

Why Are My Chinese Students So Quiet?: A Classroom Ethnographic Study of Chinese Students' Peer Review Activities in an American Multilingual Writing Class

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This paper explored how Chinese students perceived peer review activities and how they viewed the roles of their Chinese identities played in their interaction and negotiation in a freshmen composition class at a Midwest university in the US. In this study, classroom ethnographic research methodology was used to analyze the sociocultural factors involved in Chinese students' peer review activities and to uncover the way the tacit culture shaped students' learning experiences in classroom. The findings showed that there was a significant gap between American pedagogical objectives and the Chinese students' real practice. Students basically regarded peer review as a problem-identification process instead of a social-cultural practice that involved dynamic negotiation. Although they denied that it was their Chinese cultural background that made them speak less in class, they were unaware of the fact that the way they viewed peer review as "finding out the problems" was exactly how they were influenced by their previous teacher-centered classroom experiences.

Keywords: international students; English acquisition; college composition; peer review

INTRODUCTION

As more and more international students pursue degrees in the United States, many US universities have been setting up composition courses specifically designed for multilingual students whose first language (L1) is not English. Currently, the pedagogy of US ESL/EFL writing is based on L1 compositional studies which reveal that writing is an act of discovery and a recursive process during which writers discover and revise their ideas (Hairston, 1982; Perl, 1980). Therefore, American writing instruction is normally process-oriented and involves a lot of peer review activities. Based on this notion, in order to help student writers, teachers should intervene in students' writing processes instead of just focusing on their written products.

However, for multilingual students from China where education is teacher-centered, peer review can be a challenging activity not only because they have to discuss writing in English, which is a foreign language, but also because their previous classroom experience was heavily lectured-driven and product-oriented. In a teacher-centered classroom, students expect the teacher to provide all the knowledge and they rarely initiate and facilitate learning by themselves. Moreover, because of the emphasis of grammar in curricula in China, students normally regard revision as a "rewording activity" of purely sentence-level changes (Sommers, 1980). More importantly, peer review, designed to pay group attention to individual writing and seek individual benefits, requires students to argue and write as individuals (Carson & Nelson, 1996). It is believed by many scholars that because of China's collectivist culture that emphasizes "harmony" and the benefits of the group instead of the individual good, peer review among Chinese students can be very different from Western instructors' expectations. Coming from a tradition of teacher-centered classroom and a culture valuing "harmony" and "humility",

the Chinese students tend to be good listeners in class and may avoid being too critical to their peers.

Therefore, as a Chinese writer myself, I am very interested in understanding and interpreting the peer review activities among the Chinese students through a lens of culture. Specifically, I will focus on the following research questions: 1) What are first year Chinese students' attitudes and perceptions of peer review in US writing classrooms? In what ways do they feel peer review is useful or not? 2) How do they react and behave when facing reviewers from China and from other countries? 3) How do they perceive the role of their Chinese identity plays in their interaction and negotiation when doing peer review?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars have discussed whether peer review could benefit L2 writers in general. Some mention that peer review can enable students to generate insights into their writing because students can share with each other their opinions and do writing as a negotiated socio-cognitive activity (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003; Flower, 1994). Some scholars also point out that peer review can reduce student writers' dependence on teachers (Tsui & Ng, 2000) and foster their "capacity for independent problem solving" (Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998).

Moreover, practicing peer review in L2 classes can also help students develop their social and cognitive basis for effective revision (Hu & Lam, 2010; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996).

However, there are also studies showing that peer review may not be very effective in multilingual classes. Some scholars concern that L2 students from teacher-centered cultures tend to trust teacher feedback more than peer feedback and may distrust peers' suggestions (Paulus, 1999; Zhang, 1995). More importantly, one distinct feature that makes L2 peer review different from L1 peer review is that the reviewers are not native speakers and they are not capable to give

suggestions due to their language proficiency (Villamil & Guerrero, 1998). Also, because of possible L1 interference and cross-cultural differences, L2 students may have different understandings of good writing. Therefore, the differences may lead to inappropriate suggestions (Allaei & Connor, 1990).

With regard to Chinese students, some previous scholars find that students are able to provide some useful feedback to their peers, though the number of suggestions about contents and structures are very limited (Hu & Lam, 2010). Scholars also find that although Chinese students admit that peer feedback is useful, they still prefer and value teacher feedback more than peer feedback (Miao, Badger, & Zhen, 2006). There is also research trying out an integration of computer-mediated communication into peer review among Chinese students (Hu, 2005). These scholars find that combining a computer-mediated method could promote dynamic and multi-directional communications among students and prepare them with an open mind towards difference (Hu, 2005; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Tuzi, 2004). However, there is still lack of research that fully explains Chinese students' perceptions of peer review in US multilingual writing classrooms.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are certain types of communication happening in classrooms. As a small social unit, a class always has certain rules and norms that students need to follow in order to behave in a proper and meaningful way. Philips (1983) suggested that a single classroom interaction could entail multiple layers of organization and different types of communication. She summarized four basic types of communication in classrooms, namely, whole class interaction, small group interaction, one-to-one involvement between the teacher and a student, and desk work. The four types were also called "participant structures", which was used to describe the interactional

systems in classes. In Philips's notion, "participant structures" were not static and fixed because she admitted that students' awareness of proper social-communicative behavior in certain structures could change and develop according to both the "synchronic" and "diachronic" relations within communication. In this way, both "student to teacher" and "student to student" relations in classrooms involve certain kinds of roles, and participants' expectations of particular roles in this social unit can be influenced by age, gender, socioeconomic status, professional knowledge, etc.

Peer review activity is one kind of "group project" that belongs to "small group interaction" as classified by Philips. In this "group project", students work together to accomplish a project collaboratively and collectively. Even though students have control of their own interactions within small groups, a larger official structure of the whole class is still in play. Therefore, a small peer review group is a complex integration of "student infrastructure" and "official infrastructure" that is invisibly regulated by the teacher, the institution, and even the larger social-cultural norms. For peer reviewer from different cultural backgrounds, the structures of interaction could be more dynamic since a single word or eye contact could entail different cultural and social meanings that transcend time and space. In the following sections, I will analyze students' perceptions and their interactions during peer review through the theoretical lens of "participant structures."

METHODS

In order to better explore the sociocultural factors involved in Chinese students' peer review activities in class, I used a methodology of classroom ethnography. Classroom ethnography can generate "insights into cross-cultural issues in classrooms" and "theoretical constructs about

learning as a social and culture process” (Bloome, 2013, p. 8). Therefore, it could help uncover how the tacit culture among the Chinese students shapes their learning practice in US classes.

Participants

My participants were multilingual students enrolled in a freshmen composition course in a mid-west university. The multilingual composition course was a one-semester course. Each semester there were more than 300 international students enrolled and more than 60% of them were Chinese. The class I observed was taught by an American instructor named Bill (pseudonym). Bill was a white male American in his early 30s and he was also a PhD student in literacy and language education in the university. In his class, there were 14 students in total, with 8 Chinese, 3 Korean, 1 Malaysian, 1 Greek, and 1 Indian. When it was time to do peer review, Bill divided the students into groups of 3 (with one group consisting of 2 students). I chose to join in a group with 2 Chinese and 1 Korean students because in this way I can see both Chinese-to-Chinese communication and Chinese-to-non-Chinese communication. On the other hand, since one of the Chinese students is male (Zhelin) and the other one (Siqi) is female, including participants of both genders can help eliminate potential bias due to gender differences.

Data Collection

Different types of data were collected in order to generate accurate interpretation of students’ perceptions. Specifically, my data were from the following sources:

Participant observation and field notes. There were 3 units in total in this course (i.e. they have 3 big assignments for the semester) and at the end of each unit they had two class sessions of peer review. I visited 8 times, each for 50 minutes, and observed the entire second unit. I took notes of my participants’ reactions and interactions during their discussions and sometimes joined and helped facilitate their discussions. Participant observation helps me to

provide both an “insider” view and an “outsider” perspective. I also took field notes with thick descriptions of what happened during observation (classroom interactions, classroom atmosphere, demographics of students, facial expressions, gestures, etc), with memos about my thoughts, feelings, questions, etc, in order to find out patterns of behavior shared by my participants.

Documentation. I collected documents such as the course syllabus, class PPT and readings, assignment sheets, and my participants’ writing drafts both before revision and after revision. Generally, these documents were collected in order to capture the everyday learning practices of my participants.

Interviews. After I finished observing the peer review sessions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Zhelin and Siqi separately, each lasting 40-50 minutes. Other informal interviews and conversations during everyday observations were also jotted down. Both casual and formal interviews provided data that helped further my understanding of students’ perceptions of peer review.

DATA ANALYSIS

Students’ attitudes and perceptions of peer review

Generally, the two participants regarded peer review as a problem-identification process. While reading each other’s paper, they only focused on sentence-level issues and tried to find out grammatical errors. When I joined in Zhelin and Siqi’s group, I found that they, with another Korean female student named Hyun in that same group, were only marking grammatical errors on the paper quietly. Seeing the whole class being very quiet, Bill suggested students read their papers out loud and discuss with each other. However, the three students in my group were still reading silently. Therefore, I suggest each of the reviewers, whenever finishing one paragraph,

should point out one good thing and one thing the author needed to improve about that paragraph. After finishing reading Zhelin's introduction paragraph, both Siqi and Hyun praised Zhelin for writing a clear introduction. However, Hyun did not mention where Zhelin should revise and Siqi only cast her doubt on one grammatical issue within that paragraph. When the whole class was finished, the group had already covered two authors' papers and I only heard a few conversations which were all about grammar.

From the interviews, I found out that they focused on grammar for three reasons. Firstly, their previous learning experience in China was still affecting them. Zhelin and Siqi mentioned that when they learned writing in China, the teachers gave them some writing models and expected them to write according to sample structures, as quoted below:

Well, they (the teachers) just gave us writing models with structure and we need to just write based on that structure and then for the vocabulary part, we need to exchange the word with their synonyms. And that's the only thing we do so there is not much focus on the content. That's the kind of Chinese writing we learnt in China. (from Zhelin)

Moreover, both Zhelin and Siqi emphasized that grammar was their biggest concern and the most difficult part for them to learn in English:

For Chinese students, we always have some grammatical mistakes anytime we write. But here in the United States, professors focus more on the contents. (from Zhelin)

I am still struggling with grammar but the university does not teach us this. (from Siqi)

Siqi also mentioned that even though she had good ideas for a topic, the instructor sometimes could not understand her because of her language and grammar.

Another reason the two participants mentioned was that although they knew that the instructor expected them to give more suggestions on contents, they did not know how to comment on a peer's paper. During the interview, Zhelin said,

We do a lot on grammar since we do not have that strong skills to review the argument or concept...I mean capabilities to argue that whether the content is good or bad.

Siqi also admitted that she was not confident in giving suggestions on contents and she only discussed about grammar with her peers because grammar had "definite answers."

In fact, the notion behind the grammar-checking activity was that those Chinese students viewed peer review as an "error-identification" process and the goal of doing peer review was to find out problems in each other's essay. Because the students believed that if they were not able to do "right things" and provide "valuable suggestions", they should not start a conversation. Therefore, they tended to rely merely on teacher's feedback instead of peers' comments in order to get "correct answers".

Reality VS expectation

Despite the fact that my participants only checked each other's grammar when doing peer review, they did expect to get suggestions on global issues such as structure, content, idea-developing. Siqi said,

Bill expects us to check grammar, structure, content, etc., but we are all Chinese students and we have similar English level. I only check grammar but I hope they can tell me what I miss and which part to improve.

Zhelin also mentioned the same gap between reality and expectation:

It's not that we just want to check grammar. It's just we are not sure about other things and the time is also too limited to finish whole essays...I actually want some suggestions on things like contents or evidence too.

Students wish their peers could give them helpful feedback but it was not always the case. Both Zhelin and Siqui thought that whether peer review was useful or not depended on who they were working with, specifically, what country their peer reviewer was from. They said:

If I am in a group in which most students are Chinese, we will talk about something else unrelated to the essay and we will talk in Chinese. If I am in a group with people 141 from different countries and we won't speak Chinese because it will make others embarrassed. (from Siqui)

It depends on who you are working with. In my class, I would prefer to discuss with students from Europe or India or Malaysia because they will give me a lot of new ideas to help improve my essay. I think they have better English level, and their educational background also matters. (from Zhelin)

However, because most of the students in the writing class were from China and Korea, Zhelin and Siqui seldom had the chance to work with students from non-East Asian countries. They generally thought their experience of peer review was not useful to their writing and they would just wait for the follow-up individual conference with Bill to help them with global revision, just as mentioned by Siqui:

Peer review is not effective but anyway we will ask the instructor to revise, because he will check and his opinion is more professional.

Cultural beliefs about peer review

As mentioned above, one of the reasons that Zhelin and Siqi preferred peer review partners from other countries was that they believed that students from non-East Asian countries were more confident in expressing their opinions. They attributed this to the difference of the educational background between East Asian students and students from Europe or India, just as what they explained in the interviews:

In East Asia classrooms, teachers will tell you the knowledge and you won't have the opportunity to talk about your opinion. (from Siqi)

It's just like in class discussions, you will always hear the Malaysian or the Indian guys talk, we (the Chinese) are just so quiet. (from Zhelin)

Although the participants admitted that students from a teacher-centered classroom tended to be more quiet than students from a student-centered educational background. However, the participants denied previous scholars' belief that it was the Chinese culture that valued "harmony" and "being modest" that made them more silent in class. The students mentioned that the main reason was that they did not have better language proficiency compared with students from India or Europe. This opinion reflected their tacit belief that a better linguistic competence stood for a better composing competence. They said:

It's not a cultural thing. It is apparent that students from Asia and students from Europe are different because their English level is more proficient. If I have better English skills, I will definitely say more. (from Zhelin)

I will speak more if I have better English ability. (from Siqi)

From these quotes, we can see that Zhelin and Siqi ascribed their source of unconfidence to their linguistic ability instead of their Chinese cultural identity. However, both of them did not realize that it was their underlying belief that a peer reviewer should only provide "valuable" and

“professional” suggestions that lead to their unconfidence in speaking out their voices and opinions. And this particular understanding that a peer reviewer was a problem-identifier instead of a meaning-negotiator was actually the subtle reflection of their Chinese identity formed in a teacher-centered educational background.

DISCUSSION

From participating in the peer review group and interviewing the two Chinese students, I found that there indeed was a significance gap between the expectation of US composition pedagogy and Chinese students’ real practice. With the nature of L2 writing still being a question unresolved, how to effectively adapt a process-oriented pedagogy based on L1 research and teaching tradition into L2 writing classroom remains a grey area. When students come from cultures with different classroom conventions from the West, they are likely to have totally different expectations of their teachers, their peers, and the learning process. It is common for them to act like beginners of western conventional interactional norms in classes. Therefore, US instructors are likely to find students unprepared to comply with peer feedback processes due to the cultural differences in students’ school experiences. The differentiation within small interactional structures as well as the gap between student infrastructures and the larger official infrastructures result in great deviation from instructors’ ideal pedagogical objectives of reinforcing course contents through peer review interaction.

Although my participants denied that it was the Chinese cultural values such as “harmony” or “being modest” that made them speak less than students from other countries but rather their language proficiency, they were not conscious of the fact that the way they viewed peer review as “teaching other people” was exactly how they were influenced by their Chinese culture and their previous teacher-centered classroom experiences. Therefore, the gap not only

exists in language, but also in culture. The various participant structures within multilingual classrooms are imprinted with students' L2 cultures and identities. Therefore, a multilingual writing class should not be taught only according to L1 pedagogical experience and strategies.

In a multilingual class with students from China, an instructor should help students build their confidence by encouraging them to view peer review as a process of communication, negotiation and meaning co-construction rather than an activity of problem-identification and error-correction. With long-time immersion in a Chinese culture that values traditional wisdom and respects authoritative knowledge, Chinese students are not confident in speaking if they cannot contribute some "solid truths" to the group. That is also why my participants feel students from India, Malaysia, or Europe are better at writing, since the latter can speak more proficient English, especially as English is an important instructional language in many school and official settings in India and Malaysia. Therefore, teachers should also eliminate these Chinese students' misunderstanding that higher language proficiency does not necessarily mean better composing ability.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study, what is interesting is that although students seemed to know the instructor's expectations of peer review, they still only focused on finding grammatical errors and fixing problems. They hardly regarded writing as a social-cultural process and practice that could be dynamically negotiated. In order to create an effective peer learning environment, instructors should model peer review procedures for multilingual students and help them adapt to western classroom interactional norms. For example, they can provide students peer review guidelines designed specifically for one particular assignment. However, in a one-semester intensive writing program, teaching how to do peer review could also be challenging because of limited

time and resource. In addition, further research should be done to explore how to create a cooperative learning environment for Chinese students, as well as what it means to provide a supportive writing classroom for students from non-western cultures.

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