

## **Self-managed Peer Writing Groups for the Development of EFL Literacy Practices**

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### **Elisabeth L. Rodas**

University of Cuenca, Ecuador  
<elisabeth.rodas@ucuenca.edu.ec>

### **Laura Colombo**

National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET, Argentina)  
<laura.colombo@conicet.gov.ar>

### **Abstract**

*Peer response writing groups present several benefits in language learning classrooms. However, they are usually supervised by the instructor and thus become time consuming when carried out in class. This descriptive case study offers a model for extramural peer feedback and analyzes 12 meeting transcriptions of four undergraduate EFL writing groups implemented outside class time as support for an academic writing course with limited time for student interaction. These peer response groups were organized to: 1) provide participants with an additional audience, 2) open a space to practice the L2 in an authentic communicative situation, and 3) engage in peer review activities, a literacy practice associated with scientific-academic writing. Based on the data analysis of participant interactions, three main themes emerged according to what the members talked about: interacting as authors and reviewers of research articles, using the L2 in authentic communicative situations, and talking about and enacting literacy practices. Although the experience of these writing groups was mainly positive, one of the limitations was their short lifespan, which prevented additional training to model peer response that would help facilitate the interaction among the participants, an important consideration to achieve beneficial peer feedback and to scaffold the process.*

*Keywords: peer feedback, EFL, undergraduate students, academic writing, language teaching*

## Peer response in the ELT classroom

For many years now, peer response (i.e., peer review or peer feedback) in ELT classrooms, understood here as the exchange of texts for oral and/or written feedback between two or more learners, has suggested several benefits. From a composition studies perspective, one advantage of peer feedback on writing is having an additional audience as a complement to that of the teacher (Lee, 2015; see also Chang, 2016). Another advantage is for students not only to critically evaluate another person's text but also to become self-critical of their own writing (Rollinson, 2005). It has also been found that students engaged in giving feedback benefit by improving their own writing skills (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) as it helps to identify linguistic errors and to develop critical analysis and reading strategies of others and their own writing (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

From an interactionist perspective, peer feedback gives language learners opportunities to engage in meaningful exchanges to help negotiate meaning where their language production differs from the target (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Long, 1996); as mentioned by Gass and Mackey (2015), these gaps or communication breakdowns propel the interlocutors to use different strategies such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, and repetitions to solve them, thus creating spaces to learn and develop the L2. Additionally, from a sociocultural perspective, interactive and collaborative activities in peer response groups present opportunities for jointly constructed knowledge, making learners "active agents in their own development" (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 227; see also Gass, 1997). This does not preclude peer response from having some disadvantages, which could include, but are not limited to: giving or receiving overly critical comments, an excessive focus on form in detriment of content, a fear of offending peers, among others (Hyland, 2003b)

The implementation of peer response activities in the classroom has taken into consideration different aspects. One of them has to do with how peer response activities are organized. Ferris (2003) and Liu and Hansen (2002), for example, have suggested that these activities should be carefully structured so that students know what to comment on. As a matter of fact, in a study of teacher practices, Ferris (2014) noted that the majority of teachers surveyed provided training and presented guidelines for students to know what to look for in a text and how to respond when engaged in peer response. Another consideration has been the source of feedback. A summary of studies carried out on various forms of feedback (teacher, peer, self) done by Ferris (2003) seemed to indicate that, in general, a combination of different sources of feedback can be beneficial to students, with a consideration of both the advantages and disadvantages of each.

At the same time, some studies about peer response activities have also analyzed the language of communication used. This is an important aspect, especially in contexts where learners share an L1. Although some studies point to disadvantages of using the L1 in peer activities (e.g., Huang, 1996), others highlight its benefits. For example, a study by Yu and Lee (2014) indicated that learners used the L1 "as a useful cognitive and social mediating artifact to reduce the consumption of cognitive resources and the inhibitory effect of L2 during peer feedback" (p. 36). Other research has shown the facilitative effect of L1 in peer response activities (e.g., De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Zhao, 2010), even though this was not the main focus. As has

been noted by Storch and Aldosari, “to restrict or prohibit the use of L1 in L2 classes is to deny learners the opportunity of using an important tool” (2010, p. 372).

As Chang’s (2016) review presents, the majority of studies on L2 peer response “are classroom-based research conducted at the tertiary level” (p. 85). These peer review activities are generally part of the undertakings within a language classroom with the teacher’s guidance and supervision. However, as Ferris (2003) claims, one of the main issues that has been mentioned in the literature regarding peer response within the classroom is that it either takes up too much classroom time or not sufficient time is given to fully take advantage of this pedagogical tool.

### **The rationale for self-managed peer response groups**

In this study, we describe four undergraduate EFL peer response groups from a university’s Honors Program. These groups were organized as extramural, supplementary support for an academic writing course with a limited in-class time for interaction with students (two hours weekly). The main purpose of these writing groups was to provide genuine reactions as readers to help improve their writing in a low-stakes environment without a professor’s direct supervision. This purpose is contrary to the common trend in language education (as presented earlier), which in many cases is to develop the written or oral English language per se, analyze a particular form of feedback, or engage in peer feedback from an error correction approach, which was not the focus here. The peer response writing groups’ implementation took into consideration several positive aspects of this pedagogical tool, as based on the literature.

First, peer response groups would provide participants with an additional audience and, most importantly, another source of feedback for their drafts apart from the instructor (Hyland, 2003b). Feedback, from a process approach to writing, constitutes a key element to guide writers in the development of skills through discussions, drafting, and revisions (Casanave, 2004; Ferris, 2007). Although not able to provide the same feedback as an instructor, “all learners can play a role by at least identifying where they think an error has occurred” (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012, p. 135). As the course instructor would also meet individually with each student to review his/her draft, peer comments would be given as preliminary readers to each other’s drafts.

Second, these groups would open an additional space outside the classroom to practice not only their written language skills but also their speaking skills while commenting on texts, thus making an authentic and meaningful use of the foreign language (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). As has been suggested, peer feedback activities allow students to “engage in unrehearsed, low-risk, exploratory talk that is less feasible in classroom and teacher-student interactions” (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2005, p. 226).

Third, in these groups students would engage in an authentic literacy practice often associated with the writing and publishing of research papers: the peer review process (Colombo, 2017). Following Street (1993), a literacy practice is defined as the ways in which written language is used in everyday life and, thus, it cannot be reduced to a series of observable behaviors since it involves prior knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and social relationships. Therefore, although the participants in this particular study would not necessarily publish their research

papers at the end of their undergraduate studies, they would have gained first-hand experience in a common practice in the academic sphere: asking peers to act as proofreaders before submitting the text for evaluation (in this case, to the course professor).

Lastly, this interaction with their peers would allow them to take a first step toward becoming part of the disciplinary discourse of their majors by focusing on a specific genre and the ways this particular type of writing is constructed by experts (Colombo, 2018; Hyland, 2003a). This focus on a particular genre would be possible since participants would take to their groups shared knowledge about the task (i.e., writing a scientific article), a positive aspect when students engage in peer response activities (Ferris, 2003).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to analyze participants' interactions in these self-managed, peer-led, and interdisciplinary writing groups (see taxonomy by Haas, 2014) to determine how: 1) participants developed their role as an additional audience, 2) L2 was used in an authentic communicative situation, and 3) they engaged in literacy practices associated with research scientific-academic writing. Through the insights gained from this analysis, we aim to contribute to the literature on peer response writing groups and language teaching for the development of undergraduate students whose language is not English. Although the experiences of this study are context specific, different aspects of this model for intramural peer feedback we present could fit varied teaching situations. Readers could take what applies to their classrooms and adapt it to their specific contexts.

## **Methodology**

In this descriptive multiple case study four undergraduate EFL writing groups implemented in an Ecuadorian public university during one semester were purposefully selected (Maxwell, 2013). To determine if the peer response writing group participants had engaged in the activities for which they had been created, data collection included several sources: 12 transcriptions of group sessions (four per group), a semi-structured interview with the course instructor, and course instructional materials.

## **Context and Participants**

The writing groups were formed by 15 Spanish-speaking students from one of the cohorts of the university's Honors Program. To be part of this program, students were required to 1) pass an institutionally administered English language proficiency test, demonstrating a level B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001), 2) demonstrate academic excellence in their undergraduate studies, and 3) be committed to taking additional classes apart from their usual course load for the semester.

As part of the Honors Program's curriculum, students had to take an academic writing course, which met for two hours once a week for sixteen weeks. The course used a genre-approach to writing instruction, focusing on the development of a research article. The 15 students were undertaking research activities for their undergraduate theses or working with other professors on different research, and they were at different writing stages. As the students had a level B2 of English or higher, their final writing assignment for the course would consist of the

introduction and the methodology section of a research paper written in English and based on their research projects.

The course instructor, who was part of a faculty writing group at the university, requested the writing groups' coordinator at the Academic Reading and Writing Program to organize peer response groups with these students. The main purpose would be to provide them with a varied audience and a different source of feedback on their final writing project than only the instructor's. This out-of-class support was needed due to the lack of time in class to engage in this particular activity even though it was considered to be beneficial. Extramural peer feedback activities would complement individual teacher-student conferences scheduled toward the end of the semester and one in-class group feedback session on oral presentations based on a section of their writing projects. Thus, students would receive a combination of feedback from several sources. Participation in the peer response groups would be voluntary and would not receive any credit toward the academic course.

### **The preliminary training session and group organization**

Eleven of the 15 students in the course received a preliminary training session in Spanish conducted by the writing groups' coordinator at the university's Academic Reading and Writing Program (missing members received this training on another day). This meeting took place in the first week of the March-August semester before the academic writing course started. Students enrolled in the course were contacted via email by the instructor and invited to take part in the preliminary training session. Its purpose was to inform students of this outside component of the course from the outset (Hyland, 2003b, p. 201). The objectives of the session were to: 1) introduce the concept of peer response groups and their purpose, 2) discuss general guidelines for group meetings, and 3) model the feedback process.

The coordinator explained that the purpose of the peer response writing groups was not to focus on language correction but to provide genuine comments and reactions on the development of the text as additional readers besides the instructor. Then, the general meeting guidelines were presented; the coordinator in conjunction with this paper's co-author had implemented these guidelines with faculty writing groups, and they had proven to be useful in facilitating group interaction. An important guideline was for students to consider the tone in which comments were to be given (i.e., as suggestions to improve the text and not as negative criticism); the emphasis was on giving constructive feedback when commenting on each other's texts.

Tied to this was the means of delivery of peer feedback; the mode of delivery would be both through written as well as oral comments, as has been done elsewhere (e.g., Miao et al., 2006; Tsui & Ng, 2000). This implied a two-step process. To start, one member would share his/her text at least three days before the face-to-face meeting through a Google Drive folder created by the coordinator for each writing group; the other group members would then read this text in advance and include any relevant written comments by using the "comment" and "suggestion" option of this online tool in the same document. Comments were to be "unfocused" in nature, meaning that they would be comprehensive and encompass any area of the text (Ferris et al., 2013). However, participants were encouraged to offer comments on the text's overall organization, concentrating on how understandable the content was in each

section reviewed. Although the literature indicates that unstructured feedback might not be appropriate for L2 language learners (e.g., Bell, 1991) and that peer activities might provide better results if carefully structured (e.g., Liu & Hansen, 2002) through rubrics or checklists so L2 learners focus on global writing issues (e.g., Chang, 2014), an unfocused approach to feedback was considered appropriate in this case; the objective was not error correction but for students to be critical readers of each other's texts. After, during the face-to-face meeting at a place of their choosing on campus, participants would give oral feedback by reviewing the previously-made written comments. Each member in turn would go through his/her written feedback, explaining and/or expanding it if it was not clearly understood as written. These sessions were meant to create more interaction between the members where dialogue took precedence.

Additionally, during this preliminary training session, the language of communication during these meetings was considered. The coordinator suggested the use of the L2 to facilitate the discussion of the text, which was to be written in this language, and also to give participants more oral practice. Since all students were at a B2 level or higher, they felt this could be done and agreed to the suggestion. Finally, the coordinator indicated that her role would be to indirectly supervise the progress of the groups' meetings throughout their lifespan but would not attend their sessions. Thus, groups would be peer-led and self-managed.

Because the students came from different disciplinary fields (Electrical Engineering, 1; Industrial Engineering, 1; Civil Engineering, 1; Graphic Design, 1; Economy, 2; Architecture, 3; Environmental Engineering, 6), the instructor agreed to group them, if possible, by disciplines once the course started and she had interacted with them. This disciplinary grouping might also make it easier for participants to comment on each other's texts. Four writing groups were formed with four members each, except one with three members. As Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) indicate, this number of participants in each group would be appropriate to provide varied perspectives as well as to put them in contact with different writing styles.

### **The writing course and the development of the peer response writing group meetings**

The start and end of the peer response groups was directly connected to the academic writing course's schedule. The preliminary training session was held prior to the beginning of the course but on the same week. In the course, after the first introductory class, the instructor taught the common organizational structure of the research article (RA) genre: introduction, methodology, results, and discussion (Swales, 1990).

As stated in the interview, the instructor's focus was on providing the general structure of a RA since the course comprised students from different disciplinary areas and was limited in time to two hours of class per week. For each section of the paper, the instructor presented its purpose, structural components, and expectations. She also introduced some recommendations regarding academic vocabulary and sentence structure, in addition to citation conventions for students to consider for avoiding plagiarism. Because students were at different stages of the research projects on which their papers were to be based, they were only required to write the introduction and methodology as a final assignment for this course. The first two sections, which were connected to the writing activities in the peer response groups, were discussed in

class from week two to week five before the start of this extramural peer response activity. Figure 1 presents the timeline for the course and peer response group meetings.

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
<b>Academic writing course</b>		Lesson on research article: introduction		Lesson on research article: methodology												
<b>Peer response groups</b>	Training session								Peer response group meetings							

**Figure 1.** Academic writing course lectures on RA and EFL peer writing groups meetings timeline

The writing group coordinator contacted the participants on the seventh week through email, reminding them of the guidelines presented in the preliminary training session (i.e., the two-step feedback delivery process as explained earlier). It asked them to fill out a shared Excel sheet stating their meeting time and days, and provided the procedure to save their meeting recordings before uploading them to their Google Drive folder. Participants had given their consent to record the sessions, and one member of each group was charged with uploading the file each week. The start of the writing groups in the eighth week was considered appropriate since students had gained “knowledge of the relevant features of content, system, content, and genre [in their course and thus were] better able to intervene with helpful advice” (Hyland, 2003b, p. 200). The peer response groups began on the eighth week and finished on the 15th week. In total, the groups met seven weeks, which gave each participant the opportunity to present at least one section of their paper (introduction and/or methodology) for peer review. This meeting schedule, then, appeared to be a good way to add out-of-class support for these developing writers

Participants proceeded to meet in their peer response groups without direct supervision from the instructor or the coordinator, who contacted them to remind them to upload the files for their sessions’ recording, register their meeting days, or to answer any questions about the group functioning/logistics that might arise.

**A bird’s eye view of a group’s session.** To gain a better understanding of a group’s interaction, here we provide a glimpse into the development of a session.

The group meets on campus, this time in one of the cubicles reserved at the library. A few days prior to the meeting, one member had uploaded his/her text to be reviewed and the other members had included written comments. The commented text is opened in their shared Google Drive folder in each member’s laptop. One member begins recording the session on his/her cell phone; in English he/she gives the session number (1st, 2nd, 3rd meeting, etc.) and indicates whose text and what section is being reviewed. The person recording the sessions asks the

others who would like to begin reviewing his/her comments. Then members take turns reading any comments they have made; this is done one paragraph at a time. At one point or another, one of the members might use Spanish but then reverts back to English as the main language of communication. Depending on the content of the comment, the author is free to interact either agreeing, giving additional information, and/or asking for clarification. The comments are usually straightforward and focused on the task. The session ends when there are no more comments to review.

### **Data collection and analysis**

To characterize participant interactions within these writing groups, 12 sessions were selected randomly for each group and transcribed verbatim, including learners' errors. The letters and numbers assigned to the groups and the members are used for confidentiality issues and do not indicate a hierarchical order (G=group; M=member). This data was complemented with a semi-structured interview with the instructor as well as course instructional materials (e.g., presentations used in class), which served to provide descriptive details as they related to the development of the peer response groups.

Open coding was applied through successive readings of the transcriptions. Stretches were assigned codes according to what participants were talking about. Through the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987), similarities were taken into account and differences were minimized to make a preliminary categorization of the different kinds of topics discussed. At a second stage, differences were emphasized in order to determine the properties of those categories. Thus, the initial categorization was adjusted with the aid of previous research and bibliography on peer feedback in order to systematize the properties of some categories (Maxwell, 2013). Analysis of connections between categories helped in adjusting and revising initial categorizations. After the first researcher conducted this process, the second researcher revised the analysis confirming or questioning the coding assigned. Finally, they deliberated about those few cases with dissimilar opinions until reaching a consensus.

### **Findings**

The data analysis of participant interactions followed the pedagogical considerations derived from the literature that informed the implementation of the four peer response groups: 1) interactions as readers of a research article taking into account genre characterizations (in this case, text organization as presented in the writing course; 2) use of the L2 in an authentic communicative situation as it concerned the development of the text; and 3) issues associated with literacy practices having to do with peer feedback and research writing. Aligned with this, results based on the data analysis of participant interactions of the four writing groups are presented following these three main themes.

#### **Interacting as authors and reviewers of research articles: focusing on the text organization**

The analysis of meeting transcriptions indicates that one of the main purposes of the groups was attained. The participants in all four groups, as intermediate readers, focused most of their



peer feedback on the text's global concerns, specifically its organization in order to improve it before their professor's one-on-one feedback meetings and final assessment. Comments centered on what is commonly included in each section of a research article and thus expected by the audience. In this case, through in-class instruction and analysis of examples of this genre during weeks two through five (see Figure 1), the students had received guidance regarding what to look for in each other's texts and their own (the research article's structure); thus, they could now review each other's texts in the peer response groups.

In this context participants also seem to have benefited from being part of a low-stakes space (Elbow, 1997) in which to voice their understanding of what had been presented in the course. These interactions about the text's organization based on previously written comments allowed members to talk freely without being prompted or evaluated by an instructor. By contextualizing or elaborating on the comments given about another member's draft, the dialogue made it possible for participants to make their learning palpable. Thus, students began to appropriate the knowledge regarding the organization of this type of text by using genre-specific terms to refer to it. Their comments connected the abstract concepts presented in the course with their practical application in the texts as we detail in the following paragraphs.

During weeks two and three of the academic writing course, as Figure 1 shows, the instructor had presented the components of the introduction: the research problem, the research gap, and the research objective. Thus, G1 members examined the introduction paragraph by paragraph, reviewing each of the members' previously written comments. From their course, they understood that one of the paragraphs needed to focus on the research gap; thus, the discussion developed as follows:

### **Excerpt 1:**

*G1-M2: Anything else about the second paragraph?*

*G1-M3: Yeah, I think that now or then [at this point in the text or later] you might include what has [been] done in relation with this technology in other places. Maybe try to explain a little bit the research gap.*

*G1-M1: Well, yes, there is some work but this work is a lot general about it [referring to the literature that has been cited regarding the main topic]. It is just about outdoor and indoor measurements but not something specific to the forest like uhm what I'm going to do. So maybe I could put that part there.*

In Excerpt 1, G1-M3 referred to this specific section of the introduction and what she considered was lacking and gave suggestions on how to better develop it ("try to explain a little bit the research gap"). G1-M3 used the "common language" set by the instructor when discussing what is usually expected in the introduction of research articles: making evident the research gap. G1-M1 explained the section and commented about how he was including studies that referred to general information to set the stage for his research, which was more specific. This explanation of what he was doing with other studies, in fact, went in line with what the professor presented through her instructional materials, where it was indicated that the second part of an introduction usually contains what previous studies have done in preparation for the author's contribution.

A similar situation occurred in G3 while reviewing the introduction: one of the members highlighted the lack of information that would help clarify the focus of the author's research. This comment led to a discussion of exactly where certain information should be located in this section.

### **Excerpt 2:**

*G3-M1: I have a question. You're going to use the interface or maybe the app with an older population or maybe just . . .*

*G3-M3: Ah, no, my project is just focus[ed] on the millennials as the population because if I go to the whole population, it's a lot of work.*

*G3-M1: So maybe you are missing the type of population in the introduction.*

*G3-M3: Ah, yeah! But that should go at the last part.*

*G3-M1: I don't know if in that paragraph [if the population should go at the end]. The goal [the purpose of the article] could be the principal.*

*G3-M3: Ah, ya [Spanish for okay] The goal of this paper is bla, bla, bla [types notes from the discussion on his computer] so then the methods*

In Excerpt 2, G3-M1 questioned G3-M3 about the placement of the information regarding the study's population in the last paragraph since, as she said, that paragraph was meant for "the goal" of the paper, what the instructor presented as the research objective. These exchanges between the writing group members seem to have helped them consolidate their understanding of course concepts and to directly apply them when analyzing another member's text. By voicing this newly acquired knowledge, they seemed to have made explicit what otherwise would have remained as tacit knowledge.

At the same time, these novice writers were not only able to critically analyze their peers' texts in their role as intermediate readers, but they could also justify the choices they had made in their own texts. For instance, in Excerpt 3, G3-M3 explained how he had understood this section needed to be structured, as follows.

### **Excerpt 3:**

*G3-M1: Maybe you are also missing studies or papers that show that it is an important topic to analyze.*

*G3-M3: Ah, ya, ya [Spanish for okay] so for example, I was going to use these sites, sites right? when I'm going to, when I will be talking about user experience. I have these sites of user experience, its [their] link with a different range of meanings, bla, bla bla . . . as support of what am I writing, what am I talking of.*

*G3-M1: Ah maybe there are no studios [studies] about, like, how is the link of security, or the perception of security of people. I don't know if it could be specific in electronic money but maybe in the financial systems [it] could be with the interface design. Maybe you have like a number or statistical [statistics]. It will be stronger.*

*G3-M2: You can put that in the introduction.*

*G3-M3: Because the idea of the introduction, I was checking, is to start from general to specific. That's why I was starting with the general importance of developing these kinds of apps for. That's why I was starting the introduction because I don't know if I*

*should start talking about the user experience, emotional design or should I be talking about the final system. No se si me explico [I don't know if I'm making myself clear].*

As Excerpt 3 exemplifies, the interaction with peers made it possible for G3-M3 to make explicit the choices he made based on what he had understood was the purpose of the introduction. Thus, by focusing on each paragraph of the section under review, group members were able to support their decisions with respect to what had been learned in the course. In this sense, they were not just talking about the structure of a research article in an abstract manner, but they were able to begin recognizing its sections or their absence in their own texts.

Perhaps these interactions might seem to indicate that writing group members were not being critical about their writing but merely following the instructor's "recipe" for a research article, enacting some kind of "write by numbers" while producing their drafts. Nevertheless, by using the genre's characterization to shape their drafts so as to anticipate their readers' expectations, these students were actually taking their first steps as reviewers and authors. This is, they were engaged in a process of academic socialization that entails "learning how to participate in a competent and appropriate manner in the discursive practices of a given academic community" (Morita, 2009, p. 444). As newcomers in scientific writing practices, they were gradually learning how to work in a specific domain, thus beginning to use general strategies, which would diminish in the future as they gain familiarity with this particular situation (Colombo, 2017; Hyland, 2016).

### **Using the L2 in authentic communicative situations: discussing about language**

In discussing the characteristics of the introduction and the methodology, it would have been unavoidable for the EFL learners in these writing groups to also engage in talking about language itself. In fact, as previously mentioned, another of the benefits which had been considered for the implementation of the peer response writing groups had been to give students an opportunity to use the English language outside the classroom in an authentic communicative situation. However, in these meetings the main purpose was not on producing perfectly spoken English exchanges or on correcting each other's speaking skills. Thus, when participants made specific comments about language use, it was with a focus on how well it communicated their ideas through the drafts they were jointly reviewing. In this regard, participants' comments about language use arose when they: 1) asked for confirmation of the meaning of a word, 2) noticed what they considered the incorrect use of a word in context, and 3) considered the use of vocabulary more appropriate for an academic text.

First, because the participants were English language learners discussing topics usually dealt with in their native language, some of the exchanges had to do with members asking others for confirmation of a term in English or directly indicating that they did not know the word which was needed in that context. In this case, members would sometimes code-switch, reverting to the use of Spanish, for a brief moment, to indicate this lack of knowledge. Excerpt 4 illustrates how members in G3 addressed this situation.

#### **Excerpt 4:**

G3-M2. *Okay, in continuity, I don't know if that is okay. Eso quiere decir continuidad. No sé cómo se dice en inglés* [That means continuity. I don't know how it is said in English].

G3-M3. *That is why I gave this feedback* [she refers to the written feedback on the text] *because I wasn't sure if you were talking continuity about the movement.*

G3-M2. *Ah.*

G3-M3. *Movement is not the right word, continuismo* [continuism]?

G3-M1. *Ah, no.*

G3-M2. *Entonces* [Then], *if you [are] using "continuity" as continuidad* [continuity], *it's okay.*

G3-M1. *I think there is a specific term in economics to refer to that, to the lack of continuity.*

G3-M2. *No me acordaba la palabra* [I couldn't remember the word].

In this case, code-switching, which has been known to ease discussions and act as a learning tool in homogenous groups (Colombo, 2012; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Levine et al., 2002), seems to have been used for this purpose, to facilitate the interactions about the text. However, once the term was discussed and clarified, participants reverted to the use of English to continue commenting on their texts.

Second, another situation that gave rise to discussions about language arose when participants noted what they considered an incorrect use of a word in context; in this case, members would offer suggestions for improvement or change. Usually, as Excerpt 5 from G4 shows, members would highlight the dissonance in the use of the word as the text was discussed, and they would offer suggestions for improvement.

#### **Excerpt 5:**

G4-M3: *In the second sentence, I thought that "realize" wasn't a good word to use. I thought maybe "performed" or something like that.*

G4-M2: *Where?*

G4-M3. *In the second sentence, where it says: "an initial exploration was realized." Maybe, performed.*

The author most likely chose the word "realize" due to its close spelling resemblance to the word "realizar" which means "to do" in Spanish, a case of a false cognate, assuming that these two words which sound similarly have the same meaning. In this case G4-M3 identified what she thought might be an error, as Bitchener and Ferris (2012) suggest language learners could do; she offered a solution, "perform," which seemed to better fit the needs of the text. Once this was clarified, they continued reviewing the rest of the text.

Finally, some interactions between members regarding language arose when they proposed the use of vocabulary more appropriate for an academic text. This awareness of formal vocabulary for academic purposes instead of informal terms seemed to be based on the academic writing course as well. In this regard, in Excerpt 6 a member from G1 made the following comment:

#### **Excerpt 6:**

*G1-M2: Okay, for the last part [last paragraph being reviewed] I found this sentence [reads sentence]: to the author's knowledge this is the first low antenna heat conducted in the forest of Ecuador. I think this part is not very.*

*G1-M3. Well explained?*

*G1-M2. [it] has not a very academic language. Because this isn't very formal. You could use something like: "It is known or this kind of technology is something new. It has . . . hasn't any applications yet in our country." Something like that.*

*G1-M1: okay.*

In a similar way, in another group, G3-M1 suggested the inclusion of specific words as had been advised by the instructor of the course: "maybe you are also missing studies or papers that show that it is an important topic to analyze, and also the words that [instructor's name] said we have to put: important, fundamental."

In the above examples, it can be seen that the discussion within the peer response groups regarding word choice and type of register used (formal/informal) allowed participants to connect what was explained by the instructor with its practical application in the drafts they were reviewing, as had also been the case when discussing the text's structure. Participants did not focus on the language used during their exchanges in the meetings themselves; this allowed them to continue their conversations with ease and without feeling the need to correct themselves as long as their utterances were comprehensible to the other members.

### **Talking about and enacting literacy practices: being authors and reviewers in a sheltered environment**

As the participants' drafts began to take shape through their group discussions and their own writing, some discussions arose having to do with literacy practices related to what authors and reviewers do when writing for publication. In other words, the text was not seen, by some of them, as only a requirement for the academic writing course, but as a document that could be expanded and shared with a broader audience. For example, G3 members began to consider one of the steps in the publishing process, reviewing the requirements of the journal, as exemplified in Excerpt 7.

#### **Excerpt 7:**

*G3-M1. Well, I have a little problem because the specific article of my thesis ah I have to make, I have to put all the information there to present to my tutors, but in the way [in the format] that I'm able to send it to a journal or something like that. I think I should divide the thesis into three articles.*

*G3-M3. Yeah, but have you already checked the journal that you are going to send your paper?*

*G3-M1. I haven't checked that.*

*G3-M3. You should do that.*

*G3-M2. So you can see the characteristics.*

*G3-M3. So you can see how long they accept the paper because if you can determine, for example, the length that the journal accepts, you can have a better idea of what you*

*are going to focus on in this article. For example, in my case, the maximum of words is 6000.*

Because the texts being reviewed were based on graduation research projects or research with their professors, participants were aware of an audience not only beyond their course instructor and peers but also beyond their university setting. This focus on the publication venue and its requirements was touched upon only by G3 members. Although the other groups did not discuss issues connected to publishing, they had exchanges that dealt with writing for an audience outside the disciplinary field, which required clarification of terms or additional explanations, as Excerpt 8 from G1 shows.

### **Excerpt 8:**

*G1-M3: Okay. In the second paragraph, you introduce the [term] Lora. But I don't know if Lora is a term wide[ly] known in your field but for us this is the first time we have read about that. So I suggest to explain what the new technology is, their advantage, why did you choose this technology.*

*G1-M1: Right, yes, it is a new technology so not much [many] people in my field know about it so I think it would be great to explain first some advantages of this technology.*

*G1-M2: Yes, I agree with M3. I also don't know if maybe Lora is some kind of ...*

*G1-M3: Program technology?*

*G1-M1: It's a communication system but . . .*

*G1-M2: It is a word or is it an acronym?*

*G1-M1: It is an acronym which means long range.*

*G1-M2: Okay, then I think it should be explained.*

Even though the instructor made an effort to group students by their disciplinary fields, there was still enough difference between them, making it possible for authors to receive a variety of perspectives and for members to question a term which might have been taken for granted by someone in the same field. This outside reader's comment guided the author (G1-M1) to clarify his text and perhaps make it comprehensible to a wider audience outside his field of study, a very common situation authors face when trying to publish a research article. Later on, this goal seemed to have been achieved by the said participant, whose text was reviewed again three sessions later, when G1-M3 remarked: "I agree with G1-M2 and I think it is very clear. And I can understand the article even [if] I don't have [an] idea about your field, but it is very clear." In general, comments which considered an audience beyond one's discipline were made by all groups at different points during their meetings, becoming an advantage for students who might be used to writing only for an instructor.

### **The need for additional training on peer response**

These peer response groups received one preliminary training session at the beginning of this pedagogical experience, in which the coordinator presented the two-step feedback process to be used (written and oral comments) and modeled it by commenting in front of the students on an example text. Perhaps because the feedback process was relatively unstructured (no rubrics or guiding questions were provided), there was one marked difference in the development of

the groups although members fulfilled the expectation of meeting to give feedback on their drafts. On the one hand, G1 and G2 participants touched on each written comment during their meetings; however, for the most part, they did not elaborate on them and the authors passively received feedback with little to no additional remarks regarding their writing process (e.g., reasons for including information, clarification of ideas). On the other hand, G3 and G4 participants expanded on their written feedback during the meetings, which gave way to several exchanges about the author's research in order to clarify information that had been included in the text.

The analysis of the groups' meetings highlighted this difference in peer response among the groups, which signaled to the coordinator that additional training in peer review practices was needed. Sufficient training is a key factor in the success of this type of interaction (Chang, 2015; Liou & Peng, 2009), and it would have been beneficial to help participants develop more confidence and to make them feel comfortable in giving feedback. Although the participants in these writing groups came from the same academic writing course and, thus, had other opportunities to interact with each other in class, they still required help in the provision of feedback. This was even the case for G3 members who exchanged many more comments than in other groups. In this group, G3-M1 at one point during their first meeting considered it important to ask the coordinator about further advice on how to give comments because, in her case, she was afraid to offend her peers. She said:

**Excerpt 9:**

*G3-M1: I think it would be very helpful for us for [names the coordinator] to give us advice about how we can comment because when I was commenting, I think that maybe M3 is going to . . .*

*G3-M3: Feel offended? No! I'm made of wood [they laugh].*

*G3-M1: Or something like that.*

*G3-M3: I'm made of wood, steel!*

*G3-M1: But it depends on people, how [they] are receiving our comments so it would be very helpful for us [to receive additional guidance].*

*G3-M3. Yeah, that's it.*

As new participants in this literacy practice of peer review, the possibility of offending fellow members through their comments is not an unfounded concern, which could have been alleviated through more training. In addition to offering them one training session and clear guidelines on how to give and receive feedback, the presence of the coordinator at least during the first two meetings could have provided some scaffolding and opportunities to give feedback on feedback, allowing for a discussion of possible modifications to the work dynamic with participants. This concern of not offending peers could also be linked with a level of trust which, according to several authors, takes time to develop among group members (Colombo, 2013; Wegener et al., 2016; Wilson & Cutri, 2019).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the interactions that took place within these four writing groups of EFL undergraduate students shows that group meetings can constitute a low-stakes space that benefits participants in four areas. First, since the course instructor could not engage students in consistent in-class peer feedback activities due to time limitations, as a supplementary tool (Brathwaite, 2009), these self-managed writing groups provided participants with additional support to help them improve their drafts. Nevertheless, as we mentioned before, additional training and scaffolding is necessary for the participants to be able to give and receive feedback in an enriching manner.

Second, voluntarily using the English language as the language of communication during peer response group meetings gave students authentic and meaningful interactions in this language. They interacted with each other to clarify what was written, checked or suggested better options, and negotiated meaning based on the comments given (Hansen & Liu, 2005). At the same time, briefly switching to their L1, Spanish, was not an issue but served to facilitate certain interactions, as has been the case in other studies (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Levine et al., 2002; Yu & Lee, 2014). As noted earlier, from an interactionist perspective, learners engage in exchanges that help them to negotiate meaning where their language production differs from the target through peer feedback (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Long, 1996).

Third, through their discussion about the text and its organization, members made explicit the knowledge gained in their academic writing course, becoming critical readers of others' work as well as their own, paying special attention to genre-related issues. Because the instructor had first presented in class the structure of a research article's introduction and methodology (see Figure 1) and had analyzed with the students examples of this genre, it was feasible for them to focus their attention mainly on global issues, the structure and organization of these two sections, instead of on local issues and error-free language, which might not have been appropriate at their level of English (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

Finally, these new writers actually performed a common literacy practice in academic and scientific writing: peer review. Members were able to consider the usefulness of their comments when these were incorporated by the authors to improve their texts. In this way, participants engaged in literacy practices associated with the writing for publishing process, taking their first steps as authors and reviewers of research papers.

Although not explicitly stated, they also experienced the writing process not as a solitary but as a collaborative endeavor (Mitchell et al., 2013), which engaged them in a meaningful activity (i.e., the writing of their research articles) through the interaction with others; this takes time and effort and puts the writer at the center of the text's construction. Additionally, peer feedback from interdisciplinary members helped authors to see their texts from another perspective and to consider a broader audience beyond that of their own disciplinary fields. This goes in line with other research about the benefits of peer writing groups (Colombo & Rodas, 2020).



One of the limitations of the study was the writing groups' lifespan, which precluded additional training to take place to model peer response that would help facilitate the interaction among the participants, an important consideration to achieve beneficial peer response (Chang, 2015; Ferris, 2003; Liou & Peng, 2009) and to scaffold the process (Hansen & Liu, 2005). At the same time, working with others implies the development of trust, which does not happen overnight; thus, some group members showed apprehension about not hurting others' feelings with their comments, as mentioned earlier. The need for supplemental training has been the case not only in EFL peer response groups but also in other types of writing groups (Haas, 2014), requiring the facilitator to provide more guidance in order to improve their functioning. In this case, continued support from the groups' coordinator (e.g., joining one of the meetings to give further examples of peer feedback) would have been especially relevant for these peer-led and self-managed writing groups. Further research could contrast the implementation of peer response writing groups where the coordinator has a greater influence on the participants' interactions, but without taking away their independent nature, thus paving the way for their smooth running, in contrast to groups which only receive written instructions on how to conduct meetings and give feedback.

Another limitation relates to the specific context of this study and the participants involved. As indicated earlier, these were students from a university's Honors Program, who were already highly motivated and committed to their academic activities. They were also conscious of their heavy schedules; for this reason, they might have been more focused on the task at hand and less inclined to talk about other topics besides the review of the texts, which might have extended the time spent in the meeting. At the same time, despite not receiving any grade for this activity, they might have kept to the peer response activities due to their knowledge that the coordinator was keeping track of their progress and would review their recorded sessions. Participants in peer response groups in other contexts might not be as highly motivated students and might not maintain this focus.

Despite these limitations, we consider that the experiences of these undergraduate EFL writing groups could offer a model for extramural peer feedback, which could be of benefit not only to the students who participate in them, due to the reasons mentioned above, but also to teachers as a pedagogical tool to supplement courses lacking the time to incorporate in-class peer feedback. As has been noted in other studies (e.g., Ferris, 2003), a combination of feedback sources can be beneficial to learners. Thus, extramural peer response writing groups offer a space to complement the feedback provided by the instructor. Additionally, for universities which have writing centers, this type of initiative could be articulated in tandem with academic writing instructors and writing center tutors or staff to help facilitate this type of groups. We hope that the results of this study can offer further insights into peer response writing groups that have the potential to promote academic writing in real contexts at the undergraduate level as well as to introduce students to literacy practices common in the academic-scientific world.

## **About the authors**

**Elisabeth L. Rodas** is an adjunct professor of English in the Department of Languages. She coordinates and researches writing groups in the Academic Reading and Writing Program at

the University of Cuenca, Ecuador. Her research interests include second language learning and language program management.

**Laura Colombo** is an Adjunct Researcher at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) – Institute of Linguistics, Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her research interests include teaching academic writing in first and second language.

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