Trained Peer Response to Develop EFL Students' Positive Attitudes toward Peer Response

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Abstract: This article reports part of a broader action-research study on training EFL students in the use of strategies for effective peer response. Surveys using questionnaires were conducted among 20 university students involved in the action research to measure the changes in attitudes toward peer response before and after the classroom-based action research. The findings suggest that significant changes were obtained in all the questionnaire items regarding attitudes toward peer response. The students indicated that classmates' oral and written comments helped them enrich the content of their writing, improve the organization of their writing, and improve the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of their writing.

Key words: EFL writing classroom, peer response, students' attitudes

In response to the impact of collaborative learning theory and a shift in the teaching of composition from an emphasis on product to an emphasis on process, peer response has gained its popularity in writing classes (Nelson and Murphy, 1993). Peer response as one way to help students focus on writing as a process and on revision has become a common feature in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms, where the process approach to teaching writing is used (Berg, 1999; Lane and Potter, 1998).

To date, various issues concerning peer response in first and second language settings have been examined. The studies have attempted to ex-

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amine the impact of peer response on students' revision and quality of writing (Connor and Asenavage, 1994; Mendonca and Johnson, 1994), to investigate the effects of training students for peer response (Berg, 1999; Lane and Potter, 1998; Stanley, 1992), or to report on students' perceptions, attitudes, and benefits (Carson and Nelson, 1996; Lane and Potter, 1998; Nelson and Carson, 1998; Tsui and Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1995). However, studies into the success of peer response in ESL contexts present a mixed picture (Hirvela, 1999; Zhu, 2001). The inconclusive findings show that studies on peer response need further exploration and that more studies are still needed.

Studies on peer response have shed considerable light on several aspects of peer response. As surveyed by Zhu (2001), the aspects include how groups function, how students perform peer response and comment on peer writing, what characterises successful peer response groups, and what factors may affect peer interaction. Few studies, however, have been done in the Indonesian context. As Krapels (1990) suggests, so much more about second language writing process lies undiscovered. Similar studies are thus still worth conducting in different contexts to contribute to our understanding of the issue of the processes and pedagogy of composing.

At the Department of English, State University of Malang, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), the process approach to teaching writing has been put into practice quite recently by some of the writing lecturers. As also noted by Curtis (2001), widespread use of such approaches in Hong Kong and in Asia is not evident. The introduction of the approach at the Department has been generated by a lot of reflection about our teaching practice after observing a number of native English primary classrooms in English speaking countries implementing the approach. Reading theoretical and empirical evidence from studies on ESL writing has also contributed to the introduction of the approach. However, since at the Department the writing-as-a-process approach is adopted by only some of the lecturers, students taking writing courses where the approach is implemented by the lecturers are not yet accustomed to peer response activities as one of the common features of the approach. They often appear perplexed as they might have come to the writing classroom looking for expertise from their teacher, but found that they are expected to revise their writing in the light of feedback from their classmates.

Personal observation and discussions with the students in my writing classrooms revealed that many of them had doubted the value of peer response. They thought that their classmates had the same, or lower, English proficiency and that they were still in the process of learning English. In addition, similar to McKendy's (1990) experience, some of my students felt unqualified to respond to the work of others and unwilling to value the comments of fellow novices. They seemed to look upon my response, that is the teacher response, more favourably. It appears here that it is not an easy matter for my students to differentiate the problem of lack of language proficiency in English from the ability to express fruitful ideas. In addition, based on personal experience, the practice of students responding to the writings of other students might be considered culturally unusual. In our culture, students generally view the teacher as the possessor of all knowledge and the one who is responsible for responding to students' works.

This study was thus carried out to provide evidence on the above discussion of language proficiency and culturally-related roles of the teacher and the student. What is reported in this article is part of a broader action-research study on training EFL students in the use of strategies for effective peer response. Training strategies for peer response functioned as the intervention (i.e., the action) implemented in the study and it was meant to prepare the students for more effective ways to use peer-response activities in the process-writing course. In this regard, this article is the answer to one of the research questions, that is, *"How does training in peer response strategies affect students' attitudes toward peer response?"*.

METHOD

The students who participated in this study were students of the Department of English, State University of Malang, taking the Writing-III Course. Following Writing II, Writing III aims to develop students' ability to write various types of English essays, primarily expository ones, through different ways of helping students to develop coherence and progression in the organization of their texts (Fakultas Sastra, 2001). Consent was obtained from 20 students. Of these 20 students, 11 were female and 9 were male, with the average age of 20 years 1 month, ranging from 19

years to 22 years. For these students, English was the third language that they learned as their first language was their regional language, either Javanese or Madurese, and their second language was the national language, Indonesian. These students were in their fourth semester in the Department, which means that they had passed their Writing I and II Courses.

Surveys were carried out during week 1 and week 15 of the 16-week semester, that is, Semester II-2001/2002, to measure the attitudes of the students toward peer response before and after the study. Even though small-scale in terms of the scope, as the surveys involved only 20 students in one EFL writing class, the collection of the information could provide more detailed, statistical evidence. The data obtained from these surveys were used to support the preliminary data based on my personal observation in writing classrooms and my informal discussions with some students, which have formed the background of this study.

Questionnaires, as one of the typical data-gathering techniques in surveys (Cohen and Manion, 1990:97), were administered to all the students with a slight difference of questionnaire items between the one distributed in week 1 and the one distributed in week 15. The difference occurred because there were items which referred to the students' perception of the need for the training, and thus given in week 1, and those which referred to the students' judgement about the experience they had had in this study, and thus given in week 15. There were 30 scale items in the questionnaires, in which the students were requested to select their responses from among a set of four alternatives. In this case, Burns (1999:130) suggests that it is preferable to restrict the possibilities to no more than three or four in order to avoid confusion although there is no restriction to the number of alternatives that can be included. Following Cohen and Manion's (1990:99) suggestions on the identification and itemising of subsidiary issues related to the research purpose, these 30 scale items could be grouped into five issues focusing on the students' attitudes toward process writing, students' perceptions of their writing, students' attitudes toward peer response, toward the training, and toward teacher response. As described before, this article refers only to one of these five issues, that is, students' attitudes toward peer response.

The students' responses to the two questionnaires were analysed to find out the mean for each of the questionnaire items. Comparisons using *t*-test of SPSS were then made between the survey administered at the beginning of the semester, before the strategy training for peer response, and the one administered near the end of the semester to measure whether there are some changes in attitudes. The changes would be assumed to be an indication of the students' reactions to the training for peer response in the class, be they negative or positive. The training had the following chief goals: to convince the students that peer response was a worthwhile activity, to help them focus their discussions on particular aspects of writing, to suggest appropriate language to use in their responses, and to help them react constructively to a response to their own writing from a peer.

In addition to the questionnaires, individual interviews with all the students were carried out at the end of the study. The students' responses to the questionnaires were then combined with the interview transcripts to make the study more enhanced. The interview was basically meant to elicit the students' comments on and feelings about what we were doing during the semester. Consent was obtained from all the 20 students and I decided to interview them all because I believed that each individual student would experience what we were doing during that semester in a very different way from the others. In a way, what I did was like what Burns (1999:133) describes, that is, "action researchers may wish to conduct surveys as a way of focusing their preliminary ideas and then follow up the initial results of these enquiries with more in-depth interviews".

RESULTS

Cronbach's alpha for testing internal consistency of the questionnaire items was used to establish the reliability. Ideally, the Cronbach alpha coefficient of a scale should be above .7 (Pallant, 2001). In the current study the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .89.

As described before, the data obtained from the two questionnaires were computed to find the mean of each question. The results of the computation can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' Attitudes Toward Peer Response

Questionnaire Item	Pre-study			Post-study			Changes in Responses			
	Mean	SD	SE of Mean	Mean	SD	SE of Mean	Mean Difference	t-value	2-tail significance	SE of Difference
1. Do you think having peer response ses-sions will be useful? (Pre)/ Do you think ha-ving peer res-ponse ses-sions is use-ful? (Post)	2.35	.587	.131	3.65	.671	.150	-1.30	-6.52	.000	.199
2. Do you think your classmates' comments help you enrich the content of your writing?	2.20	.410	.092	3.10	.641	.143	-.90	-5.29	.000	.170
3. Do you think your classmates' comments help you improve the organisa-tion of your writing?	2.10	.447	.100	2.95	.686	.153	-.85	-4.64	.000	.183
4. Do you think your classmates' comments help you improve the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of your writing?	2.05	.686	.153	3.25	.716	.160	-1.20	-5.41	.000	.222
5. Do you think your classmates' written com-ments help you enrich the content of your writing?	2.05	.605	.135	2.95	.686	.153	-.90	-4.40	.000	.205
6. Do you think your classmates' written com-ments help you improve the organisa-tion of your writ-ing?	2.20	.410	.092	2.90	.553	.124	-.70	-4.55	.000	.154
7. Do you think your classmates' written com-ments help you improve the language (in-cluding gram-mar and vo-cabulary) of your writing?	2.30	.571	.128	3.10	.641	.143	-.80	-4.17	.000	.192
8. Do you think reading your class-mates' writ-ings is useful?	2.40	.503	.112	3.45	.605	.135	-1.05	-5.97	.000	.176
9. Do you think reading your class-mates' writ-ings gives you more ideas?	2.40	.598	.134	3.15	.587	.131	-.75	-4.00	.000	.187
10. Do you think reading your class-mates' writ-ings helps you improve the organisa-tion of your writ-ing?	2.15	.489	.109	3.00	.649	.145	-.85	-4.68	.000	.182
11. Do you think reading your classma-tes' writings helps you im-prove the lan-guage (in-cluding gram-mar and vo-cabulary) of your writing?	2.45	.605	.135	2.95	.605	.135	-.50	-2.61	.013	.191

Note: 1= not at all/none/poor   2= a little/fair   3= some/good   4= a lot/excellent

As can be seen from Table 1, there were 11 questionnaire items regarding students' attitudes toward peer response. The table shows that prior to the study the students in general had fair attitudes toward peer response, which was indicated by the means of the questionnaire items ranging from 2.05 to 2.45. They stated that peer response sessions would be of little use for them (item 1; mean=2.35). More specifically, they considered that classmates' oral comments would be of little use for them in enriching the content of their writing (item 2; mean=2.20), in improving the organization of their writing (item 3; mean=2.10), and in improving the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of their writing (item 4;

mean=2.05). Similarly, they indicated that classmates' written comments would be of little use in enriching the content of their writing (item 5; mean=2.05), in improving the organization (item 6; mean=2.20), and in improving the language, including grammar and vocabulary (item 7; mean=2.30). The students also showed that in general reading classmates' writings would be of little use for them (item 8; mean=2.40). They further indicated that reading others' works would be of little use in giving them more ideas to write (item 9; mean=2.40), in improving the organization of their writing (item 10; mean=2.15), and in improving the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of their writing (item 11; mean=2.45).

After the study, significant changes were obtained in all the 11 questionnaire items regarding attitudes toward peer response. As displayed in Table 1, the students thought that in general having peer response sessions was useful (item 1; mean=3.65). In particular, they indicated that classmates' oral comments helped them enrich the content of their writing (item 2; mean=3.10), helped them improve the organization of their writing (item 3; mean=2.95), and helped them improve the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of their writing (item 4; mean=3.25). The students also thought that their classmates' written comments helped them enrich the content of their writing (item 5; mean=2.95), helped them improve the organization of their writing (item 6; mean=2.90), and helped them improve the language of their writing (item 7; mean=3.10). Reading classmates' writings was also considered useful (item 8; mean=3.45), particularly in the areas of content (item 9; mean=3.15), organization (item 10; mean=3.00), and language, including grammar and vocabulary (item 11; mean=2.95).

To sum up, the pre-study questionnaire shows that the students had fair attitudes toward peer response, which is reflected by the means of the questionnaire items ranging from 2.05 to 2.45. These fair attitudes significantly changed to become good attitudes at the end of the study as indicated by the means of the responses to the post-study questionnaire ranging from 2.90 to 3.65.

DISCUSSION

The relevant interview transcripts were used to highlight the discussion of the research findings since the interview data provided more in-

sights into understanding the questionnaire data. As presented in the previous section, the questionnaire results indicate significant changes in students' attitudes toward peer response, from fair to good. Peer comments, both oral and written, were considered useful in helping the students enrich the content of their writing, improve the organization of their writing, and improve the language of their writing. When the means of the post-study questionnaire items were further compared, the same orders of usefulness were obtained both in oral comments and in written ones. For the two types of comments, the highest mean was in the usefulness of the comments for improving the language, which was respectively followed by those for enriching the content and improving the organization. Such findings imply that these students see writing quality more importantly from the language, especially the grammar. This is supported by the interview transcripts which indicate that most of the students get benefits from the classroom activities in the following areas, which were ordered based on the frequency of their occurrences: grammar, diction, ideas, and organization. Students giving attention more to grammar than to the other aspects of writing when commenting might be influenced by the current practice of teaching and assessing writing at the Department, which seems to be similar to what Kuswandono has reported in his study at Satyawacana University (2001). Allocating more time for grammar instruction and exercises in writing classes, as also reflected by the way writing courses is sequenced in the departmental curriculum, implies that writing product remains the main orientation of teaching writing at the Department. Furthermore, as some teachers seemed to grade students' composition based largely on the appropriateness and correctness of the sentences and the words, these students might have been misled about what is important in a piece of writing. The interview transcripts below illustrate how the students involved in this study felt about the practice of teaching writing at the Department, responding to the interview question *"How do you see this Writing III? Is it similar to or different from the previous writing courses you have taken?"*. The names following each transcript are pseudo names.

> - ... yeah ... the previous writing ... I just write ... I just write some essays, but I don't know ... **hal yang masih kurang** ... what is the lack in my writing. (Mayang)

- ... after that [in my previous writing classes] we submitted to the lecturer, and the lecturer gave the comments ... from my experience, I never have some kind of ... I mean oral comments from my lecturer. I have written comments, and then I revise it by myself and then submit to the lecturer. (Prima)

- ... And the teacher also just sit ... asked me to write assignment, and then she just gave ... er ... the feedback. (Dilla)

- ... in Writing I and Writing II, the teacher only gave us assignments and they only explained us ... what is the organization of the writing, and then ... just collect our works and give us correction. And after that ... that's all. Here ... in Writing III, I ... I can get the useful things such as ... er ... how my development in writing ... (Doddy)

- ... We're just writing ... what I got in Writing II with ... she just gave an assignment and she explained how to write. And then she said ... please do it at home. And then, we gave it to her in the next meeting and then ... she tried to give a grade. But, there is nothing ... just that's all. It's just the grade. (Nisa)

The changes in attitudes described above were then assumed to be the students' positive reactions to the training. The training in the use of strategies for effective peer response has convinced the students that peer response was a worthwhile activity. This study found that before the training the students perceived that having peer response sessions would be of little use (item 1; mean=2.35). This attitude was confirmed with the interview transcripts revealing that many of them doubted the value of peer response because of such reasons as: ... as a learning student, they usually base on what they have ... not what they experience ... only based on what they have from their study ... (Prima); ... because we are from equal ... equal level ... (Jordy); ... because as friends are same level, our experience are ... are average ... quite similar ... (Doddy). It seems that issues related to language proficiency were one of the factors why the students did not enthusiastically welcome peer response in a writing class-room.

After the training, however, the students stated that having peer response sessions was a lot useful for them (item 1; mean=3.65). Some of the reasons why they began to value peer response can be seen in the following interview transcripts, which are the students' responses to the interview question "Would you rather have only teacher comments, only peer comments, or the combination of both? Why?". Such responses support the findings of this study concerning the students' positive reactions to the strategy training. Of the 20 students, the majority (85%) prefer the combination of teacher response and peer response with various reasons as described below.

-Well ... I rather have combination because ... (laughing) ... sometimes teachers did not always right. They ... they sometimes forget to correct my mistakes. (Mayang)

- ... er ... I think I prefer both mam ... because sometimes I am not too sure with my friends' responses, so we have to confirm with teacher comment. But, ... not only teacher comment because from the peer comment we have it through discussion, so I think we can understand it better. (Lucky)

- I prefer to get both because sometimes when I got ... I got the paper from the teachers, I still got confused ... what do you mean about this comment? And I can see in the comment of my friends ... Oh, I see it ... **maksudnya gini** ... It completes each other. (Rony)

- I think the combination is better because it means that we will have many suggestions. It will make our writing better. Sometimes, the comments from teachers and friends are ... similar, but sometimes different. So, the combination will enrich ... the writing. At the beginning, it's sometimes ... what is it ... hard for me to believe my friend's comments, but when I find that sometimes their comments are ... the same with the teacher ... er ... I am sure. (Laksmi)

The students found it beneficial to obtain comments from more than one source. This finding was in line with what Jacobs et al. (1998) ob-

served. However, implied in many other responses to the above interview question is the fact that the students still had more confidence in the teacher response. Many of them saw the teacher response better in terms of quality, more guiding, and more reasonable. Additionally, the students saw the teacher as someone more capable, more experienced, and more knowledgable so that very often they did not want to argue about the teacher's comments, but would consider them more. In other words, even though both the questionnaire and interview findings suggest that the students significantly welcomed peer response in a writing classroom, the interview findings imply that the students favoured the teacher response more, similar to what Nelson and Murphy (1993), Tsui and Ng (2000), and Zang (1995) found. Nevertheless, these students did not want the teacher to be the sole source of feedback in a writing classroom. Both sources of feedback are complementary, as also pointed out by Cault (1994) and Jacobs, et al (1998).

In addition, this study found that the students benefited more from peer response than from reading classmates' writings, as can be seen from the higher mean for the usefulness of peer response compared to reading classmates' writings. However, further examination to the individual questionnaire items that comprise the questionnaire items of the usefulness of having peer response and reading classmates' writings suggests inconsistent responses. Table 1 shows that reading classmates' writings was more beneficial in terms of content and organization (items 9 and 10) than having peer response comments was (items 2, 3, 5, and 6). Contrary to these findings, greater difference in means was found in the questionnaire responses in the area of language. The students responded that comments from peers (items 4 and 7) provided more benefits in terms of language than reading the works of peers did (item 11). The reason that can be used to explain these inconsistent findings is that the students might have thought about the revision stage when responding to the questionnaire items regarding language, but thought about the writing stage when responding to the questionnaire items regarding content and organization. Comments from peers were considered to provide the students with more direct things to do (i.e., things related to language) in revising their drafts, but they might find it hard to see the indirect benefits of reading others' works to the language improvement of their own writing.

In contrast, reading classmates' writings would be more useful than classmates' comments in the areas of content and organization for the students' future reference when writing.

Further qualitative analyses to the interview data indicate that peer response had four roles to play. The first role that could be identified is that the students saw peer response as a way of both helping and evaluating. *"I can learn from my mistakes from my friends,"* one of the students, Mitha, commented. As also revealed in the interview transcripts, peer response helped the students better their writings because they got the comments from classmates through discussion. By having the discussion, they felt that they had time to ask classmates for clarification and explanation, as also illustrated by these students

"I think by having a lot of discussion, we can learn from each other ... I can learn from my friend's mistakes and maybe my friends can learn from my mistakes". (Laksmi)

"But, ... not only teacher comment because from the peer comment we have it through discussion, so I think we can understand it better". (Lucky)

However, they sometimes found peer response as a way of evaluating as well, especially when their classmates just pointed what was not correct or appropriate in their drafts without providing comments or suggestions for improvement. It might be that the students positioned themselves as the teacher when reading classmates' works, instead of functioning themselves as readers. In other words, the students took the perspective of a teacher, and not that of a reader, when reviewing others' drafts; reviewing thus means finding mistakes in others' works.

Second, the students stated that peer response was likely to develop their sense of audience. They realised that there would be other readers in addition to the teacher who would read their writings. Therefore, they should write as clearly as possible so that their intended meaning could be understood by their readers; they should have readers in their mind when writing. Doddy described his situation as follows:

"At first, when I have finished my ... my writing, I am sure that there will be very less mistakes. But, finally after the discussion, there are

many mistakes in ... in spelling, in structure, and sometimes my ideas cannot be understood by ... by readers. Of course at first I felt frustrated ... I felt disappointed to myself that I could not ... er ... produce, expose, what I mean to the readers through reading ... through writing. But, finally in the process ... I enjoy ... I accept this as a good way to ... to make our writing better".

Third, peer response was useful in building up the students' confidence as writers. Through peer response sessions, they saw that other students sometimes also needed to revise their first drafts. These students gradually became aware that they were not the only ones facing writing problems; they were not alone and their problems were not unique, as Connors and Glenn (1995) state. Such an awareness is expected to develop the students to be more confident in themselves as writers. As can be seen from the following sample of interview transcripts, some of the students found out that there were also many other friends who had problems in writing.

"First ... yes ... because I know that my writing is so bad ... (laughing) ... I felt frightened [having my friends read my works] at that time ... because I know that my friend maybe better than me ... their writing. But ... then after ... er ... this semester I can learn that my friends that I thought that they are smarter than me ... they still get mistakes". (Sofia)

The fourth role is fostering the development of the other language skills. In addition to the writing skill, peer response has allowed these students to develop their listening, speaking, and reading skills. Let us see the following comments from the interview transcripts.

"Yes. I like writing now ... more because in this writing ... er ... we also practise our speaking by peer response ... and then ... er ... I can read my friend's writing so I feel it can help me to ... to improve my reading and writing". (Dilla)

"And, in this semester ... actually it is not only writing matter, but also speaking ... there is speaking in it and how to convince our ... our readers our audience, how to make clarification about what we

have written down. We just try to talk in more logical way". (Doddy)

Working collaboratively in groups throughout peer response sessions has provided the students with multiple opportunities to develop their language skills in real ways. Such practical benefits would be particularly more valued in our TEFL situation, where it is mostly in the classroom that we expect our students to get the language exposure as much as possible.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that significant changes were obtained in all the questionnaire items regarding attitudes toward peer response. At the end of the study, the students indicated that classmates' oral and written comments helped them enrich the content of their writing, improve the organization of their writing, and improve the language (including grammar and vocabulary) of their writing. Such changes in attitudes were then assumed to be the students' positive reactions to the training. The training in the use of strategies for effective peer response has convinced the students that peer response was a worthwhile activity. However, even though both the questionnaire and interview findings suggest that the students significantly welcomed peer response in a writing classroom, the interview findings imply that the students favoured the teacher response more. The reason why they expected the teacher response more favourably remains related to the discussion of language proficiency and culturally-related roles of the teacher and the student, which has formed the background of this study. Additionally, four roles of peer response could be identified in this study: helping and evaluating classmates' writings, developing students' sense of audience when writing, building up their confidence as writers, and fostering the development of the other language skills. In short, the results of this study support the argument that the reluctance of the students of the Department under study to participate in peer response activities was likely to be partly due to the perceptions concerning language proficiency and culturally-related roles and lack of preparation in how to participate effectively in peer response. The training was meant to minimize the students' resistance to the innovation, that is, the process approach to teaching writing; which might not appear to bear immediate

benefits to them.

Considering the small sample size, it is important to point out that this study has limited generalisability. Additional research is thus needed for a more complete picture of EFL students' attitudes toward peer response, particularly in the Indonesian context. Further research questions might include: Would the results be similar if many more students reflecting different parts of Indonesia were involved? To what extent peer response would make students empowered? In what way peer response could help students increase their writing skills and self confidence as writers? Following what Tsui and Ng (2000:14) suggest, "since some L2 learners are skeptical about getting feedback from their peers, as part of learner-training, the teacher should highlight that responding to peers' writings is a learning process".

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