

A CASE STUDY OF USING PEER FEEDBACK TO PROMOTE CRITICAL LITERACY IN EFL WRITING CLASS

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Abstract

This study is aimed at describing how the college teacher teaches critical literacy through peer feedback and revealing benefits and challenges of applying peer feedback to promote critical literacy in genre-based writing class. One college teacher and four students are employed as participants in genre-based writing course. The instruments used were classroom observation and in-depth interview in genre-based writing class. Data were taken from field notes during classroom observations completed with the interview results. Unit of analysis was teacher and student utterances during classroom interactions and interviews. The data were processed through descriptive qualitative analysis, namely transcribing the classroom observations and interviews, analyzing the encoded data, and drawing conclusion. The results of the study show that writing correction in small group discussion results in critical literacy development. Peer feedback develops students' linguistic skills and their learning motivation. However, students' linguistic inabilities and non linguistic aspects hinder peer feedback activity. Oral and written feedback activity improves the writing performance and promotes critical literacy of the EFL learners.

Keywords: *critical literacy, EFL writing, peer feedback*

INTRODUCTION

Literacy has moved beyond reading the words to reading the world (Freire, 1970), that is, from functional literacy that focuses solely on developing students' linguistic skills to critical literacy that aims to give students a language of critique to achieve equality and social justice or effect social transformation. This shift from functional literacy to critical literacy starts to influence language educators in particular to teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). A focus on literacy sees reading and writing as complementary dimensions of written communication rather than as utterly distinct linguistic and cognitive processes (Kern, 2000, p. 2). For many language teachers, enacting critical literacy in their classrooms is complicated weaving together with students' power issues awareness, resistance to issues of power and their frustration. Thus, language teachers have to find appropriate teaching methods to trigger students' critical literacy related to their linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural skills.

Writing is seen as among the most crucial skills by foreign language learners due to its productive role in communication. A genre based approach to teaching writing focuses on getting students in to new discourse communities by making them aware of the characteristically patterned ways that people in the community use language to fulfill particular communicative purposes in recurring situation (Kern, 2000, p. 183). It relates to social context and enhances student reflection on their own writing process and consequently they produce their own strategies for pre-writing, drafting and rewriting. In this way, the main focus is on

the process itself leading to the final version of the writing task. Therefore, giving feedback is seen as a crucial tool for development of foreign language writing skills for learners to express meaning effectively with the help of multiple drafts (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In sum, learners are expected to benefit from feedback effectively in order to improve their writing skills.

In recent years, peer feedback has become an important pedagogical tool in English writing classrooms. Peer feedback allows students to interact with peers by providing comments on others' writing, engendering a social space for communication and discussion. Recent studies (Rollinson, 2005; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) show that reading peers' writing, identifying writing errors, and giving writing suggestions to peers is beneficial for ESL students to improve writing, for writing is not an individual task any more but rather a scaffolding experience supported by peer feedback. While providing and receiving peer feedback, ESL students get to know how to support peers and be aided by peers with the shared motivation of improving writing (Chandler, 2003). However, the use of peer feedback in EFL writing seems to be under-explored (Min, 2006). This study applies peer feedback in EFL genre-based writing class to promote students' critical literacy.

Critical literacy

The term *critical literacy* is introduced by social critical theorists concerned with issues of social injustice and inequality. They are particularly worried about power structures that dominate modern society, as well as the role of education for increasing or eliminating inequalities (Gee, 1999). Freire (1970), as one of the main contributors to the *critical pedagogy philosophy*, proposes a methodological approach based on problem-posing education that aims at making students critical thinkers. A set of different situations or problems are presented in class and students are encouraged to reflect on them and offer possible solutions. Freire (1970) claims that this process involves uncovering of reality, striving for the emergence of consciousness, and critical intervention in reality. The teaching methodology offered by Freire (1970) aims to counteract "the banking model" of education that considers students mere depositories of knowledge. In more practical language learning contexts, critical literacy encompasses a set of critical and analytical attitudes and skills, which can be applied in the process of understanding and interpreting diverse kinds of texts.

Critical literacy views literacy as social practices (Gee, 1999). He distinguishes critical literacy from functional literacy by laying out their respective ideology, purpose, literacy curriculum and instruction. The purpose behind functional literacy is to produce skilled workers for the marketplace. Therefore, the curriculum is prepackaged and restrictive, and the instruction is individualistic and competitive. However, for critical literacy, texts are inscribed with power and are not neutral but marked by vested interests and hidden agendas. The curriculum is to use materials from the everyday world as text and analytic tools to deconstruct these texts to lay bare their ideological workings and power relations; consequently, the instruction is situated, interrogated and counter-hegemonic. To sum up, critical literacy is a way of thinking, in which a

reading and writing practices challenge texts or the taken-for-granted ideas in everyday life.

Genre-based writing

Genre refers not only to types of literary texts but also to the predictable and occurring patterns of everyday, academic and literary texts occurring within a particular culture (Hammond and Derewianka, 2001). In the western countries, genre or text-type, either spoken or written, is often identified/grouped according to its primary social purposes.

According to Swale (1990), the genres which share the same purposes belong to the same text-types. Derewianka (1990) identified further six main school type-types according to their primary social purposes: (1) Narratives: tell a story, usually to entertain; (2) Recount: To tell what happened; (3) Information reports: provide factual information; (4) Instruction: tell the listeners or readers what to do; (5) Explanation: Explain why or how something happens; (6) Expository texts: Present or argue a viewpoint.

These social purposes of the text-genres in turn decide the linguistic inputs of the text (i.e. their linguistic conventions, often in form of schematic structure and linguistic features). Specifically, schematic structure refers to internal structure or text organization of the text-type in forms of introduction, body and conclusion while language features consist of linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, connectors and etc the writers have to use in order to translate information/ideas into a readable text. A genre-based writing places great emphasis on the relationship between text-genres and their contexts. In doing so, it aims to help students become effective participants in their academic and professional environment as well as in their broader communities.

Peer feedback

In education, feedback is widely seen as crucial for both encouraging and consolidating learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and the significance has been recognized by researchers and teachers working in the field of ESL or EFL writings. In fact, feedback is input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision (Kellogg, et. al., 2009). Peer feedback is the processes through which students respond to and provide feedback on their peers' writing highlighting the positive and the negative aspects in a way to help each other reach better written products (Graves, 1994, p. 25). Peer feedback can be in the form of corrections, opinions, suggestions, ideas to each other. Thus, peer feedback is the practice of students' discussing and commenting each others' written work, which has great benefits for EFL students who are learning to write and learning to revise.

Peer feedback is a learning strategy in which students respond to one another's written work and provide feedback. Peer feedback has a number of benefits for the students (Brown, 1994). It focuses on the writing process, improves students' critical skills and allows them to improve their work before it is graded. Also, peer feedback activity helps them raise the sense of audience for both the writer and reader. Students make their writing more effective and audience oriented through discussing it with their peers. Peers provide them

immediate feedback. They can ask questions and seek clarification through discussions. Through discussing and reading alternative point of views on the same topic, they can revise and refine their own ideas in an effective way. In this way a real communication occurs in arranging, explaining and justifying, which is also a main goal of language learning. Peer feedback makes students motivated towards writing with the help of positive feedback from their peers and their apprehensions can be lowered (Tsui & Ng, 2000). From the previous explanations, it is clear that most of peer feedback studies are conducted in ESL classrooms; only a few are conducted in EFL settings, and accounts of critical literacy practices are still scarce. It is therefore significant to explore the application of peer feedback in EFL writing contexts related to students' critical literacy.

Based on the background of the study, literature review, and theoretical framework, research questions of the study are formulated as follows:

1. How does a college teacher teach critical literacy through peer feedback in EFL writing class?
2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of applying peer feedback to promote students' critical literacy in EFL writing class?

Therefore, research objectives of this study are: (1) to describe teaching procedures of critical literacy through peer feedback, and (2) to reveal perceived benefits and challenges of applying peer feedback to promote critical literacy in EFL writing class.

METHODS

This study employed a case study in genre-based writing course to the fourth semester students of Universitas Muhammadiyah Purworejo, Indonesia. One college teacher (*Ms. X*) and four students (*A, B, C, D*) were chosen as research participants. Of two students were selected due to their active participation, and the other two students were chosen because of their passive participation during the class. Data were taken from field notes during classroom observations completed with the interview results. Unit of analysis was teacher and student utterances during classroom interactions and interviews.

The instruments used were classroom observation and in-depth interview to answer the research questions. Classroom observations were done three times when students learned narrative, descriptive, and exposition texts. All field notes were documented during classroom interactions. Afterwards, in-depth interviews with the college teacher and four students for fifteen minutes for each participant were conducted after the genre-based writing class. The interviews were audio-recorded to display the data. The data were processed through descriptive qualitative analysis, namely recording the field notes, transcribing the interviews, analyzing the encoded data, and drawing conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teaching procedures of critical literacy through peer feedback

The instruction used by the teacher moves toward critical teaching by employing feedback activity in genre-based writing class. The first research objective, i.e. the

critical teaching procedures of peer feedback is obtained from field notes of the classroom observations and interview results of the participants. The field notes and interview results show that the teacher implements the following steps to promote students' critical literacy in small group discussions. First, teacher shares copies of text to the students or shows the text on screen. Second, she divides students into small groups. Third, she gives some minutes to the students to identify and analyze narratives as a text model. The students then write another narrative with the different topic. Later, teacher gives opportunity to the students to exchange their writings and share their ideas, comments, or suggestions toward other works. Other students or groups can give some additions, insights, or objections to other feedbacks. Finally, teacher gives reviews and feedback to the activity which has been done.

Here is the summary of the interview results with the college teacher.

I personally think that every student has to understand and be aware of peer feedback. Understanding characteristics of text types is basic knowledge for him/her to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of the genre. Then, every student can share his/her finding or ideas, and give suggestions to others based on his/her understanding. By finding the mistakes, sharing ideas/opinions, and giving suggestions, students are stimulated to think critically.

Interestingly, four students show similar answers to the teacher's. The following is the result of the interviews with the students.

To me, if peer feedback is often done then it will train us to be more thorough and critical. Because I will get used to finding mistakes and fix it so that when I make my own writing I will be more careful. It will also make me get used to know the grammar or the rules of writing correctly as I correct the mistakes made by others.(Student A)

I think peer feedback allows us to think freely and get the beneficial feedback. For example, in genre-based writing class, when we are correcting writing each other, we will not be anxious of what mistake we have made, because someone who corrects their work is our friend. It means that pressure will be a little bit decrease than directly corrected by the teacher. As we know we are correcting each other; of course, we have to think critically. We have to find the correct and the best reason about our correction. We have to explain why our friend's work correct and why it is wrong. We have responsibility to study hard in order to make our correction precise.(Student B).

For critical feedback, the teacher has students discuss first in small groups. Each group member in turn take the role of "director" responsible for directing the discussion, "challenger" for challenging the ideas students mentioned and "wrapper" for summarizing their discussions. Each group has to give written comments to another group comments. The students may agree or disagree with

other groups' opinions and revisions. When students finish group discussions, several of them are called to share in front, and it is mostly during this period that the teacher poses critical questions and attempts a critical dialogue with students.

From the data analysis, it is clear that correcting someone's work in small group discussion will trigger students to think critically. This finding supports another finding (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008) which states that critical literacy is developed in stages due to students' ability to comment and revise other works in small groups. This teaching phase of peer feedback motivate them to have critical thinking since students must have logical reasons to their corrections.

To sum up, the teacher approaches her writing instruction by encouraging students to see things from different perspectives; asking students to consider their comments and suggestions; supporting them in taking a stance on their opinions; asking for clarifications of their peers' feedback; and reflecting or accepting to other feedback; and clarifying or even changing their own feedback. Giving comments and suggestions to other writings in small group discussions is beneficial to develop students' critical literacy for reading and writing skills.

Benefits of peer feedback

There are many benefits of peer feedback to promote students' critical literacy. Based on the results of the data analysis, the perceived benefits are related to students' motivation to learn and linguistic skills. Peer correction makes students' learning motivation in class develops since the classroom atmospheres are less threatening and motivating. Students' linguistic knowledge, i.e. grammar, vocabulary, and content also develops by employing peer feedback in genre-based writing class. The following is the result of interviews with the college teacher and students.

In my opinion, the benefits of peer feedback are the following. First, students may get better ideas/notions from their peers' writing. Second, students can sharpen their judgment's skill. They become more aware of their own linguistic skills by being asked to review the work of their peers, especially in grammar aspect. Third, classroom atmosphere is less intimidating because students can freely communicate with their peers related to the feedback of the writing. (Ms. X)

I feel that one of the benefits we can get is a high motivation for learning. Because, when we are given a job to correct other works; certainly, we will have a responsibility to give the appropriate reason for all of correction we made. (Student C)

Activities of vocabulary development, grammatical knowledge, and writing skills are the focus of an English writing course. A critical literacy classroom demands active participation and constant reflection on the student part which most Indonesian students are not accustomed to from their past learning experience. It emphasizes critical ways of reading and writing towards the narrative, decriptive, exposition texts that students are able to give critical comments and corrections. Therefore, giving oral and written comments needs

proficient knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and content towards the text so that linguistic skills of the students automatically develop when writing such feedback.

To engage students in critical literacy, the teacher uses peer feedback instead of the teacher feedback in order that the classroom atmospheres are not intimidating. Teacher gives direct correction during teacher feedback, and the students have no rooms to ask for clarifications and tend to agree with the teacher comments without thinking critically. Peer response provides a nonthreatening environment to the students since the students have the right to reject or incorporate the peers' comments in their revised draft; hence, it can also enhance their attitudes and motivation towards writing, and raise their confidence in writing as well.

It is obvious that peer feedback develops students' linguistic skills and learning motivation and this idea is also similar to previous research findings (Min, 2006). The improvement of their linguistic skill can be seen from the better results of genre-based writings in the third meeting compared to the first and the second meetings. Indeed, students may have better writing content after being revised by their peers. Also, the classroom settings are motivating and less threatening since students can ask clarification for their peers' comments and revisions immediately.

Challenges of peer feedback to promote critical literacy

Some challenges occur towards the application of peer feedback to promote students' critical literacy. Research findings show that the difficulties are related to students' linguistic inabilities and their non linguistic aspects like attitude and personality. Many students have no sufficient knowledge about grammar, vocabulary, and writing content. Also, they are reluctant to criticize their friends' works since they are afraid of creating poor friendship among them. Summary of the interview results is presented below.

I think students find difficulties to correct the sentences in a text because they don't know the suitable words or terms to use related to the topics. Besides, some of students are still confused with grammar. (Ms. X)

My own difficulty in doing peer feedback is, my insight is still very little. I do not have enough vocabulary and I am not sure how to put one word in a certain sentence correctly. It is also related to grammar so when writing or doing peer feedback I will have trouble finding errors and may have trouble to fix them. Then, I don't want to dominate the class activity and less motivated to express my ideas or opinions. Also, I don't want to make my friends feel embarrassed by giving a lot of corrections to their writings. (Student D)

This finding is also relevant to the previous findings about the problems of applying peer feedback in EFL writing class (Ho & Savignon, 2007). They state that peer feedback is difficult to apply due to linguistic and non linguistic aspects. Students intend to comment and correct other works, but they have no sufficient grammar and vocabulary mastery as EFL learners. Those linguistic skills are highly

required to be able to comment their peers' essays critically. Besides, the students' reluctance to criticize their peers face-to-face is caused by their worry that the corrections will bring bad relationship as friends. Also, eastern cultures like hospitality and obedience influence their willingness to comment and criticize other works. Those problems needs high considerations by EFL teachers who want to apply peer feedback in writing class.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Revising other writings in small group discussions during peer feedback activity is able to promote students' critical literacy. In addition, peer feedback improves the writing performance of the students. EFL teacher and students hold the opinion that feedback is effective and plays a positive role in motivating the students and improving their academic achievement. The students show positive attitude towards peer feedback, as majority of students like to work collaboratively with their peers discussing their writings. However, students' linguistic inabilities and non linguistic aspects cause peer feedback activity incapable of running smoothly.

Peer comments develop a sense of audience and make the writers critical to their own writings, encourages collaborative learning and develops a sense of text-ownership. Due to linguistic barriers, teachers have to conduct peer feedback training so that students are able to revise other works precisely. In addition, brainstorming, leading questions, and controversial topics can be used by the teachers to develop their students' critical thinking. Students have to motivate themselves to take active participation during group discussions in order to enhance their critical literacy. Also, a longitudinal study needs to be conducted for further investigations with larger scales.

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