, grammar, etc.) and the second reading was done in conjunction with the rubric and was for examining the organization, content and overall accuracy of the draft.

Students in groups were instructed to use the same rubric worksheet for the same draft and, upon finishing, hand both sheets to the next student in the group. This served two purposes: peer reviewers had more opportunity to read and review more drafts and the original writers would receive feedback from more of their peers.

In addition, students were instructed to print two copies of their drafts, with one being used in the peer review session and the other being given to the teacher. During the sessions, the teacher moved around the room to monitor the activity and occasionally give advice and support if the teacher decided that a given student was struggling with the process.

Use of Rubrics The rubrics given to each class differed in that the first class received a rubric with the three grade ranges (>80%, 70–80% and <70%) and the criteria (organization, language/accuracy, content, citations and references and rewrite). (See Figure 1 for a smaller version of the original.)

Figure 1:

	(>80)	(70–80%)	(<70%)
Organization			
Language			
Content			
Citations			
Rewrite			

The second class was given a different rubric that contained all the same information as the first plus in-text explanation of each grade range for each component. (An abbreviated version of the original is shown below in Figure 2.)

Figure 2:

	(>80%)	(70–80%)	(<70%)
Organization	All major parts are fully developed	All major parts are present but may have problems.	There are major problems or instructions were not followed.
Language	Errors do not cause lack of clarity	Errors cause lack of clarity	Errors cause significant lack of clarity

The text explanation in the second rubric was written to provide support to students and guide them to make evaluations of their peers' drafts. Students were instructed to circle the box they thought appropriate and encouraged to write additional freehand comments at the bottom of the page. The lack of text explanation in the first rubric was designed to encourage students to decide on their own evaluations of peer drafts in a more independent fashion.

Finally, both rubrics contained a small box labeled "Score" at the bottom left of the page. Students were instructed to assign a hypothetical score to the drafts. Students were explicitly instructed that giving differing scores within the peer review groups was acceptable. These scores were recorded and averaged by the teacher and then removed from the rubric prior to being given to the original author. These scores were recorded by the teacher for the purpose of comparing them to the scores given by the teachers but they were not shown to the authors as it was thought that the reviewers' scores could falsely encourage or discourage the student writers.

Results

When the results of student and teacher assessments were examined, variation

was clearly seen but no fixed patterns could be observed. The different rubrics given to students did not appear to produce any significant variation in students' evaluations. With some drafts, the students assigned higher grades than the teacher (up to twelve points higher), while other drafts showed the opposite with the teacher assessing the drafts in question more highly (up to twelve points higher) than the students. This generally indicates that student assessment skills are producing different (sometimes wildly) results than the teacher. In other cases, teacher and student assessment were nearly the same. (Visual representations are shown below in Figures 1 and 2.)

Figure 1:

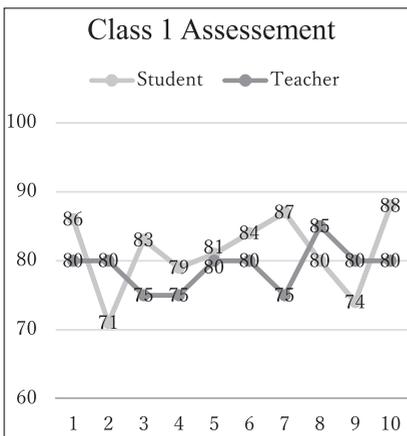
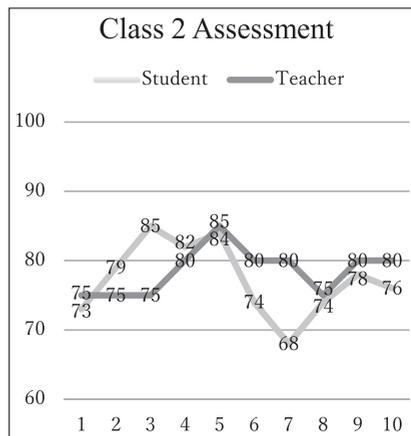


Figure 2:



While the quantitative data does not show a clear pattern of students developing peer review skills, the more qualitative data gathered informally exhibits some growth of review skills. Students' comments ranged from positive but unspecific comments (“nice” and “good job”, for example) to more specific and focused comments such as “develop conclusion more” and “watch grammar”, indicating that students are generally aware of the usefulness of peer review.

Conclusions

Even with the vague and mixed results, rubrics appear to have value as evidenced by students' thorough use of rubrics and frequent, effective comments during peer review sessions. The second rubric with supporting text appears to be slightly more effective as the students' evaluations were closer to the teacher's final evaluations, thus answering the research question in a mildly positively manner. While the type of rubric may not have a large or definitive influence on students' peer review skills, it can be inferred that rubrics are useful as an instrument to structure peer review due to the comments mentioned above.

Future Research

Future research projects could include more explicit instructions on peer review with the teacher providing feedback on the student feedback. Students should be developing their evaluation skills as they are simultaneously developing their writing skills in a positive feedback cycle. Also, future research projects could focus more on qualitative data, namely the comments students write at the bottom of the rubric worksheets, subject to coding and interpretation. This goal could also involve more structured teacher instruction. In conclusion, with the teacher providing instruction and guidance throughout the course term, students can build a greater sense of autonomy as they take greater control of their writing and overall learning.

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