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Structuring peer review activities for beginning learners of German as a second or foreign language

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Abstract

The present paper offers a complete framework for effective implementation of peer review into beginning German language courses. The framework is informed by insights gained from research literature addressing the use of peer review and feedback provided by the students who were engaged in the peer review activities. The suggestions made in this paper have implications for materials development and would allow language instructors to make informed pedagogical decisions.

1. Introduction

Writing has always been an integral component of second language instruction. Over the years, researchers and practitioners have acknowledged the great level of difficulty it causes to language learners and have been working toward the development of a sophisticated approach to teaching writing in the second language classroom. In this fashion, significant part of the literature is devoted to the use of peer review in writing classes (Althausser & Darnall, 2001; Ferris, Brown, Liu & Stine, 2011; Graff, 2009; Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Mendoca & Johnson, 1994; Silva, 1993; Trautmann, 2009). Peer review is a technique that allows students to work collaboratively and critique one another's writing. Supported by sociocultural theories that emphasize the need for interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Frawley, 1983), peer review could play an important role in writing instruction at various levels.

First of all, it has the potential to instill audience awareness (Leki, 1990). Very often in the foreign language classroom, the audience is limited to the instructor. This might encourage learners to approach the assignment as a form of testing, and thus, diminish the social function of writing (Belanoff, 1991; Reid & Kroll, 2006). In contrast, peer review allows learners to write for a real audience, namely peers. Research has demonstrated that writing for a real audience increases the levels of students' engagement with the assignment (Arnold et al., 2009; Kessler, 2009; Lund, 2008; Mak & Coniam, 2008; Martinsen & Miller, 2012; Rott & Weber, 2013). Likewise, previous studies have revealed that when carefully structured, peer review provides additional opportunities for learning and improves the overall quality of writing (Leki, 1990; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Rott & Weber, 2013). In this fashion, receiving effective feedback on global level, which is usually associated with planning, organizing, revising, and the use and implementation of outside source materials may result in a coherent writing with a strong argument and well-structured supporting

ideas (Leki, 1990; Rott & Weber, 2013). Finally, receiving quality feedback on local issues, which focusses more on sentence-level revision and is associated with punctuation, grammatical and spelling errors ensures the final, polished look of the written product (Ferris, 2010).

Although the advantages of peer review are widely acknowledged, research has suggested several problematic aspects. To begin with, students may not have a clear idea of how to effectively collaborate with their peers (Rott & Weber, 2013). In addition, students prefer to receive feedback from their teachers and the idea of being critiqued by peers is not always appealing to them (Min, 2006). Moreover, students might have serious linguistic gaps that prevent them from providing quality feedback to their peers (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005; Leki, 1990). Indeed, students tend to focus on local issues such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and avoid engaging with global issues, which include problems with structure, organization, and coherence of the text (Cumming and So, 1996; Leki, 1990). And finally, even though the use of peer review has been extensively researched, there are no clear guidelines on how to effectively implement peer review in the second language classroom.

The present paper offers a complete framework for effective implementation of peer review into beginning German courses. The framework is informed by insights gained from research literature addressing the use of peer review and feedback provided by the students. The suggestions made in this paper have implications for materials development and would allow language instructors to make informed pedagogical decisions.

2. Students' Engagement

To make sure that students do not experience difficulties like the once described above, extensive training and preparation should be built into the language course. The following sections offer concrete advice on how to structure and organize peer review sessions so that students' participation is highly effective and results in an overall improvement of writing quality.

As suggested by Rott and Weber (2013), to ensure students' involvement, final papers should be uploaded into the online course shell and should be made part of the reading material in the course. In addition, the project should be graded and constitute a certain percentage of the final course grade (Appendix A).

3. Scope and Organization

The present project proposal takes a process-oriented approach to writing (Ferris, 2007; Shrum & Glisan, 2009). This approach involves a sequence of activities leading to the completion of a final written product. The various components include prewriting, drafting, revising, and publishing (O'Donnel, 2014). For the individual writing components, students should be asked to work with a partner, critique one another's written work and provide suggestions for improvement.

4. Making Students Familiar with the Peer Review Project

The peer review project is initially presented at the beginning of the semester when the course objectives and expectations are discussed. Students receive an information sheet with the project guidelines, which provide details about the individual components, deadlines, and grading (Appendix A). Students have a week to decide on a topic and choose a partner for the peer review

sessions. Since students are enrolled in a beginning German class and have limited exposure to the target language, they lack extensive lexical and grammatical knowledge. Accordingly, students are encouraged to decide on a topic that is included in the course curriculum and was already discussed in class. This allows them to draw on existing knowledge and limit the possibility of overcomplicating the assignment by trying to use lexical and grammatical features that were not previously encountered.

To promote participation and high level of engagement during the review sessions, the benefits of peer review are discussed with the students. Students are made aware of the most recent research findings concerning peer review as a writing technique. It is explained that the benefits associated with peer review are twofold. On the one hand, students could benefit from the peer review in their role of a feedback receiver and improve the overall quality of their own writing (Ferris, 2010; Leki, 1990; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Min, 2006; Rott & Weber, 2013). On the other hand, by adopting the role of critics, students could develop critical evaluation skills, which might help them to identify problematic patterns in their own writing and generate ideas for improvement (Ha & Storey, 2006; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

5. Scaffolding

To reduce the complexity of the task and provide modeling and support to the students, relevant scaffolding techniques should be carefully implemented into the project structure (De Guerrero, & Villamil, 2000). Thus, students will be trained to provide appropriate and helpful feedback to their peers and effectively use the feedback they have received to revise their own writing (Ferris, 2010; Min, 2006). The feedback provision process at each stage (prewriting, global issues peer review, local issues peer review) is first modeled by the instructor. Students are shown a writing sample composed in the previous semester. They are encouraged to participate in a whole class discussion and critique the sample. Most importantly, students are aware of the fact that they as authors have to make the decision whether to incorporate the feedback suggested to them or ignore it because it is irrelevant to the writing purpose and audience (Graff, 2009). To guide students' revision process at the various stages, prompt sheets with clear guidelines and directions are provided (Appendix C; Appendix D; Appendix E).

5.1. Prewriting

The first phase of the assignment is the writing of the proposal. Once the project was formally introduced to the students, they have a week to turn in the written proposal (Appendix B). Students are asked to write the name of their peer review partner, utter the central idea of the project, provide a brief description, and identify the potential audience.

5.2. Composing the First Draft and Engaging in Global Issues Peer Review

After completing their project proposal, students have a week to compose their first draft. Once the first draft is composed, learners engage in the global issues peer review session. At that point, students are advised to avoid surface-level editing and focus primarily on issues related with content and organization (Kessler, 2011; Leki, 1990; Rott & Weber, 2013; Williams, 2005). To ensure the coherence of the final written product, students are encouraged to examine whether the thesis statement is effectively uttered; introduction, body, and conclusion are well-organized; supporting ideas are introduced clearly; and transitions between sentences and paragraphs are

logical. Accordingly, student writers are encouraged to identify the weak points in their partner's written work and suggest ideas for improvement. To ensure equal level of participation among students, their interaction is guided by a prompt sheet (Appendix D).

5.3. Local Issues Peer Review

Students have a week to consider the global issues suggestions for improvement made by their partners and revise their first drafts. During the next stage of the project, students are asked to engage in the local issues peer review session and focus exclusively on accuracy. The overall objective of this session is to ensure the final polished look of the writing by correcting grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors.

Every so often, writing instructors rely on direct error correction when giving feedback to their students. Direct error correction is associated with the provision of the correct form, whereas student writers are expected to transcribe the correction into the text's final version. However, existing research suggests that direct error correction correlates with short-term learning effects, and therefore, it may not be the most appropriate way of providing feedback in the ESL classroom (Ferris et al., 2000). An alternative way of indicating students' errors is through the delivery of indirect feedback. When providing student writers with indirect feedback, reviewers usually indicate that an error exists; however, students are not directly provided with the correct form (Ferris, 2006). Recent findings recommend the usage of indirect feedback in the writing classroom, in part because, it prompts students to reflect on linguistic forms and look for the most appropriate way to correct their writing. Thus, the deeper level of engagement associated with the indirect feedback helps students to acquire more long-term knowledge when compared to the direct feedback technique (Ferris et al., 2011).

Accordingly, reviewers are presented with a list of error types they had to look for. It should be noted that student writers are familiar with all grammar and punctuation error types presented on the list. Grammar points that were not formally introduced to the students should not be considered for the present project. All error types are indicated with a corresponding symbol (Appendix E). Reviewers were instructed to underline the problematic area and provide the symbol corresponding to the certain type of error. The students who receive error feedback are expected to consider alternative grammatical forms, punctuation or spelling. As suggested by Byrd and Benson (1994), students should be encouraged to check the correctness of a grammatical, punctuation, or spelling choice by explicitly referring to a specific section in the grammar book or dictionary.

5.4. Publishing, Discussion Questions and Presentation

In week ten, students upload their final projects into the online course management system. The final written versions should be available to all course participants. Students have a week to read the papers of three classmates and pose three questions per paper. The questions are meant to address the topic of the writing and prompt further discussion. Moreover, asking students to read the papers of three classmates and think of logical questions make the whole writing process more meaningful and ensure that the final written product would be read by a larger audience. The questions are posted in the discussion section of the course management system. Students have a week to provide written answers to the questions.

6. Assessment

The whole project constitutes ten percent of the final course grade. To ensure students' engagement with the project and high levels of participation, individual components are graded (Appendix A). Students get familiar with the grading policy and procedure during week four when the project guidelines are formally presented. Making students familiar with the parameters of assessment prompts them to stay on track, engage in the peer review sessions, and thus, work toward achieving the projects learning outcomes such as coherent and error-free final product. To ensure that students would read the papers of their peers, they received a grade for generating questions based on their peers' writing. Finally, students were expected to present their own projects by conveying the information meaningfully and in a natural flow.

7. Teaching Implications

Despite the many positive sides peer review has to offer to language learners, instructors hesitate to implement this pedagogical strategy in beginning language courses. To date, peer review as a tool for improving students' writing skills, is predominantly employed in intermediate or advanced language classes. However, the project described in the present paper demonstrates that students' effective participation in peer review sessions is achievable even on beginner level.

The various interactive activities employed in this project provide students with the opportunity to be writers and reviewers in an environment in which learners are traditionally viewed as passive feedback receivers. In addition, this project challenges the conventional view that instructors are the only audience of students' writing and allows learners to present their ideas in front of a larger audience, namely peers. Most importantly, students are introduced to a distinctive learning experience by employing all four language skills (students practiced extensively their writing skills, read the papers of their classmates, orally presented the final version of their paper, and listened to their peers' presentations). Consequently, the different components (prewriting, drafting, revising, publishing) employed in the peer review sessions allows students to improve the final version of their written assignment by reexamining and presenting ideas critically, constructing coherent arguments, and warranting the final error free look of the writing.

Based on the experience with implementing peer review in beginning German language classes and the insights gained from research literature, the following guidelines are offered to assist language instructors who are willing to adopt the peer review practice. First and foremost, student writers require carefully designed writing instruction, which provides learning opportunities for the students and ensures education growth (White, 1994). For this reason, the writing task should be engaging and tap into the classroom context. Most importantly, students should be able to see the connection of the assignment to both their course objectives and the real world (Leki & Carson, 1994). Second, the writing assignment should be based on students' existing lexical and grammatical knowledge. This would prevent potential complications by allowing student writers to focus solely on improving their writing skills rather than acquiring new linguistic knowledge. Third, evaluation criteria should reflect the objectives of the individual project components (prewriting, drafting, revising, publishing, presentation and effective participation in the peer review session) as well as the overall course goals (White, 1994). Next, to ease the task, writing should be approached as a process whereas students' attention is directed toward the individual steps, they should take in order to produce high quality texts in form and content. Finally, to ensure equal participation of students, they have to be taught how to effectively fulfil the role of being

writers and critical readers at the same time. Hence, students should be taught strategies for developing and organizing ideas, revising and editing texts, reading their classmates' writing critically, and preparing their written products for a variety of audiences. (Kessler et al., 2012; Rott & Weber, 2013).

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Appendix A Writing Project Guidelines

This semester, you will be writing a paper on a topic that is of interest to you. Towards the end of the semester, the final papers will be uploaded into the online course shell and will be part of the reading materials for this course. To complete the project successfully, you have to: a) write a project proposal; b) compose drafts; c) engage in structured peer review sessions; d) revise and publish your writing; e) read the final papers of three classmates and pose interesting questions; f) present your paper and answer the questions posed by your classmates. The paper should be between 280 and 300 words long.

The topic of the writing project needs to draw on the topics we have already discussed in class. Possible topics are: *Free Time, School, Daily Routine, Hobbies, Talents and Interests, Work Places, etc.* You need to make sure that the grammar structures you utilize in your paper have been discussed in class.

Schedule

Week 4	Making students familiar with the writing project
Week 5	Project Proposal
Week 6	First Draft due, Global Issues Peer Review Session
Week 7	First draft revision due
Week 8	Second Draft due, Local Issues Peer Review Session
Week 9	Second draft revision due
Week 10	Publishing
Week 11	Generating questions
Week 12	Project presentation. Answers to questions.

Grading

The written project accounts for 10% of your final grade and will be graded according to the following criteria:

1. **Project Proposal (15 %)**
 - Proposal submitted on time 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Proposal is of a good quality 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Effective participation in the proposal peer review session 0 1 2 3 4 5

2. **Drafting (40%)**
 - First draft submitted on time 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - First draft is of good quality 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Effective participation in the global issues peer review session 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Revision of first draft 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Second draft submitted on time 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Second draft is of good quality 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Effective participation in the local issues peer review session 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Revision of second draft 0 1 2 3 4 5

3. **Final version (20%)**
 - Content**
 - Topic was addressed appropriately 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Appropriate length 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Ideas are meaningfully connected 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Form**
 - Minor errors, which do not interfere with comprehension 0 1 2 3 4 5

4. **Questions (10%)**
 - Questions submitted on time 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Questions are of good quality 0 1 2 3 4 5

5. **Paper presentation (10%)**
 - Fluency**
 - Natural flow 0 1 2 3 4 5
 - Content**
 - Appropriate information conveyed 0 1 2 3 4 5

6. **Response to questions (5%)**
 - Logic and coherent responses to questions 0 1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B Project Proposal Guidelines

In order to develop concrete ideas about the topic, content and structure of your written assignment answer the following questions.

1. **Write the name of your peer review partner.** _____

2. **Which topic/ topics will you discuss in your written assignment?**

3. **Make a list of ten helpful expressions that relate to your topic.**

4. **State the central idea of your written assignment and provide a brief description.**
(Write 5 sentences)

5. **Create a visual web that represents associations among ideas.**

6. **Which writing genre is the most appropriate to address your topic? Why?**
 - a. narrative
 - b. letter
 - c. descriptive
 - d. expository
 - e. persuasive
 - f. poetry_____

7. **Who is the prospective audience for your paper? Is this paper going to be of interest to the audience? Why?**

Appendix C

Peer Review at the Prewriting Stage

Writing is a social act and its primary function is communication. To make sure that you and your partner communicate your ideas clearly read one another's proposals and discuss the following questions. Take notes while reading your partner's proposal.

1. What information does the writer want to communicate?

2. Are the ten expressions proposed by the author appropriate for the topic? Are there any other expressions that you would add to the list?

3. How will the writer organize the content? According to:

- 3.1. hierarchical structure
- 3.2. chronological structure
- 3.3. special relationships
- 3.4. subtopics
- 3.5. other, Specify _____

Is this the most appropriate organization structure? Why or why not?

4. Who is the prospective audience for this communication?

5. Why is this information of interest to the audience?

Appendix D

Global Issues Peer Review Guidelines

In order to improve the content quality of your paper, you will work together with your peer review partner, read one another's papers and provide comments based on the questions below.

1. Is the assignment addressed appropriately? Why or why not?

2. Can you easily identify the topic of the paper?

3. Do you like the paper's title? Why or why not?

4. Does the introduction capture the reader's attention effectively? Why or why not?

5. Is the thesis statement effectively stated? Why or why not?

6. Are the different ideas introduced clearly? If not suggest alternative ways of expressing ideas.

7. Which paragraph is the most interesting and presents the most compelling details? Why?

8. Are there any weak points in the in the argument of the paper? How can the writer address this issue?

9. What tone has the writer established in the paper (formal, casual, playful, serious, etc.)? Do you think this tone is appropriate for the given topic? Why or why not?

10. Do you like the conclusion of the essay? Why or why not?

Appendix E

Local Issues Peer Review Guidelines

Once you have improved the content of your paper, start working on the mechanics. Work together with your peer review partner, read one another's papers and provide comments based on the issues described below. Do not correct the errors in your classmate's paper. Mark down the errors by using the symbols.

Symbol	Error Type	Further explanation
S	Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spelling mistakes • Capitalization of proper nouns
DA	Definite article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect use of the definite article (the)
IA	Indefinite article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect use of the indefinite article (a, an)
P	Pronouns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect use of pronouns. This includes personal pronouns, possessive pronouns
Pr	Prepositions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect use of prepositions
VF	Verb form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect verb conjugation
PP	Participle Perfect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect past participle
T	Tense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect verb tense
W	Word order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect word order in statements • Incorrect word order in questions • Incorrect word order in Yes/ No questions • Incorrect word order in dependent clauses
P	Punctuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect use of punctuation • Missing punctuation