Expanding Learning Spaces for Second Language Writers: A Writing Partners Project Across Program Boundaries

Sophia Zevgoli
Deree – The American College of Greece

Evi Dilaveri
Deree – The American College of Greece

Abstract

Writing Partners projects have been instituted as ways of providing student writers with audiences other than their classmates and instructors. These projects may take various forms: e.g. high school students are paired with students at another school or with college students, etc. This article outlines a new approach to Writing Partners projects that utilized trained peer review and pairing of students from two successive academic programs related to writing: the English for Academic Purposes Program and the Writing Program. This project was piloted at Deree – The American College of Greece in Spring 2014. The aim of the project was to investigate whether this practice would have an impact on the participants' writing abilities and attitudes towards writing.

The findings of the project suggest that extending a community of writers "beyond classroom walls" (Gillis 1994: 64) and across academic program boundaries, and utilizing trained peer review, may enhance students' writing skills and positively affect their attitude towards writing. This has been shown through qualitative and quantitative analysis of the students' revised writing and an examination of their written reflections. The article proposes that similar Writing Partners projects be implemented at different institutions to enhance student writers' skills.

Introduction

Writing Partners projects have been instituted as effective ways of providing student writers with audiences other than their classmates and instructors. This article outlines a new approach to Writing Partners projects that utilizes peer trained review and pairing of students from different academic programs.

The project was implemented in Spring 2014, at Deree – The American College of Greece, which is the undergraduate and graduate studies division of The American College of Greece (ACG), an independent, English-medium, higher education institution.

The aim of the project was to find out if building a community of writers that "extends beyond classroom walls" (Gillis 1994: 64) and across academic program boundaries and uses peer trained review can effectively support the development of students' writing skills and positively affect their attitude towards writing.

Drawing on Gillis' (1994) idea of pairing students of different writing ability, the project paired students from two successive academic programs, the English for Academic Purposes Program (EAPP) and the Writing Program (WP). The project involved these two programs mainly for three reasons: Firstly, both programs are related to writing, with EAPP placing special

emphasis on the development of students' reading and writing skills. Secondly, in both programs process writing (Alexander, Argent and Spencer 2008) is implemented. Thirdly, at Deree – ACG, EAPP and WP form a sequence in the sense that students completing EAPP are required to attend the WP courses. EAPP is addressed to incoming students who are not proficient in English and aims at equipping them with the academic language skills necessary for successful college studies in all disciplines. The program comprises four levels/courses. EAPP is immediately followed by WP, a three-course program aiming at equipping students with the academic thinking and writing skills they need to succeed in college but also beyond college as thoughtful and confident writers.

The project utilized trained peer review drawing on research demonstrating its linguistic and cognitive benefits. Peer review provides participants the opportunity to further integrate and master course material (McKeachie 2002); it helps participants improve their critical thinking and evaluative skills (Smith et al. 2005); it increases student engagement and investment in learning (Rieber 2006); it trains students to use legitimate resources so that their awareness of plagiarism (Badger 2010) is reinforced; it helps learners develop a better understanding of the writing process including revision (Mendonca and Johnson 1994, Villamil and De Guerrero 1996 and Min 2006); it enhances their sense of audience (Mendonca and Johnson 1994 and Tsui and Ng 2000); it improves their sense of ownership of the text (Tsui and Ng 2000); and it creates more positive attitudes towards writing (Min 2005). More interestingly, *trained* peer review has been shown to be even more effective in generating more and better feedback (Zhu 1995 and Min 2005).

The project conducted both qualitative and quantitative analysis of student writing. For the qualitative analysis, both macro- and micro-features were used as measures of text improvement.

Methodology

Participants
The participants were 8 students at Deree – ACG: 4 in EAP 1002, the last course of the EAPP sequence, and 4 in WP 1010, the first course in the WP sequence. There were 5 females and 3 males, and their average age was 21. All were native speakers of Greek. The English proficiency of the EAPP students was at C1/C2 of the Common European Framework for Languages, while that of the WP participants was at C2.

The WP participants had completed EAP 1002 in the previous semester. It was estimated that familiarity with the requirements and challenges of the specific course would help these students empathize with their peers, which would increase their engagement in the task. The selected WP participants had earned an A-B grade in their EAP 1002 course. This selection was done to ensure they would be able to provide effective feedback after appropriate training.

Regarding the EAPP participants, students with average writing skills were selected to ensure there would be room for improvement. The students' writing skills were evaluated based on the grades they had earned on previous written coursework.

Furthermore, the selected students were not members of the authors' classes[1].

Stages
In sum, the project involved the following: the EAPP students shared the first draft of their argumentative essay, which is part of the writing requirements for their course, with the WP 1010 participants. After receiving training in providing feedback, the WP participants reviewed

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[1] The institution granted the authors permission to conduct this project involving students. Furthermore, the authors met with the students to provide them with a detailed description of the project. The students signed an informed consent form in which they agreed to participate in the project and granted the authors permission to use their work anonymously.

the EAPP essays and produced relevant written commentaries. The EAPP participants subsequently reviewed their peers' feedback and revised their papers accordingly. Finally, both groups wrote a reflection about the impact of this peer review activity on the development of their writing skills and their attitude towards writing.

The project consisted of four stages:

Stage I
At this stage, the student participants were selected.

Stage II
In the second stage, the students received training in providing quality feedback. This was necessitated by findings demonstrating a positive correlation between peer review training and revision quality. Although there is ample evidence demonstrating the cognitive and linguistic benefits of peer review activities, research has shown that the extent to which students incorporate their peers' feedback into their subsequent revisions is very low (Connor and Asenavage 1994, Paulus 1999 and Tsui and Ng 2000). A question that has naturally emerged is "Why isn't peer feedback utilized by students, if it has proven to be so beneficial for their writing?" One of the answers given to this question is that peer feedback is not as concrete and useful (Chou 1999 and Tsui and Ng 2000) as students would have liked it to be, which has been attributed to the fact that peer reviewers lack the skills and knowledge to provide effective feedback (Wiener 1986). This has led some researchers to investigate whether providing training in peer review may generate more helpful feedback, which is more likely to be incorporated into subsequent revisions of student work. The relevant studies reported positive results: Not only did the trained groups produce more effective feedback, but also students incorporated a significantly higher number of the reviewers' comments into revisions post peer review training (Berg 1999 and Min 2005).

The peer review training for this project was conducted in two sessions. In the first session, the WP Coordinator met with the students and instructed them in how to provide quality feedback. She gave them a handout with general principles guiding peer review, a guidance sheet for the response letter to the first draft, a sample essay, and an accompanying mock cover letter. She subsequently asked the students to provide written feedback on the sample essay. The guidelines given to the WP participants may be summarized as follows (Chisholm 1991, Straub 1999, Bean 2001, Nilson 2003 and Walk 2008):

- **Read the essay as sympathetic readers, not as teachers, nor as editors**: Do not take over the paper. Do not dictate, write, rewrite or copy-edit the writer's paper. Recommend specific strategies that would help the writer improve his/her essay.

- **Address the writer's questions as set out in the accompanying cover letter, but also point out additional strengths and weaknesses:**
  Address content and organization-related issues first; do not be concerned with mechanical and language aspects too early.
  Start by making some positive comments.
  Discuss the paper's weaknesses in a positive, constructive, and respectful tone.
  Comment primarily on patterns, that is, representative strengths and weaknesses; this holds for content and structure-level issues, as well as for grammar and sentence-level problems.

- **Focus on the following main areas of the argumentative essay:**
  Thesis, Structure, Argumentation, Refutation of opposing claims, Evidence (sources), Style.

In the second session, the WP Coordinator met with the students after she had reviewed their written feedback on a sample essay and explained to them how they could refine their comments to make them more understandable, specific, useful and convincing. The WP participants were asked to read each other's response to the essay and comment on the effectiveness of the suggestions made by their fellow reviewers.

Stage III
Stage III involved four steps:

In step one, the EAPP students produced the *first draft of the argumentative essay*.

The EAPP students, additionally, compiled a *cover letter* where they explained: their stand on the issue discussed in their paper; their most convincing and least convincing argument; the greatest difficulties they had in writing the first draft of the argumentative essay; and the most significant aspects of their paper – its thesis, organization, argumentation, refutation of opposing claims, use of evidence, style, etc. – on which they would like their peer reviewer to comment.

It was explained to the EAPP participants that they maintained ownership of their text in that they could integrate into their writing only those feedback points that they found useful and convincing.

In step two, the WP students received the first draft of the argumentative essays and the accompanying cover letters and provided written feedback on the essays. The relevant written feedback was then sent to the EAPP students.

In step three, the EAPP participants reviewed their peer feedback and revised their essay.

In step four, both groups wrote a *reflection paragraph* on the impact of this peer review project on the development of their writing skills and their attitude towards writing.

Stage IV
All documents produced by the participants were reviewed to assess the extent to which the peer feedback had been taken into consideration and had led to effective revisions.

Findings

WP participants' training, EAPP cover letters, and WP response letters
During the WP students' training, it became evident that they originally assumed that local errors were the most important aspect of their peers' writing, on which they should focus their attention. They believed that their primary concern should be the correction of language errors (e.g. grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and punctuation).

The areas in which the WP students needed more help during the training were: focusing on global issues while at the same time making specific and convincing suggestions for revision; and better organizing their responses so that they include an introduction, main body, and conclusion.

The EAPP students requested feedback on how to: create an interesting and attention-grabbing introduction; produce a complete thesis statement; develop their arguments to support their own claims; rebut opposing claims; effectively use sources/evidence to support their claims; enhance the essay organization; write an effective conclusion; and enhance their diction. They were more concerned with content and rhetoric-related issues than language issues. The points they identified were indeed points that needed improvement. As was expected, they did not identify all of them.

The WP participants commented on all points identified by the respective EAPP participants and on additional ones. The response letters indicated post-training improvement in providing feedback in the following respects:

(a) The WP students moved from local to more global comments while at the same time providing concrete suggestions (for a similar result, see Lundstrom and Baker 2009):

Example:

Before training:	"I'd like you to check your first sentence on your second body paragraph, maybe re-read it. I do understand what you are trying to say, but the sentence is quite confusing. You can change the way you start your sentence, for example put *'One side'* instead of '*The*' because as a reader I expect you to continue your phrase and see what the other side believes … Be careful when you put commas between sentences, remember where you need to put them in order for your sentence to be clear..."
After training:	"I like the way you organize your ideas in your first body paragraph. The main idea is clearly stated in the topic sentence, and you use the proper transitions to connect the sentences together. Though, I'd like to see you develop your example about age limitations more. For instance, give some ideas of types of arts where the government can set limitations and talk about how that could possibly help. Also, I'd like to see you use some quotation or paraphrased information to support your argument."

(b) The students provided better organized responses (with an introduction, body, and conclusion).

(c) The students reflected back the writer's main ideas:

Example:

Before training:	"This is a very good essay. … I believe your arguments are very strong…"
After training:	"I read your article and I totally agree with you that the Internet is not as safe as we think. Anyone can have access to our personal data and we are exposed to many dangers."

Analysis of EAPP revisions

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the revised EAPP essays were conducted. The qualitative analysis aimed at assessing the revision quality (Min 2006: 125). The quantitative analysis involved mainly a comparison of the number of recommended revisions to the number of feedback points integrated into the revised writing.

Qualitative analysis

Criteria for text improvement

Different studies have used various measures of text improvement, i.e. micro features such as improved grammar (e.g. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz 1992), or macro features, such as appropriateness and organization of information (e.g. Nystrand, Greene and Wiemelt 1993). Given that this project involved two academic programs with varying degrees of emphasis on both types of features, both micro features and macro features were identified as signs of enhanced quality. Improvements on macro features (e.g. idea development, organization (Min 2006: 125) and source documentation), but also on micro features (e.g. style) were sought.

Idea development was assessed in terms of: explicitness of the writer's position; sufficient presentation of information to support the writer's position; sufficient and objective presentation of opposing claims and refutation thereof; and effectiveness of introduction, thesis statement, topic sentences and conclusion.

Organization was assessed in terms of: relevance of the directly quoted or paraphrased information to the ideas discussed; logical flow of ideas; and effective use of transitions within and between paragraphs.

Source documentation was assessed by means of: in-text citing of sources; and listing of sources at the end of the essay.

Style was assessed in terms of: appropriate diction; appropriate structures; and mechanics (e.g. spelling, punctuation, etc.).

Feedback leading to better texts
Both groups placed more emphasis on idea development, organization and source documentation and less on style. Close review of the response letters and the two drafts of the argumentative essay demonstrated that most of the peer feedback *did* lead to better texts according to the criteria described above. Examples of feedback that led to improved second drafts are given below:

(a) providing more information to support one's view or to refute one's opposing claim;

Examples:

I.

First draft:	"Instead of censoring someone's work, it would be much better for the government to find and apply more effective restriction measures. For example, they could set better age limitations."
Feedback:	"…I'd like to see you develop your example about age limitations more. For instance, give some ideas of types of arts where the government can set limitations and talk about how that could possibly help."
Second draft:	"Instead of censoring someone's work, it would be much better for the government to find and apply more effective restriction measures. For example, they could set better age limitations. **There should be criteria in what ages you can see a controversial piece of art. Depending on how rough the content is, there should be the ideal age to watch it.**"

II.

First draft:	"Defenders of art censorship claim that some pieces of art have inappropriate content and pass negative religious messages to the community. However, people are free to believe in any god they want."
Feedback:	"Your second body paragraph is also written well. You present the opposite views and you give good examples to support what you're saying. Since you're asking in your letter, my suggestion to you so you can refute opposite claims is to use an example from a different article and then give the proper credit. For example, when you talk about how some pieces of art have inappropriate content and pass negative religious messages to the public, give one known example that the audience can later check."
Second draft:	"Defenders of art censorship claim that some pieces of art have inappropriate content and pass negative religious messages to the community. **For instance, the controversial sculpture created by Tania Kovat in 1994, named "Virgin in a Condom".** However, people are free to believe in any god they want."

(b) revision of introduction;

Example:

First draft:	"Censorship of art is used not only by democratic governments and by church but also by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that nobody wants to live again in the future. Art should remain absolutely free, so that artists can express their true emotions. Moreover, art can show us the future and every thought of censoring art will lead the society to the deep dark past. In my opinion, art and censorship can't be together."
Feedback:	"It is obvious from your introduction that your thesis statement is clear, which means that the reader can easily understand that you're opposed to censorship in the Arts. Though you illustrate well your point of view with examples from the past and existing facts, I would advise you to add a couple of lines talking about the opposing view. In other words mention briefly why some people are in favor of censorship in the Arts and then use your counter-arguments."
Second draft:	"Censorship of art is used not only by democratic governments and by church but also by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that nobody wants to live again in the future. **In addition, it is used and supported by people to help the society keep its traditional ethics and to protect those who have the power.** In my opinion, art and censorship can't be together. Moreover, art can show us the future and every thought of censoring art will lead the society to the deep dark past. **Art should remain absolutely free, so that artists can express their true emotions.**

There was also feedback that did not lead to effective revisions. This had to do mainly with thesis statement revision and text organization, which are two areas that students find very challenging. For example, in certain cases the EAPP students produced incomplete thesis statements or created poorly organized body paragraphs. Although this was commented on by the reviewers, the EAPP students did not address these points in their subsequent revisions.

Quantitative analysis
The total number of the reviewers' comments that recommended revision was 17, 9 of which were solicited and 8 unsolicited. Out of these, 13 feedback points. i.e. 76.5%, were integrated into the students' revision, while only 4, i.e. 23.5%, were not integrated. Out of those that were integrated, 7, i.e. 53%, were solicited and 6, i.e. 47%, were unsolicited. Out of those that were not integrated, 2 were solicited and 2 were unsolicited, i.e. 50% respectively. This is depicted in the table below:

Table 1. Integrated and non-integrated peer review comments

Feedback points recommending revision		
	Integrated: 76.5%	**Not integrated: 23.5 %**
Solicited	53%	50%
Unsolicited	47%	50%

The feedback that was not integrated had to do with idea development (further supporting one's view and conclusion revision) and organization.

WP and EAPP reflection
In their reflections, the WP participants reported that this project:

- o increased their confidence in their writing abilities as they were now able to identify areas for improvement and comment on other people's writing – e.g. "Now that I know that my writing skills are improved and I can recognize and correct the most common mistakes in fellow-students papers, I certainly feel more confident about my writing abilities.";

- o was beneficial in that they were able to identify the mistakes they themselves once made – e.g. "I saw the mistakes that I once used to make as an EAP 1002 student, and through this procedure learned to give more emphasis on my instructor's guidelines.";

- o offered them a practical revision of the principles guiding effective writing – e.g. "… this process was not beneficial only for the writers but also for the peer reviewers as it reminded us some basic guidelines that we should follow while writing.";

- o affected the way they viewed writing – e.g. "The most important thing I learned from this project is that writing is not about taking a pen and writing lines, but it is an art that I can develop with practice and hard work."; and

- o increased their sense of audience – e.g. "… this project helped me to realize that I need to inform my audience throughout my essay without taking for granted that the audience can understand what I am saying..".

- o The WP students also reported that the project was particularly beneficial with regard to development of ideas, organization and source documentation.

In their reflections, the EAPP students pointed out that this project:

- o increased their confidence in writing. This was attributed to the fact that the peer reviewer had made positive and encouraging comments and had also raised awareness of areas for improvement – e.g. "… the letter of my peer helped me to realize what my weak points are, and now I will be able to improve them."; and

- o reinforced the value and pleasure in writing because it (a) increased their openness to other people's opinions – e.g. "…through the project I learnt to accept the opinion of another student…", and (b) helped them further develop the ability to take a clear stand on issues – e.g. "my position in the essay became more clear."

- o The EAPP students also stated that the project was particularly beneficial with regard to development of ideas, organization, source documentation and academic style.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this small-scale project demonstrate that utilizing a new approach to Writing Partners projects that involves trained peer review and pairing of students from different academic programs supports the development of their writing skills and may positively affect their attitude towards writing.

It has been shown that both groups, i.e. writers and reviewers, benefited from their participation in the project. The EAPP students, on the one hand, were provided with an additional authentic reader who asked questions and made recommendations, which led them to view their own text from a different perspective. The fact that this review came from a higher-level student who had already completed the course they were attending at the time and whom they thus considered a more skilled writer than themselves increased their confidence in his/her

feedback. As a result, they used the provided review to produce better texts in terms of idea development, organization, source documentation and style. The WP participants, on the other hand, received additional outside-of-class training in how to provide quality feedback and used it to identify various content- and structure-related inefficiencies (for a large-scale study on this, see Thompson 2002). Both writers and reviewers stated that this activity increased their awareness of the areas in which they needed to improve (for evidence suggesting that giving peer feedback on a paper seems to improve one's writing ability more than using peer feedback, see Lundstrom and Baker 2009). Furthermore, in their reflection paragraphs, both the EAPP and WP students stated that their participation in this project had reinforced the value and pleasure in writing and increased their confidence in their writing abilities.

Interestingly, both reviewers and writers placed more emphasis on idea development, organization and source documentation and less on style. Regarding the EAPP students, this was not surprising given that at the first draft stage of the writing process they had to think and make choices about how to write a complete and concise thesis statement, how much and what kind of support they needed, and how to organize their ideas logically. Language-related issues became more prominent at the editing stage of the rewriting process, which came later. As far as the WP participants are concerned, this was the result of the training they had received at the beginning of this project.

The quality of the peer review and the extent to which this was integrated into the second draft of the argumentative essay and triggered quality revisions is in line with the findings of large-scale studies demonstrating that peer review training can positively impact students' revisions (e.g. Berg 1999 and Min 2005). In this project, most of the trained peer feedback, i.e. 76.5%, was incorporated into the students' revisions. This included both solicited and unsolicited feedback to a similar extent, i.e. 53% versus 47% respectively. In light of what the EAPP participants reported in their reflective writing, this can be attributed to the fact that they found the trained peer feedback helpful and were, thus, willing to use it in their subsequent revision. This also explains why they were almost equally willing to integrate feedback on areas on which they had not asked their peers to comment.

The amount and types of revision made in the second drafts and the students' reflections indicate that this project was a beneficial and positive learning experience for the participants. In light of this, it is proposed that Writing Partners projects focusing on sharing and responding to writing and utilizing peer trained review be implemented in different institutions. They may involve various academic programs and students of the same or differing writing ability. Projects of this sort would offer students the chance to work in an expanded learning space with peers at international institutions, and faculty teaching at these institutions the opportunity to share instruction practices and collaborate creatively.

Acknowledgements

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