

The practice of peer-learning at Kansai-Gaidai University: A case of intermediate reading and writing class

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要旨

日本語教育の現場において、一般に読み書きのクラスでは会話のクラスと比較し学習者間のインターアクションが少なく単調なものになる傾向があると言われる。また、読み書きクラスと称してはいるが、実際には読解に多くの時間が割かれ、作文などの「書く」という作業には、カリキュラムなどの都合上、多くの教育機関では時間が少なくなってしまうのが現状であろう。しかし、「書く」という技能は、日本の大学あるいは大学院への編入や進学を考える学習者や、日本企業への就職を試みようとする学習者にとって必要とされるだけでなく、他の技能と密接に関連しており、日本語の総合的な能力を反映するスケールに成りうるものでもある。今回、関西外国語大学中級読み書きのクラスに在籍する日本語学習者を対象に、ピア・ラーニングにおけるピア・レスポンスの実践を試みた。ピア・レスポンスの実践は、英語の第二言語教育現場においてかなり前から取り入れられており、既に様々な効果が認められている。教師から学習者へという一方的なフィードバックに依存せず、学習者間の建設的なインターアクションを通して、学習者がさらに書く力を高めていくことができればと考える。本論では、ピア・ラーニングの実践における利点や問題点、また学習者に実施したアンケートをもとにピア・レスポンスのさらなる可能性と今後の課題について考察する。

【キーワード】 peer learning, peer response, interaction, ESL, facilitator, self-monitoring

1. Introduction

Kansai Gaidai University has 423 registered foreign students from 39 nations. The Japanese language course is divided into conversation and reading & writing classes. While the conversation class is in principle an indispensable unit, the reading and writing class is designated as a student's elective subject. Therefore, while the conversation class is taken five days a week, the reading & writing class is only scheduled three times per week. In the three meetings per week, the lesson curriculum includes vocabulary, *kanji*, grammar

expression, reading comprehension, and composition. Thus, sufficient time focusing on composition is not included in the course plan schedule or curriculum. However, the composition test has a big influence on grading in mid-term and final examinations. Is it possible that time for writing instruction is being neglected in the curriculum? It can be said that writing skills are also closely related to other communications skills. Furthermore, writing skills are essential for students who are considering Japanese university or graduate school, and students who want to enter employment in Japanese companies in the future. Considering this, more time has been spent on writing instruction for the intermediate level reading and writing class since the 2009 spring semester.. Furthermore, the element of peer-learning has been included. Peer-learning is already practiced by English education as a second language (ESL), and various advantages such as the mutual effect of peer support can be seen. I propose that we consider the potential practice and effectiveness of the peer-learning method in Japanese education at Kansai Gaidai University. Moreover, through the questionnaire conducted in the end of the semester, I would like to continue to search for the key to further improving the practice of peer-learning in the future.

2. Peer-learning

2.1 What is peer-learning?

The definition of peer-learning is a study method involving collaborative work with peers. Peer-learning where a learner finishes a task through actual language use mutually exceeds mere language learning in a classroom, and promotes social activity. Ikeda & Tateoka (2007) explained that the relation in peer-learning can be indicated with the “student itself”, “the peer”, and the “object to study” as shown in Fig. 1. In peer-learning where collaborative study is undertaken between students, as Fig. 1 indicates, the learner who is a subject of study is located at the center, and the central role which connects the other three; an “object”, the “others”, and “self” are played. Moreover, Ikeda & Tateoka (2007) said that the above triangles are formed considering a learner as a center, and an "object", the "others", and "self" can learn more deeply through the interaction in collaborative study. Peer-learning with such characteristics as the activity in the process creates a composition is called a peer response in this paper. In this paper I will discuss the possibility of the peer response activity in improving and refining learners’ writing skills.

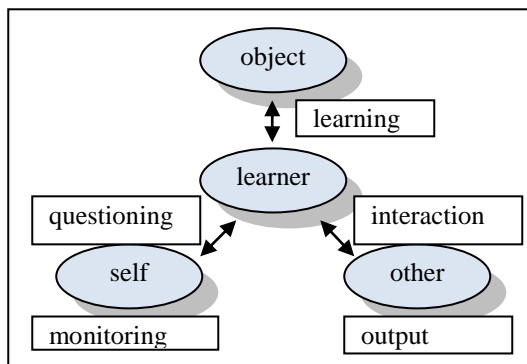


Figure1. The structure of collaborative work

2.2 The practice of peer response and evaluation

Peer response was first used in writing instruction of students who are native English speakers, and the way that they learn was shown to be not one-sided instruction through a teacher but when students cooperated. Elbow (1973) claimed that motivation also increases and the learning effect increases through this method. Thus, peer response has been adopted in second language acquisition education as well, and is currently practiced in English education for ESL students. In such English education, various effects of peer response have been observed. According to Feris & Hedcock (1998), the variety of feedback from peers is improved. Also, through the peer response, while performing collaborative work as equals where participants can work out a creative idea with peers in a relaxed atmosphere where the degree of stress is comparatively low, it is said that the mutual sense of reliability can also be an advantage of a peer response.

3. The practice of peer response

3.1 Types of teacher instruction in writing class

Although some advantages of peer response was shown in 2.2, we were wondering if the advantages could be employed effectively in Japanese language education. In traditional writing instruction currently being performed at many Japanese language learning institutions, the instructor generally takes a leading role in the correction process. A teacher will prepare a topic so that a learned vocabulary, expression, or *kanji* character taught in class could be practiced as much as possible, and the learners will individually conceive a composition following the given subjects. Then the teacher carefully corrects each student's text word-for-word. If we take the intermediate level reading & writing class at Kansai Gaidai University as an example, one composition examination requires an

average of 1,200 characters, and since each class has 13-16 students, one teacher must correct roughly 117-144 pages of *Genkouyoushi* per composition exam. Instances requiring the teacher to review mistakes such as a mere vocabulary, expression, *kanji* character, or spelling, as well as some parts which the concept is completely incomprehensible may be frequently found at the intermediate level. This sort of situation in a classroom seems to point to the fact that the burden on a teacher is quite large. Furthermore, some of the students have made comments such as "The instructor's correction only makes me feel that I am not good at writing", "When I have my composition back from my instructor, I feel so ashamed because of the amount of corrections, even though I like to write", "Many mistakes makes me disappointed, the correction seems to prove that I am a terrible writer", shown in questionnaire 4.1, which begs us to question if that type of writing instruction is really effective. Although this type of teacher initiated correcting instruction should not be totally denied, as the correction and revision of a mistake by an instructor are required to some extent, it may be true that a focus on correcting instruction should not be placed only on the linguistic form of a learner's composition, as such comments show. It is also important to support the thinking process so that a desire to communicate one's thoughts in Japanese can also be filled.

3.2 The procedures of peer response

Thus, the trial of the peer response in the class of Reading & Writing Japanese 4 was started. Although it may be common to work in a group in peer response activities, because it was a new experience for many learners in this class, peer response was introduced step-by-step. First, in order to avoid prejudice between learners, etc., the name of the writer of each composition was concealed, and comments on the composition were exchanged. Second, peer response in a pair was performed, and the learners exchanged opinions.⁽¹⁾ These procedures referred to by Reid (1992), allowed each learner to provide their main idea, good points, unclear points, and advice to a peer's composition as a reader. Inexperienced peer response learners, who expected a serious task where all the responsibility for a peer's correction had to be taken, were also able to attend a mutual peer response practice with an earnest attitude through the procedure mentioned above.

3.3 The problems found

However, in the beginning, peer response did not advance smoothly in all the intermediate level reading & writing classes. As 2.2 described, a peer response has innate

circumstances which have evolved in through English as a first language education, which includes related Western cultural aspects. That is, it is a viable method because education where students are accustomed to conveying their opinions logically since a young age, and also participate in criticism or discussion is more common. As a result, it may be said that it is an activity which is not comparatively familiar for learners from Asian countries including Japan. In fact, there were 2-4 Asian learners per class, and confusion was observed to the concept of a peer response in the beginning. Among such learners, there were also those who were accustomed to instructors leading correction as shown by 3.1, and thus there was resistance to collaborative work with peers, as well as others who were reluctant to criticize others' compositions. Moreover, among the inexperienced peer response learners, the point of the peer response was not fully understood, and they questioned why peers with no linguistic competence were to act in place of the instructor. Such feedback showed that clearer explanation of the goals and methods involved in the peer learning activity should be undertaken for its successful practice. After this feedback in the middle of the semester, further trial was carried out in class. The following is the questionnaire and the results about peer response activity by the learners, conducted at the end of the semester.

4. Questionnaire

4.1 Content of the questionnaire

The following questionnaire was given to intermediate level reading and writing class where peer response was practiced. ⁽²⁾

Part A: (background)

1. Have you taken Japanese essay class at your home institution? →Yes / No
 - If yes, what have you done in the class?(e.g., paragraph organization; essay tests; peer-correction/editing; usage of *Genkoyooshi*...etc)
 - ()
 - What did your Japanese instructor do in your institution? (e.g., correcting mistakes; giving valuable comments...etc)
 - ()
2. Did you like writing essays at your institution? →Yes/ No
 - If yes, give the reasons. ()
 - If no, give the reasons.(e.g., writing essays is boring; it takes a lot for me to organize my thoughts...etc)
 - ()
3. Before you came to Japan, your essay skill was: →extremely poor/ poor/ fair/ good/ excellent

4. After taking RWJ3/4, did your essay skill improve? → significantly/ greatly/ fairly/ slightly/ no change/ worsened

- In RWJ class, what do you think was helpful to improve your essay skill? → ○はたくさんあってもいいです。

1) leaning about Japanese paragraph structure in class 2) peer-editing in class
3) instructor's correction 4) group discussion 5) leaning how to use *Genkouyoushi*
6) handouts given in class 7) reading materials 8) others()

- If RWJ class, what do you think would be helpful for you in order to improve your essay skills? (e.g., more essay tests; discussion on each topic...etc)
()

Part B:(topic and essay)

1. So far, your favorite topic for essay writing is:

()
● Give the reasons. ()

2. So far, your least favorite topic for essay writing is:

()
● Give the reasons. ()

3. If you can chose topics, what topics would you like to write about? (e.g., Japanese pop-culture...etc)

()
● Give the reasons. ()

Part C:(peer-editing)

1. Have you done peer-editing practice at your home institution? →Yes/ No

2. Do you think that peer-editing practice is helpful? →Yes/ No

- If yes, give the reasons. (e.g., It was helpful to get ideas on each essay topic/ I feel more comfortable getting feedback from my peers...etc)
()

- If no, give the reasons.
()

Part D:(from now on)

1. Do you plan to write essays in Japanese in the future? →Yes / No

- If yes, please explain the reasons. (e.g., I like writing essay; I will need it for the entrance exam into Japanese university...etc)
()

- If no, give the reasons. (e.g., I don't have to take another essay class in the future...etc)
()

Part E: If you have any comments or inquiries on Japanese essay writing, please write them here.

()

4.2 Effectiveness found in the results

In Part A (background), it became clear that 69% of the learners had not taken any writing lessons in their home institution. Moreover, 31% of learners who received writing instruction mentioned that correction of a mistake (97%) and the comment on the composition (3%) were the major instruction in the class. Furthermore, as for their improvement in writing skills, 92% of learners answered that writing skill had improved either “significantly/greatly/fairly” through the reading & writing class at Kansai Gaidai University, and the remaining learners also admitted that writing skill had improved slightly after the attendance of the reading & writing class at Kansai Gaidai University. In Part B (topic and essay), there were many topics listed which related to each learners own experience or hobby. That is why I feel it is necessary to prepare various topics, with careful attention to the deviation of a topic when given. In Part C (peer response), the learners who had experience with peer response in their home institution was only 23%, and it turned out that the practice of peer response was the first experience for almost all learners. Moreover, about the effect of a peer response, 62% of learners answer that it was effective, and as the main reason, they pointed out that they started to adopt the viewpoint of reader, and thus came to consider whether their own writing is clear enough to understand for other readers. Apart from that, new and creative ideas arose, and cultural understanding deepened with partners. While working together, friendship becomes strong and it becomes easier to write a composition. Moreover, it was mentioned that learners can also learn from a peer’s tendency to make errors in a composition. Through the peer response, learners experience the role of both a writer and a reader, and started to be conscious of a reader’s viewpoint, and it is thought that this will lead to a learner’s self-monitoring. As stated, learners from various cultural backgrounds gather at Kansai Gaidai University, and this is considered an opportunity for learners to gain mutual understand under such an environment. As a result, by obtaining sympathy from peers, confidence may rise and the joy and desire to write can be increased. In Part D (from now on) and Part E, positive aspects such as wanting to continually develop writing skills and a change in emotional mindset from unfavorable to favorable feelings about writing can be gained through peer response. A shift can be made from the image of writing as a solitary task to work which can be shared in both difficulty and understanding by obtaining a study friend called a peer. Moreover, comments citing the importance of reading, and the necessity of improving reading ability in order to understand peers’ compositions were also seen.⁽³⁾

4.3 Problems found in the results

On the other hand, the learners who answered that peer response was not effective, gave the following reasons; “It makes me feel rude to criticize a classmate’s work”, “I feel better when an instructor gives feedback”, “I need more time to practice through peer response”, and “I think that peer's language capability was not sufficient”, etc. Thus, less effectiveness may be expected for inexperienced peer response learners who have not been convinced of the meaning and method of peer response. A clear explanation would be necessary from the beginning of a semester for why not only the correction or support of an instructor but also of a peer is helpful, and for the purpose of peer response and procedure. That is, not just a few times of practice of peer response, but long-term enforcement enabling learners to feel a sense of trust with peers, and thus lead to the effect of improved performance. Furthermore, as Granott (1993) pointed out, when a gap in language level between learners is found, "imitation" or "making a scaffold" is shown, and the practice of peer response may be focused only on grammar structures, kanji characters, etc, but never be on the deeper argument of the context of a peer’s work. Thus, in the case of peer response, instructors need to pay close attention to each member, with consideration of matching each peer appropriately. Finally, we also need to take into consideration that learner needs to expose a self inside, or language capability in the process of peer activity, depending on the topic. Therefore, it is a necessity to allow diversity in topics. In addition, I think it is also important for an instructor to give each peer a long-term period to build a relationship of mutual trust with their peer partner(s) in order to approach real collaborative work.

5. Conclusion

As it has been stated in this paper, various advantages were proved through the practice and questionnaire of peer response. Especially, as 4.2 shows, it can change the way of thinking about writing and the knowledge that an individual tends to be inclined to, and it can also be concluded that there are fruitful results which cannot be obtained only by learners’ individual practice or an instructor’s one-way feed back. Once such skills including self-monitoring are obtained, benefits can be seen even in self-supportive study. Moreover, in a relaxed atmosphere of peers who are able to build a confidential relation, smooth feedback was produced that is connected with development of communication. Furthermore, confidence was established through support from peers, and we are able to see further study volition having developed. However, this does not show that an

instructor's role in the writing practice is unnecessary. In Japanese study, an instructor needs to offer proper support so that learners can enhance their ability smoothly. In his study, Nakai (2009) described the role of the instructor as facilitator, and emphasized the importance of the instructor's role, which should facilitate the learners to continually improve the content of their work. As stated in 4.3, it is thought that successful classroom management is important in the practice of peer response. Ikeda (2004) reported a result that even some learners without an experience of peer response could get used to the peer activity by a proper course design gradually. Thus, a course-design considering the learner's learning environment is necessary. In addition to this, as having pointed out in 4.3, considering topic select, a learner's multicultural background, and classroom administration such as creating an atmosphere and community where learners trust each other are important roles of the instructor.

Since intermediate learners were subjects in this study, there was a lower level of Japanese ability, and as such the role of facilitator played by the instructor was very important as Nakai (2009) pointed out. As a further step, I would like to practice the peer response with advanced level learners in order to see what kind of similarity there is to intermediate learners, what kind of effect there is with the advanced learners, and what change of role may be required of the instructor. Furthermore, I would like to strive to promote introspection and self-monitoring through peer response so that learners can continue writing practice by themselves eventually.

Notes

- (1) A group performance was also practiced later.
- (2) All questions were performed in English.
- (3) Other major comments are as follows; "Thanks to the peer practice, I felt more comfortable to write essay in Japanese", "A relaxed atmosphere with peer made me help to come up with lots of ideas for my composition"...etc.

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