

USE OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES AS A FACTOR IN PEER EDITING IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM



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Introduction

A recent study of two third-year composition and grammar review courses examined the peer-editing process among native speakers of English learning Spanish as a foreign language (Amores, 1996). Among other findings emerging from the research were group members' interactions, including how those interactions related to the larger instructional context in which writing was produced. Data were collected in the researcher's classroom and in the class of another instructor teaching the same course (Dave)¹. From a total of 35 students involved in the study, eight primary informants were selected, four from the investigator's class and four from Dave's class.² Qualitative techniques used in this study included ethnographic interviews, participant observations during peer editing, observation of participants outside of peer-editing sessions but in the classroom setting, artifact inventories, diaries, and questionnaires. Data collected over four months revealed a clear tendency among informants to define the peer-editing process primarily in social and emotional terms. Their views were based more on perception of role and status, and upon linguistic capabilities of the individuals involved, than on the potential improvement of the final draft of the composition (as teachers using peer editing probably hope). This article describes only one aspect—the emergence of politeness strategies—as a factor in the peer-review process. For a detailed description of the research design, see Amores (1996).

Theories of Speech Behavior

Several competing theories have been advanced over the past decade to explain certain patterns of speech behavior in direct interactions. Investigations of language use and gender have signaled that men and women's speech varies across ethnic groups and gender (Tannen, 1990) and according to the context within which it occurs (Ochs, 1987; Sherzer, 1987). Ochs found that social rank, cultural ideology, political status, and age were factors more powerful than gender affecting language variation among the Samoan population. Sherzer reported similar findings in the speaking practices of the Kuna Indians of Panama, stating that age,

power, and intimacy were as determinant as gender in verbal communication. Both sociolinguists, however, stressed that linguistic differences between women and men were associated with the context and activities in which they were engaged and not with the individual's gender. That is, if a man were involved in a female activity, he would use the female register in the same way that a woman did.

Crosby and Nyquist (1977) conducted a study on gender differences in speech among people making inquiries at an information booth in an American urban municipal center. They found no significant differences between genders, indicating that both male and female speech is, somehow, context specific.

Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) (Giles and Smith 1979; Coupland, Coupland, Giles, and Henwood, 1988) stated that speakers, based on contextual demands and on their past experiences, adapted their speech to their interlocutors' in accordance with their interpersonal orientations and goals (e.g., wanting to obtain the other person's social approval, wanting their communication to be efficient, or wanting to establish themselves as distinct from their interlocutor). To this end, as speakers perceived or anticipated their interlocutor's expectations, they selected from a range of strategies, both verbal (pause and utterance lengths, choice of language system, etc.) and nonverbal (see Giles and Smith, 1979, for a good summary of linguistic adjustments).

Research on discourse processes provided evidence that speakers and writers used a wide range of linguistic devices—including compliments—to initiate and sustain interpersonal involvement in discourse and as a tool for redressing face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The data reported in this study supported this position, specifically within a peer-editing context.

Social Concerns During Peer-Editing

A number of practitioners share the assumption that the peer group approach is a successful alternative to a teacher's response for developing writing skills in L1 (Gere & Stevens, 1985; Hairston, 1982; Moffett, 1983; Witbeck, 1976) and in L2 (Vandergrift, 1986). Among their

contentions, they argue that if the process of writing 1) presupposes the development of strategies for the discovery of meaning, 2) emphasizes the principles of audience (i.e., that the writer is addressing an imagined group of readers), and 3) treats the activities of prewriting, writing and revision as a recursive process, there are strong reasons for using peer editing. Peer groups provide an opportunity for working collectively to discover ideas, provide individual students with experience and interaction, and broaden the kind of feedback students receive, thus developing their sense of audience. Peer review is also supported by certain theories of learning, especially Vygotsky's developmental theory (1978), which emphasizes that group collaboration promotes learning. In most of these studies, the focus has been on the product that results from the peer-editing process, with little attention to the dynamics of the interactions between students. In contrast, the present study looks at exchanges between students during and after the peer-editing sessions and considers ways in which these paired activities might be improved.

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Johnson and Roen (1992) consider peer review as a potentially face-threatening act because it may require reviewers to make comments and suggestions or to ask questions. Students' perceptions of their status within the group may be diminished by a peer's criticism. As in everyday speech, compliments are one of the politeness strategies used to mitigate and balance criticism, as well as to establish and sustain interpersonal rapport. These researchers propose two main functions of complimenting in the peer-review context: ideational and interpersonal. “They [compliments] are ideational because the compliments express cognitive judgments and perceptions [and] interpersonal because they

affect writers' relationships with their addressees" (Johnson and Roen, 1992, p. 31). Because of the nature of the task, both the cognitive and the affective goals of complimenting are interrelated. Therefore the researchers consider as positive those compliments that are strictly ideational in function (i.e., "Overall, your paper is very good" [Johnson and Roen, 1992, p. 36]). They consider true compliments to be those closer to the notion of complimenting in speech and intended to create a friendly rapport among writers (i.e., "Your review feels smooth and complete [and interesting!]" [Johnson and Roen, 1992, p. 36]).

According to a set of syntactic patterns and lexical items found in the data, Johnson and Roen (1992) distinguish the following forms of compliments: *positive evaluation*, determined by the number of positive evaluative terms used by the reviewer; use of *intensifiers*, such as "really enjoyed," "very informative," "very interesting," etc.; *personal involvement*, assessed by "explicit reference to oneself as measured by the use of first person pronoun [and] explicit reference to the addressee by the use of second person pronouns;" *compliments redressing specific criticism and suggestions*, defined as the use of "good news/bad news pairing strategies" to soften negative criticism (i.e. "Your personal opinions are very valuable and interesting. However, I don't feel you interject enough") (pp. 43-46).

"Throughout the study, participants seemed to use the term 'constructive criticism' most often as a synonym for comments that were sincere but not threatening."

Whereas teachers and researchers tend to think of peer editing as a process through which students collaborate to improve the linguistic accuracy of their compositions, students may focus more on other aspects of the activity. For example, two of Dave's students, Faith and Alan, appeared to be sensitive to the vulnerability that peer correction might provoke, since they knew that taking criticism personally was commonplace among students. They acknowledged also, however, that the ability to accept negative criticism might grow with time and increased familiarity. As Alan pointed out:

I think the first time when you work with somebody, if they say, you know,

"this work is not very good" you're not gonna be real pleased with that [...] But like if you then maybe the second time, third time you start gettin' to work with that person, you start to get more comfortable. [...] I think it would bother me at first, but then it wouldn't bother me afterwards. It might bother me a little bit, but if it's constructive criticism and you have to take it, and I'm gonna do the same for him, so [...] It might be scary, yeah... Sometimes you might not wanna criticize the person's paper, you know, like... because he sits right next to you. Because you feel like he'll get mad at you or whatever.

Faith, Alan's peer reviewer, agreed with Alan and signaled a shared, if tacit, goal of students to avoid hurting each other's feelings. According to her, "oh, this is good," or "oh, this is nice" are common—and linguistically positive—student utterances during interactions which are often perceived as insincere. In speaking of the risks of working with unfamiliar classmates, Faith added:

I'd still try out for help but I'd be more tentative up to what I'd say, and I might not even offer as much constructive criticism as I offer Alan because [...] I don't wanna hurt the other person's feelings and say "this is bad," you know. But with Alan, I can offer constructive criticism and I know he won't take it personally. Because Alan was in my class before, so we're used to doing it, so I can be really open with him and say "hey, that's wrong, you know, you can change it," [...] if people just pair off in the groups, I mean, their responses would be very restrictive because they'd be worried [...] about what the person thinks of them, as well as, you know, "why are they saying my paper is bad?," you know, things like this. They might take it personally instead of constructive criticism.

Throughout the study, participants seemed to use the term "constructive criticism" most often as a synonym for comments that were sincere but not threatening. Faith's words seemed to insinuate that student resentment of "constructive criticism" might diminish the possible benefit of peer editing, since the potentially adversarial relationship could cause the editor to soften his or her comments and the writer to ignore those comments. Therefore, their fear of hurting peers' feelings and, possibly, their own reputations, seemed to take priority over academic purposes within this cultural microcosm.

Alan and Faith, who had been class-

mates in another course, enjoyed the fact that their friendship allowed them to correct each other's papers openly. Hugh and Oscar did not know each other before this class; therefore their circumstances were different. Like Alan and Faith, these students both valued "a second opinion," "a student point of view," to cite Hugh's words. However, they were conscious of the problems associated with peer-editing as well. For example, Oscar confessed: "If the [student's] paper is full of so many errors in each sentence that I cannot understand what he is saying, then perhaps I'm afraid of telling him 'look, your paper has serious problems,' and I do not want to [laughter] destroy his pride"³.

Hugh, for his part, although insisting that "I don't mind anyone reading over my work at all and offering constructive criticism," admitted that the editor had to be the "right person," otherwise "you might not want to work with that person anymore [...] you might hate that person because they rip you apart or something."

The following analysis demonstrates that because Hugh and Oscar were unfamiliar with one another, they were careful to behave in a manner that would prevent any misunderstandings or discomfort resulting from their interaction. Their perceptions of their role as peer editors were determined both by the task the instructor assigned and by their personal desire to establish and maintain harmonious relationships in the classroom environment. The objectives of the teacher (a grammatically accurate and well-developed composition) and of the students (the establishment of a socially comfortable interchange) could thus be in conflict.

Peer-Editing Behaviors

Hugh and Oscar

In the current study, an analysis of how two of the subjects (Hugh and Oscar) used compliments as politeness strategies in constructing discourse establishes a clear profile of their attempts to build rapport. Sitting face-to-face in movable desks, Hugh and Oscar were working quietly on their second composition, the autobiography they wrote for narration. As usual, after approximately 20 minutes, they started reading to each other the responses that they had meticulously written on the review sheets (see Appendix A). They looked at their papers, nodding at each suggestion, and laughing intermittently at their mutual praise:

Hugh (H): You go first.

[Oscar begins commenting on Hugh's composition]

Oscar (O): Let's see... Why, why don't I go through the comments first and then, and then maybe I give you some ideas?

H: O.K.

O: Considering the introductory paragraph, you state your thesis clearly, it's right there [...] The first paragraph says it very fairly, I wouldn't change that... "How interesting is the introduction of this essay?," I say about 4, 5.

H: [laughter]

O: "Vocabulary words?," [...] interesting. First paragraphs are very good in their descriptions of the violent childhood... [...] I, but I would include some specific descriptions of the happier moments in the second part of the paper...

H: O.K., yeah, I need to do that.

O: [...] "How could you improve the organization...?," almost perfect, going from negative to positive. Wouldn't alter the structure at all. "How do you rate the content...?" As I said, several examples needed in second part [...] "Specific ways the conclusion would be improved?," I say you might want to say something to the effect that you'll never be a father like the ones you had in childhood [...]

[Focus now shifts to Hugh's comments on Oscar's paper]

H: That sounds great. [...] I said thesis is good, except that you might wanna say, you might wanna add something about how your constant moving affected like your maturity... not maturity, I can't make up the word... like growing up, that...

O: Yeah, yeah.

H: ... and how that added to your important memories.

"How interesting...?" It was great and it adds a good dimension with the dialogue at the beginning. I didn't do anything for vocabulary 'cause I didn't see anything to be changed [...] Organization was practically perfect, you really, you couldn't change anything. Let's give it 4 or 5, wouldn't matter.

O: [laughter]

H: "How could you improve...?" I said very good organization and to the point. The content, I said, is almost perfect. It's a 4. "What specific topics...?" I said it's almost too descriptive, like the first pap... because it's

supposed to be narration. I said there's nothing wrong with it, I said, you might wanna take out some of the descriptions and put more things that changed your life 'cause it was more about moving and stuff. If you might have any other, anything else that might add significance, or change your life or whatever.

O: O.K.

H: I said the conclusion is very good. I said it sounds a little religious, but if that is your effect, it's fine. There's nothing wrong with it, I just, I just think it sounds a little religious, but if that is the effect, it's fine. The conclusion is fine. There's nothing wrong with it. It's a good conclusion... I didn't check like spelling or anything.

O: I didn't either.

H: Yeah.. You wanna do that?

O: Yeah, we can until time is up.

This typical interaction between Oscar and Hugh presents the social practices these students engaged in during peer revision: mutual consideration and support, as well as a positive attitude toward each other's effort. Holmes (1988) defines compliment as "a speech act which explicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' [...] which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (p. 446). A first glance at Hugh and Oscar's responses reveals an extremely positive evaluation of each other's work. Their emphasis on their respective strengths is manifested by the number of positive adjectives—quite profuse, considering the length of the text—such as "good," "interesting," "perfect," or adverbs like "clearly," "fairly," and "at all" used to stress positive points. It is also noteworthy that they increased the force of their compliments by using expressions like "great" instead of "good" or the intensifier "very" with a number of adjectives.

Another exchange, which was part of a peer-editing session for an opinion essay, revealed again how these students adopted a polite interpersonal attitude in an apparent effort to create a socially appropriate atmosphere of solidarity:

H: The first paragraph is fine, the thesis, whatever, couldn't be stated more clearly. The introduction is really good. I said the vocabulary and the paper read very smoothly. The only thing to do is to try and find out how to spell the ethnic group names. I looked up some and I just put them at the bottom here...

O: Oh, good!

H: You didn't wander at all and I thought the organization is perfect, it's really smooth, really smooth. I said the content is almost perfect. Equal information on each topic, like even amount. It was really good, there's really nothing needed to be changed.

O: O.K. Yours is good too. [...] The introductory paragraph was O.K., except if you make this change: you don't need this, you don't need to say "I read this article"...

H: O.K., O.K.

O: Organiza... introduction is good. You state here what your position is... You might give an example to support your own opinion...

H: O.K.

O: Vocabulary words... Vocabulary is fine in most parts, but there are several, there are certain easily correctable grammatical errors, like, like... I know what you mean, but it's not the right way to say it...

H: O.K.

O: [...] You use "encima," "encima" es "más de." I understand what you mean, I don't have any trouble...

H: Just change some of the vocabulary.

O: Yeah. But the organization is 5. The basic structure is sound: introduction, the arguments against and the pro-arguments and then conclusion. The content is about 4. I said although I disagree with the opinion, the facts in favor are convincing enough to make me stop and think.

Both samples highlight another way in which Oscar and Hugh built a friendly rapport, perhaps to soften the force of the potential offensiveness of their comments. One of the mechanisms consisted of surrounding their criticisms with compliments, what Johnson and Roen (1992) have called "compliments redressing specific criticism and suggestions" (p. 45). Instances of Oscar and Hugh's mutual praise before pointing out weaknesses in their papers are numerous in both fragments: "First paragraphs are very good in their descriptions of the violent childhood [...] but I would include..." "thesis is good, except that you might wanna say..." "introduction is good, you state here what your position is... You might give an example." Hugh's comments about his peer's conclusion in the first excerpt provide, perhaps, the most illus-

trative example: "I said the conclusion is very good. I said it sounds a little religious, but if that is your effect, it's fine. There's nothing wrong with it, I just, I just think it sounds a little religious, but if that is the effect, it's fine. The conclusion is fine. There's nothing wrong with it. It's a good conclusion."

Compliments were not the only politeness devices these students used to soften specific suggestions. Oscar and Hugh employed other strategies that served the same purpose.

Brown and Levinson (1987) identified two main strategies of politeness: "positive politeness" or "the expression of solidarity," and "negative politeness" or "the expression of restraint" (p. 2). They claimed that the uses of each were oriented to the foundations of social life. Among the negative politeness strategies identified by these analysts, Oscar and Hugh employed: 1) hedging, which serves to moderate the assumption that the objective of the speaker's assertion is to inform the listener (i.e., "you might want to say something to the effect that you'll never be a father like the ones you had in childhood"); 2) use of the passive as a mean of avoiding reference to persons involved in face-threatening acts (i.e., "several examples are needed in the second part"); 3) minimizing the imposition (i.e., "vocabulary is fine [...] but there are certain easily correctable grammatical errors, like... I know what you mean, but it's not the right way to say it").

"The students' mutual respect was further revealed by acts such as their agreement on how to carry out the task, assign roles, or order priorities."

The social balance sought by Hugh and Oscar seemed to be supported by some other strategies as well. First, their use of "I say" or "I said" to open most of their comments is noteworthy, since it seems that the students wanted to separate the self from the editor, perhaps to distance themselves from threatening tasks. Also notable is Oscar and Hugh's mutual respect toward each other's writing. As observed, they never tried to impose their own preferences, either in terms of content or style. On the contrary, their suggestions were always more a kind of brainstorming of possible ideas to incorporate into the text that might better reflect the author's thoughts and provide

a better way to communicate his intended message. Oscar's last utterance in the second excerpt clearly illustrates this remark: "I said, although I disagree with the opinion, the facts in favor are convincing enough to make me stop and think."

The students' mutual respect was further revealed by acts such as their agreement on how to carry out the task, assign roles, or order priorities. The latter was especially true when they had to decide whether or not to correct grammar. Hugh's linguistic competency in Spanish was quite weak in comparison to that of his classmate, and it was reflected in his writing. Although the content of his essays was always sound and the organization was good, his grammar errors made his writing almost incomprehensible. He was aware of it: "Oscar normally gives me good grades for my content, and organization, and my thesis. My biggest problem is my grammar and vocabulary [...] I'm taking it a word-for-word translation from English to Spanish, and that is not... you shouldn't do that because it doesn't work." Perhaps because everyone needs to display competency and in spite of his acknowledgment of his own weaknesses—Hugh resisted his peer's suggestions regarding grammar correction. On only two occasions, when they had approximately 20 minutes left, and perhaps because of the investigator's presence, Hugh accepted his peer's help.

Although somewhat anxious with respect to grammar correction, Hugh appreciated Oscar's tact and cooperation. He rated his peer-editing experiences as positive, both personally ("I feel really comfortable doing it [peer-editing] with Oscar, yeah [...] I think peer-editing brings people together a little bit") and academically:

I like having Oscar's [feedback] also because you get actual student feedback on what can be changed [...] From the teacher point of view it's like changing every little single thing to the way he would write it... Like the way he was gonna say it maybe is not the way I wanna say it, I wanna say it differently [...] The way would be totally properly done, but I don't think you learn as much like that.

Alan and Faith

Alan and Faith, the two other students in Dave's class, shared these same positive reactions to the process. In speaking about the benefits of having a peer editor, Alan stated:

It's nice to have someone, two people rather than one, correcting your paper

[...] Having the same person twice, I mean, it's just gonna correct whatever I missed the second time, but nothing is gonna change [...] If the teacher just puts the right stuff it's just like "all right, copy that and don't look over the mistakes." But what we do, you should learn a little bit because we have to work on it.

However, Alan and Faith's behavior during peer review was quite different from that of Oscar and Hugh. The following sample illustrates the correction of the report essay and shows these peers' most common interactional behavior patterns:

[Alan is editing Faith's composition on Picasso]

ALAN (A.): What's this? What's that for?

FAITH (F.): I thought Pablo Picasso was born Pablo Ruíz Picasso

[...] I say his name completely.

A.: Combine here, "cuando era niño era un prodigio, *por eso* estudiaba a las academias en la Coruña y Barcelona, la escuela donde su papá enseñaba." ('when he was a child he was a prodigy, and *because of this* he studied at the academies in La Coruña and Barcelona, the school where his father was teaching.'). Combine here, "Picasso le gustaban a las mujeres *coma* y por esa razón..." ('Picasso liked women *comma* and for that reason...') and then "vivió con muchas otras," ('he lived with many other women,') because you have "vivía con muchas otras y tuvo..." ('he used to live with many other women and he had to...'). You've got to keep saying... it's "vivó, "y vivió, "vivió." ('he lived [incorrect form], and he lived, he lived.')

[Pause]

[At this point, the activity shifts to Faith's comments on Alan's composition on Roberto Clemente]

F.: Instead of "much of the day" you just say "a great part of the day." [...] Was he [Roberto Clemente] a baseball player in the USA?

Dave: [He had just approached them] Sí, por supuesto, mujer. ('Yes, of course, woman.')

A.: ¿No sé...? ¿No sabes qué es él?

('I don't know...? [incorrect start] You don't know what [who] he is?')

F.: No, ¿de dónde eres, eres?

('No, where are you from, you from?')

Dave: Oh, ¿de dónde es él...?

(‘Oh, where is he from...?’)

A.: Dave, ¿es en la, es en la tierra?

[laughter]

F.: What team was he on?

A.: Read it! You only read the first two paragraphs and you’ve got to read the rest of it [...] You have to find out, I’m not gonna tell you. It’s a secret.

[The discussion returns to Faith’s composition]

A.: You don’t have a thesis.

F.: Yes.

A.: Where is it?

F.: In the first paragraph.

A.: “Era su talento que le propulsó...” ¿Esta?

(‘It was his talent that propelled him... This one?’)

F.: Sí.

(‘Yes’)

A.: “It was his talent that prop...”

F.: “It was his talent that propelled him into fame and became one of the most famous painters in his times.”

A.: In the beginning here, instead of just come out and say “he was born here and...,” I don’t know, I’d like to see your thesis like at the beginning, like in the first couple of sentences, and then talk about the places he... or whatever. But talk about maybe... mm... “one of the most famous painters in Spain is Pablo Picasso,” and then talk about the type of work he did, and then some of his paintings.

F.: How should I do it?

A.: Just move this up to the beginning and talk about, as an introduction to him, like why he’s famous right at the beginning of the paper [...] and then you restate this in there [...] You can do it if you want. It’s up to you, but... You don’t talk about his paintings. You should talk about his famous works.

F.: This is a paper about him, not about his paintings, I mean...

A.: But you can always say something about his paintings because if he didn’t paint nobody would care about who he was [...] This time you have the conclusion, wow!

These students’ interactions do not reflect the politeness strategies reviewed in the previous section, perhaps because their linguistic levels were more comparable (they both were rated at the Intermediate High level when the semester began). More likely, it is because they had “known each other for a while,” and saw no reason to make an effort to create a comfortable framework within which to perform the task. Instead, both Alan and Faith’s comments are characterized by directness, as shown in their use of commands: “combine,” “talk about,” “you just say”; categorical expressions such as “you’ve got,” etc.; and the absence of modals that, as noted above, function to mitigate criticism. Even in pointing out weaknesses in the essays, they addressed each other directly: “you don’t have a thesis,” “you don’t talk about his paintings.”

However, certain implicit rules seemed to underlie Alan and Faith’s behaviors. First, they never used negative terms in making suggestions to each other. Alan was particularly cautious: “I went through and it [Faith’s composition] was kind of boring, I *thought* it was kind of boring... Well, I don’t, I didn’t sa... I *thought* it, I thought it, you know...” This student manifested his sensitivity to his audience repeatedly during the course of the interviews. In explaining why he enjoyed peer editing, he said: “Just makes me feel good, I don’t know [...] I mean, when I can tell ‘yeah, this is good,’ but when I say ‘this is really awful,’ I don’t know how to feel about that.” In fact, a review of the data indicates that he never said “this is awful,” and neither did his partner.

The second set of rules involved their friendship. Perhaps because they knew each other before taking the class, they spoke much more frankly. Their exchanges seemed to go beyond what would have been considered “polite” among more casual acquaintances. Alan was disturbed by Faith’s apparently unintentional behavior several times. During the peer-editing session just quoted, the following incident took place:

F.: You see... that’s what’s really not explained, like basically your thesis was saying, I mean...

A.: I wanted to say that he’s a good baseball player and helped people in Latin America. That’s my thesis, right there.

F.: Yeah, but you only have a couple of sentences, so that’s not really basic...

A.: I have to go the library tomorrow.

F.: You understand?

A.: *I’m going to the library tomorrow and... It’s only a rough draft.*

F.: I know! I’m just...

[After a small pause]

A.: It’s excellent [meaning his composition]

F.: Content, I’ll give you a 5. This is gonna be the only time.

A.: You gave me a 5 in the last paper.

F.: Did I?

A.: It’s so good... I can’t stand it. [meaning his composition] I always do a good job in organization.

F.: But we both disagree.

A.: On what? On my thesis?

“...close relationships create an environment within which there is a minimal danger of losing face, resulting in the use of jokes and insults as a way of assuring intimacy and stressing solidarity.”

Brown and Levinson (1987) categorize joking as a positive politeness strategy that serves to put the listener “at ease” (p. 124). They maintain that close relationships create an environment within which there is a minimal danger of losing face, resulting in the use of jokes and insults as a way of assuring intimacy and stressing solidarity. Faith and Alan probably made a tacit assessment of each other’s mood, since when incidents like this happened, they always tried to appease each other either by teasing or praising, thus maintaining the interactional balance. The following exchange, which depicts the peer editing of an argumentation essay during the last session, is also illustrative:

F.: O.K., let me read this sentence, how I’m reading it, O.K.? “In my opinion, these people are cowards and their...”

A.: And “se tienen manía a las personas. Deben estar...”

(‘they hate [incorrect Spanish] people. They should be...’)

[...]

F.: You should put “tengo” then.

(‘I have’)

A.: What? It’s not me, it’s them.

F.: O.K. How can you say it’s not you if you say “en mi opinión”?

(‘in my opinion’)

A.: “In my opinion, these people are cowards and they have hate of the people...”

F.: “They have hate of the people, they should be stopped.” You need something else there, boy.

A.: It’s all right. I, I know what I’m doing.

F.: Mmhmm

A.: Just forget how to translate it.

F.: They have people...

A.: *It’s all right.*

F.: “... people y...” I mean, you need something else there...

A.: It’s O.K. now.

And, again a minute later, they finished their work joking and teasing each other, seemingly to put each other at ease:

F.: “I believe.” You wanna say “pensar” (‘to think’). These are some of stereotypes I can’t believe of... Necesito otro verbo... “Pensar” muchacho! Muy bien. O.K... Es el fin.

(‘I need another verb...to think’, boy! Very well. O.K. That’s the end’)

A.: Sí.

(‘Yes’)

F.: Adiós.

(‘Goodbye’)

The above data also show Alan and Faith’s particular way of praising each other, which exemplifies Brown and Levinson’s (1987) previous remarks. Due to their friendship, they rarely used positive terms. In fact, Faith’s words “muy bien,” (‘very good’) cited in the previous excerpt, were pronounced for the first time during their last peer-editing session. Their mutual praise consisted of teasing or insulting each other, as if they wanted to attenuate the power of their compliments. Since peer-editing might not entail any threat to Faith (“I can be really open with Alan”), she had no need to accommodate her discourse to the context, as was the case for Oscar and Hugh.

Implications for the Classroom

Some research on peer response has questioned the efficacy of peer editing because students tend, among other reasons, to elaborate when revising their peers’ writing and to adopt a certain leniency toward each other’s weaknesses (Newkirk, 1984a; 1984b). These studies reveal that students may simply fear giving criticism. Indeed, research has suggested that an L2 environment may be even more threatening (in that students are more uncertain and less able to express themselves fully) and offer more risks to student writers than an L1 setting (Johnson and Roen, 1992). The primary student informants’ verbal behaviors in the current research seem to confirm that view. However, to judge from the behaviors of Dave’s students, the development of an appropriate atmosphere where “constructive criticism” takes place is possible. Although it is inappropriate to recommend specific applications of qualitative research findings, readers are encouraged to consider whether the following guidelines would be effective in their own peer-editing assignments:

1. Make a conscious effort to establish rapport between and among students.

Although we, as teachers, cannot dictate friendships, we can and should work to create a positive learning environment in the classroom. Among other things, this environment requires that students have mutual respect for one another. In the university-level classroom, particularly at the beginning and intermediate levels, it is quite likely that the students will not know each other before coming together in the language class. As Alan observed, “I think it’s better to work with peers and get to know everybody in the class ‘cause you feel a lot more comfortable talking [...] It’s better to know everybody in the class before starting everything.” By using one or more “mixer” activities early in the semester, and by encouraging students to address each other by name, the teacher can promote this sense of community, thereby setting the stage for a more relaxed atmosphere within which the peer-editing process is carried out.

2. Conduct regular peer-editing sessions where the documents being edited do not belong to a member of the class, and where the peer-editing pairs must collaborate and achieve consensus regarding editorial recommendations. Since it is human nature to become a bit defensive when one’s work is criticized, this practice will help students to realize that the comments of peer editors are focused solely on the manuscript and not on the author.

Similarly, the collaborative approach to critiquing an anonymous manuscript may sensitize students to the scope of the editing process and prepare them to focus their comments when they begin to edit each other’s manuscripts.

“The task of the instructor is NOT to cruise the room interjecting his or her own extemporaneous and unsolicited comments into the ongoing discussions between students.”

3. Define clearly the role of the instructor and of the students in the peer-editing process. Students should take an ordered approach to consideration of the manuscript, recognizing and respecting the authority of the author and keeping in mind that the peer-editing session is but one aspect of the larger process of composing and communicating a message. Authors tend to have a sense of ownership of their work. When numerous substantive changes are proposed, the author may feel that his or her text is being appropriated by the reviewer. The role of the instructor, on the other hand, is to establish the guidelines of the peer-editing process, reminding students of the different aspects of the composition to be considered (e.g., audience awareness, coherence, cohesion, style of expression, grammatical accuracy, etc.). The task of the instructor is NOT to cruise the room interjecting his or her own extemporaneous and unsolicited comments into the ongoing discussions between students. Where instructor assistance is requested, the focus should not be on arbitrating differences of opinion, but rather on asking questions that will enable the pair to hone their comments to the specific issue under consideration.

4. Pay particular attention to the pairing of students for peer-editing activities. There can be a variety of criteria for determining pairs for collaborative activities: pairing students with the same (or different) linguistic ability; pairing students who are friends outside of class; pairing students who are new acquaintances; pairing students based on seating; etc. Throughout the peer-editing process, the teacher must be aware of the small-group dynamics and intervene in the event it becomes clear that a pair is dysfunctional. This can be done as long as the teacher is willing to reconstitute groups as the need arises.

5. Take prior experience of students into

account. As the data show, both Alan and Faith, as well as Oscar and Hugh, attributed a part of their success to their prior experience. Alan and Faith had done peer correction together in another class. They believed that, as a result, they had a better understanding of the process and could be a bit more direct and straightforward in their comments to each other. Although Oscar and Hugh had not worked together directly, they both had had experience with peer tutoring as a part of their English writing classes and felt that knowing the "procedure" of working together facilitated the task. As Oscar said, "if students say the truth in a frank manner and sincerely, they are going to include what the others suggest." He further emphasized the significance of what he termed "sincere" versus "insincere" criticism from peers. His thoughts echoed those of Faith when she questioned the value of so-called positive comments ("This is nice."); she believed that they were insincere and therefore worthless, since they provided her no basis for improving her composition. In planning a course, the instructor should probably assume initially that students do not know each other and have had no previous experience in peer editing. Thus, the instructor should prepare one or more sessions early in the semester to introduce the concept to the students. If it turns out that the class is already familiar with the process, the students can begin to work on their own compositions earlier in the semester.

Summary and Conclusion

The four informants in this article seemed to experience writing as a process of discovery of meaning, where audience played a determinative role, since they valued the opportunity to have "a second opinion" in the creation of their work. In order to profit as much as possible from peer response, both dyads engaged in a series of social practices aimed at constructing the supportive peer-feedback setting required by the act. They seemed to have reached their goals since, toward the end of the semester, each student admitted that working with a partner "helped pretty good," to use Hugh's phrase. It was the consensus of the instructors involved in these classes that the compositions of the students consistently improved as the semester progressed.

"These observations give rise to a more complex awareness of the multiple factors governing peer editing."

The linguistic behavior of the students in this study supports the claim that context exerts a major influence on language use. The peer-review situation, with its potential negative criticism, imposed certain risks, and the students' behavior in mitigating them was a major feature of their work as editors.

These observations give rise to a more complex awareness of the multiple factors governing peer editing. Oscar, Hugh, Faith, and Alan clearly wanted to be competent editors and help their peers. They believed that peer feedback was better than teacher response in communicating their intended meaning. But beyond that, they wanted to be respectful and considerate of one another, which explains their social practices. For these students, the emotional and social aspects of peer editing took precedence over the pedagogical and academic issues of the process. Further research (targeting practices both in and outside class, focusing on students at varying degrees of proficiency or in languages other than Spanish, attending to the instructor's behaviors, etc.) will increase awareness of the dynamics and consequences of peer editing. We may thus redefine the role of peer-editing in the L2 writing process.

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Endnotes

- Names are fictitious to protect anonymity.
- This article reports on one aspect of a broad study. Although there were eight primary informants, data from only four of the subjects are pertinent for inclusion here.
- Oscar's comment was originally made in Spanish. It has been translated into English by the author for the convenience of readers. The English translation reflects what was perceived to be the intended message, rather than attempting to highlight or emphasize the errors in form that might be present in the Spanish. When the focus of the citation involves student interaction regarding linguistic matters (i.e., peer editing), a more literal rendition of the language is provided, including lexical and linguistic inaccuracies.

APPENDIX A

CORRECTION GUIDES

EDITORIAL REVIEW SHEET: COHESION AND CONTENT

Name of reviewer _____ Date reviewed _____

Author's name _____

Please answer the following questions:

a. If you could write a title for this paper, what would it be?

b. Consider the introductory paragraph. Does the author state his/her thesis?

Check the appropriate blank. Yes _____ No _____

Could the thesis be stated more clearly? Yes _____ No _____

c. How interesting is the introduction of this essay? Rate the interest level of the essay on a scale from 1 to 5

(1 = boring; 5 = fascinating) 1___ 2___ 3___ 4___ 5___

d. What vocabulary words would you change to make the essay more interesting? Please be as specific as possible.

e. Are there places in the essay where the author seems to wander? That is, are there parts of the essay that are not relevant to the thesis statement? Write the words "off-topic" near those sections of the paper that seem "off-topic" to you. You may write directly on the author's paper.

f. How do you rate the organization of this essay? Rate the organization on a scale from 1 to 5.

(1 = Needs much improvement; 5 = Outstanding) 1___ 2___ 3___ 4___ 5___

g. How could you improve the organization of the essay? Please be as specific as possible.

h. How do you rate the content of this essay? Rate the content on a scale from 1 to 5.

(1 = Needs much improvement; 5 = Outstanding) 1___ 2___ 3___ 4___ 5___

i. What specific topics in the essay could be expanded upon, clarified, or deleted? Are examples needed?

j. In what specific ways could the conclusion be improved?

RESPONSE TO THE REVIEWER

Name of author _____ Date of response _____

Name of reviewer _____

Please fill in the blanks below.

a. I agree with the following comments that the reviewer made:

b. These are the changes I plan to make in response to the reviewer's comments:

c. I disagree with these comments:

d. I think I need the most help improving the following: (Please check one or more blanks)

___ the thesis statement; I need a clearer thesis statement.

___ the introduction; I need to make the introduction more interesting.

___ the transitions between paragraphs; I need better transitions.

___ the content; I need to add more details.

___ the vocabulary; I need to avoid redundancy.

___ the grammar; my grammar is weak.

___ the conclusion; I need a more interesting conclusion.

___ the conclusion; I need a conclusion that is more directly related to the thesis.

___ the coherence; parts of my essay are off-topic.

e. Other: Please describe. Be as specific as possible.