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# Using Peer Response Groups with Limited English Proficient Writers

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## Abstract

The use of peer response groups in writing classrooms has become increasingly popular in recent years as emphasis has shifted from product to process. For the limited English proficient (LEP) student, however, interaction with peers or teacher has been more restricted. The present study investigated the effectiveness of the use of heterogeneous (in terms of language proficiency and ability) peer response groups with forty-six LEP students in grade four language arts classes. The results indicated significant differences on two measures of fluency for the subjects assigned to peer response groups; however, there was no difference in overall quality of compositions produced.

## Introduction

A significant trend in the teaching of composition in the last decade has been the paradigm shift from emphasis on product to process. Researchers such as Hairston, 1982; Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986; and Dyson & Freedman, 1990 have noted this shift from studying writing itself to studying what writers do as they write. In turn, practitioners are beginning to focus instruction on a series of recursive stages the writer engages in to produce a piece of writing. These stages generally include prewriting or invention, drafting, revision, and editing (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986). As DiPardo & Freedman (1987) point out, this process approach to instruction views writing in progress as a dynamic entity which can be substantively improved by multiple drafts and revisions. Further, each stage of the process presents opportunities to intervene and support the writer.

As teachers have begun to recognize the need to provide support for students at each stage of the writing process, the use of peer response groups has become increasingly popular (Elbow, 1973;

Murray, 1968; Macrorie, 1970; Gere 1987; Tompkins, 1990). It can be argued that such groups provide a real audience for sharing writing in progress. DiPardo & Freedman (1987) argue convincingly that the use of peer groups in the writing classroom goes beyond the goals of the paradigm shift to process and, perhaps more importantly, supports the critical role of social interaction in language learning.

Learning in small groups has been investigated extensively in numerous content areas. In general, results of such studies have yielded positive findings (Walberg, Schiller & Haertel, 1979). Cooperative learning methods in which students work in small heterogeneous groups appears to lead to subject mastery (Daiute, 1986; Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984; Slavin, 1983). Key features in most cooperative learning environments include assignment of specific roles to individuals within the group and emphasis on group as well as individual accountability. Research on instruction suggests that this collaboration enables students to develop judgment and critical skills more effectively than students working independently on the same task (Abercrombie, 1969).

The use of the cooperative groups to foster improvement of writing has been somewhat limited in scope. Bruffee (1984) suggests that collaborative learning is particularly effective in writing instruction because talking gives students an opportunity to internalize language which can later be externalized in writing. Daiute (1986) linked research on collaboration and writing development. Children who collaborated on four story-writing tasks and children who did not collaborate made different types of gains on individual writing samples. Collaborators become more fluent and used more story elements. The children who did not collaborate increased their editing skills. And Stevens, Maden, Slavin & Farnish (1987) reported significant effects in favor of students using a Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composing (CIRC) model on standardized tests in language expression. Students also performed better on writing samples scored with an analytic scale on "Organization" and "Ideas" features.

Substantial research in the last decade has also focused on how learning is facilitated by the language of small group work (Webb, 1982, 1989; King, 1990; Hillocks, 1984; Gere & Abbott, 1985). Webb (1989) found that student individual achievement in groups was positively related to giving elaborated explanations but not in receiving the explanations. King (1989) studied the effects of a

peer-questioning strategy on student achievement in small groups. In this context of reciprocation and shared responsibility, high school and college students scored better on subsequent achievement tests than did students who simply discussed the material in small groups. In a later study King (1990) used guided reciprocal peer-questioning with college students in conjunction with learning expository material presented in class lectures. She argues that using investigator-provided generic questions promoted the kind of verbal interaction that is beneficial in small groups. These findings suggest that structuring the discussion within groups may be an important element to insure their effectiveness.

In the field of composition, Gere & Abbott (1985) examined the language of writing groups to determine what students say when they critique one another's work. They found that the highest proportion of comments focused on the content of the writing and the second highest proportion offered directives in writing. The notion that students do not stay on task in response groups appears to be dispelled by these findings. However, it should be noted that teachers in the study provided explicit directions to the students concerning the procedures to be followed in the small group.

Daiute & Dalton (1988) studied the use of collaborative groups in grades four and five. When contrasting the type of talk used by collaborators who improved with those collaborators who did not improve from pre to posttest, the authors noted significant differences in the amount of talking in categories that reveal the occurrence of cognitive conflict, negotiating, and suggesting alternatives. The group showing no gain did more talking only in the category of literal spelling. Cognitive conflict, the realization that one's perceptions, thoughts, or creations are inconsistent with new information or another person's point of view, is a key factor in cognitive development.

Hillocks (1984) in his meta-analysis of what works in teaching composition found that classes in the "environmental mode", featuring high levels of peer interaction and structure, to be more productive than composition classes operating in the "natural process" mode where students are given the ill-defined task of commenting on each other's paper. As Applebee (1986) points out, "environmental" instruction is a series of process-oriented activities in which the materials and problems are orchestrated by the teacher in order to engage the student in some particular aspect of writing. He suggests that Hillock's terminology, might be improved by

labeling this approach as "structured process".

Freedman (1984), citing theories of oral language learning and intellectual skill development as hypothesis testing strategies involving listener-speaker interaction, extends the theory to writing and builds a case for the need for interaction of reader-writer.

For the limited English proficient (LEP) student, however, classroom interaction with peers or teacher is practically nonexistent as teacher dominated environments seem to be the rule (Ramírez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991). In addition, conflict between the student's cultural background and the teacher approach to learning has been cited as an important barrier to student participation (Spindler, 1987). Individual learning and problem-solving styles are affected by the cultural and linguistic environment in which the student has been brought up (Bermúdez, 1986; Laosa, 1981; Dunn, 1990). As a result teachers need to develop the skills and sensitivity to meet the literacy needs of LEP students.

Teachers, however, need more than a change in strategy to accomplish these goals. For writing to develop, a paradigm shift from individual skills to interdependent language arts is necessary (Edelsky, 1986) and from teacher dominated-environments to interactive, peer-oriented ones. Calderón (1989) has reported that group learning effectively enhances literacy environments for these youngsters since it builds on students' strengths rather than weaknesses. An additional enticement is that it can be easily integrated in content area instruction.

Furthermore, students need to interact with their text and get involved in the transaction of meaning with some measure of spontaneity in order to develop language skills (Edelsky, 1986), providing an environment that fosters those conditions needs to be an instructional priority. Since talk has been found to be an adhesive in important cognitive and social aspects of writing (Hulme, 1990; Edelsky, 1986), it follows that this strategy will greatly enhance the negotiation of meaning and the acquisition of critical language arts skills, such as language fluency (Bermúdez & Prater, 1990).

Thus, in view of what is known about the development of writing and the positive effects of collaborative group learning, it seems promising to pursue further the usefulness of peer response groups in language arts classrooms.

### **Purpose of Study**

For LEP students, it would appear that use of heterogeneous (in terms of language proficiency and ability) peer response groups could provide a particularly rich opportunity to develop both oral language and social skills. Further, it seems likely that the development of these skills ought to facilitate written language. Guided by the substantial body of evidence that supports the use of cooperative groups (Walberg, 1979; Slavin, 1983; Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984); the facilitative effect of language on writing (Freedman, 1984; Gere & Abbott, 1985); and the need for structured tasks (King, 1990; Hillocks, 1984); the following study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of peer response groups with LEP writers.

**Subjects and Design.** Forty-six LEP students in grade four representing two elementary schools in the greater Houston area, Texas, participated in the study. The experimental group had 27 students, 25 Hispanic and 2 Asian-Americans. Of these, 16 were female and 11 were male. The comparison group had 19 students, 18 Hispanics and 1 Asian-American. Of these, 10 were female, 9 male. The students ranged from nine to eleven years in age. All students had been in English-as-a-second language (ESL) or bilingual education classrooms at one time but were currently functioning in regular classrooms. However, they were considered by their teacher to have limited proficiency in English, enough to jeopardize their academic work.

**Procedure.** At the beginning of the school year, all students in grade four were randomly assigned to teachers and sections. In each instance the teachers participating in the study taught two sections of language arts daily. One section from each teacher was randomly assigned to small group conditions. Heterogeneous small groups of 4-5 students were formed by the teacher, distributing LEP students evenly among the groups within a given class section. The other class section of each teacher was assigned to individual conditions. The procedures described below were used with the entire class; however, only the results of the LEP students were used in this analysis.

A writing sample was collected from all subjects in the study to be used as a pretest. Students were asked to do personal writing on the topic "An Interesting Trip".

**Strategy Training.** Students in classes assigned to small group conditions (T1) were randomly assigned to 4-5 response groups. Generally, there were one or two LEP students per group. The teacher explained how the group would function and modeled how to respond to a piece of writing. First, the author read his/her composition to the group. The group members listened and told the writer specific things they liked about the composition (e.g. a vivid description, strong verb, an action sequence, use of dialogue, etc.). Then the writer asked for help on a particular part of the composition that he/she thought could be improved. Finally, members of the group told the writer parts of the composition that they wanted to know more about (elaboration) or that were confusing to them. Students were directed to refer to specific parts of the text so that their comments would not be too general to be useful. The method of responding as well as suggested responses were based on those provided by Tompkins (1990).

One member of each group was designated as the response group leader. The leader's responsibility was to convene the group and make certain that time was allocated equally among all group members. Each member of the group was instructed to offer a comment on each composition. The group members remained constant for the duration of the study.

The following steps were used for three consecutive weeks to produce one composition per week as students engaged in prewriting, drafting, revision and editing of their papers.

**Step 1: Topic Selection.** Students met in groups to share ideas about topics they were considering. Students came to the group with 2-3 ideas for composition topics and talked through them with the group. Group members assisted the writer in selecting what he/she would be writing about. Students then worked individually on their compositions.

**Step 2: Sharing First Draft.** After writing the first draft, students met again as a group. Each student in turn read his/her composition to the group. Each person in the group gave the writer compliments, the writer asked the group for help on a specific parts of the composition, and group members asked for elaboration or clarification.

**Step 3: Revising.** Students rewrote their papers based on the comments of the group.

**Step 4: Editing.** Students brought their composition to the

group for final editing. Each group member had a specific duty during the editing process. For example, one student circled errors in spelling, another looked for incomplete sentences, and another looked for correct use of capitals and end punctuation. If there were more than three in a group, two students were given the same task. Dictionaries were provided. Each paper was proof read and returned to the writer.

**Step 5: Final Rewrite.** Students incorporated changes in their papers and handed them in.

Under these conditions students wrote three compositions. On the fourth week, the same steps were used but a topic was assigned. This time the students were asked to write on "My Favorite Television Program". This composition was used as the posttest.

The students in individual settings (T2) also wrote one composition per week with the same first and last essay topics assigned as above. The steps for this group were as follows. Students were asked to list 2-3 topics (weeks 2 and 3) and then decide for themselves which of the topics they wanted to write on. They completed a draft of the composition and submitted it to the teacher. The teacher marked spelling and mechanical errors. When she returned the papers, she asked students to reread them and make certain that their writing was clear and that they had added all information that a reader would need to know. Students rewrote the composition and turned it in.

### **Instrumentation**

**Overall Quality of Compositions.** Compositions were scored using a six-point focused holistic scoring. (See appendix A.) Each composition received two independent readings. Scores that varied more than one point were read by a third reader who assigned the score. Cohen's Kappa was calculated on the unarbitrated scores and yielded a reliability coefficient of .94 on the pretest and .92 on the posttest.

**Fluency** was measured by counting the number of words, the number of sentences, and the number of idea units in each composition. An idea unit is defined as a single clause, independent or dependent (Gere & Abbott, 1985).

### **Analysis/Results**

Separate ANCOVA's were used to determine the effects of treatment at posttest, adjusted for pretest performance on each of the



dependent measures. Table 1 shows the posttest and adjusted means for this analysis. No significant group differences were found between the two groups on overall quality of compositions produced although the mean for T1 was slightly higher. On the three fluency measures, significant group differences in favor of T1 were found in number of words ( $M$ 's = 100.22 and 70.37, respectively) and number of idea units ( $M$ 's = 15.93 and 9.89, respectively). No significant differences were found between the two groups on number of sentences produced ( $M$ 's = 8.52 and 6.68, respectively).  $F$ -values for each analysis are also shown in Table 1.

### Discussion

Two the three measures of fluency were significantly higher for the students who shared their successive drafts in small groups. For all levels of writers, fluency of thought and ideas is essential before the form of the composition can be meaningfully addressed. And, for LEP writers, the lack of fluency in the English language can severely limit the quality of their writing. The results of the present study support similar positive findings by Dauite (1986) and Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish (1987) and suggest that collaboration works equally well with the LEP learner.

In addition to the quantitative findings, reflections of the participating teachers were insightful. For example, Héctor's teacher noticed that students in her class frequently repeated a feature from another students paper that was well received by the group. His use of dialogue appeared after another student had read a paper with dialogue. (See Appendix B for student compositions.) The number of words produced by Héctor actually decreased from the early to later composition; however, he has many fewer run-on sentences connected with "and" and he has added a dialogue.

Hermelinda's increased fluency is apparent. Her last composition is almost twice as long as the first composition. Further, her correct use of verb tense is apparent in the second composition.

The teachers participating in the study also reported that the shared responsibility within the group forced participation of some students who ordinarily remained silent in a large group setting. As the author refined and improved the pieces of writing through successive drafts, a sense of ownership and pride in authorship developed. These observations by the teachers were encouraging.

**Table 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, and F-test for Overall Quality,**  
**Words, Idea Units, and Sentences**

	Response Group Conditions N=27			Individual Conditions N=19			F	P
	Mean	S. D.	Adj. <u>M</u>	Mean	S. D.	Adj. <u>M</u>		
Overall Quality (Posttest)	2.37	1.01	2.33	2.16	1.26	2.16	.91	.35
Words (Posttest)	100.33	50.52	100.22	70.37	42.63	70.37	5.5	.05*
Idea Units (Posttest)	15.67	8.32	15.93	12.68	7.81	9.89	9.11	.001**
Sentences (Posttest)	8.48	6.07	8.52	6.84	4.51	6.68	3.72	.06

\*Significant \*\*Significant

## Conclusion

It is likely that one month is not a sufficient length of time to produce significant differences in overall quality of writing; hence, no quantitative differences were detected when essays were scored holistically. It may also be necessary for the teacher to provide more direct instruction in specific aspects of the writing that are assessed by the scoring rubric. Further, more extensive modeling of appropriate responses, explanation of group general procedures, and provision of suggested categories of responses may enable the group members to avoid what Hillocks (1984) refers to as "ill-defined tasks."

It should be noted that the essays of students in T1 were judged to be equal to those produced under individual conditions, the social benefits of collaboration, along with the enhanced fluency seem to support the effectiveness of using peer response groups with LEP writers.

From an instructional point of view, the operation of response groups within a classroom frees the teacher to meet individually with students who need special attention. With the current emphasis on cooperative learning environments in many schools, the language arts content area seems ideally suited to this type of classroom management procedures.

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## Appendix A: Focused Holistic Scoring

### Score 6

- Fluent command of language (Native-like fluency)
- Clearly and consistently organized
- Effective elaboration; good use of supporting detail
- Correct purpose, mode, and audience

### Score 5

- Effective language use (near-native fluency)
- Moderately well organized
- Moderately well-elaborated with some supporting detail
- Correct purpose, mode, and audience

### Score 4

- Somewhat effective language use (few local errors)
- Adequate organization (may have some minor digressions)
- Some elaboration and detail present
- Correct purpose, mode, and audience

### Score 3

- Limited language control (occasional local errors)
- Some elements of organization present but not in a consistent fashion (frequent digressions and gaps in organization)
- Limited evidence of elaboration present; few if any details
- Attempts correct purpose, mode, and audience

### Score 2

- Some evidence of language control (local errors frequent, no words in the foreign language)
- Poorly organized (may ramble at times)
- Little or no elaboration, lacks supporting detail
- Attempts correct purpose, mode, and audience

### Score 1

- Lack of language control (few words in the foreign language; global errors still present)
- No organization
- No elaboration
- No awareness of purpose, mode, and audience

### Score 0

- No language
- Off-topic
- Blank paper

## Appendix B: Student Samples

## Pretest

Hector

Writing

I went to the arboretum and saw a snake and a turtle and a alligator and a bobcat and we had a picnic and ate food and we had alot of fun then we went on the bus. then I came home and saw television and then went to the astro dome to see the Astros play and then I bought popcorn and soda and Glen davis hit a home run with bases loaded and graig bigio hit the ball to the left and they scored it was the last ining and they won 8 to 0 and they were all happy.



## Appendix B: Student Samples

## Post-test

Hector

My favorite TV show

My favorite TV show is the Simpsons because they are funny and crazy.

I liked the part when Bart was walking around the water fountain.

Then his dad Homer went "Don't get wet. His sister Lisa and his mother

Marge and even his little sister went "Home". Then he turned to the water

fountain. In he saw Bart already swimming in the big water fountain.

Homer went, "Come back you little pilgrim."

## Appendix B: Student Samples

## Pretest

Hermelinda

One day a go to the seaword  
It was very good in seaword  
I saw animals in the street.  
Everywhere was fool of children.  
and moms and dads and grand  
mom to. It was fun we saw  
some persen with whales they  
are jumping in the water.

## Appendix B: Student Samples

## Post-test

Homework #2

my Favorite TV Show

my favorite show is Growing Pains. The main characters are Mr. and Mrs. Seaver and their family. Carol is in school. She is a good speller. Mike always wants to go dating but he always is getting in trouble. Maggie is Mrs. Seaver. One day she tells a story about her family. One day Mike and Bower supposed to do a report to the coach. But Mike doesn't want to do a report. He always does something different than doing his report.