

## Peer Review and Cultural Diversity

*“People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher.” – Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

“Why do we need to peer review? It seems to be an activity without purpose and, after all, how can my classmates help me, considering they may know ‘less’ English than me?” This question is reflective of the comments we hear semester after semester from our students in academic ESL writing. Therefore, in fall 2015, my colleague and I decided to implement a teaching technique, which we called a peer review project, in order to help our students understand what peer review means, how it works, and how to apply it. Since our academic ESL program has three levels—foundations, intermediate, and advanced—we decided to begin this peer review project with the foundations level.

As ESL teachers, we had to address assumptions about peer reviewing before starting the project. We believed students did not know what “peer review” meant; in other words, they did not know the literal meaning of these two words combined. In addition, we assumed cultural concepts of traditional classrooms, in which the teacher is the only knowledgeable authority in the classroom, could have a keen influence on students’ reactions to peer review. As such, we believed our students felt strongly that the teacher was the only person authorized to comment on and suggest changes to their writing. Furthermore, we thought the diversity of our students’ backgrounds could also have an enormous impact on how students perceived the peer review activity on both ends of the process: first in reviewing a peer’s writing, and then having their own writing reviewed by a classmate. For example, some of our students may have a master’s degree from their home countries, while other students may come from refugee camps where education is very limited. Therefore, the reviewers may feel intimidated by taking the “authority” of the teacher into their own hands and commenting on a classmate’s writing, and those being reviewed may feel uncomfortable having their writing “assessed” by classmates with an unknown level of English language skills.

After considering our assumptions before developing and applying our peer review project, we established our goals. We expected to accomplish three aims:

1. To help students understand what peer review is, how to use it, and how it is helpful;
2. To promote the peer review practice in a respectful and appropriate environment, in which students feel comfortable commenting on their peers’ writing and receiving comments on their own writing; and
3. To clarify that peer review was not about looking for and pointing out classmates’ mistakes.

When we started our project, we realized our expectations and predictions about cultural diversity in our classroom were correct. We had 7 of our 11 students that were identified as Gen. 1.5 (students who are not academically proficient in L1 and L2); 3 students were international students—two of whom had master’s degrees and the other had some college experience from their home countries—and one student was an immigrant with some academic experience, as well.

Our project developed gradually; in fact, it was a scaffolding process. Initially, we started with one sentence related to the course content of the week. The task increased in the number of sentences and in the complexity of the structures until students could write at least five sentences in paragraph format. This practice happened on Fridays for 10 minutes during fall 2015. Students wrote the requested structures using the number of sentences determined on the proper form. The teacher exchanged their writings randomly. After reviewing their classmates’ writings, students got their own writing back to revise. Students were free to keep their sentence the same if they didn’t agree with the reviser’s comments. In some weeks, students were allowed to use their textbook and handouts when conducting their reviews. The table on the following page displays samples of how the project developed. The samples are original, including errors.

In the Week 2 sample, the student wrote a sentence following the required structure, but they missed the content of the practice and created a sentence off topic. In Week 4, the reviewers were very strict about making the author follow the required pattern: Subject, Verb, Object (SVO). The author changed his pattern; however, the sentence still did not follow the SVO pattern. In Week 9, the reviewer noticed the fragment; however, the reviewer did not mention the time clause issue. Therefore, the author still had a “wrong” sentence. Finally, in Week 12, the reviewer didn’t notice that the present perfect structure was missing, but he focused on other mistakes.

In the first two weeks, students were very modest in their comments. However, later in the semester, they became so confident about their comments that even when they were wrong they were very persuasive.

## Samples of Tasks and Comments

Task Description	Student's Writing	Peer Reviewer's Comments	Student's Revised Version
<b>Week 2:</b> Write a sentence about the do's and don'ts if you meet a bear. The sentence has to follow a pattern: Subject, Verb, Object, Indirect Object.	"Don't run when you see a bear."	"There is no subject. The sentence needs the special verb."	"They wrote a letter about the bear to her."
<b>Week 4:</b> Write two sentences using simple past tense, following the pattern: Subject, Verb, Object. One of the sentences must have a negative structure. Topic: ONE thing that you did last year, and ONE thing that you did not do last year.	"Last year I was in my country. Last week, I didn't do my homework."	"You need object in your sentences."	"Yesterday we talked about my country."
<b>Week 9:</b> Write three sentences using future tenses and the words: "When," "By the time," and "After."	"When I am done with college I will go to bible study. By the time I will go to Iowa, After Ms. Janet class, I am going to Ms. Ainne class."	"Sentence 2, you have to make another sentence as a complement sentence. By the time I will go to Iowa, what will you do."	"By the time I will go to Iowa to visit my friends."
<b>Week 12:</b> Write four sentences about how to be a good student. Your sentences must include one present perfect tense, one simple past, two modal verbs, and one positive addition.	"A good student will do home worke every day. A good student should use now voc in write paragraph A good studnt mustn't translite in class. A good student can read more in home."	"You should write (to) not (in) in the second sentence and you should write in past. Ex: write=wrote The last sentences you have to have (too) in the sentence."	"A good student should use new voc too write paragraph. A good student can read more a home too."

Note: The above reflect the students' original responses.

The students became so critical, they started reviewing the informal online discussion boards. Students analyzed each other's posts and comments, such as, "You have a sad story which is an important event in your live [sic], but next time try to follow the rules about tense." These comments became common by Weeks 4 and 8 of the semester.

At the end of the 16-week semester, we again asked our students what peer review meant and what they learned from the project. Students A and B, who each had previously said they had no clue what peer review was, gave the following definitions of peer review and a summary of what they learned during the semester:

### What is peer review?

- **Student A:** "Peer-editing is to check your classmate grammar. To check the spelling of your classmate writing."

- **Student B:** "It's about what we learned during the week. It's help me with my writing aid it's makes me remember what I learned during the week."

### What have you learned this semester?

- **Student A:** "I have learned many things which is how to check my classmate grammar."
- **Student B:** "I learned how to write correct sentence and correct other student sentence."

Both students' responses to the meaning of peer review reflects what they learned with the project. However, Student B gives a more complete definition of the technique because he understood peer review as beneficial to him, improving his writing skills, and helping him to review the content. Student B confirms Freire's statement: "People teach each other..."

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From this experience, my colleague and I came to a number of conclusions about using the peer review technique in our ESL course:

- Through peer review, students were able to identify issues in their own writing.
- With a lot of guidance, our students became critical and were able to find issues in their classmates' writings; however, because the traditional classroom concept in which the teacher owns the knowledge was so deeply ingrained, some students needed teacher approval to write their comments.
- Students handled language structure issues very well and gave very effective comments when peer reviewing, but when they had more open content, they missed content/coherence issues. Typically, in our writing process, there is a second draft that the teacher collects and reviews; therefore, the students' next class, Foundations II, will focus on paragraph structure and organization of ideas and the teacher will comment on their second draft.
- As educators, we should not assume that our students understand academic writing conventions and terminologies even if they may have attended American schools.

At the end of the semester, we believed we had reached our goals and the majority of our students understood what peer review meant and how to apply this important step in their writing process.

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