PEER CORRECTION IN ESL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Like in any other learning situation, in a second language classroom a learner essentially needs to be provided with feedback on his/her performance. Due to the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching and Learner-centered Teaching, students' active participation in language learning is now highly sought and therefore, peer correction is becoming increasingly popular among the practitioners. This paper re-views peer correction as a 'popular' technique to be used in classroom and explores several issues regarding this. It also places peer correction in the context of Bangladesh and tries to find out the effectiveness of the technique particularly for the classrooms of Bangladesh. Moreover, in this paper I have hypothesized that the acceptability of peer feedback varies between the young and the adult learners. In order for testing the general acceptability of this technique and the hypothesis, data have been collected from students at tertiary level as well as students from primary level. Finally, the students' responses have been analyzed and discussed, and some recommendations have been provided regarding the practice of peer correction.

Key words: Peer correction, peer feedback, adult and young language learners, learner-centered teaching, cultural difference.

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the various roles that a language teacher plays, giving feedback to learners' performance is one of the most significant. With the shift in method from Grammar-Translation or Audiolingualism method to Communicative Language Teaching, teacher's role as a feedback provider has also changed. In the early methods of language teaching, the teacher was considered to be the sole source of knowledge; therefore it was only his/her prerogative to impart knowledge as well as to correct students' knowledge. But, the 'recent' approaches and methods have emphasized a lot on learners' cognition and their autonomy. With such a change, student-oriented techniques of error correction, such as peer correction or self correction has come up.

In this paper I have re-looked at peer correction and tried to find out the suitability of it as a classroom technique to be used in Bangladesh.

II. ERROR CORRECTION

Errors are no longer looked at as a result of 'no learning' rather it is viewed as the 'outcome of natural development' in language learning. So, in this process the teacher does not always correct errors; s/he just acts as a facilitator so that students themselves can be engaged in the process of correcting errors.

There are different ways in which the teacher can make feedback happen in class. The obvious technique that comes to anyone's mind is teacher correction. In a traditional classroom, a teacher as well as students expects the teacher to correct students' errors. Since the teacher is thought to be the one from whom knowledge flows to the students, it is only 'natural' that s/he will decide whether students have learnt or not.

The idea of self correction is closely tied with learner autonomy as well as the say, "Tell us, we forget; Show us we remember; Involve us, we learn." Self correction is the technique which engages students to correct their own errors. "It can… foster the development of skills needed to regulate their own learning and it places more responsibility for learning on the students (Rief, 1990)".

Peer correction in class happens when a student gives a response and "we ask a class *Do you think that's right? ... or* tell them to add a written comment to a piece of written work they have completed (Jeremy Harmer, 2007)". Peer correction is implemented in classrooms to enhance learner autonomy, cooperation, interaction and involvement. Most language teachers apply this technique in classrooms, aware or not aware of the theories of learning. An example of peer correction in language classroom is presented below:

Monica: Trains are safer planes.

Teacher: Safer planes? (*with surprised questioning intonation*)

Monica: Oh… Trains are safer than planes.

Teacher: Good, Monica. Now, 'comfortable' …Simon?

Simon: Trains are more comfortable. Planes are.

Teacher: Hmm. Can you help Simon, Bruno?

Bruno: Er… Trains are more comfortable than planes.

Teacher: Thank you. Simon?

Simon: Trains are more comfortable than planes.

[Jeremy Harmer, *How to Teach English*, page 63.**]**

The moment the teacher has nominated Bruno to 'help' Simon, s/he has applied peer correction. The teacher could have given the correct answer himself/herself; but in this way, s/he has ensured that

1. more students get the chance to use language in the class.
2. students learn to help each other.
3. s/he lets the authority go to students' share to some extent
4. Simon as well as Bruno as individual students has learnt the language item.

A. Philosophy behind peer correction

With the emergence of learner-centered beliefs in language teaching, the practice of peer feedback has become considerably more frequent in language classrooms. As a correction technique, it has been backed by a lot of theories of language teaching, such as Humanism, Communicative Language Teaching and Learner-centered Teaching. According to Paul Rollinson (2005), the principles operating behind applying this technique are:

1. Peer feedback is less threatening than teacher feedback. Because students are more comfortable with their classmates and therefore, getting corrected by own friends evokes less anxiety.

2. When correction comes from the teacher, it reinforces teacher's authority. In a traditional language class, the teacher is the authoritative figure and s/he is considered the sole source of knowledge. Students play the role of just a passive receiver of information. But through the practice of peer feedback, the classroom becomes less dominated by the teacher.

3. The involvement of peers in the correction process makes the classroom atmosphere more supportive and friendlier.

One more significant issue of classroom teaching comes up with peer correction. It is now acknowledged by most of the practitioners that students' involvement in classroom should be enhanced to better learning, and involvement indeed increases when students give feedback to each others performances (Gower et al. 1995).

Also, peer feedback takes the focus away from the teacher and thus initiates a transfer of roles from the teacher to the learners. Finally, since peer correction offers opportunities to the students to be responsible for their own learning, it is also advocated by the practitioners who believe in learner autonomy. Ágota Scharle and Anita Szabó (2000) have strongly suggested peer feedback to be applied for checking, especially, students' written work. They have provided an outline of how it can be applied in classroom; once students finish writing, the teacher gives one essay (or any written work) to each student and students are asked to evaluate each others work. They correct the errors and send notes to the respective authors about what they have corrected.

B. Problems with peer correction

Though peer feedback is largely welcomed for its cognitive, social and affective value, many of the teachers as well as students still doubt the benefits of it. Some of the problems with this technique are:

1. Some students might feel reluctant to correct their friends' errors because correcting friends' errors might harm their relationship. The

Chinese students in Nelson's study (1996) have been found to have withheld critical comments to maintain 'group harmony' or to not claim a degree of authority.

2. Jeremy Harmer (2004) anticipates a possible problem with peer correction. The student, after getting corrected by a peer, might feel that s/he is inferior to his peers. In such cases, students prefer to be corrected by the teacher gently.

3. Students might feel reluctant about giving their work to their peers for correction because they do not want their classmates to know about their errors. To such students', peer correction exposes them to their community and therefore, it affects their self-esteem.

4. Some times students do not value their peers' knowledge, and therefore they do not revise their written works based on their friends' feedback. But the same comments coming from their teachers are taken into consideration while revising (Macdonca & Johnson, 1992). In a study conducted by Sima Sengupta (1998) the results showed that

   a. Out of 12 students, not one of them revised their written work from their peers' feedback.
   b. The students mentioned 18 times that they were 'embarrassed to have peers read the composition'.

Also, in the same study one student is found to have said that "*I think organization is better if teacher tells me what to do. I think I do not like my neighbour to read my composition. I have many mistakes. I am not… I do not like… my class friend will laugh.*"

So it is evident that student-student correction as a technique is not an absolute 'good thing' to do in class. Problems might occur when it does not suit the students or it is not practiced well. Therefore, it has to be done carefully, only when there is an absolute cooperative atmosphere in the classroom.

III. PEER FEEDBACK IN SPEAKING AND WRITING

Peer correction as a technique does not have a uniform nature, and therefore the impact too varies.

From my observation and experience of classroom teaching, I have noticed that peer correction applied in a class on speaking and in a class on writing operate in completely different ways. Peer correction in teaching speaking happens when the teacher orally asks anything to a student and s/he gives a wrong answer, then the teacher nominates a person (or asks the rest of the class) for giving the correct answer. On the other hand, when students' written works are given to their friends for checking, it is known as peer correction in writing. Since the nature of correction is different, the issues and the impacts of the technique are also different and those are explained below:

- In speaking, when one student corrects his/her friend's errors, the issue becomes one of embarrassment. Whenever, students express their discomfort with this technique, the main problem they mention is that they do not want to be 'insulted' in front of the whole class. Also, through peer correction students automatically get compared with their friends, where they are proven inferior to their peers.

- As Sima Sengupta's (1998) research suggests, the issue of embarrassment exists, when peer correction is applied in writing. But, there is one added issue at play in writing. The purpose of applying the technique for teaching writing is students would get to know their problems from a less anxiety-provoking party, which would make learning easier. But, sometimes students have been found to not consider their peers' corrections and advice for revision. Because, in such situations, correction lacks reliability. Students do not view their peers as authorities who could correct their errors. As a result, the whole purpose of applying this technique fails.

IV. PEER CORRECTION AMONG YOUNG AND ADULT LEARNERS

Apart from the nature of peer correction, the acceptability and the validity of peer correction can also be different based on students' age. Peer correction has several psychological issues related to it. As young learners grow up as adults, their self-esteem and self-respect develop, and they become more aware of themselves as individuals. As a result, sometimes peer correction is not welcomed by the adult learners. Equally true is the opinion that adult learners, with age and maturity, learn to adapt better with people around them.

They learn to provide constructive criticisms as well as to tolerate or accept criticisms. On the other hand, young learners are more dependent on the teacher. They may not be as conscious as the adults are, but the value that they attribute to peer correction might not be worthwhile. For the very young learners, teacher is the ultimate source of knowledge and correction should always come from the teacher.

One more issue regarding learners' age is related to the validity of peer correction. As a technique, peer correction attributes a lot of responsibilities on students' part. Adult learners, after the required training, are able to practice this type of correction fairly well but the same might not be the case with young learners. As Paul Rollinson (2005) notes, "… the age of students…may constrain the extent to which the response activity can safely or profitably be left in the hands of the students."

Considering these issues, my study incorporates several nuances of peer correction and tries to see

1. whether peer correction is accepted by students in the context of Bangladesh

2. whether the acceptability varies between adult and the young learners.

V. THE PRESENT STUDY

A. Population

In order for answering the previous two questions, I conducted a study among the language learners of Bangladesh. And, for answering the second question, two groups of learners were chosen: a group of adult learners and a group of young learners. The adult group consisted of 23 students of BRAC University from the English and Economics department and from the Business school. Their age ranged from 19 to 24. They all had done language courses in their respective schools and also in the university's language school (CfL). The other group had 20 child learners between 8 to 11 years.

B. The methodology

The study was conducted using questionnaires. There were similar but different questionnaires for the two groups, based on the thought that child learners would need simpler and more direct questions than the adult learners. For example, the question in the adults' questionnaire "*In language classes, when the teacher corrects students errors, do you think it causes anxiety*?" was framed differently for the questionnaire for children as "*In language classes, when your teacher corrects your errors, do you feel nervous?*" Also, one question in the adults' questionnaire (*Do you think better learning will take place, if students correct each other's errors? Why or why not*?) was deleted thinking that such a question would require some amount of understanding of the teaching and learning process and young learners would not be able to respond to this effectively.

Also in order for obtaining quantitative data, there was a section in both the questionnaires where learners were required to either agree or disagree. In this section, there was a third dimension, neutral, in the questionnaire for the adults, which was deleted for the children thinking that children of 8-11 years are likely to either agree or disagree to any statement. They might not realize that there can be an opinion which is half-way between agreeing and disagreeing. The additional dimension of neutrality might just complicate the section for them.

All the learners were given detailed instructions before they started responding to the questions. During the data collection from the young group, an instructor was present to guide them through the process and to make sure that they understand the questions well and respond to the point.

C. Findings

The findings of the study are as varied as it could be. There is hardly any straight forward statement that can be made about the findings. I have analyzed the collected information on the basis of two questions posed in this paper:

Whether it is accepted or not: The responses of the students show that they are familiar with peer correction in classroom, specially when it is applied during oral communication. The total population of the study is 43 students (23 adults, 20 children). Among them, 20% percent of the students responded in affirmation for peer correction but as large as 80% of them did not see much use of it.
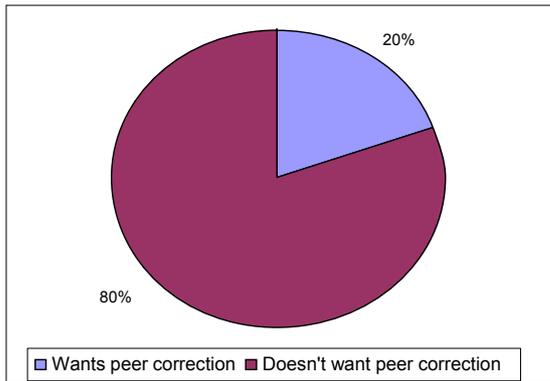
Graph 1: Integrated responses of the groups to peer correction

Two of the students (adult) said that they are okay with peer correction but the final answer should come from the teacher. So to them, peer correction could be practiced but along with teacher correction.

Some of the students, specially the adults were able to give elaborate reasons for liking or not liking peer correction. Among the reasons for liking peer correction, they said:

1. *Since their* (peers') *standard is equal to mine, they will explain my mistakes more softly.* (adult)

2. *I would love to because this will improve our English.* (child)

The reasons for which students did not accept peer correction are:

1. B*ecause, my friends don't know better than my teacher.* (child)

2. *Because, they are like me and they can also make mistakes.* (child)

An adult student was also able to evaluate peer correction from a teacher's perspective, which did not really fall in the range of responses but it could be considered as valuable data.

1. *It is also time consuming. Because when asking from friends he/she might be wrong so we have to move to another friend.*

Peer correction was not so accepted mostly for the embarrassment that it might cause. But surprisingly enough, an adult student said that she liked peer correction because the insult would make her remember the correct answer, therefore better learning would take place.

The responses did not vary much due to different skill focuses. Specially children showed the same responses to peer correction in both speaking and writing. In both cases, 14 of the 20 children (70%) said that they liked it. But for adults, the responses revealed additional information. 13 adult learners (56.52%) said that they liked peer correction in speaking, and 14 (60.87%) expressed acceptance for peer correction in writing. But in case of writing, 4 students said that they liked peer correction on condition that the essays were rechecked by the teacher.

Whether the results vary for age: Unlike the anticipation, not all the findings revealed differences between the adults' and the children's responses, but definitely some differences were noticed.

6 of the 23 adult learners (26.09%) agreed to the statement that they did not want their friends to know about their errors, whereas 9 of the 20 child learners (45%) agreed to it. This matches with the previous findings that adults are more welcoming about peer correction. Similarly, only 5 adults (21.72%) disagreed to the idea that since peers knew each other better, they would be able to help their friends with errors more effectively. For the same statement, as many as 8 child learners (40%) disagreed. Contrary to these findings, 11 of the 20 child learners (55%) said that they would feel more comfortable if peer correction happened, whereas only 7 of the 23 adult learners (30.43%) echoed it.

The acceptance or likings for peer correction was not great with any of the groups. But, both were somewhat welcoming about experimenting it. This welcoming nature was more among the adult learners. When the students were asked to choose any one of the two ways, all the children chose teacher correction, but 1 adult student said peer correction and 3 said both.
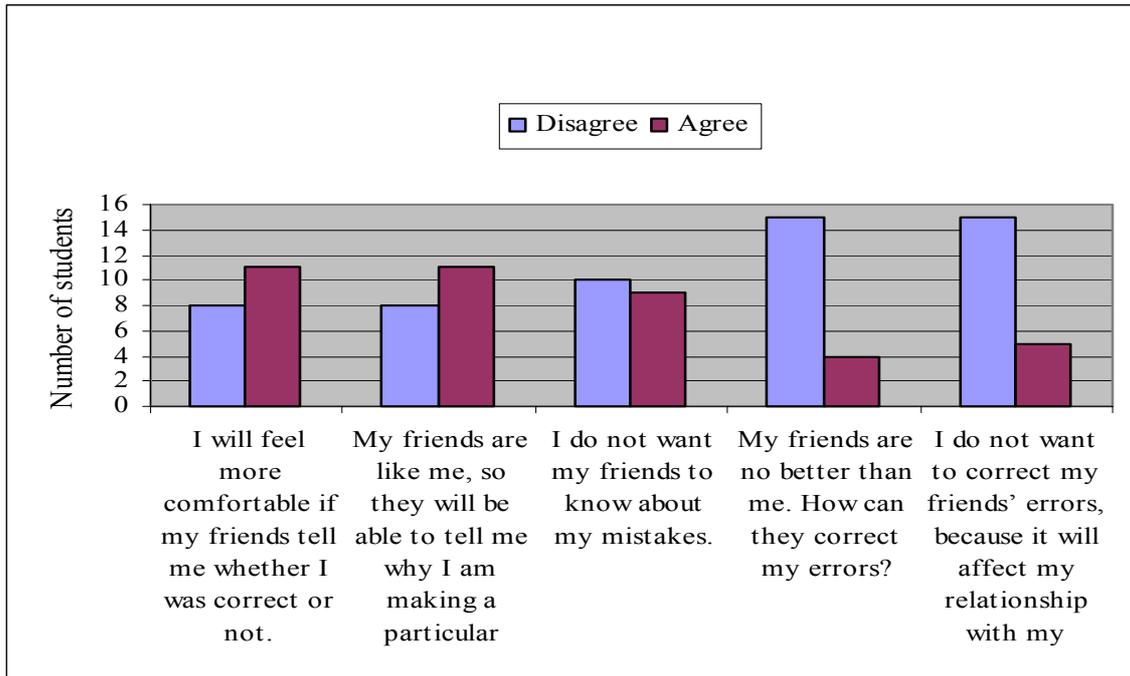
Graph 2: Quantitative data from the child learners
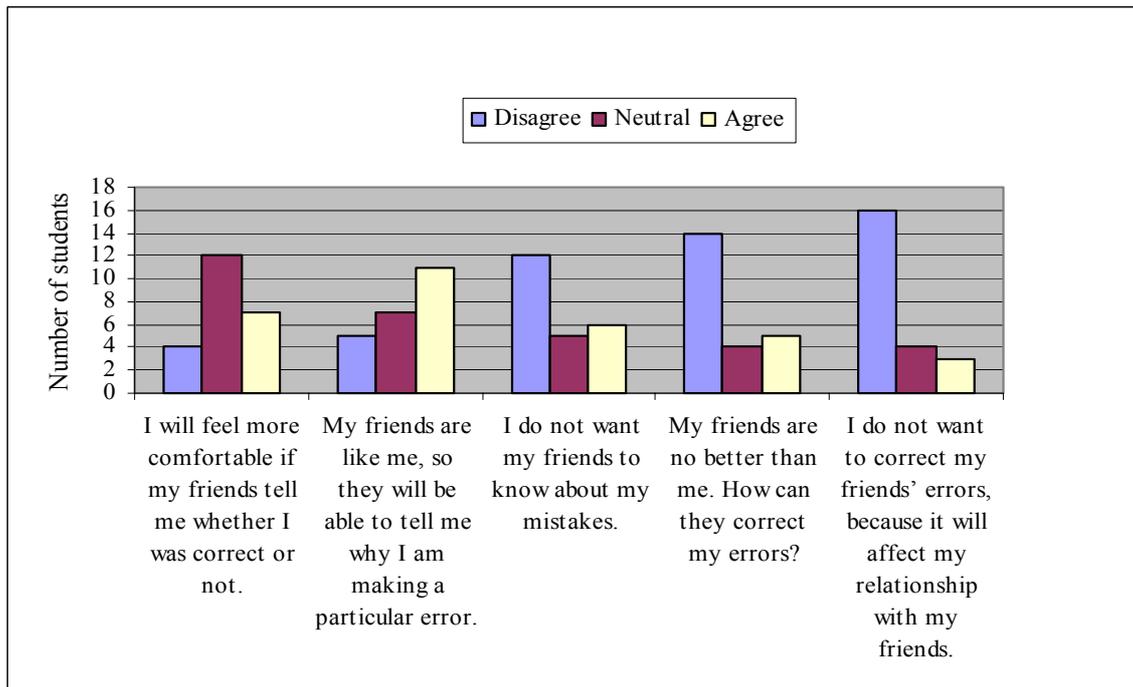
Graph 3: Quantitative data from the adult learners

All the members of the adult and the child groups agreed to one point that whatever the method for correction might be, the final answer should come from the teacher. Responses to a question like *When your friend has corrected your error, do you think the teacher should again give the final*

answer regarding whether a response is correct or not? all the 43 students said that they wanted the final answer to come from the teacher.

To sum up the findings, it can be said that it is not that the students, both adults and children, did not like peer correction. All of them experienced peer correction in class in some form or the other and they did not dislike it. But if peer correction is used as the major way of correction, students would not feel comfortable and be sure of their learning.

VI. DISCUSSION

The data presented in this study reinforce some of the issues previously discussed, and show similarities with the findings of the earlier studies conducted on peer feedback.

One point has to be understood when we respond to the data gathered. When students were asked whether they preferred peer correction or teacher correction, most of them chose teacher correction. This does not necessarily mean that they do not like to be corrected by their peers. Rather, it means that given a situation when they have to choose one, they would choose teacher correction over peer correction. Tim Roskams' study (1999) shows a very similar finding about the preference for teacher correction and he reports that "Note that this is only a comparative preference and does not imply that students did not value peer feedback."

Such responses are expected considering the fact that all of them have been accustomed to being taught in traditional settings and teacher has always been the source of knowledge and authority. Now, it is difficult to make them 'undo' their existing orientation and make them learn that learners bring a lot of knowledge to class and imparting of knowledge is not a one-way communication.

This brings us to another issue to be discussed, the one of cultural differences. Learners of most of the Asian countries are taught in traditional settings, where the teacher is considered to possess all the knowledge and students, like sponges, only play the roles of receivers. Learners of Bangladesh too live with a strong belief that knowledge is the prerogative of the teacher. This belief conflicts with the idea of collaborative learning and learner autonomy. As long as such orientation of students' is not altered, it is very unlikely that they would welcome contributions from their peers. Due to this

existing attitude among the Asian learners, studies (Zhang, 1995; Ho and Crookall, 1995) have shown that peer correction has not worked successfully with them. Roskams (1999) refers to the findings of two studies by Arndt (1992) and Garratt (1994) and states that the effectiveness of peer correction has been questioned by the students "who come from Asian cultures, as active participation and accurate, appropriate and meaningful feedback may be constrained by fear of mistakes, politeness norms and the belief that peer feedback lacks credibility compared with teacher feedback." The same idea has been reported by Carson and Nelson (1996) who say that students do not want to provide feedback to their peers' performances either for 'maintaining a group harmony' or for reluctance to claim authority.

Participants of this study have raised a very important issue regarding peer correction. Although they have been able to view peer correction as a useful technique, they do not want it to be exercised as the sole technique for correction. An adult learner has responded to the usefulness of peer correction in writing by saying that it is beneficial only "*if the teacher rechecks it.*" Also, the fact that all the participants, irrespective of their ages, have agreed to the idea that the final answer has to come from the teacher, echoes the same issue. The students of the study conducted by Sima Sengupta **(**1998) too express the same concern; *"The teacher must tell me".* Such responses address the issue of reliability regarding peer correction. Students' only accept peer correction only when it is backed by teacher correction. Until the teacher supports the peer-evaluator, the students do not take it. This issue becomes more serious when it comes to correction in writing. Since the teacher is present during the correction in speaking, students are more or less assured about some kind of feedback coming from the teacher. But in writing, the teacher does not monitor the evaluation; therefore students have to be assured that the correction is valid and reliable. Tim Roskams (1999) reports a similar finding regarding the reliability of peer feedback and therefore, he suggests that "teachers should probably supplement peer feedback with some kind of teacher feedback."

The data presented in this paper might seem very surprising to the extent that it does not reveal striking differences between the responses of the two groups. But, looking at it closely will resolve

the confusion. One possible reason for getting similar responses is even adult students in Bangladesh are not exposed to ideas like learner autonomy and they have hardly got enough chance to practice this. Generally, we expect children to rely a lot on the teacher but in a traditional classroom setting, adults are also accustomed to playing a similar role, a role of only receiving and not imparting anything. This might have left the adult learners completely dependent on the teacher and not ready to allow certain amount of responsibility and authority either to themselves or their peers.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Ideas like learner autonomy and collaborative learning have come to us from the Western countries and before we blindly adopt those we have to understand that we do not stand on the same platform. Our learners are brought up and taught in a setting which is very different from theirs. Therefore, in order to receive the benefits of a 'useful' technique like peer feedback, we have to prepare our learners. Several suggestions have been listed down here that the teacher might take into consideration while preparing learners for collaborative learning or exercising elements of it.

1. Since the ESL learners of Bangladesh are not yet ready for practicing peer feedback, the teachers have to train them. One way of doing this is, along with peer correction, practicing other techniques which foster learner autonomy. For example, the teacher can apply pair work and group work in class, students can be assigned group take-home projects, classroom materials can be negotiated between the teacher and the learners, classroom interaction can be enhanced through discussions and debates and so on. Continual practice of all these collaborative techniques will introduce the learners with the idea of autonomy and gradually the students will learn to take responsibilities for their own learning rather than only receiving input from the 'authority'.

2. For practicing peer feedback, the teacher has to create a 'safe' environment in class where students' 'faces' are saved. Also, s/he must assure the students that feedback from peers is valuable, reliable and useful.

3. Before peer correction can be implemented, students must be trained, specially when it comes to applying peer correction in writing. Engaging untrained and un-oriented students in the correction process yields invalid and unreliable feedback.

4. Peer feedback should not be exercised as the sole way of providing feedback. Because even if students welcome this technique, it should not be taken for granted that students always provide correct feedback.

5. Above all, learners have to be oriented to the 'new' roles of a learner which is not one of a receiver but of an active participant. This kind of orientation can take place only when teachers themselves believe in this. Both teachers and learners have to live the idea that effective and meaningful learning takes place only when students actively contribute to the learning and negotiate constantly in terms of creating 'meaning'.

VII. CONCLUSION

Advocated by a large group of researchers, peer correction definitely has its benefits. But before it is practiced in class, the teacher has to reconsider it keeping the determining factors (the context, the learners etc.) in mind. A technique proven to be effective in a particular setting with a particular group of learners might not be good enough in a different setting with a different bunch of learners. Echoing Jeremy Harmer (2004) it can be said that the teacher might ask students for their opinions about which technique of correction they are comfortable with. If students are not ready for peer feedback, then the teacher should not force it on them. Most of the students of Bangladesh are in a similar state, where they still view teacher correction to be the only way of providing feedback. To me, in such a context it might be best to practice teacher correction along with some orientation to different collaborative activities.

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