IMPLEMENTING PEER ASSESSMENT TOOLS TO ENHANCE TEACHING WRITING

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Abstract: *Collaborative work has become increasingly important; however, many teachers do not include it in teaching writing since they regard writing as an individual act. The aim of this paper is to show a new approach in teaching academic writing. It is based on the sociocultural theory, constructivism and the developed process writing model. The idea is that students go through the process of collaboration by using peer assessment activities (through workshops on Moodle). This approach is very demanding and time-consuming in a traditional classroom setting, but it is not the case in an eLearning environment. There are many advantages why teachers should use online peer assessment tools and one of the possible modes of such instruction is presented in this paper.*

Keywords: *teaching writing, peer assessment, SLA, E-Learning, Moodle*

1. INTRODUCTION

"*It's not about the tool, it's using the tools to facilitate learning*"

(Churches, 2009)

Writing is one of the most important basic skills that belongs to the three Rs (*r*eading, *w*riting and a*r*ithmetic). Developing writing skills is a very demanding and difficult task both for teachers and students. It becomes even more difficult when it comes to developing writing skills in a foreign language. Traditional classroom setting and paper based tasks make this process complicated. Moreover, it needs time to go through the whole process of writing, revising, evaluating and re-writing. On the other hand, if eLearning tools are implemented when teaching writing, this process becomes simpler and shorter in time. The results are better in the end, too. The aim of this paper is to show a new approach in teaching academic writing where online tools for peer assessment are used. This approach is based on the research that took place in 2013 with students at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade. The theoretical background can be found in the theory of socioculturalism and constructivism. The model for developing writing skills is the model for process writing (The Hayes-Flower writing model 1981), but revised and adapted for this approach.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Sociocultural theory and constructivism are rich soil for explaining peer learning and peer assessment. Vygotsky stated that "with collaboration, direction, or some kind of help the child is always able to do more and solve more difficult tasks that he can independently" (Vygotsky, 1987: 209). He explained that there is the zone of actual development and the zone of proximal development which he defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by the independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). When applied to second language acquisition, sociocultural theory sees learning as dialogically based, i.e., "acquisition occurs *in* rather than *as a result* of interaction" (Ellis, 2008: 526). Bruner continued in the same manner as Vygotsky and introduced the idea of "scaffolding". Scaffolding is the same concept as the zone of proximal development. It is "the dialogic process by which one speaker assists another in performing a function that he or she cannot perform alone" (Ellis, 2008: 527). This means that in peer learning children are more prone to make progress.

Peer learning, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, collaborative learning are synonymous and mean learning in a group in which all members of the group take responsibility not only for their own learning, but also for the learning of their peers, "Peer learning is a type of cooperative learning which fosters the value of interaction between students and results in a variety of successful outcomes " (Christudason, 2003). They have a common goal, which can be problem-solving, research or upgrade skills.

An important aspect of peer learning is peer assessment. In this section we will give a definition of peer assessment/evaluation, emphasize the benefits and provide a model on how it should be implemented.

Peer assessment is a process of assessment in which schoolmates, colleagues from the faculty or peers evaluate each other's work. Falchikov (1995) defines peer assessment as "the process through which groups of individuals rate their peers". Topping proposed a more detailed definition, "Peer assessment is defined as an

arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status" (Topping, 1998: 250). A similar idea is with the concept **peer editing**: it is a technique where students work together, review, correct and suggest changes or comment on the paper before the final version is submitted to the teacher.

It is obvious that there is a difference between traditional, deep-rooted ways of assessment only by teachers and alternative evaluation by and among the students. Traditional assessment views the student as a passive recipient of knowledge who can be assessed only by authorities such as teachers. Learning is an individual process and the evaluation is objective and neutral (Anderson, 1998, cited in Lee 2009). An alternative assessment expects from students to apply their knowledge and skills in order to read with understanding, analyze, criticize and evaluate the work of others. There is a mutual benefit in this interaction – both for the one who evaluates and for the one who is evaluated. The task assigned to the evaluator is cognitively demanding and meets the highest levels of Bloom's taxonomy. In the analysis and evaluation of the works of others, the evaluators become aware of their own work and develop critical skills.

While conducted our research, we insisted that the students from the beginning understand the importance of collaborative learning. They did not have the freedom to arbitrarily provide feedback, but the feedback was based on the peer review sheet. The questions from the sheet were used to create online peer review tool in the workshop.

Collaborative assessment, despite some shortcomings, which are largely culturally conditioned, has many advantages and should be implemented in the current model of the writing process and the creation of distance learning courses.

3. THE RESEARCH

The scope of this research was developing academic writing skills in English by means of electronic collaborative tools (workshop on Moodle). The workshop was used to facilitate peer assessment activities on the platform. It is worth mentioning that without eLearning tools such activity is very demanding and time consuming, almost impossible to be performed.

The research took place in 2013 at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade. 105 students participated in the research. The 10-week course "Introduction to Academic Writing" took place online on Moodle platform at globetrotter.rs. The research question was whether the

students who participated in various collaborative activities performed better in the final exam when compared to the students who did not participate or took small part in them. The main hypothesis is that the students who use e-learning collaborative tools have better results in the final exam. It is because they develop critical thinking skills in the process of collaborative/peer assessment which helps them with their own writing. Statistical analysis showed that there was correlation between participation in peer assessment activity and the grade in the final exam (r=0,502) and correlation between peer assessment activity and the grade for the essay organization in the final exam (r=0,522).

It was confirmed that the students who participated in collaborative activities showed continuous development in writing. Furthermore, they performed better in the final test when they had to write an argumentative essay. The students particularly showed good results in compositional organization, mainly in using the funnel introduction, formulating the topic sentence and controlling idea, providing good supporting details. After ten weeks of collaborative practice, the shape and internal pattern of their essays became clearer, and organizational skills were more adequately controlled.

4. E-TOOLS FOR PEER ASSESSMENT: WORKSHOP

Encouraging results after the final test point to the workshop as the most important tool when teaching writing. The workshop is one of the modules on Moodle platform. Moodle is an open-source learning management system used as a web application to help teachers create online lessons or courses (moodle.org). There are many advantages of Moodle over traditional lessons and one of them is surely assessing learners via workshop. Workshop is a very useful tool through which students can:
• get instructions for doing the task
• view the example solutions
• submit their paper in a set period of time,
• assess the teacher's example on the basis of set criteria,
• compare their assessment with grade teacher for the given example,
• evaluate other students.

Picture 1 Phases in workshop

The workshop has five stages which can be time-controlled and opened/closed as needed. When there is an active phase, it is painted in a different color (e.g. In picture 1 the fifth phase is painted green and it means that

no one can submit their work). The picture 1 shows the stages of:

Phase 1- set up phase: in this phase teachers introduce the task, explain the procedure for the submission of the task and create a list for evaluation.

Phase 2 – submission: in this phase students submit papers, can view a list of assessment criteria and teacher assigns work for collaborative assessment or self-assessment.

Table 1 Instruction for students

Write a paragraph about a special sport or activity that you are presently enjoying, have enjoyed in the past, or plan to do in the future. The paragraph should be up to 250 words, not longer. Please use Word/Open Office Writer, save a document as **Sport name surname** *, for example* **Sport Danijela Ljubojevic** *. Send the document by using this module. Your friend's work will be available to you after your own submission.*

Pay attention to everything you have read so far about topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentences! Go through the Editing Checklist on your own before you submit your work.

Phase 3 – grading evaluation: students (and the teacher) evaluate assigned paper.

Phase 4 - evaluation score: if there were more participants in the assessment (the paper was assessed both by the teacher and the student), in this stage the platform automatically evaluates the grade and calculates a score (mean value or some strict/lax grading).

Picture 2 Grading evaluation phase in workshop

Phase 5 -closed: when this phase is on, no one can make changes in the workshop.

5. CONCLUSION

Workshop in this research was used as the main tool for developing writing skills. Workshop is connected to the concept of collaborative learning because students can evaluate their own work and compare their scores with the scores given to them by another participant (a teacher or a student). Self-assessment is an important aspect in the development of critical thinking and fosters the autonomy of students.

Also, an important aspect of this research is shifting the focus from the traditional concept of a teacher as an instructor and evaluator to the students' new role. Student become evaluators and give each other explanations. Collaborative learning has a major role in distance education and the tools enable students to perform tasks in teams. Besides group work, tools for collaborative learning achieve continuous learning, monitoring and evaluation, which is in line with modern concepts of formative assessment, i.e. assessment *for* learning instead of the traditional assessment *of* learning. Moreover, the advantages offered by the distance learning are reflected in the fact that a teacher alone does not participate in the evaluation process, but also the students themselves develop an awareness of assessing the knowledge and achieve autonomy in learning. The teacher in this approach becomes a moderator who directs and monitors the process.

Theoretical contribution of this research is redefining the existing cognitive processes writing model. It suggests adding collaborative elements both to the prewriting phase and first draft phase. Because of the great emphasis it puts upon collaboration and peer learning, this model is called socioconstructivist writing model of cognitive processes.

Practical aspects of the research refer to organizing classes for teaching writing skills: how to implement distance learning courses and how to apply socioconstructivist writing model of cognitive processes. Moreover, the valuable part is the designed ten-week Moodle course with SCORM created lessons, as well as one of the most detailed checklists for asssessing writing (both for paragraphs and essays).

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