



Improve the Grammar Skills of Second-Year English Major Students through Peer Review

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Abstract:

In the realm of language acquisition, grammar stands as the backbone of effective communication. Mastery over grammatical conventions not only enhances clarity in expression but also lends credibility and sophistication to one's writing. However, for second-year English major students, grasping the intricacies of grammar can often pose a daunting challenge. Traditional classroom instruction, while invaluable, may not always provide the personalized feedback and interactive learning experiences necessary for substantial improvement. This research explores an innovative approach to addressing this challenge: harnessing the power of peer review to augment the grammar skills of second-year English major students. This process not only fosters a deeper understanding of grammatical concepts but also cultivates critical thinking and analytical skills essential for academic and professional success. Thus, this study aims to assess the efficacy of peer review in ameliorating students' grammar. The study involves second-year English major students at a university in Hanoi, aged between 20 and 21. Employing a student-centered analytical approach, the research identifies common grammatical errors among students and proposes remedial strategies. The study's outcomes are anticipated to benefit English major students and non-English majors alike.

Keywords: grammatical errors, peer review, English major students, writing proficiency.

1. Introduction

This study delves into the effectiveness of employing peer review as a means to enhance grammar skills among students at a university in Hanoi. Peer review offers a valuable instructional approach by fostering student-student interaction. In this method, students work in pairs to identify and correct grammatical errors, which can be integrated into any writing class session by instructors to assess student comprehension and progress. By engaging in peer review, students not only rectify grammar mistakes but also glean valuable insights from their errors, contributing to a more enriching learning experience.

Writing stands out as a fundamental aspect of language acquisition, constituting a productive skill wherein individuals express ideas through written language. According to Turk and Kirkman (1989), the act of writing is inherently improvable through thoughtful consideration, asserting that virtually anyone can develop proficient writing abilities. Consequently, integrating peer review into writing lessons emerges as a prudent choice, given its simplicity and accessibility to students. This method fosters ample opportunities for student interaction, thereby altering the pace of classroom dynamics. Moreover, by shifting the instructional focus from the teacher to peers, students gain autonomy in their learning process, enabling them to freely articulate their thoughts and acquire knowledge independently.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Concepts of Grammar and Teaching Grammar

Understanding grammar and its effective instruction are pivotal aspects of language education. This literature review synthesizes key perspectives on the concepts of grammar and teaching grammar to shed light on best practices and current debates in the field.

Defining Grammar: Grammar encompasses the rules and structures governing a language's syntax, morphology, and semantics. It serves as the framework for effective communication, facilitating clarity and coherence in language use (Chomsky, 1957).

Traditional vs. Communicative Approaches: Traditional grammar instruction typically emphasizes rote memorization of rules and grammatical structures, often divorced from meaningful communication. In contrast, communicative language teaching prioritizes functional language use in real-life contexts, advocating for grammar instruction integrated into communicative tasks (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Role of Grammar in Language Learning: The role of grammar in language learning has been a subject of ongoing debate. While some argue for explicit grammar instruction as a foundation for language proficiency (Ellis, 2006), others advocate for implicit acquisition through exposure to authentic language use (Krashen, 1982).

Task-Based Grammar Instruction: Task-based language teaching (TBLT) integrates grammar instruction into task-based activities, fostering language learning through meaningful engagement in communicative tasks (Skehan, 1998). This approach promotes a balance between form-focused instruction and communicative competence.

Feedback and Corrective Feedback: Effective grammar instruction involves providing feedback on learners' grammatical errors. Research suggests that corrective feedback, when provided appropriately, can facilitate language acquisition and error correction (Ellis, 2009). However, the optimal timing, type, and delivery of feedback remain topics of ongoing investigation.

Technology-Enhanced Grammar Instruction: With the advent of technology, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) tools offer innovative approaches to grammar instruction. Digital resources such as online exercises, grammar apps, and language learning platforms provide learners with interactive and personalized learning experiences (Levy & Stockwell, 2006).

Cultural and Contextual Considerations: Grammar instruction should also consider cultural and contextual factors, recognizing the diversity of linguistic norms and communicative practices across cultures. Culturally responsive pedagogy encourages inclusive and culturally relevant grammar instruction that respects learners' backgrounds and identities (Gay, 2010).

Understanding language is facilitated by grammar, serving not only as a tool for organizing words but also for crafting them into meaningful sentences. It plays a crucial role in forming coherent expressions. According to the Oxford Dictionary, grammar encompasses the entire structure of a language, comprising syntax, morphology, and sometimes phonology and semantics. Teaching grammar adheres to certain principles, as outlined by Thornbury and Scott (1999). Firstly, it's essential for teachers to contextualize grammar, explaining why a particular grammatical form was chosen within a given context. Secondly, students should have ample opportunities to apply grammar in communicative settings, ensuring comprehension and production of language. Thirdly, minimizing direct explanation time maximizes practice time, allowing students to engage, communicate, and internalize language. Fourthly, teachers should tailor grammar instruction to students' needs, using diagnostic activities to gauge their knowledge. Fifthly, fostering an optimal learning environment with varied opportunities aids in effective grammar acquisition, considering factors like input accessibility, fluency, accuracy, and feedback. Ultimately, these principles should be adapted to suit students' levels, needs, interests, expectations, and learning styles. Despite these guidelines, grammar classes often face challenges, such as students reverting to their native language, teachers feeling a lack of control, and student behavior issues like defiance or disruption.

Additionally, classroom materials often fall short, and students frequently experience boredom or lack of motivation. To address these issues, English language teachers can consider the following suggestions:

- Teach grammar by introducing structures, rules, and examples.
- Utilize visual aids, such as illustrator graphics, to illustrate grammar concepts.
- Introduce grammar through contextual situations to enhance understanding.
- Employ critical thinking methods to engage students in grammar learning.
- Provide ample practice opportunities, ensuring students grasp new concepts effectively. Homework assignments should be given, and time should be allocated in class to review and explain students' questions.
- Foster a comfortable and supportive atmosphere in the classroom to encourage participation and learning.
- Offer straightforward examples to aid students in comprehending concepts easily.

2.2. Peer check

Peer assessment, also known as peer check or peer feedback, has emerged as a valuable pedagogical tool in writing instruction. This literature review aims to provide an overview of research on peer assessment in writing, exploring its benefits, challenges, implementation strategies, and effectiveness.

Benefits of Peer Assessment:

Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of peer assessment in writing. Peer feedback provides students with additional perspectives on their writing, fostering deeper reflection and revision (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). It promotes active engagement and collaborative learning, as students take on the roles of both evaluators and recipients of feedback (Topping, 2009). Moreover, peer assessment enhances critical thinking skills and metacognitive awareness, as students learn to identify strengths and weaknesses in their own and others' writing (Van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006).

Effectiveness of Peer Assessment:

Research suggests that peer assessment is effective in improving writing skills. A meta-analysis by Cho and MacArthur (2010) found positive effects of peer assessment on writing quality across various grade levels. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that receiving feedback from peers can lead to revisions that result in improved writing performance (Topping, 2009).

Implementation Strategies:

Successful implementation of peer assessment requires careful consideration of various factors. Research suggests that clear guidelines and training are essential to ensure that students provide constructive and helpful feedback (Topping, 2009). Peer assessment activities should be scaffolded, gradually increasing in complexity to support students' development of evaluative skills (Van den Berg et al., 2006). Additionally, creating a supportive classroom climate where students feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback is crucial for the success of peer assessment (Cho & MacArthur, 2010).

Challenges and Limitations:

Despite its benefits, peer assessment poses several challenges. One common concern is the variability in the quality of feedback provided by peers, which can affect its usefulness (Topping, 2009). Additionally, issues related to fairness, bias, and students' reluctance to critique their peers' work may arise (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). Furthermore, managing peer assessment activities within limited class time can be challenging for teachers (Van den Berg et al., 2006).

Best Practices and Recommendations:

To address these challenges, researchers recommend implementing peer assessment using structured protocols and rubrics to guide feedback (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). Providing opportunities for peer review throughout the writing process, rather than just at the final stage, can also enhance its effectiveness (Topping, 2009). Moreover, fostering a culture of respect and collaboration in the classroom can mitigate issues related to feedback quality and student reluctance (Van den Berg et al., 2006).

In conclusion, peer assessment is a valuable practice in writing instruction, offering numerous benefits for students' learning and writing development. By carefully addressing implementation challenges and following best practices, educators can harness the power of peer assessment to enhance students' writing skills and foster a collaborative learning environment.

Tips for organizing pair work in classrooms, as suggested by Byrne (1989), aim to address potential issues:

- Arrange students into pairs conveniently.
- Ensure clear task instructions.
- Keep activities simple and concise.
- Avoid excessively prolonged activities.
- Conduct periodic checks.
- Manage noise levels as needed.
- Offer feedback on performance.

To establish a peer check method:

- Fully explain the procedure before dividing the class.
- Provide demonstrations or examples beforehand.
- Prompt students to articulate task understanding before beginning.
- Prepare supplementary activities for quick finishers, ensuring they've completed tasks accurately.
- Schedule feedback sessions after pair or group work.
- Set definite time limits.
- Regulate student pairings to avoid dominance dynamics.

The role of teacher in peer check

The teacher plays a crucial role in facilitating peer check activities in the classroom. They have control over the content and methodology of student learning. The teacher's role may vary depending on the specific activity being conducted. Harmer (1998) discusses various roles a teacher may take on, including controller, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, and investigator.

Once pair or group work begins, students are expected to work independently, with the teacher circulating the classroom. The teacher should briefly observe each pair, listen to their interactions, and make notes on any language errors for later discussion with the whole class. It's advisable for the teacher not to interrupt or correct students during their work, allowing them to focus and collaborate effectively.

3. Methodology

The research employed writing analysis to gather genuine data. Participants consisted of English majors at a university in Hanoi, all within the age range of 20 to 21 years old. Specifically, they were second-year students currently studying grammar. The study involved a total of 6 participants. Over a span of 8 weeks, the researcher collected 48 academic writings authored by these 6 English majors. The primary aim was to identify common grammatical errors among the students' writing. Subsequently, the researcher implemented a peer-checking approach, involving all participants, to aid in error correction and underscore the significance and efficacy of peer-checking in improving grammar proficiency among second-year English majors.

4. Findings and discussions

The data analysis of students' writing aimed for a comprehensive understanding of the grammatical errors encountered and to evaluate the effectiveness of the peer-check method in enhancing grammar skills. The researcher selected 6 students from a pool of 52 second-year students, comprising 2 excellent, 2 good, and 2 poor performers. These students were organized into 3 pairs: pairs 1 and 2 consisted of a good student paired with a poor student, while pair 3 included 2 good students.

Over the course of 8 weeks, on Mondays, students were tasked with writing a 200-word paragraph within 35-40 minutes. In the first two weeks, the researcher collected 12 paragraphs from the 6 students and identified various errors such as incorrect grammatical structures, subject-verb agreement issues, tense errors, misuse of synonyms, and incorrect word classes.

Following these initial assessments, the peer-check method was implemented from week 3 to week 8. During this period, students continued to write paragraphs, and in each pair, one student would identify and correct mistakes in the other's paragraph. The researcher provided exercises to reinforce learning and prevent recurring errors.

After 4 weeks of implementing the peer-check method, significant improvements were observed. Students who previously made numerous grammatical errors showed noticeable progress. By the end of the study, students in pairs 1 and 2 demonstrated a reduction in grammar mistakes, and those in pair 3 showed minimal errors.

Remarkably, the excellent students consistently produced error-free writing throughout the study. These findings suggest that the peer-check method, coupled with immediate corrective exercises, effectively improves grammar skills.

In conclusion, the study underscores the effectiveness and feasibility of the peer-check method in enhancing students' grammar proficiency over an 8-week period.

5. Conclusion

Utilizing the peer-check method is a widely recognized practice both in Vietnam and globally. However, the manner in which it's organized greatly impacts its effectiveness. This study reinforces the efficacy of peer-checking in enhancing students' grammar skills, particularly in writing. Students can pair up to exchange academic papers and mutually identify and correct errors. Teachers can oversee this process, offering guidance and resolving any disputes or queries that arise.

This method offers several benefits. It fosters a relaxed and conducive classroom environment, facilitates learning from peers' mistakes, and encourages cooperation among students. Additionally, it provides an avenue for students to seek assistance from more proficient peers when needed. Despite its merits, implementing the peer-check method poses challenges for teachers, especially in large classes where individual monitoring is difficult. Moreover, students lacking proficiency and enthusiasm for English may hinder its effectiveness.

In conclusion, the peer-check method proves suitable for seminar classes, as evidenced by experimental results and student feedback. While this study was conducted at a university in Hanoi, it holds potential applicability to other educational institutions in Vietnam. Moving forward, it's recommended to integrate the peer-check method more extensively into writing sessions and explore its utility in improving other language skills, particularly speaking and reading. Ultimately, the goal is to enhance students' grammar proficiency, leading to improved exam outcomes, such as the IELTS exam. Additionally, this research aims to offer practical suggestions for organizing peer-check activities during writing lessons, with the hope of minimizing grammatical errors across various forms of writing.

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