Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

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EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF REFLECTIVE WRITING AND PEER FEEDBACK ON STUDENT WRITING IN AND BEYOND THE UNIVERSITY

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Many higher education institutions in the world do not adequately support writing outside of coursework. This is the case in our contexts of Madagascar and Vietnam. In such contexts, self and peer support can be the most helpful strategies to support students with their writing and to assist them in gradually becoming autonomous. That is why we introduced reflection and peer feedback to our students. Earlier research has established that reflection can enable students to set goals, monitor, and self-evaluate critically (Wenden 1991; Little 2020), while peer feedback helps student writers raise audience awareness, enhances the quality of students' interaction, and facilitates revision, as well as improves writing quality (Berg 1999; Dizon 2016; Min 2005, 2006; Sánchez-Naranjo 2019).

Multiple aspects of student writing (e.g., writing self-regulation, writing quality, comments, and revision) have been studied, but most research has been short-term. What is lacking is long-term research which examines how sustainable writing approaches might be as student writing transfers during their undergraduate years and beyond. In English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts in particular, writing research has been modest, despite emerging calls for cross-cultural research to expand the discussion as to how second language (L2) writing can be effectively taught, to examine cultural

biases in teaching L2 writing, and to grow writing knowledge (Cozart et al. 2016; Donahue 2016; Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue 2011). To address these gaps, our study examined both short-term and long-term effects of reflective writing and peer feedback to see whether they can be effectively applied to contexts where there is little support for student writing. We focused primarily on exploring how the knowledge (or lack of) gained from reflection and peer feedback benefited students immediately after and during the two years following the interventions carried out in our contexts. We asked (1) what are the short- and long-term impacts of reflection and peer feedback to student writing, and (2) in cases where the two approaches were not effective, what was missing?

Contexts

Though our two institutions are dissimilar in many ways, they have one thing in common: little support is provided for student writing. In Madagascar, English is considered a foreign language and is officially taught as a school subject from grades 6 to 12. English (reading, writing, and grammar) is one of the school subjects tested in the national high school examination. In higher education, English continues to be a mandatory subject regardless of the field of study. Writing is the skill that is assessed most often. In Vietnam, English was officially recognized as the country's major foreign language in the 1990s, following Vietnam's Economic Reform in 1986 (Tran and Tanemura 2020). In the national public education system (grades 1-12), English is a compulsory subject from grade 3. The most important English exam is the high school graduation exam at the end of grade 12, in which reading and writing skills are tested. Despite being one of the skills most focused on, writing remains one of the most problematic skills for Vietnamese test takers (cf. Educational Testing Service ETS, in Trinh and Nguyen 2014). While these authors argued that the reason for test takers' struggles with writing was due to teachers' approach to teaching it, Nguyen (2009) observed that Vietnamese writing teachers also struggle with raising student awareness as to why they need to learn to write

in English in the first place. Thus, at present, a mismatch exists between pre- and within-university language education's goals, where the former mainly targets reading and writing skills to prepare students for exams, whereas the latter gives priority to listening and speaking skills. Only recently, writing at university has received more attention, with teacher feedback, teaching approaches, and assessment being hot topics. However, academic discussions on writing and supporting student writers have remained significantly scarce.

We chose to work with students in English teacher training for the purpose of sustainability and transferability. We expected that even if they would not become teachers, they might still use what they gained from the experiences in their own personal and professional writing. During their study program, the participants took compulsory writing courses, which included Developing Fluency in Writing, Writing Proficiency, and Advanced Proficiency in Writing in Madagascar, and Basic Writing, Academic Writing, and Critical Writing in Vietnam.

Research Design

In both contexts, our research was conducted in two phases. At the University of Antananarivo, Madagascar, phase 1 was an extra-curricular nine-week writing course, called "Reflective Writing" (RW). RW was given to all twenty-two first-year students before they started their first compulsory course. In RW, the students were given three argumentative essay questions. For each essay, they produced three drafts (200 words each) in three weeks. They were guided to keep reflective journals in which they set goals and monitored and evaluated their own writing. They were also given opportunities to work in groups weekly to discuss their difficulties and suggest possible solutions. Also, they reflected every three weeks on the benefits and the difficulties of reflection in their journals. The students' journal entries were the data collected for phase 1. At Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education (HCMUTE), twenty-six second-year students participated in a peer

feedback intervention. At the time, these students were taking the Academic Writing course in which they were taught to write short academic essays (about 400 words) on topics of general interest, e.g., education, sport, and relationships. Peer feedback was carried out parallel to participants' writing classes and outside their class hours, and the activity involved written feedback in Google Docs and face-to-face discussion.

Phase 2 of our research was carried out two years later when our Malagasy participants were in their third year, and the Vietnamese participants had left school and entered the workforce. We contacted those who participated in the first phase of our study and interviewed them about their experience of writing. Three Malagasy students were able to answer an open-ended questionnaire followed by email communications by the deadline we had set. Four Vietnamese alumni responded to a questionnaire, then attended one-to-one interviews.

Methods

Our study was guided by the following questions:

1. Are there any short-term benefits of reflective writing and peer feedback to the participants' writing within the university? (Phase 1)
2. What are possible long-term effects of reflective writing and peer feedback on writing within and beyond the university? (Phase 2)
3. What would have made the reflective writing and peer feedback experiences more helpful? (Phase 2)

For question 1 (phase 1), a thematic analysis approach was used to analyze all the Malagasy students' journals, and text analysis was employed to investigate the Vietnamese students' comments. An adapted framework developed in Liu and Sadler (2003) was used to categorize comments into two groups: level of comments (macro or micro) and usefulness (revision or non-revision). For the post-study questionnaire, descriptive statistics was used. Regarding questions 2

Context	Research phase	Participants	Major/Occupation	Data collected
Madagascar	Phase 1	22 first-year students	English teacher training	Journal entries
	Phase 2	3 third-year students	English teacher training	Questionnaire Email communication
Vietnam	Phase 1	26 second-year students	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)	Students' written and oral comments on their peers' first drafts Post-study questionnaire
	Phase 2	4 alumni	Teachers (2) Sales administrator (1) Customer service team leader (1)	Questionnaire One-to-one interviews

Table 6.1. Contexts, Participants, and Data Collection

and 3 (phase 2), thematic analysis was utilized to make sense of the data. Table 6.1 provides some information on our contexts and data.

Results

Short-Term Gains of Reflective Writing and Peer Feedback

Results of phase 1 showed that reflective writing raised students' awareness of writing goals and their own problem–solving abilities, and peer feedback was found to benefit students' writing at text level and enhance their critical thinking.

Awareness-Raising

Reflective writing helped our Malagasy students develop their metacognitive skills and raise their awareness of the necessity of having writing goals. This awareness helped them feel more involved in the writing task and perceive it as a more complex and involved activity. Then, awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in writing emerged. They were able to turn what they considered as weaknesses into specific goals to work on, which then motivated them to find appropriate learning strategies. They focused on their mistakes and were determined to correct and learn more about them. They noticed that their writing could improve thanks to multiple rounds of writing and revising, and by working on difficulties inside and outside class, with little feedback from the teacher. That gave them motivation, self–confidence, and a sense of personal development. These outcomes are in line with what Gere (2019, 289) says: "Writing development interacts with personal growth, and both achievement and confidence are interwoven with and supported by affective dimensions." That resulted in a developing appreciation for the importance of independence from the teacher and for interdependence among peers.

Textual Benefits

Our Vietnamese participants reported that peer feedback benefited their writing at both macro (organization, content, and ideas) and micro (vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics) levels. The examination

of 2,064 student comments showed that 57% of them were on the macro level, and 43% were on the micro level, as table 6.2 presents. Non-revision-oriented comments on macro level, as well as revision-oriented comments on micro level were the most common. A closer investigation of the non-revision-oriented comments showed that most of them were praise (70%) (e.g., Your ideas are great), whereas most of revision-oriented micro comments were on vocabulary and grammar. Our results echo previous research which reported that EFL/ESL writers commonly offer praise comments and that comments principally center on vocabulary and grammar.

Comment types	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3	Essay 4	Total
Macro comments (revision-oriented)	141	60	98	90	389
Macro comments (non-revision-oriented)	165	194	216	209	784
Micro comments (revision-oriented)	138	155	196	124	613
Micro comments (non-revision-oriented)	61	65	83	69	278
Total	505	474	593	492	2,064

Table 6.2. Students' Peer Feedback Comments

Almost 75% of students believed that, as the study progressed, they shifted their focus from micro-level issues to more macro-level issues. However, this only applied to the non-revision-oriented comments. Students said that peer feedback training facilitated the shift in their feedback foci. Probing further into the common practice of giving comments on grammar and vocabulary, we found that earlier experience had a strong impact on student comments. Most students said they followed their high school and university

writing teachers' practice where vocabulary and grammar were most commented on. Below are typical examples of student opinions:

> Commenting on local issues is my old habit. . . . I think it came from my teachers. When they give reviews, they focus on grammar and linguistic structures rather than organization or ideas, so I just do the same. [BE1587]

> I think the habit of Vietnamese teachers is to pay attention to grammar more than to other things. [JM1019]

Beyond Textual Benefits

The interview data showed that the Vietnamese students not only became more critical of their peers' writing, evidenced in an increase in helpful comments on global issues in essays 2 and 3, but also of their own writing. For example, student HR1631 said: "If you write something and you don't have anyone to review your essay, it means that you always think that your writing is good, it has no mistakes. However, peer feedback helps me to realize that my writing always needs to be improved."

The development in students' critical thinking was also evident in their opinions on when peer feedback was *not* helpful. For example, DK1480 said: "But the thing was not many comments on global areas are made, and the most common type of comments that my peer offered are on grammar and vocabulary." By that, this student perceived comments on micro-level issues as unhelpful. Another student, CP1195, believed that "peer feedback would not be useful when my peer did not understand my points and made unhelpful comments." And yet another view was also expressed by student CP1195: "Her feedback was not always helpful because it was not critical enough."

Together, the first phase of our study suggests that reflective writing and peer feedback carry considerable potential as sustainable pedagogical approaches for learning to write, evidenced by the fact that students developed metacognitive skills and were capable of

helping each other improve writing on the textual level and become more critical in their thinking about writing.

Long-Term Gains: Product to Process Thinking and Transfer of Learning

The findings of phase 2 showed that our participants' perspectives on writing evolved from product-oriented to process-oriented. For the Malagasy students, this shift seemed to stem from reviewing their essays repeatedly. This process impacted their perceptions of the purpose of writing, as one student said:

> I learnt in the course that writing is indeed an active process. . . . To write only for the sake of writing, or even simply for getting good marks should not be the motivational purpose when writing. . . . I learnt that writing is about "me communicating with me," and then "me communicating with my readers." . . . Engaging my heart and brain entirely into the writing by means of asking questions about what I write is a strategy that I learned from the "reflective writing" course. [MS0001]

Now an alumni and working as a teacher, IQ1029, a Vietnamese participant, said the introduction to process writing (i.e., revising, editing, and proofreading writing over multiple drafts) and what he gained from peer feedback experience were helpful to his earlier writing and present teaching. He said:

> I found that my work gets better thanks to several rounds of writing, revising, and peer review. Often-times, my peer can spot mistakes that I can't see or overlook. Now I also use peer feedback to my students so that they understand what process writing is like. Though my students' proficiency is still low, they are capable of giving comments on ideas, organization, and coherence. [IQ1029]

For alumna BE1587, she learned from the peer feedback experience that writing was not an enterprise that could be achieved after a single attempt. She said: "I write and revise and that cycle is completely unlimited." This emerging understanding became instrumental in enabling her to complete a writing task that she and her team were doing, which was to create training materials for her company. She said: "I have to say it's a process. . . . It wasn't a personal task. It's group work. I write first, but the whole team would read it, contribute to it, revise it, give me ideas to revise, and then I revise it. . . . After revising, the team will read it again, and after I feel it's OK, I will submit it to the boss for approval." [BE1587]

Additionally, a transfer of learning (Cotterall 2009) was observed, as all three Malagasy interviewees stated that they continued reflecting and using strategies they had learned in Reflective Writing (RW), such as setting writing goals, planning and organizing ideas, and self-correction. Two students said they applied self-correction to beyond-university writing. Those strategies would be necessary even after graduating from college, according to MS0002. She saw them as transferable and useful for future writing. MS0003 also commented on the lifelong nature of those strategies and the awareness raised in RW. She believed what she learned in RW resulted in her development as an "independent learner": "This course helped me to change my mind gradually about being an independent learner. Throughout my school studies from primary schools until high school I had always depended on what input I got from teachers." [MS0003]

Beyond the university, the pleasure of writing or the feeling of necessity to write that they developed in RW motivated the students to put their thoughts and reflections into writing. They used writing as a means of reflection on important events in their lives, on their personal growth, and on their interests, thereby nurturing both their writing and personal development:

> Ever since I learnt "reflexive writing," once an import-
> ant life event or a life-marking moment has occurred
> . . . I always took a pen and paper, and I reflected on

> the situation so as to write about how I felt and thought about it. . . . I also keep track in my journal the evolution of my passion and feeling towards my life goals as I grow up intellectually with time. [MS0001]

MS0002 described voluntarily writing summaries of the books she read. She evaluated her writing by comparing her current pieces with prior ones, which was a strategy she had learned in RW. Despite being her own audience, she constantly strived to improve her writing through the comparison:

> When I first wrote a summary, it was just a simple summary of one paragraph in which I wrote what I remembered of the story. . . . However, in my recent summary and the following, after reading one chapter, I write down the summary of it. . . . Now, my summary takes about 5 pages in my copybook. [MS0002]

Suggested Solutions to Make Reflective Writing and Peer Feedback More Useful

The results reported in our first two research questions informed us that reflection and peer feedback can be applied as sustainable, strategic approaches for writing in contexts where institutional support for the student writers has remained alarmingly lacking. However, our participants' opinions also showed that reflection and peer feedback could be even more beneficial, provided some changes were made. For instance, integrating peer feedback into group discussions in the RW could be a way for learners to help one another with their difficulties, as a Malagasy suggested: "I would suggest that students should read their classmates' essays because sometimes it is easier to detect mistakes in someone else's writing. . . . In that case I think that the group discussion would be hugely helpful and interesting because I can really figure out where, for example, one of my group members had difficulties." [MS0003]

In the Vietnamese context, peer feedback could be more sustainable if the focus on micro aspects were addressed. From participant

MS0037's perspective, the peer feedback she experienced at the university was mainly about peers giving comments on micro-level issues, but it was very different from what she later experienced at a professional development training course (TESOL) she was taking. At the university, she often did one or two rounds of peer feedback in pairs, compared with multiple rounds of group peer feedback at her TESOL course where she was writing lesson plans. According to her, peer feedback was always more about macro-level issues, which was unlike what she had previously experienced. Besides, her prior peer feedback experience did not help her realize the importance of the audience, which she only discovered in her profession. She said:

> The difficulty is not much about the language, but more about the teaching skills, and we have to write so many times because of the ideas. Like he [her course instructor] doesn't agree with our ideas, or he gives us much more ideas. Then we changed the ideas. It's the reason why I had to re-write again and again. . . . Before, I didn't learn so much on writing for a specific audience or purpose, but now I have specific learners, specific tasks. . . . We have to do it seriously and critically. [MS0037]

Another participant also believed that peer feedback at the university was too much focused on micro-level issues, whereas her current focus of work writing was on ideas and effective communication. She said after receiving clarifications of information from her colleagues and clients several times, she began to pay closer attention to getting her message across. She said:

> At my university, I did proofreading because I have to revise my grammar and vocabulary, but now I'm working, it's not important anymore. The most important thing is information I give to the readers, not the writing style. They don't care if my writing skills are good or bad, they only care about information, correct information. [YT7501]

To address our participants' tendency to focus more on micro-level issues in peer feedback, one solution could be training, which has been reported as essential to effective peer feedback (Min 2005, 2006). The training should also incorporate guidelines on solicited feedback. Regarded as sustainable feedback (Geitz, Brinke, and Kirschner 2011), solicited feedback is the feedback students actively ask to have instead of just receiving feedback. Geitz, Brinke, and Kirschner (2011) argued that feedback only becomes sustainable when students play an active role in the feedback process.

Implications

The benefits observed from this study suggest that reflection and peer feedback should be incorporated into writing courses. Both practices enabled our students to understand the purpose of writing. Our study focused on EFL contexts, but given the current global mobilization of students, it is anticipated that most institutions, including those not focused specifically on EFL instruction, will have growing encounters with EFL student writers. Therefore, our research implications expand beyond EFL contexts.

We suggest writing teachers should focus more on macro-level strategies for writing by guiding students to set goals, consider the audience, and make regular reflections on difficulties and improvements. In non-EFL contexts, writing mentors/advisors in writing centers can prompt students to focus on their writing process by giving them opportunities to review their own writing and providing space for them to give peer feedback.

In EFL contexts like the ones presented here, the need for student writing support should be recognized by university program coordinators. Both in EFL and non-EFL contexts, the students are rich resources who can serve as support for themselves and for one another. Therefore, the English writing curriculum should include self-reflective questions and guidance for peer feedback sessions. It should highlight the process nature of writing. If institutions want their students to write better at the university and continue developing writing skills for academic and professional success,

they need to help their students make use of sustainable resources and approaches.

Acknowledgements

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