

Strategy-based Peer Assistance in EFL Writing: An Alternative to Traditional Peer Correction

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Abstract—Peer correction is one of the ways whereby feedback is provided to language learners, especially in foreign language learning situations where meaning-focused instruction is aided by form-focused activities to accelerate the learning process. However, studies on peer correction show that the problems of the practice are more than its advantages. Based on observation of process-oriented EFL writing classes at the university level, we propose strategy-based peer assistance (SPA) as an alternative to traditional peer correction (TPC). SPA enjoys the benefits of TPC and solves most of the problems inherent in it. SPA fosters cooperative and alleviates the teacher's task of correcting students' work. Because it is based on the natural communication strategy of appeal for assistance it is more learner-centered and safeguards against the social, psychological, organization and time constraint problems from which TPC suffers. Hence, TPC should be abandoned in favor of SPA.

Index Terms—peer assistance in EFL writing, an alternative to peer correction

I. INTRODUCTION

In foreign language (FL) learning contexts, language development is frustratingly slow because the students' exposure to the language is confined to a maximum of four hours per week of classroom instruction. In such a situation, meaning-focused instruction is aided by form-focused instruction in the hope of accelerating the learning process. Grammar teaching and error correction constitute the two major components of form-focused instruction. Grammar instruction enhances the natural hypothesis formation process by confirming and modifying the students' tentative self-discovered rules. It also adds new ready-made rules to the already existing stock, (Mahmoud, 1995). Error correction, by definition, only modifies the incorrect hypotheses. This paper focuses on this second component of focused instruction: error correction. Needless to say, in any learning situation, the learners need and expect some kind of feedback – positive or negative – indicating the extent of learning and FL learning is no exception. Thus, error correction is a common practice in FL learning and it is as old as language teaching, (Bolitho, 1995; Saito, 1994).

Despite the debate over the effectiveness error correction (see e.g. Chandler, 2004; Truscott, 1999), the practice persists and it will continue as long as there is no conclusive evidence bearing out its effectiveness or otherwise. For most FL teachers error correction is a pedagogical duty reinforced by their own convictions and their students' needs and expectations. If grammar instruction speeds up the hypothesis formation and testing process as we said earlier, then error correction shares with it the hypothesis modification function. Thus, error correction has a place in the FL teaching and learning process. Accordingly, the debate has shifted from correction or no correction to more complicated issues such as: Which errors should be corrected and how? When to correct and who should correct them? The first three questions are beyond the scope of this paper. Our intention here is to discuss the question of who should correct the errors. Pishghadam and Kermanshahi (2011) list three types of correction: teacher correction, peer correction and self-correction. This study focuses on peer correction because it is the type of correction that generates more debate among FL teaching specialists.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS

As Hansen and Liu (2005, p.31) say, peer response is supported by a number of theories: process-oriented writing, cooperative learning, and interaction and scaffolding in language learning. It is worth mentioning here that peer feedback is also in line with the learner-centered approach to language learning. For the purpose of this study, we need to underscore the fact that peer response is one of the important language learning and communication strategies. It is this linkage between peer response and communication strategies which constitutes the thesis of this paper. To the best of my knowledge, no study has made this connection so far and none of the definitions of peer response captures it as we will see. Looking at peer response from the perspective of communication strategies might change [1] the essence of the practice, [2] the teachers' and students' attitudes towards it, and [3] the terminology used to refer to what goes on among the students in process-oriented writing.

Communication strategies are the steps taken by a language learner to solve communication problems, (James, 1998; Tarone et al, 1983). Upon encountering a problem when communicating in the FL, learners employ either avoidance strategies (e.g. giving up communication, changing the topic) or achievement strategies (e.g. non-linguistic strategies,

inter-and-intralingual transfer). The strategies that are relevant to the topic of this paper are the social, interactive compensatory ones (i.e. asking for help, clarification, verification or correction, cooperating with others). We will discuss peer response in light of these strategies which, of course, presuppose cooperation, interaction and learner-centeredness in process-oriented writing.

Peer correction is also referred to as peer review, peer feedback, peer editing, peer response, peer evaluation and peer assessment, (Bartels, 2003). According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 390) it is “an activity ... in which students receive feedback about their writing from other students – their peers.” In the same vein, Bartels (2003, p. 34) defines it as an activity where “students read each other’s papers and provide feedback to the writer.” It is clear from the definitions that they refer to feedback in general – positive or negative. Peer correction refers to one type: negative feedback. Hansen and Liu (2005, p. 31) use ‘peer response’ where the students are used as sources of information ... for each other ... commenting and criticizing each other’s drafts.” None of these definitions depicts peer response as a spontaneous achievement strategy employed by the students without any systematic or planned intervention from the teacher. The term ‘peer assistance’ is used in this study to refer to the students’ natural compensatory communication strategy. It refers to the students’ social strategy of appeal for assistance and the concomitant help that they get from classmates before, during or after drafting a piece of writing.

III. EMPIRICAL BASIS

This study gained impetus from our classroom observation of EFL process-oriented writing classes. Three groups (15 students each) of third semester male and female university students majoring in EFL were observed by their instructor in a post-intermediate essay writing course. The same instructor taught the course for three consecutive semesters. In this course, the students are usually required to write argumentative essays ranging from two and half to three pages. The essays are handwritten in two-hour sessions. The course focuses on process-oriented writing, hence, the students are allowed and encouraged to make use of any sources available (e.g. electronic and paper dictionaries and grammar references) to help them with the composing task. This study was motivated by the students’ natural tendency to use their interactive communication strategies to accomplish the drafting task. The students were observed cooperating with each other in pairs and small groups to solve mainly surface-level problems (i.e. spelling, grammar, style and vocabulary). They would always ask for:

- the spelling of a word or verification of its spelling
- a vocabulary item or verification of its correctness or appropriateness
- the correct form of a word or verification of the usage of a form
- the correct tense of a verb or verification of the usage of a tense
- the syntactic or semantic correctness of a sentence
- a grammar rule or verification of its correctness

In addition to appeal for assistance from classmates, the students were observed using mobile phones, laptop computers and other paper-based sources to solve such problems. It goes without saying that some students – individually or in group – would seek the instructor’s help to provide a linguistic form or verify its correctness. Consultation with a classmate or the instructor in private (i.e. conferencing) is the essence of the strategy-based appeal for assistance. The process is personalized or ‘desocialized’, as James (1998, p. 243) says, since assistance is sought and offered and the writer’s work is reviewed “in private rather than a social context.” Personalization or ‘desocialization’ here refers to the process of confining reciprocation of assistance to classmates with whom the student wants to cooperate as opposed to ‘publicization’ in traditional peer correction where the writer’s work is seen by members of a group formed by the teacher. The difference between the peers and the electronic devices (spelling checkers, grammar-checkers, etc.) is that the latter guarantee full privacy and more accurate feedback on language problems.

In the EFL writing classes observed, the instructor would not interfere in grouping the students. They would always sit in pairs or groups depending on the social relationships between them. Thus, they would interact and exchange assistance with friends and classmates with whom they were willing to work. In very few cases, this peer assistance was uni-directional; a student would seek the help of a classmate who he thought was more competent in the language or in some aspect of it. The students reciprocated assistance throughout the process of composing the first draft. However, none of them asked a classmate to review the whole draft essay most probably because of that continual assistance during drafting or because of time constraints. The students did not ask for help with content or organization because they used to debate the topic in the previous two-hour session, take notes, generate and sort out ideas, and prepare an outline to be developed into an essay in the following session. Thus, the first of the two two-hour sessions of the week was allotted to the selection of an argumentative topic, brain storming through a debate and preparation of an outline. The second session was devoted to drafting and writing up the essay. Hence, the students would come to the writing session with a clear idea about the content and organization of the essay.

IV. SPA vs TPC

The strategy-based peer assistance (SPA) proposed in this study only enjoys the above mentioned benefits of traditional peer correction (TPC) but it also solves most, if not all, of the problems inherent in it (i.e. in TPC). In this

section, we will discuss some of the problems of TPC and see how SPA can help us guard against them. According to the definitions of peer correction presented earlier and the description of how it is delivered (see e.g. Bartels, 2003; Hansen and Liu, 2005; Pishghadam et al., 2011; Qi, 1993; Sultana, 2009), the process entails dividing the students into small groups and asking them to provide oral or written feedback on each other's drafts following some guiding points or questions from the teacher. According to Bartels (2003, p. 34), "In most cases the questions focus on organization and style, rather than surface-level grammar or spelling mistakes." Hansen and Liu (2005) share the same view. Thus, in TPC, the teacher's role is three-fold: (1) dividing the students into groups, (2) providing them with guiding points or questions, and (3) checking the final version of the composition. The students' task is to respond (i.e. correct, edit, review, assess, etc.) to each other's drafts in light of the teachers' guiding points and produce the final version following their peers' response.

In SPA, the students consult each other and reciprocate assistance during the composing process. Therefore, terms such as 'peer editing', 'peer review' and 'peer correction' may not precisely describe what the students actually do. These terms apply only when the students deal with completed draft compositions. Terms such as 'peer assessment' and 'peer evaluation' imply some sort of measurement; the peers read the completed composition and give scores or grades, (see e.g. Harmer, 2007). As such, the practice is turned into a testing activity where the students focus the score rather than on the learning aspect. Hansen and Liu (2005, p. 31) use the term 'peer response' to refer to the process of "commenting on and criticizing ... drafts." However, this term would be appropriate if it referred to the peer's response to a student's request for assistance during or after the composing process. In this study, we used 'peer assistance' to refer to the response of the peer to a student's appeal for help before, during or after composing. Hence, the term reflects the fact that the assistance is requested by the writer any time during the writing session and that the peer's response is not judgmental or evaluative.

Most researchers (e.g. Bartels, 2003; Hansen and Liu, 2005; Pishghadam et al., 2011; Qi, 1993; Rollinson, 2005; Sultana, 2009) admit that this practice (i.e. TPC) is fraught with problems. In fact, the disadvantages they enumerate are far more than the benefits. Regarding the advantages, Bartels (2003) agrees with Hyland (2000) and Topping et al. (2000) that peer response gives the students the feeling that they write for an audience and that it motivates them and increases their confidence in their writing. They also believe that peer response trains the students to assess their own writing. Mok (2011, p. 231) thinks that "it can facilitate students development of various learning and life skills such as learner responsibility, meta-cognitive strategies, evaluation skills, and a deeper approach to learning." It goes without saying that since the students work in groups, peer response fosters cooperative learning. Peer response can, by definition, alleviate the teacher's task of correcting the students' compositions, especially in large classes. An advantage that is frequently mentioned in peer correction literature (e.g. Hansen and Liu, 2005; Mok, 2011; Pishghadam et al. 2011; Rollinson, 2005; Sultana, 2009) is that it is in line with the learner-centered approach to language learning. Of course, learner-centeredness can be achieved in error correction not only through peer response but also through self-correction guided by correction codes or linguistic explanations provided by the teacher, (Mahmoud, 2011).

According to Johnson (2008) one of the advantages of peer correction is that the teacher is not involved in it. Like Rollinson (2005), he believes that the teacher's correction is threatening and degrading. Rollinson (ibid, p. 24) believes that the students can and do revise effectively on the basis of comments from peer readers." However, Sultana (2009, p. 13) does not subscribe to this view. She contends that the students may not trust their peers' knowledge, so "they do not revise their written works based on their friends' feedback." Lin and Chien (2009, p. 84) report their students' belief that "teachers' correction cannot be totally replaced by peer correction." However, such conflicting views, among other things, render the effectiveness of peer correction questionable. In the strategy-based peer assistance (SPA) proposed in this study, the students refer to their peers in case of problems during drafting and may willingly request them to review their draft compositions. Like TPC, SPA can help in minimizing mistakes and make the teacher's correction of the final versions less arduous. Thus, for peer response to be truly learner-centered, the teacher should not be directly or indirectly involved. He should not impose it on the students by setting up groups, laying down rules and allocating a certain portion of class time for it.

A common concern raised by some researchers is that the students may not be in a position to correct each other's writing because they are similar in their proficiency level in the language. Mok (2011, p. 230), for instance, says that her students believed that their peers were "not good enough" to assess them. Similarly, Rollinson (2005, p. 26) says that the students "may not easily accept the idea that their peers are qualified to act as substitutes for the teacher and critique their writing." However, the students' inability to correct their peers could be due to their low proficiency level in the language. In this case, the peer's feedback could be detrimental to the writer's linguistic health. The writer may be given an incorrect form or his incorrect form could be misjudged as correct. It sometimes so happens that the writer is right and the peer is wrong. In fact, even a teacher can be a source of error, especially in foreign language learning contexts where the teachers are non-native speakers of the language.

Students with higher proficiency levels may be qualified to perform the task. Even if that is the case, the writers might not accept correction because it is embarrassing and makes them feel inferior to the others, (Harmer, 2004; Sultana, 2009) or because the feedback is given in a harsh and humiliating manner, (Bartels, 2003; Nelson and Murphy, 1992). However, in case of SPA, it is the writer who seeks the peer's help and this help is reciprocated out of the students' own free will. As we stated earlier, peer correction lightens the teacher's workload but it does not relieve him

completely. However, Barlets (2003) adds one more burden to the teacher: he or she has to check if the peers give the right kind of feedback. The time and effort spent on checking both the students' final version of the composition and the peers' written feedback could be enough for the teacher to do all the correction by himself. In SPA, the students keep filling in their linguistic gaps and verifying the forms and structures they use with the help of their peers throughout the composing process. The teacher will see only the final version of the composition incorporating all of the forms provided and modifications suggested by the peers.

Some FL teachers may not be in favor of peer correction because they believe that the correction provided by the peers itself may not be correct. However, in a truly process-oriented writing task, the students are free to use their appeal for assistance strategy and seek help or verification from any available source during drafting. The peer who is requested to help can, himself, fall back on other sources (e.g. the teacher, electronic devices) for help if he is not sure of the correctness of his response.

Bartels (2003) agrees with Gearhart and Herman (1998) and Wilhelm (1996) that "peer review can pose problems in assessment because it may not be clear how much of the ideas, organization, or even wording ... are the work of the student being assessed or of the peer providing feedback", (Bartels, 2003, p. 36) This is certainly true if it is a writing test or examination and if the students are allowed to cooperate in such situations. In normal writing exercises, it is learning that counts. The students are expected to make use of their peers' feedback and improve their proficiency level and writing skill. Communication strategies – including non-linguistic ones such as using body language – can lead to learning through feedback, (Bialystok, 1990).

Ur (1996) believes that peer correction saves the teacher's time but the students might not spot all errors. In contrast to Ur, Bartels (2003), Caulk (1994) and Rollinson (2005) believe that peers provide comprehensive feedback. However, it is clear that these researchers are concerned with the completed first draft. In SPA, students usually seek their peers' help in the hope of avoiding or minimizing errors and improving their writing. They engage in a learning experience where they need to fill in gaps in their language knowledge and to verify the correctness or appropriateness of the forms and structures they use. It is not a test for writers nor is it an error hunting contest for the peers.

The issue of spotting errors is related to the relationship between the students. A reviewer may ignore the writer's errors if they are friends, (Carlson and Nelson, 1996; Rollinson, 2005; Sultana, 2009) and he might pick up on every error if he does not like him. Even worse is that TPC which is organized by the teacher may break up relationships between friends and it may aggravate animosity between the students who are not on good terms with each other. However, in SPA, the students rely on their peers for help to solve communication problems and avoid or reduce mistakes as we said earlier. There is no grouping of students by the teacher. Friends and those who are on good terms with each other work together and exchange assistance. Rollinson (2005, p. 26) believes that "most of the potential problems can be alleviated by properly setting up the group and establishing effective procedures." This solution might work if 'proper setting up of the group' means taking into account the relationships between the students. This entails giving them the freedom to choose the classmates with whom they can cooperate and work in harmony during and after writing. Thus, one of the most important requirements of SPA is that the teacher should not interfere in the natural course of the process by grouping students or imposing any work plan on them. Bartels (2003) agrees with Zamel (1985) when she says teacher's comments are "confusing, contradicting or even useless to the students," (Bartels, 2003, p. 36). Rollinson (2005, p. 25) describes teacher's the feedback as "unspecific, incomprehensible, contradictory, inconsistent, inaccurate, meaningless to the students." Be that as it may, it is not a justification for conducting TPC which suffers from drawbacks that are more than those of the teacher's correction. What Rollinson and others say about teacher's correction can also be said about TPC. The superiority of TPC over teacher's correction needs to be empirically verified.

TPC is believed to be time consuming, (Rollinson, 2005). This is true, especially in cases where writing classes are one hour or less. From our personal experience, many students hardly find time to revise their two-to-three-page essays even in a two-hour writing session. That is why we concur with the view that the students should be encouraged to employ their social communication strategies of asking questions and appealing for assistance from their peers (SPA) during the drafting process. The students can review each other's finished drafts if there is any time left. However, peers, electronic checkers and even teachers may make mistakes or overlook them when responding to the writers. Peers and teachers may overlook some mistakes simply because they may not notice them. In case of peers, their proficiency level could be another reason. Electronic checkers, by definition, do not suffer from such human problems but they may still be a source of error because they are not context-sensitive. Thus, SPA can perform the function of TPC without impinging on class time or on the relationships between the students and it does not give rise to the problems of TPC discussed earlier.

One of the guiding principles listed by Hansen and Liu (2005, p. 35) for peer response is to "let students decide on grouping and group rules." Grouping the students and having them correct each other's compositions is a sensitive issue in some socio-cultural settings where rapport cannot be guaranteed and any teacher imposed arrangements may not be welcomed. In such situations, the writer may be embarrassed not only because the others will see his work but also because he might receive some destructive comments from his peers. Even in favorable social contexts some students may not be willing to expose their errors to the others. In SPA, the teacher does not have to worry about grouping the students or planning the activity since students who usually sit next to each other work together and vice versa. They exchange assistance without rules or instructions. Mok (2011) points out that the teacher needs to be trained in peer

response. According to Rollinson (2005) the students also need to be trained as well. In case of SPA, neither the teacher nor the students need to be trained. Appeal for assistance is a natural communication strategy employed by the students spontaneously and all the teacher has to do is to encourage this strategy and offer assistance upon request. Thus, the teacher's role is the same as that of the peers and the electronic devices that can assist the students during and after drafting.

TPC becomes an abominable chore and begets embarrassment when a student is required to read his composition loudly to his peers. Qiyi (1993) thinks that loud reading is useful because it publicizes the student's work. According to Hansen and Liu's (2005) guiding principles of peer response, the peers read each other's drafts and discuss them one by one. However, whether the writer reads his draft loudly or the peers read it silently, the student's work will go public. Publicity is one of the reasons why the students may not be willing to engage in TPC. The brief comparison between SPA and TPC presented in this section shows an important difference between the two practices. SPA is a natural and spontaneous strategy used by the students whereas TPC is an activity organized by the teacher regardless of the students' attitudes towards it.

V. SPA IN FOCUS

The foregoing comparison between strategy-based peer assistance (SPA) and traditional peer correction (TPC) shows that SPA enjoys all of the advantages of TPC and guards against most, if not all, of its drawbacks. Like TPC, it fosters learner involvement and cooperative work among the students. It also alleviates the teachers' task of correcting the final compositions. It helps the students avoid or minimize errors while they are writing the first draft. In SPA, the students seek their peer's help out of their free will and accept their feedback before, during and after drafting. If TPC is described as being friendlier, more sympathetic and less threatening than teacher's correction, these attributes are more applicable to SPA in view of the good relationships between the students who choose to work together and reciprocate assistance.

Because SPA is based on good relationships between the students, there is no feeling of animosity, inferiority or embarrassment. The students trust the sincerity of their peers' response, appreciate their assistance and value their knowledge. The peers will not pick up on each mistake nor will they make destructive comments. The fact that SPA is given during the drafting process makes it a learning experience rather than a testing and evaluation process. SPA and the help that the students get from electronic devices continue throughout the drafting stage, so it is not time consuming. There is no need to allocate a certain portion of class time for peer correction as a separate activity to be performed after completion of the first draft. SPA is truly learner-centered because the students employ their natural strategy of appeal for assistance. Any intervention from the teacher – by setting up groups, laying down rules or giving instructions – militates against the process. Because SPA is natural and spontaneous, neither the teacher nor the students need to be trained.

VII. CONCLUSION

Like grammar instruction, error correction is a form-focused activity that is believed to enhance the learning process in classroom foreign language teaching situations. Acknowledging this role of error correction, the debate has shifted from whether to correct errors or not to more complicated issues related to the types of errors that should be corrected, when and how they should be corrected and who should correct them. In this study we focused on the agents of correction and on peer correction in particular. The peer correction studies reviewed for the purpose of this study invariably caution the teachers against the drawbacks of peer correction. Accordingly, we proposed strategy-based peer assistance (SPA) as an alternative to traditional peer correction (TPC). Our classroom observation revealed that SPA does not only enjoy the benefits of TPC but it also safeguards against its numerous problems. SPA fosters cooperative learning and it is more learner-centered than TPC because it is based on the students' natural strategy of appeal for assistance. The teacher's role is to encourage the use of this strategy and, like peers and electronic devices, offer assistance whenever he is consulted. Allowing the students to choose the classmates with whom they want to cooperate and reciprocate assistance solves all of the social, psychological and organizational problems inherent in TPC. Neither the teacher nor the students need any special training in SPA since the students employ a natural compensatory communication strategy and reciprocate assistance spontaneously and willingly before, during and after the composing process. Hence, SPA is not a separate classroom activity to be performed at the end of the writing process. As such, no time needs to be allotted to it, so it does not consume class time. Reciprocation of assistance while drafting also makes for a comfortable learning environment. It safeguards the students against anxiety and frustration that ensue from the feeling of being corrected or assessed by a classmate. In a nutshell, observation of university EFL students' process-oriented writing classes reveals that TPC can be abandoned since the students naturally engage SPA which is less problematic and more learner-centered. Further rigorous theoretical and empirical studies are needed to verify the effectiveness of both TPC and SPA.

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