From Traditional Peer-Review to Response Letters in the ESL Composition Classroom

By Lorena Fuentes

Since I started teaching ESL composition courses at UMass Boston, traditional peer review had always been my concern. The core reason of this was because whenever I applied this activity into the revision of a formal essay, the students’ did not respond positively, and from their reactions, it seemed to be a total waste of time. It turned out to be a challenge to engage them in an activity I thought would help them improve their papers dramatically and discover new perspectives. However, I still wanted to find a way to engage them in this exercise so that they could see the myriad benefits of getting and giving constructive feedback. I also became interested in understanding the underlying causes my students somehow disapproved of peer review.

I adopted to ask my students the reasons why they did not believe in the benefits of peer feedback. Their responses varied from stating peer review was very boring to claiming their classmates’ feedback was either condescending or too praiseworthy. Yet, when digging more into their perspectives, it was evident that there was also a cultural interpretation of peer review. In fact, the students revealed that this type of exercise is not so overtly practiced (if not inexistent) in their cultural educational settings. Regarding teachers as academic authorities, the students firmly deemed that receiving feedback from another classmate was indeed a waste of time, as they do not posses the knowledge to effectively revise their essays. Not only did they think their classmates were not capable of helping them improve their papers, but also there was a latent concern for grammar for which they did not expect to improve from their classmates’ comments.
I decided then to think of a less “threatening” method to provide peer review. It was then when I thought of introducing the concept of Letter Response. A letter is certainly a universal concept where literacy exists, so all the student would be familiar with this notion. Our perceptions of sending a letter/email imply a more informal, non-threatening (with the exception of formal letters) activity, which would release their burden to be “expert evaluators.”

The idea with the Letter Response activity is to pair up students, so they can exchange their writing assignments. Each week, students are paired up with different classmates. They take a hard copy of their classmate’s paper home, and they write a letter to their assigned classmate before they receive my feedback. One of the most outstanding benefits of writing a letter instead of a traditional peer review is that students unconsciously become real critical readers who are not desperately focused on form, but meaning. When I started applying this strategy into my writing assignments, I was surprised to see so many substantial comments that varied from commenting on the writer’s ideas and position on the issue to expanding the analysis on the readings the students were responding to. There was significantly less concern for grammar, unless it obfuscated the meaning of the sentence(s). However, the students would not attribute their classmate’s mistakes to grammar directly, but punctuation or “awkward phrasing.” The authenticity of their comments made the process of giving advice and feedback a much more meaningful and effective process for both, students and I as an instructor.

As an instructor, I found myself amazed by the accurateness of the students’ comments in their letters. The idea was that I would read the student’s essay first, and then I would proceed to read the letter. I was afraid of making a biased decision based on
the students’ comments. However, most of the students’ observations and mine matched. Sometimes, their comments even stretched my own comments. This was a clear proof that teachers are not the only authorities to provide practical feedback. Students as readers have the expertise to provide insightful responses as well.

The Response Letter activity shed light on the importance of presenting peer review as a way of expressing the self in the form of a capable critical reader. In addition, the mere process of taking away the specific terminology from the peer review exercise (main idea, thesis statement, controlling idea, conclusion, etc.) was a key point to unleash their inner desire to question, advise, and comment on topics in which they are engaged. Even more important, this exercise offered the students another possibility to interact with each other by using writing. This is undoubtedly an invaluable opportunity ESL students need to further strengthen their English skills.

The Letter Response exercise allows insight into the ways ESL students can be engaged into the process of creating meaningful interactions as well as writing and reading critically. From my observations and experiences, seeing their classmates and themselves as readers and not as judgmental evaluators, who lack expertise, transformed their perceptions of peer review. The students are keen not only about giving some advice on their classmate’s papers, but even more about reading the letters their classmates write for them. This new approach generated a relaxed atmosphere within the classroom when giving constructive feedback on their writing, and it also created a reading community where the students and I are eager to learn from each other.