

# Student Interaction in Peer Conferencing

by Tamara Swenson

The process of writing, the very act of putting words on paper, has received a great deal of attention from composition teachers and researchers. Much of this attention has stemmed from a growing awareness among educators that composition means more than the final product of the five-paragraph essay. From this a variety of views about writing have emerged that need to be considered by the EFL teacher: writing as communication (Raimes, Focus viii); the writer as reader (Widdowson 35); writing as a discovery of meaning (Zamel 195); writing as interaction between writer and reader (Johns 30), and writing as thinking (Murray 51).

Research into the process of composition (Silva 15; Raimes, "Anguish" 261; Zamel 208) has indicated that there is more to the process of writing than can be perceived in the final product. In turn, educators have begun to ask how to best get students to experience the process of composition and understand that writers don't necessarily know what they will say before they begin (Zamel 198). Finally, there is also a growing body of data indicating that traditional correction techniques make no difference in whether a student's writing improves at all (Robb, Ross and Shortreed 90).

In response, a variety of techniques for getting students involved in the writing process have been advocated, including "quick-writing" (Jacobs 282), pyramid patterns, loop writing and listing (Hughes, et al. 65), and various brainstorming techniques (Raimes, Techniques 69-71). None of these techniques exclude any of the others, and they are

often used in combination in many composition classes. In addition to these ways of getting students started, there has been an effort to push writers toward a process of either self- or peer-evaluation. Murray (178), Raimes (Techniques 4) and Zamel (208) have urged teachers to engage students in self-evaluation of their writing through periodic writer evaluation, and writer-reader conferences, with the teacher as reader.

### Conference Method

The conference method, advocated by Murray as "...the most effective—and most practical—method of teaching composition" (174), involves the writer and the reader, usually the student and the teacher, in a continuing process of evaluating the writing. Through conferencing, the student develops an understanding of the writing process and, in turn, becomes a more effective evaluator of her own writing (Greenholtz 50).

Conferencing, however, does not necessarily mean the teacher is the only person the writer should talk to about their writing. Rather, "the student-teacher conference should evolve into student-to-student conferences" (Murray 158). This process of evolving responsibility, where the student is both writer and reader, helps prepare for the most important conferences a writer can have—those with themselves.

To bring students to this point, however, it is important to set up guidelines for conferences, whether they are student-teacher or student-student. Various guidelines have been suggested, generally following the pattern of: The writer comments on the draft; the reader reads the draft; the reader responds to the writer's comments; the writer responds to the reader's comments (Murray 160). The goal of each stage of the writing process, through pre-writing and conferencing, is to help the students become more effective writers and evaluators of their own writing.

The conference method outlined here must be modified to some degree to fit Japanese expectations and abilities (Greenholtz 52). The

modifications made to fit the expectations and abilities of the writing students of one class of students at a Japanese women's college include: student discussion with partners on the selection of the initial topic; in-class quick-writing on the topic; at home writing on the topic; student conferencing in groups of three or four; rewriting with the reader comments under consideration; student-student and student-teacher conferencing, as time permits, during class time; rewriting.

Student-student conferences are generally held three or four times during each writing project. During the first conference, the writer explains her main idea, in English or Japanese; the reader reads the paper; the reader tells the writer one thing they liked, one they didn't like and what they didn't understand; the writer can respond or ask questions about the reader's comments. In subsequent conferences, readers focus on organization, language use and, finally, editing. Student-teacher conferences occur throughout the process, although primarily when intervention or feedback is requested by the writer.

### **Interaction in the writing conference**

To thoroughly understand the role of conferencing in the writing process, it is necessary to know what is actually taking place during student-student peer conferences. One aspect that has not been thoroughly explored by writing researchers is the issue of what occurs during NNS-NNS peer-conferences. Research done on the discourse strategies in NS-NNS and NNS-NNS conversations suggests several possible interaction patterns. Of primary interest to those concerned with the writing process are clarification checks. Chaudron defines clarification checks as requests "...for further information from an interlocutor about a previous utterance" (45).

During the writing conference clarification of the writing, not the "previous utterance," is the focus of the clarification request. For purposes of this paper, clarification requests, as used in the writing conference, can be further divided into two categories: requests for

clarification of word or sentence meaning and requests for additional information about the subject. Clarification of meaning includes, among others, requests for explanation or translation of a word or idea in the writing, such as "What does \_\_\_\_\_ mean?" or "Is this \_\_\_\_\_." Requests for additional information include, among others: "Why don't you write about \_\_\_\_\_." "How do you use \_\_\_\_\_?" and "Why do you use \_\_\_\_\_?"

In actual instances in peer-conferencing interactions, for example, a request for clarification of meaning shows a request to understand the writer's topic.

A3 What's the name of . what's aloë's name?<sup>1</sup>

A1 Aloë's name?

A3 Name, do you know in Japanese?

Similarly, a request for additional information occurs later in the conversation.

A3 Aloë wa nande tsuketeru? [Why do you use aloë?]<sup>2</sup>

A1 Aloë recently is famous for many people because the effect of aloë is discovered much.

A third category of interaction, specific suggestions made about improving the paper during the writing conference, also warrants consideration in any study of NNS-NNS interaction in peer-conferencing.

## Method

*Subjects:* 12 Ss from three sophomore composition classes at a women's college represent the data sample for this study. One group of four Ss from each class made up a peer-conferencing group during the first stage of the student-student conferencing procedure as outline above. The groups, labeled for purposes of this study as groups A, B and C,

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1. Pauses in the interaction transcript are indicated by use of one "." for each second of pause time. The series "... " indicates a three second pause.
  2. A gloss of the Japanese used during the interaction appears in brackets [ ] following the student utterance.

were selected for this study by their proximity to the audio tape-recording equipment.

*Materials and Procedure:* Ss were audio tape-recorded during an entire 90-minute class period held during the second semester of the school year. Each class was allotted 15- to 20-minutes for peer-conferencing, the amount of time generally allotted during the first stage of conferencing. During this time they were directed to read and comment on the first draft of a paper on "health." Ss had completed quick-writing and at home readings on the topic, and had been asked to choose one aspect of the topic to explore further in their writing.

*Data Analysis:* The Ss'taped conversations were then examined and the relevant portions of the peer-conferencing sessions were transcribed. All English used during the session was transcribed by the researcher, while sections in Japanese were first timed, and those portions relevant to a discussion of what takes place during NNS-NNS peer-conferences were transcribed and translated into English by a Japanese NS. Transcripts were then examined for instances of each of the three categories under consideration: requests for clarification of meaning, requests for information and specific suggestions.

## **Results**

During the peer-conferencing sessions examined, a total of 31 requests for clarification occurred among the three groups. There were 29 requests for additional information and 6 specific suggestions for improvement.

Group A began by reading all the papers, then spent the remainder of the conference period discussing or clarifying the topics selected. The discussion, primarily in English, centered on clarification of meaning, obtaining additional information on the topic, and making specific suggestions. During the Group A peer-conferencing session a total of 20 requests for clarification of meaning and 26 requests for additional information occurred. Five suggestions for improvements were also made by the readers.

Requests for clarification of meaning included:

A2 Think, think about .. nani [what]? hot mugī [barley]?

A1 Hot mugī?

A4 Hot mugī is, hot mugī is used to tea.

A1 Hot mugī?

A4 Hot mugī cha. [barley tea]

Requests for additional information included:

A3 Etto, aloe, ka na, mannaka ga nan iro haiteru? [Well, aloe, what color is in the middle?]

A2 Ki-iro. [Yellow.]

And:

A3 Horenso [spinach] salad and .. and shitake .. shitake [mushrooms] .. I .. are good for our health.

A2 Shitake?

A3 Shitake.

A2 Nande [Why] good for health?

A3 Effect to .. cancer .. so.

Suggestions for specific improvement included:

A3 I think .. you are, your, um, your paper. I think you like um, you do .. write more of aloe.

A2 I like .. I don't know, I don't know many .. aloe, so I, I don't know. Um. I. Aloe is ... aloe is grown in .. Africa .... so I did it about Africa.

[laughter]

A2 I think you have to .. to .. you must write .. this is the

A1 This paper?

A2 If .... you did in this paper ... this paper.

A1 Write about .. Africa in this paper?

A2 Yes.

During Group A's peer-conferencing time, use of Japanese was confined to the sentence and word level.

Group B spoke almost entirely in Japanese. Rather than reading the

paper's first, Ss in Group B began by asking the writer to explain what was written in each paper. They then read the paper, following a pattern similar to that in Group A. However, the number of specific requests or suggestions decreased during the peer-conferencing period. Group B made seven requests for clarification of meaning, two requests for additional information and one specific suggestion, in addition to the pre-reading questions to the writers.

The Ss interactions during peer-conferencing in the pre-reading questions included:

B1 Nani ga kaeta? [What did you write about?]

B2 Shoga yo. [Ginger, you know.]

And:

B4 Nani ga shoga kakun? [What did you write about ginger?]

B3 Shoga zuto kakeru yo? [You wrote only about ginger?]

Clarification requests included:

B1 Shoga yuu? [Hot ginger water?]

B2 Um, to negi. [and onion]

B1 Negi? Nande negi? [Onions? Why onions?]

Information requests included:

B1 Kono naka ga nan to yuu ka na? [What did you say in here?]

B2 Eh! Sono kotonai. Kore wa watashi na katte kaku de. [Eh!  
Not that. I wrote about this]

And suggestions:

B4 Ah, so ka. Sono shiranakatta. Negi, sono koyo ga attan.  
[Ah, really. I didn't know that. That style of onions.]

B2 So desu. [That's right.]

B4 Naka, umeboshi, toka negi, toka ... [With pickled plums, and  
onions and ... in it.]

B3 mo .. sore mo kakun. [and .. write about this.]

Group C's conference did not follow either pattern of interaction demonstrated by groups A or B. Except when directly monitored, Ss in the Group C peer-conferencing session discussed topics unrelated to the

papers. When monitored, Ss showed similar styles of response to the writing as seen in groups A and B, although there were no suggestions for improvement or pre-reading questions. Four clarification requests and one request for additional information were found during the writing related sections of the peer-conferencing session.

One example of the group's clarification requests is:

C2 Kore ga ii, kedo, sono imi wa? [This is good, but what does this mean?]

CSs Mmm. [group agreement]

C2 Kono mama, kore ga ii, to omou. Demo, kore wa. [As it is this is good, I think. But, this.]

C4 So, so, so, so, so. [Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.]

C1 Mm, so. Karada wa, .. ume to yasai. [Mm, yes. The body .. plums and vegetables.]

While the request for additional information is:

C1 Chichi ga warukunai, ga tsukatteiru .. [my father is not sick, but uses ..]

C2 Karada wa? Itsu kara? [His body? From when?]

C1 Chichi, umareta toki kara. [My father, from when he was born.]

## Discussion

Two patterns of interaction emerged during the student-student conferencing from the analysis of the data. Peer-conferencing participants either read, then clarify what was read and seek additional information, and after clarification make suggestions for the writing; or, seek some clarification before reading, then follow the same pattern of clarification and requesting additional information before making suggestions. There appears to be little difference in the types of requests or suggestions made about the writing regardless of whether the conference is conducted in English, the L2, or Japanese, the Ss L1. However, the conference appears to focus more directly on the writing, with less wandering into other unrelated topics, when conducted in the language of the paper, in

this case English - the Ss L2.

There were no instances where students focused discussion on syntax, style, or lexicon, except where there was a confusion of meaning. Rather, student-student conferences during the early stage of the conference process appear to be centered on the ideas the writer wants to express, whether the conference is conducted in English or Japanese. This must be taken as a positive aspect of the conference method since it indicates the peer-conference allows the writers and readers to focus on discovering the meaning in the writing, a step many researchers insist is a necessary stage in the writing.

However, unlike the pattern expected to be followed of writer comment - read - reader comment - respond suggested by Murray (160), the peer-conference pattern has a number of possible permutations. This must be seen as a positive aspect of the conference method, since flexibility in the approach allows for each peer-conferencing group to explore the writing in a way that seems comfortable.

## **Conclusion**

This examination of student interactions suggests the peer-conferencing method, as it operates in Japan, can be a valid method for further involving student writers in all stages of the writing process. In addition, the data collected indicates that students involved in peer-conferences about papers written in their L2 focus more directly on the writing when discussion also takes place in the L2, indicating teachers might consider insisting on L2 use in writing conferences. Finally, results suggest that the peer-conference is an effective way to get writers and readers to more closely examine the ideas and topics in the writing during the initial stages of conferencing. However, for any firm conclusions about the effectiveness of student-student conferences in an EFL writing program to be drawn more extensive study of all aspects involved in the second-language writing process, including interactions during all stages of conferencing, must be conducted.

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