

The Effectiveness of Peer-Response Groupwork in CLIL and EFL Classroom Settings: A Collaborative Work in Writing Courses in Japan

SATO, Yasuko*

Niigata University of International and Information Studies, Niigata, JAPAN

ABSTRACT

A researcher has been utilizing the EIKEN Tests (Test in Practical English Proficiency, known as EIKEN) on university first-year students as a kind of self-learning in the compulsory course at Niigata University of International and Information Studies (known as NUIS) since 2014. Although the potential value and effectiveness of the test are proved by quantitative findings and analysis of students' results, it still carries meanings to study further about the influences of EIKEN tests on EFL class in Japan. In this paper, the researcher pinpointed the effectiveness of peer-response groupwork in CLIL and EFL classroom settings based on ESL/EFL writing to acquire the basic writing skills for passing EIKEN tests. Particularly, four different topics based on Process Writing Approach (White & Arndt, 1991) were discussed in terms of ESL/EFL writing instruction, which puts more focus on learners' sense of independence and initiatives in peer-response groupwork: 1) groupwork both in English 101 & 102 (Introduction to Writing) in university in USA & Block 3 ESL (low intermediate to intermediate level) in a language school affiliated with the university, 2) psycholinguistic argument of groupwork instructed under the theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), 3) educational argument of peer-response groupwork – pros & cons ;4) the effectiveness of peer-response groupwork in Japanese ESL/EFL writing course.

INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that the improvement of English skills of Japanese people has been always the subject matter in dispute on a roundtable in MEXT, while the globalization has been progressing much faster than before. Japanese recognize that the assessment towards Japanese Education in the world ranking has been gradually lower for the past decade. Yet, under the sharp progress of the borderless society, the advancement of English as a global language is a very crucial issue for Japanese future. To solve this urgent issue, thus MEXT started to launch the 2020 Reform Plan to make drastic changes to the educational system of English. In terms of the background of this transformation, in 2014 the

* SATO, Yasuko [国際文化学科]

Expert Government Panel on Improving English Education addressed in English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization (TEXT, 2014a):

English education in Japan has progressed under the 2008-2019 revision of the Course of Study (the national curriculum in Japan), while in special communicative competence among four skills would have included many sorts of development matters to revise as acceleratedly as possible (TEXT, 2016b). So, under the progress of rapid globalized society, it is extremely crucial for Japan to enrich four skills of English more than before. Cross-cultural understanding and communications are important to Japanese people. In that case, the improvement of English skills as a global language is inevitable to Japanese provision, and Japan should set its sight on top class in Asians.

In this paper, writing pedagogy will be explored in terms of language environment emphasizing the influence of communicative peer work on writing as follows: (1) in an American university, the role of peer-response groupwork of English 101 & 102 (freshmen level English composition classes), and Block 3 ESL (integrated classes of basic reading and writing for intermediate level students), (2) other psycholinguistic evidence for peer-response groupwork in second language learning: comprehensible input and output in second language acquisition (SLA), (3) pedagogical arguments for the introduction of peer-response groupwork: advantages and disadvantages; (4) speculation on the effectiveness of peer-response groupwork in writing classes in Japan.

In an American University, the role of Peer-Response Groupwork in English 101 & 102 (Freshmen Level English Composition Classes), and Block 3 ESL (Integrated Classes of Basic Reading and Writing for Intermediate Level Students)

The role of communicative groupwork on writing process has become increasingly more influential in the teaching methodology of American Universities. Three out of five writing instructors who taught English 101 & 102 (freshmen level composition classes aiming at the development of writing skills in expository prose) actually used peer-response groups in their English 101 & 102 classes. Their peer-response groups were small sets of workshop students who were permanently assigned to help each other in many ways. The most frequent and obvious way in which they helped each other was by reading each other's work and suggesting ways to improve it. Although their writing instructors could have met with all the students in class, they chose not to do this. Their peer-response groups, furthermore, gave their members highly individualized

attention both in and out of class.

Their peer-response groups seemed to yield exceptional benefits for their members. Gradually, most of their students benefited because they got feedback and assistance from their peers prior to writing the final draft of their compositions. The quality of compositions convinced their writing instructors that each student learned both to contribute to the group and to receive help from the group, and the group had become a busy, productive and successful team by the end of the quarter. Similarly, the groupwork convinced them of writing in relation to the perspective of a reader, emphasizing that their students write for a variety of audiences (e.g. self, classmates, the community, the teacher) to learn that approaches are highly-diversified as audiences vary.

Shi and Cummings (1995a) interviewed five experienced instructors weekly about their ESL writing classes in selected courses about their ESL writing classes in selected courses over two years at a Canadian university. One of the five skillful instructors, Elizabeth, described most of her classes as workshops in which students worked constantly in pairs or groups, observing that “students cannot sit and write for two hours without communicating with somebody else.” She stressed the need for students to convey their ideas effectively to others: she read her students’ work looking primarily for problems in communicating ideas, and chose her selection of textbooks on the basis of whether they facilitated classroom discussion.

Esther also saw her classroom activities of group editing and peer modeling accommodating the pedagogical innovation: Her students got a chance to read other people’s work and give each other feedback. It is valuable for them to learn to give feedback to others and to tackle their own work. So, they got a sense of audience other than the teacher; they were able to make revisions without teacher looking at it first (Shi and Cummings, 1995b).

However, it seemed that peer-response groups did not always work well for all of the writing instructors. When one of the writing instructors taught English 101 & 102 first used the peer work, he encountered some problems, because he merely assigned students to groups and expected them to know what to do. He did not teach them how to use peer-response group effectively. The critical factor in determining the success or failure of the method is what happens before students get into their groups to read each other’s paper. The groups by themselves are not a panacea.

Prior to working in response groups, students must understand the purpose. Their experience with response groups convinced their writing instructors that usually when students are not performing effectively in their groups, it is because they do not know what to do or they do not understand why the task is important, or a combination of these two reasons. Students, therefore, need to study what peer-response groups do and then practice using peer-response techniques.

In writing classes of Block 3 ESL at an American university (integrated classes of basic reading and writing for intermediate level students), it seemed obvious how effectively peer-response groupwork led the students to achieve a great development not only in their combinations but in the other language skills (i.e., reading, listening, speaking) as well. In this writing class, the ESL instructor divided eight students into three groups to discuss peer's papers. In the groups, students discussed whether the content of their drafts was correct semantically and syntactically. Other topics included determining the thesis of the drafts and sharing their opinions about the topics: as in English 101 & 102 peer-responses and attention to multiple drafts seemed to improve students' writing proficiency. The ESL instructor scheduled peer groups to meet twice for each composition assignment. The first time the groups met they focused on the global components of the compositions such as the organizational pattern, additional support ideas that may be needed, main ideas where the paper could use emphasis or clarification, and unrelated to unnecessary idea that may sidetrack the reader. These global components should be the subject of the first session because problems at the sentence and word level may change or disappear as the students make large structural or conceptual changes during the revision process with peers. When students revise their drafts, they decide which advice has merit and which advice doesn't match goals for the composition. Peer-responders can indicate both strength and areas where revision is needed in several peer sessions.

The finished composition showed the benefits of peer feedback and the importance of increased motivation derived from peer feedback. Urzua (has stressed that because of the immediacy of audience feedback, peer-response groups appear to have had a dramatic influence on writing development.

Other Psycholinguistic Evidence for Peer-Response Groupwork in Second Language Learning: Comprehensible Input and Output in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The purpose here is to examine both psycholinguistic rationales and pedagogical arguments for the use of collaborative work in terms of how it influences writing skills of L2 learners.

First, this study pinpointed theoretical evidence for groupwork in SL teaching combination both the results of research by Long and Porter, and the ESL writing classes of Block 3.

There is a substantial amount of evidence consistent with the idea that the more language that learners hear and “understand” or the more “comprehensible input” they perceive, the faster and better they learn (Krashen, 1982a).

Krashen (1982b) has proposed a hypothetical explanation for this, which he calls the “Input Hypothesis” (Alatis, 1980). He has claimed that learners improve in a SL by “understanding” language which contains some target language forms (phonological, lexical, morphological, or syntactic) which they cannot understand in isolation. Ignorance of the new forms is compensated for by hearing them used in a situation and embedded in other language that they do understand. whether or not simply hearing and understanding the new items are both necessary and sufficient for a learner to use them successfully later is still unclear.

Krashen (1982c), furthermore pinpoints that speaking is unnecessary: — that is useful only as a means of obtaining “comprehensible input.” As he stresses, in order to acquire L2 language learners need input that contains exemplars of the language forms which according to the natural order are due to be acquired next. That is, learners must keep on getting input for the purpose of acquiring some target language forms (phonological, lexical, morphological, or syntactic) by teacher-led communication and peer communication, such as group work. It seems obvious that “comprehensible input” is one of the crucial factors in terms of SLA.

However, at least one researcher has argued that learners must also be given an opportunity to “produce” the new forms: Swain (1981a) calls the “comprehensible output hypothesis.” Researchers following Swain have stressed that learners must be put in a position of being able to negotiate the new input thereby

ensuring that the language which is heard is modified to exactly the level of comprehensibility they can manage. Swain suggests the crucial points as follows: (a) “the learners may be ‘push-ed’ to use alternative means where there is communication breakdown, in order to express a message precisely, coherently, and appropriately; (b) using (as opposed to simply comprehending) the language may force the learner to move from semantic processing which is characteristic of the early stages of SLA to syntactic processing (i.e., whereas comprehension can take place by simply attending to the meaning of content words, production may trigger the focus on formal features); (c) the learner has a chance to test out hypotheses about the L2” (Swain 1981b).

The ESL writing class of Block 3 supports the suggestion of Swain. This is a good example that underscores the importance of “comprehensible output.” There was a student who came from Columbia in the Block 3 ESL class. Both the instructor and students found it difficult to comprehend his assessment of strengths and weaknesses of his peer’s first drafts because of his heavy Spanish accent. However, his pronunciation improved greatly through active participation in peer sessions: now it is not difficult for others to comprehend his communication. Although it might be argued that others just became accustomed to his accent, the ESL instructor witnessed his ease of interaction outside his class as well. This brief example thus demonstrates that active peer group work can give students many opportunities to speak and, in turn, producing language gives the students remarkable motivation and feedback. If it is the case that active speech production in peer-response group work can effectively affect SLA, this type of collaborative work should be used to teach a second language.

Pedagogical Arguments for the Introduction of Peer-Response Groupwork Group: Advantages and Disadvantages

I participated in a workshop named “Revision Empowering the Beginning Writer” at the TESOL 26th Annual Convention and Exposition in Canada. In this workshop, participants formed several groups and examined the challenges and benefits of a student-centered approach to writing. In particular, they discussed how peer-response groups in writing classrooms effectively worked with group members. They went on to outline its advantages and disadvantages. The outcomes of this activity are summarized in Figure 1 below:

Advantages

(1)	Ss encourages communication.
(2)	Ss focus on content.
(3)	Ss become aware of readers.
(4)	Ss can learn from each other.
(5)	Ss can learn in a non-threatening environment. (They can communicate better if their affective filter is lowered.)

Disadvantage

(1)	Ss don't need to criticize. (They may hesitate to criticize.)
(2)	It is hard for Ss to focus on grammar.
(3)	Ss' comments tend to be vague. (The other Ss' comments are not as good as T's.)
(4)	Ss want to speak in L1. (If there are homogeneous settings in the group.)
(5)	Readers can't read students' handwriting.

Figure 1 Advantages and disadvantages of peer-response groupwork

This list will be expounded upon in the following paragraphs.

First, *peer groups encourage communication*. In other words, group discussion motivates students to contribute. This motivation is due in part to the relative ease with which members of a small group, as opposed to a large group, can communicate. The circumstances are not as prohibitive. Empirical evidence supporting this idea has been provided in several recent studies by Littlejohn. For example, it has been found that small-group study can lead to increased motivation for studying Spanish among beginning students; “learners responding to a questionnaire reported that they felt less inhibited and freer to speak and make mistakes in the small group than in the teacher-led class” (Littlejohn, 1983). As one of the advantages, therefore, it seems obvious that collaborative work motivates study.

Second, groupwork encourages students to focus on content. By focusing on content, an audience of peers makes sure that a composition includes clarity of thought. Thus, it makes sense to have readers pay attention to the context rather than to only the organization, grammar, and mechanics. In English 101& 102 and Block 3 ESL classes, I have encouraged and have seen others encounter much difficulty in judging the explicitness of thought and the back-ground schema of the audience. In peer-response groupwork, students become aware of which idea is unclear and how it should be composed through peer sessions.

Point (3) suggests that Ss become aware of readers. Again, the writing classes of English 101 & 102 and Block 3 ESL reflected that this was an outcome of peer-

response groups. Students seemed to be learning how to take the audience into account when they were writing and developing a sense of voice and how to manipulate language for the best effect, reading and responding by peers who valued the author's perspectives. Each student, thus, realized the importance of the perception of various audiences from peer-response group.

The next point asserts that Ss can learn from each other. One aspect of their learning concerns social and communicative skills. Sharan & Sharan suggest that small-group experiences produce “attentive listening, effective implementation of peer's ideas, cooperation and sharing of information, mutual help, talking in turn, serving as a group leader, and so on.” Especially, peers in small groups are more likely to talk with each other than to talk with the teacher and, when need arises, to ask to clarify meaning.

Receiving immediate feedback is another important advantages of peer-response groupwork. In order to improve L2 writing, the revision process can be helped through peer sessions. Each student writer reads a piece of writing to the others in the group, and the group gives immediate feedback to the writers. The kind of feedback varies with different goals and writing pieces, but Graves (1983) suggests that “revisions that children make as a result of the conference can be at a much higher level than those made when the child is working and reading alone.” Sommers (1982) also found that revisions are simulated by the immediate feedback because “students' comments create the motive for doing something different in the next draft and thoughtful comments create the motive for revision.” Peers' comments, in the form of immediate feedback, therefore, will have a powerful effect on improving L2 writing.

The last advantage is that Ss can learn in a non-threatening environment. This means that they experience less anxiety and consequently find it easier to communicate. Many students, especially the shy or linguistically insecure, experience considerable stress when called upon in the public area of the teacher-led classroom. This stress is increased by the knowledge that they must respond accurately and quickly. In conclusion, Long and Porter (1985) underscore that “a group provides a relatively intimate setting, and usually a more supportive environment in which to try out embryonic SL skills.” Under such intimate and supportive circumstances, it is believed that learning is enhanced.

Although there are many advantages for using small group work, there are also some disadvantages. *One of them is that Ss don't need to criticize or that they may hesitate to criticize.* However, there seems to be some solutions to mitigate this

tendency. A teacher can, for example, train them to mention not only positive aspects but negative aspects as well in their drafts. Thus, with the instruction of a teacher, the students will become better at pointing out negative feedback.

Another disadvantages of small groupwork is that it may be hard for Ss to focus on grammar. It is believed that Ls students tend to focus on content rather than grammar because it is hard for them to point out and correct grammar mistakes in their drafts especially when all members of the group are at the same level of proficiency. As a means of solving this problem, however, a teacher may guide the students to focus on grammar mistakes as well as content as much as he/she can, showing a couple of typical examples.

A third disadvantage is that Ss' comments tend to be vague. Many students appear to believe that the other students' comments are not as good as the T's. Since students do not know how to comment on their drafts, generally their comments tend to be too general, or not specific enough. Again, this problem can be solved through teacher's adequate guidance. In advance, a teacher advises students on how to put comments on their drafts. A teacher, for example, explains the important criteria to be noted such as whether there is a question at issue in an argument paper.

Another disadvantage is that Ss want to speak in L1, especially when they are in homogeneous settings. This might be one of the more serious problems. A possible solution might be to have the students choose a leader for their group. The leader's duty would entail ensuring that everyone speak in L2. In where group cannot decide upon a leader, the teacher would have to choose one.

The last disadvantage is that readers can't read students' handwriting. Word processors are available for student users for many purposes now so that for the convenience of reading, a teacher can recommend that students with handwriting problems use a typewriter or word processor.

The advantage and disadvantage of using peer response groupwork for writing classes have been examined in the paragraph above. Since many of the disadvantages can be countered with extra teaching supervision, it seems that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. Hence, peer-response groupwork does seem appropriate for teaching writing skills.

Speculation upon the effectiveness of peer-response groupwork in writing classes in Japan

As mentioned in the introduction, most Japanese teachers are restricted both pedagogically and practically in the way they teach English. Writing instruction especially seems in need of reform; original, creative, and individual approaches must be produced by writing instructors in order to improve conventional writing instruction. Presently, there appear to be various kinds of problems or weak points in the controlled compositions which we have used in Japan. One of them is that as the approach is currently used in junior and senior high school, students' writing skills have not improved much. That is, although they are able to manipulate previously learned language structures, they are not able to express their ideas fluently in a developed essay. In order to counter this problem I would suggest using process writing together with peer-response groupwork in writing classes in Japan. Process writing is an approach which has a number of specific stages: generating and exploring ideas, discovering through writing what one wants to say, revising, getting feedback from readers, repeating these steps as many times as necessary, editing, and at least arriving at a finished composition (White & Arndt, 1991). Onozawa (2010) & Stanley, (2020) say that because peer group work provides a positive and encouraging environment, it would improve students' writing skills.

In general there are thirty five to forty students in a classroom at a junior or senior high school in Japan. As a practical matter, therefore, it is not easy for a Japanese English instructor to make small groups consisting of five to six members and to control all groups simultaneously. Especially, if the instructor gets some questions from each group, it will be difficult for him/her to cope with them within fifty minutes. As there are bound to be some troublemakers, for example, those who talk about irrelevant topics, or are not cooperative with other peer group members, it will be also hard for the instructor to control these kinds of students. Taking the risks into consideration, however, the instructor should gradually train the students to become familiar with peer groupwork. Each group, for example, decides on an assignment to affirm some responsibility in the learning process and to help the instructor in order to carry out assigned work; he/she introduces the process of writing to them, that is, instruction on making pre-writing with drafting, revising, peer review, additional revising, and editing. One of the most crucial roles of peer-response group work is in revising and editing. Thus, in advance the instructor gives students an example of how a peer session should be conducted in order to produce much better drafts and also what kinds of oral and written comments are effective. Guided with the aid

of a peer-response sheet (see Figure 2), peer responders can concentrate on ideas and meaning, locating any problems in content or organization, mechanics which hinder clear expressions. In addition to the aid of a feedback form, one alternative method is to duplicate particularly good examples of peer-response work done by students during the previous years. These examples not only provide good models for current students to study, but also help create credibility for the task: if students from previous classes have been able to handle the task efficiently, current students will feel the method produces real, attainable results. Thus, an instructor needs these strategies to encourage students become familiar with peer-response group work in process writing.

Figure 2 A Peer-Response Sheet

<p>A. Answer the following questions related to the ORGANIZATION component?</p> <p>1. List the topic sentences that support it.</p> <p>a. _____</p> <p>b. _____</p> <p>c. _____</p> <p>d. _____</p> <p>2. Is the composition interesting? What makes it so?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>3. Does the introduction succeed?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>4. Does the conclusion reemphasize and/or expand the introduction?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>B. Answer the following questions using the CONTENT component?</p> <p>1. Does the student appear to know much about his/her subject?</p> <p>2. Is all the information in the composition pertinent to the thesis statement?/to the topic sentences?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>3. Is there a strong topic sentence? What is it?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>4. Does the conclusion reemphasize the introduction?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>5. Does the title express the student's point of view?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>C. Answer the following questions using the VOCABULARY component?</p> <p>1. What is the overall tone of the composition?</p> <p>a. What is the range of the vocabulary?</p> <p>b. Is it appropriate to the topic?</p> <p>c. Is it appropriate to the audience?</p> <p>2. What sophisticated word choices are included in you or peer's composition?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>3. What methods of transition are used in the composition?</p> <p>a. within paragraphs b. between paragraphs</p> <p>D. Comment on the composition with this form.</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>NOTE: if you can answer "yes" to all of the yes/no questions above, you have probably written very good papers.</p>

CONCLUSIONS

Through this study the researcher has pinpointed at the exceptional benefits and effective use of peer response groups in writing courses for not only ESL students but beginning to intermediate level university students in Japan. Although the application of peer-response group work and process writing seems to have been generally well and widely put in ESL composition in the U.S., it is not without its fault findings. Therefore, an instructor should modify the instructional technique to accommodate a diversity of Japanese student needs and the individual personalities of teacher and students, elements which are necessary for success with peer-response group work, as with almost every other effective technique. An instructor who devotes time and effort to instruction in the use of response groups will be rewarded when students write better papers, feel more confident about their writing skills, and view writing as a positive experience rather than a negative one, even though he/she may need to tolerate some partial failure; there is no royal road to teach a foreign language — writing.

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