

# Improving Composition Skills through Peer Review

Randall Cotten

## Abstract

Making students aware of the connections between reading and writing can help them make improvements in each of these language areas. Peer review and feedback can be used to help make learners become aware of the connection between reading and writing. The technique also helps beginning writers to quickly learn the basics of paragraph writing while learning to also consider the expectations of their audience. Giving students a rhetorical form that is standard for native English writers and readers helps them learn not only what form they need to follow, but also gain the ability to monitor and correct their own writing as well as that of their classmates.

Keywords: EFL, reading/writing connections, peer review, feedback

## 1. Introduction

In order to be able to produce writing that is easily understood by a reader, students need to be taught strategies that will make them aware of how readers read. In addition to thinking about their reader, writers must also think as a reader (Beach and Liebman-Kleine, 1986). Both Kroll (1993) and Zamel (1982) point out the need for writers to be able to “project” or “cast” themselves into the role of the reader. This is a skill that less proficient writers lack because they are too worried about grammatical accuracy or following a particular rhetorical model. However, by utilizing their knowledge of how readers read, writers can shape their writing so that their intended message will be communicated to the reader. In other words, writers can draw upon their knowledge about reading when making choices about how to present their ideas to a reader. If, as Kucer (1987) suggests, both readers and writers draw from a “common linguistic data pool,” then knowledge of one skill can be shared with another. In this sense, reading and writing skills are reciprocal; one can be used to improve the other.

Normally, the first draft of a composition is far from being ready to read. It is usually more writer-centered than reader-centered. The process of writing necessitates moving from the inner world of the writer to an external text world where the reader resides. During the revision stages of writing, learners become readers of their own text, but to do this effectively, they must “distance” themselves (Kroll, 1993) from their writing, taking on the role of an anonymous,

“critical” reader (Kucer, 1987). By reading their own texts, writers – or what we may term “wreaders” – can discover likely areas that are difficult to understand and, in trying to clarify those meanings for the reader, generate new ideas. For, it is often through the attempt to explain our thoughts to others that we discover ideas we had not realized before.

Spack (1982) asserts that the process of writing can itself create ideas. Furthermore, Zamel (1982) states that, if “students can learn that writing is a process through which they can explore and discover their thoughts and ideas, then product is likely to improve as well.” Improvement will take its form in prose that is created for the reader. Writing *for* an audience (not just *to* one) gives the writer a purpose for exploring his or her ideas and expressing them so that others can benefit from them. As Beach and Liebman-Kleine (1986) state, writers “need to adopt their reader’s presumed perspectives, assessing their writing in terms of how their readers may react to or comprehend that writing. In other words, they must become their own best readers.”

If writing can be improved through reading, then it seems that reading can also be improved through writing. The notion of writing as a discovery of meaning seems transparent enough, but when applied to reading, it may seem redundant. After all, isn’t the meaning obvious? The writer of the text surely has put all of the meaning in there. What is there to discover? Yet, meaning does not exist independently of a text; rather it is created through the interaction of the reader with the text. What is relevant and

important to one reader may not be the same to another. It is important that student-readers be allowed to make connections with the text that are meaningful to them, for this is what makes the text “come alive” (Zamel, 1992). We bring our background knowledge and experiences into play when interpreting the information in a text; what resonates for each reader will necessarily be different.

Tierney and Pearson (1983) state that both reading and writing are composing activities. One reader mentally composes the meaning of a text differently than another would. The purpose of teaching students to read like a writer, or as Hairston (1986) terms it, “reading rhetorically,” is to show them how to focus both on the content and on the process by which a text was written. By being consciously aware of how they, as readers, process a text, students gain an awareness of what a reader does with a text that they themselves write. Without teaching students techniques in “reading like a writer,” they may continue to focus only on the content, in a kind of “information-driven” mode (Kroll, 1993). This restricts the way in which they approach the tasks of reading and writing.

Next, we shall examine how the teaching implications discussed above can inform an integrated approach to teaching reading and writing. Turning theory into practice is often a difficult transition to make.

## **2. From Theory to Practice**

Basic readers need to be taught to identify the main idea of a paragraph. This helps them derive the overall meaning from a text in spite of words that they might not understand, but more importantly, it is the first step in getting students to realize that the printed word is just another form of communication: the author has a message that he or she is trying to communicate. Looking for the main idea gets students to search for and think about what this message is. This also teaches them that, even if they do not know all of the words, or if they cannot understand long sentences, they can still grasp the overall meaning. Students are so often overly concerned with the words they do not understand that they give up looking for the basic message contained in a written passage. Likewise, complicated grammar structures can send students into analysis mode, reading and re-reading a certain passage in the hopes of unravelling the mysterious code contained within. Yet, if they would suspend their feeling of anxiety about the things that are unknown, and try

to get a sense of the message that can be extruded from what can be known, then perhaps they can arrive at an overall understanding.

As beginning writers, students need to understand the importance of information organization and its affect on communicating a message to the reader. One activity which can help students become aware of this is peer review and feedback. Next, an example of how this was taught in a reading / writing class is given.

## **3. “Set of Three” Paragraph**

Over the course of several lessons, students are given instruction in writing basic expository paragraphs. They are given exercises designed to help them understand the purpose of a topic sentence (i.e., to introduce the topic and set a limit on its breadth through the use of controlling ideas), and to see the importance of giving supporting facts, such as examples and details, which are all related to the main idea of the paragraph. For the purposes of ease of instruction and, hopefully, ease of comprehension, students are shown example paragraphs that give supporting facts in “sets of three” – three examples, and a related detail for each. Below is an excerpt from a sample paragraph about how to buy a used car:

... You should choose a car that is not too old. A car that is four to five years old is usually still in very good shape. In addition, try to find a car that has not been driven too much. You should avoid buying a car that has been driven more than 20,000 kilometers. It is also a good idea to buy a used car at a place that you can trust. Most major car dealers, such as Nissan or Toyota, also sell used cars ....

In this paragraph, there are three sets of examples with an accompanying detail which all relate to the main idea: buy a car that’s not too old (4-5 years old); do not buy a car that has been driven too much (less than 20,000 kilometers); buy a car at a trustworthy place (at a big-name car dealer). While this type of support should be easy for a native English speaker to identify and write, it is not always so easy for EFL learners. And, even though it may be easy for some students to see these supporting examples and details when the teacher *explicitly points them out*, many often fail to include

them in their writing when asked to do so. For this reason, one entire lesson is spent on have students identify the three sets of supporting examples and details in basic expository paragraphs on a variety of topics. As a final assignment, students are asked to write their own “set of three” paragraph about a topic generally defined by the instructor (e.g., write about an animal, teach me how to do something, etc.). Students are asked to type and bring their paragraphs with them to the next class. They are also told that, in the following lesson, they will exchange their papers with another student, so they might want to avoid writing about any topics which would cause them any embarrassment.

It is perhaps useful to point out that the class in which these exercises are done in is basically a reading class. For this reason, students first approach these activities as readers trying to understand how a writer has organized and presented the ideas. Students are given the task of finding the supporting examples and details in order to arrive at an overall understanding of the meaning of the text. They are asked to concentrate on finding the basic message, and not be overly concerned with words they do not understand. While these exercises are intended to help students improve their reading skills, during the instruction in identifying topics and supporting facts, students are also made aware that the texts they are reading were *created* by a writer; this written passage did not just “appear” out of the blue one day. Students are led to see how the writer has included certain facts and organized them in a certain way in order to make the meaning easy to understand. During the lessons, the teacher reminds the students that they will be writing, and that they need to construct their written texts in such a way that will help the reader understand the message they want to transmit. At every opportunity, instruction is designed to reinforce the idea of a close connection between reading and writing.

#### **4. Review and Feedback**

The “set of three” paragraph writing assignment is used to further illustrate the close relationship between reader and writer. In class, students are asked to read the paragraphs that they have written and fill out a “Self Checklist” (Appendix I). They are asked to identify, in their own writing, the same things that they were asked to identify in the sample paragraphs that they read in the previous lesson; namely, the topic, the controlling ideas, and the

supporting facts. Once this task is completed, students are given the “Peer Checklist” (Appendix II), and asked to exchange their writing with another student. While reading their peer’s paragraph, students answer the questions on the checklist. The first part of the checklist asks students to identify the exact same things that they looked for when they filled out the first checklist for their own writing. The second part of the Peer Checklist enables students to offer suggestions and ask questions to the writer of the paragraph. After students have had ample to read and fill the checklist out, they return the paragraph along with the Peer Checklist to the original author. Students are asked to first compare the first part of the Peer Checklist with that of their own Self Checklist.

#### **5. Reflection to Revision**

Normally, when students do this activity for the first time, there are two things that happen. First, many students have a difficult time finding the supporting examples and details in their peers’ writing. Second, when their paragraph is returned to them with the checklist filled out by one of their peers, if they did not clearly give those supporting examples and details, they can clearly see that the reader of their paragraph had difficulties in filling out the checklist.

If successful, this type of activity will have a sort of “backwash effect”, meaning that as students fill out both of the checklists, they will start to – if they had not already – see what type of information they need to include in their writing, and understand the importance of organizing it well. Often, this is the first time for students to become aware that someone – a reader – is trying to get some type of information from something that they have written. It is a mind opener for many students. Usually, it is only the teacher who “reads” (or, perhaps to them only “evaluates”) what they produce. In this activity, students start to see that, if they are not careful as writers, they may make it difficult for a classmate to find the information required on the checklist. It is also an excellent opportunity for teachers to get their own feedback on how well they are not only meeting their own pedagogical goals, but to simply find out how well students understand in-class explanations. It is often the case that, when students take a look at the the first (self) checklist, the teacher realizes that a few students did not understand the writing assignment well enough, and did not purposely write a paragraph that has a topic sentence and

includes a “set of three” supporting facts. Even though teachers often think that we are being crystal clear in explaining things and telling students what to do for an assignment, many times students unfortunately do not equate what we are *showing* them with what we *expect* from them. The responsibility, of course, ultimately lies with the teacher to make sure that students understand what they are expected to do to complete a task successfully.

In addition to checking for a well-written topic sentence and three supporting facts, peer readers also to give some more general feedback to their classmates. By asking students – as *readers* – to state what they found interesting or new, as well as ask questions, it is hoped that, the students – as *authors* – will gain some insights into what their audience knows and expects. The answer to the question, “What other information would you like to know about this topic?” becomes input for students when they write the second draft of their paragraph. Among the many difficult things to teach students about writing, one of the most important is getting them to consider what their audience does and does not need know. By getting feedback from their peers about what more they would like to (or need to) know about the topic, writers can become more sensitive to the fact that, what might be ‘common sense’ for them might in fact be unknown to another person.

## 6. Conclusion

In this activity, students are not evaluated on their grammatical accuracy, or even how much creativity they display. Students are simply evaluated on how well they can provide examples which support their topic and fit these into a rhetorical form. This form may differ quite significantly from one which is common in their native language. For native Japanese writers, it is common to add extra information at the end of a passage to stimulate the reader’s imagination or to get them to consider one more thing in closing. However, a native English writer would most likely find this strange and confusing. While students might be asked to learn a new form, they are learning the same one, and being made aware that this is one of the forms that English readers would normally expect. As peer readers, students are taking on the role of a native English reader. They are not only learning to read like a native, but are also

gaining the skills and the ability to give valuable feedback to their classmates. As Rivers (1987) notes, students can gain proficiency in a language when they are concentrating on sending and receiving “authentic” messages. Whether spoken or written, heard or read, facility in a language is increased when there is communication which involves expressing one’s own ideas as well as comprehending those of others. The activity described herein adds one more equation to the puzzle – that of learning and using a rhetorical form, or mode, which communicators use to express and comprehend messages.

## References

- Beach, R. & Liebman-Kleine, J. (1986). The writing/reading relationship: becoming one’s own best reader. In B. Pearson (Ed.), *Convergences: Transactions in Reading and Writing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Hairston, M. (1986). Using nonfiction literature in the composition classroom. In B. Pearson (Ed.), *Convergences: Transactions in Reading and Writing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Kroll, B. (1993). Teaching writing is teaching reading: training the new teacher of ESL composition. In J. Carson & I. Leki (Eds.), *Reading in the Composition Classroom: Second Language Perspectives*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Kucer, S. B. (1987). The cognitive base of reading and writing. In J. Squire (Ed.), *The Dynamics of Language Learning: Research in Reading and English*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.
- Rivers, W. M. (1987). Interaction as the key to teaching language for communication. In W. M. Rivers (Ed.), *Interactive Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spack, R. (1985). Literature, reading, writing, and ESL: bridging the gaps. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 4: 703-725.
- Tierney, R. & Pearson, P. D. (1983). Toward a composing model of reading. *Language Arts*, 60, 5: 568-579.
- Zamel, V. (1982). Writing: the process of discovery of meaning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, 2: 195-209.

Appendix I: Self Checklist

1. My topic sentence introduces the **topic**, which is: \_\_\_\_\_
2. My topic is limited by the **controlling ideas**, which are: \_\_\_\_\_
3. I developed the main idea with examples and details. These are:
  - A. Example: \_\_\_\_\_
    1. Detail: \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. Example: \_\_\_\_\_
    2. Detail: \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Example: \_\_\_\_\_
    3. Detail: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix II: Peer Checklist

1. The topic sentence introduces the **topic**, which is: \_\_\_\_\_
2. The topic is limited by the **controlling ideas**, which are: \_\_\_\_\_
3. How is the main idea developed? Find the examples and details:
  - A. Example: \_\_\_\_\_
    1. Detail: \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. Example: \_\_\_\_\_
    2. Detail: \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Example: \_\_\_\_\_
    3. Detail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Comments & Reactions**

Please write some general information about the paragraph that you read. Your feedback can help a classmate become an even better writer.

1. What is something new or interesting that you learned from this paragraph?
2. What other information would you like to know about this topic?
3. Advice, suggestions, comments (Japanese or English is OK):

Checked by: \_\_\_\_\_

( 提出期日 平成 17 年 11 月 28 日 )