

### Improving Cognitive Academic Writing Abilities through Peer Support

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#### Abstract



*This paper is based on action research and is an endeavor to reflect on teaching practice as well as to support academic writing among undergraduate students at a public sector university. This is a work in collaboration with co-researchers to analyze the lack of peer support among the graduate students during their writing workshops. Data were gathered from an undergraduate class that I taught and my co-researchers observed it through classroom visits, observations, surveys and interviews. Both Quantitative and Qualitative methods were used to collect and analyze the data. After analyzing the data through the analytical framework of Lev Vygotsky to observe improvement among the students' writing abilities. This action research fundamentally informs the teachers about successful scaffolding of students in academic writing through critical self-reflective teaching practices.*

**Keywords:** Action Research, Peer Support, Academic Writing, Vygotsky, Critical Reflection

#### Introduction

The study is based on action research conducted in collaboration with two of my colleagues, who participated in my action research as observers with the undergraduate students of my class *Teaching Methods*, at the department of Education in a public sector university in Islamabad. Our research objectives were to investigate the amount of peer support students get during their writing class in their *teaching methods* subject and to be critically reflective on our teaching practices as action researchers and educators. A special activity of 'author's chair' was designed to observe the students share their written work with their peers and received feedback. A class of *Teaching Methods* with 41 undergraduate students was selected in a public sector university of Islamabad. 31 students were girls and 10 were boys. All the students were second language learner of English (ELLs). The average reading level of these students was at 10<sup>th</sup> grade, as measured by the Gates MacGinitie (2000) Reading Test in January, 2015.

#### The Purpose of the Study

We tried to find out how to build student self-efficacy and peer-support for writing. We were interested in how students could build on their own life experiences and cultures in their writing to decrease learned helplessness and improve student self-efficacy and peer-support. The second purpose was to reflect critically on our practices as teachers and be able to improve our teaching practices. As action research is not about the what but also about the process of how, therefore, both the findings and the process of action research inform the existing body of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell). Its purpose is to report a problem in a practice-based setting, such as a classroom, a workplace, a program, or an institution (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

#### Evidence of our Research Problem

In an October 2019 survey, when asked if other students cared about how much they improve their writing and when asked if other students like to help them with their writing, 56% of students said they either "didn't know," "disagreed," or "strongly disagreed." During the class's weekly writer's workshop, several students struggled with the pre-writing and drafting steps of the writing process, staring at their blank paper during the independent writing time. At the end of writer's workshop, one student shared their writing to the whole class from the "author's chair," and their classmates

provided feedback. However, students often were distracted and disruptive, and their feedback was rarely specific, useful, or genuine.

**Assumptions about Problem/issue/concern Existed?**

- Students who were not producing writing might have needed more structure and direction on how to develop and organize their ideas.
- During author's chair, students might have needed more modeling guided practice on what makes for quality feedback.
- Students perhaps do not feel that their life experiences and/or cultural backgrounds were valued in the classroom and, therefore, felt limited in the topics available for their writing.
- If students were not really writing about what they knew and cared about, they probably were not invested in listening to their classmate during author's chair, or showing they supported their classmate.

**Research Questions**

1. What strategies supported the undergraduate students who were English language learners (ELLs) towards becoming independent writers and develop the culture for peer support writing?
2. How does the action research process help the researchers to be critically aware of their teaching practices?

**Research Methods**

Data were collected through observations of the class by my co- researchers while the main one researcher taught in the class. The second set of data included interviews with the students of the class after collecting evidence of their writing. The final round of the data were the self-identifying survey responses that measured their writing for the evidence of improvement. The data were collected during the period of two months by visiting the class six times in this period. However, students were interviewed outside the classroom setting. As an assessment for their writing unit, students were writing a five-paragraph essay describing what kind of business related to education they would begin in the Islamabad, if they were an entrepreneur. After outlining and creating a first draft, students responded to each other's writing using our P.Q.P. (praise, question, polish) format that we had used twice before. This data set only includes the student written responses to the P & Q boxes from a randomly selected focus group.

In data aggregation we divided the writing into "content" and "writing techniques" based on the P-Q-P chart (chart attached) feedbacks. Since the P-Q-P chart was carefully designed to elicit information about both 'how to write' and 'what to write' (the question we both had for the students in interview), it was a prolific way to aggregate and analyze their data.

**Writing Strategies**

Children undergo "transformation in the relationships of mental functions that bring about periods of *crisis* in children's development at approximately ages one, three, seven and thirteen" (Mahn, 2012) and thus their concept development system should be also highly effective in their writing process. In a study by John Hayes and Linda Flower (1986) an influential rubric was formulated for writing that has guided opinion about effective writing strategies. Hayes and Flower (1986) recognized three basic writing processes: planning, sentence generation, and revising, however, planning and revising have been the subject of the majority research. Students think about their writing while they are planning and organize their ideas before starting to write (Kellogg, 1988). We identified in our research that the students lacked such rubric where they could establish their self-efficacy as writers, which would be the first step towards supporting their peers in writing. We adopted the Praise, Question, Polish (P-Q-P) model (Harris, 2008) that encouraged students to appreciate, learn and develop the skills to provide the best possible written feedback. There has been considerable increase in the effective feedback by the pairs of students that were assigned to critique each other's work.

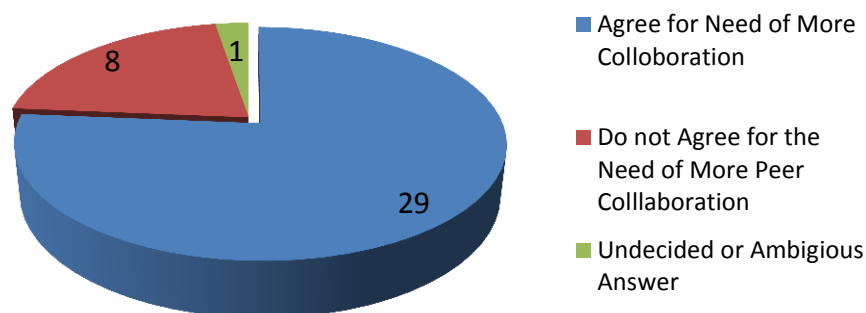
This exercise was beneficial in two ways. Firstly, the students learnt to be responsive and respectful to the work of their peers. They were asked to hold their feedback until the 'conference' time when they could share their response with the author. Secondly, the students learnt and became conscious of the topic sentences, content of the writing, and became critically challenged when they were required to 'polish' their peers' ideas. While conferencing with their partners, the critiques not only helped the author but also the student who provided feedback on the essays, hence a mutual learning process for both parties. The feedback was a brainstorming exercise for further writing

sessions and developed a mutual bond of trust among students whose probing questions were the impetus for the authors to improvise their first drafts.

The first revelation as teachers was to see the amount of growth in the students in terms of their cooperation with their peers while providing their feedback. We see it as gradual recognition of each other as writers and peers and develop a bond of trust and understanding to help each other in intellectual development. Moreover, it also implies that if the students are helped to scaffold on their learning and their values system, that they come to class with, there is a remarkable transformation in their qualitative performance. I think not mentioning anything 'negative' in the PQP chart is a very positive step as when student do not see any room for negative comments, they automatically stop thinking in that direction and thus their positive feedback is always encouraging for others. We developed rubric where we could engage the students in developing a mutually supportive atmosphere, a learning experience for us, of course!

Students as co-researchers are great asset to rely upon in the journey as practitioners researchers for the teachers. I believe a great deal of learning is generated by the students in their responses.

**Students opinions about Peer Collaboration During Writing (Quantitative Analysis)**



*Figure 1. Students' opinions about peer collaboration during writing*

There was total 36 students. 75% students agree for more peer collaborations during class writing sessions. While 22% students think they get enough peer collaboration during class writing sessions.

Table 1

*Aggregated Qualitative Response from Students*

Supporting More Help During Writing	Think They are getting Enough Support	Undecided or Unclear Response	Blames Classroom Environment for Distraction and Inability to Help Peers	Classroom Environment is Okay but is Shy Him/Herself
"Yes, I agree. We should work more with each other."	"I feel ok and don't think it's a problem"	"I think people look down because they are trying to finish something. I also think people look down because they're thinking about something. My evidence is that when I look down I'm trying to finish something"	"I think that other people do care just that like they are being distracted by the person on the side of them. They don't realize they are disruptive"	"I feel cared for and I do get good feedback it's just that I'm shy to share in front of a big crowd".

“I think that there could be more peer support because some people get too distracted”.

“No I don’t agree with the amount of attention the reader gets.”

“Yes because people don’t feel care for”

Peer Support is considered congruent to CARE and no support means NO CARE by the peers.

### Data Summary

**Finding - 1:** The majority of students’ initial perceptions of their peers’ support for writing were low.

Data Source # 1	Data Source #2	Data Source #3
Likert Survey adapted from Classroom Life Scale (Johnson et al. 1983)	Student responses to Research Statement	Students did not have the idea of right kind of feedback on writing
When asked if other students cared about how much they improve their writing and when asked if other students like to help them with their writing, 56% of students said they either “didn’t know,” “disagreed,” or “strongly disagreed.”	20/41 responses cited a lack of Interest in or distraction from listening to peers’ writing as a reason for “why we don’t show more appreciation for each other’s writing.” This was the most common response.  7/41 responses cited fears and anxiety over sharing writing with unsupportive peers as a reason for “why we don’t show more appreciation for each other’s writing.” This was the second most common response.	Students, most of the time, were eager to talk about the notion of peer feedback and discussed how important it was for them to provide positive feedback. However, they lacked any model/ rubric that they could follow about how to evaluate writing piece showing respect and appreciation to support their peers. This was shown in their responses when they had to critique each other’s work in their writing sessions. Writing not more than one sentence in their written feedback proved their feedback as ineffective. PQP chart, however, helped them see how to constructively help their partners whose work they had to evaluate. The initial perception of low peer support was due to lack of skills in which they could provide their written feedback to their peers.

**Finding - 2:** Implementing the P.Q.P. peer conferencing strategy increased culture of peer support for writing: willingness, perceptions, and skills.

Data Source # 1	Data Source #2	Data Source #3
P.Q.P. Exit Tickets	P.Q.P. responses	Focus Group Interview with Yasir and Sajid
When asked on their Exit Ticket, “Did you think the PQP activity was useful? Please explain,” 40/41 students answered: “Yes.” Their reasoning included the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process was simple and quick</li> <li>• Easier and shorter way to help show people</li> <li>• I learned something new</li> <li>• It was easy and it did help me on my writing</li> <li>• It helped me a lot</li> <li>• People can make last minute edits before doing</li> </ul>	The P.Q.P. responses in the Praise and Question categories focus on addressing writing content or writing technique. Students’ responses are written respectfully and use no negative/derogatory language.  Providing no room for negative feedback in PQP helped the students think constructively and positively about their peer’s writing.	All 4 students interviewed said that the PQP activity is useful to their writing, especially if they can choose their partner. None of the students reported anxiety or fear about PQP. Their responses about PQP were as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It’s useful. Sometimes there are corrections that I disagree with.</li> <li>• I don’t feel nervous. If there was a problem, I would tell you.</li> <li>• I think they’re great. I have Alexis! She understands/cares/ is the best.</li> <li>• It’s pretty cool. You have to try hard. They’re the only</li> </ul>

<p>something final</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I got good feedback</li> <li>• The person who checked gave important feedback</li> </ul>	<p>person checking writing, so everyone has to be careful and check twice. It does help a lot</p> <p>In Yasir's interview all students valued the feedback from their partners and appreciated the help from their peers.</p>
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**Finding - 3:** Implementing the Author's Chair strategy did not increase perceptions of peers' support for writing.

Data Source # 1	Data Source #2	Data Source #3
<p>Author's Chair Feedback responses</p> <p>The responses to the question, "what is the purpose of author's chair?", 52% (11 students) of the aggregated responses answered that the purpose is to help, support, and/or appreciate the writing of their peers. 33% (7 students) wrote that the purpose is for people to express themselves, 19% (4 students) said to improve writing, 1 student said for entertainment, and 1 said: "So people can share and we leave." This data suggests that most students agree that Author's Chair is about helping their classmates with their writing.</p> <p>In their written feedback, no student wrote more than 1 simple sentence and most responses were not examples of effective feedback.</p>	<p>Focus Group Interview with Sajid</p> <p>3 out of 4 students interviewed said they didn't intend to ever volunteer for Author's Chair. These students were apprehensive about their peers' negative or apathetic reactions to their writing. Their responses about Author's Chair were as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's fun, we get to see what other people wrote, and they liked. When I'm finished with my story, I want to share.</li> <li>• Usually it's a great idea. I wouldn't go up there. I feel nervous. I think they won't like the story.</li> <li>• It would be good if more people focused. It's a waste of time for people to share their stories they've really been working on if people don't care. Most of the time I'm scared to share my stories because I think people won't like it, think it's terrible, won't understand the references.</li> <li>• It's cool that people share their stories—have different ideas. I'm shy to show to what I'm writing about. Afraid people will just say "that's cool."</li> </ul>	<p>Focus Group Interview with Sajid</p> <p>Apparently, the students favored the Author's chair activity in the interview but they conditioned it with keeping their privacy to themselves. Thus, holding back personal and creative content that they can use in their stories. Personal image and gaining respect in the class are important for the students and they appeared less confident in skills to collaborate with each other's in form of academic writing feedback as opposed to verbal feedback.</p>

How do strategies I implement support undergraduate students, who are English Language Learners, towards developing the culture for peer support for writing?

Research Questions	Objectives	Data Collection	Analysis
<p>(1) What are students' initial perceptions of and levels of skill for peer-support for writing?</p> <p>a. Students willingness to support others with writing</p> <p>b. Students perceptions of others' support for their writing</p> <p>c. Students skills for supporting others with writing (providing effective feedback)</p>	<p>To determine students' initial perceptions and skills before beginning study</p>	<p>Likert Survey adapted from Classroom Life Scale (Johnson et al. 1983)</p> <p>Student responses to Research Statement</p>	<p>Tally responses and graph data</p>

(2) Which strategies can I implement that may be effective for developing peer support for writing, and how can I adapt identified strategies to meet the needs of 7 <sup>th</sup> grade students who are ELLs, Spanish speakers, Hispanic, and low-income?	To identify strategies in the literature that could improve my students' willingness, perceptions, and skills	<i>In the Middle</i> by N. Atwell  <i>Reading, Writing, and Learning in ESL</i> by Boyle & Peregoy  "Thank You for Sharing: Developing Students' Social Skills to Improve Peer Writing Conferences" by K. Franklin "Time Well Spent" by Leisner	Write up literature connections
(3) Does implementation of P.Q.P peer writing conferences improve student perceptions of and skills for peer support for writing?	To determine if strategy improved students' willingness, perceptions, and/or skills	Teacher and Collaborator's observations of effective feedback and behaviors during peer conferences Exit tickets—Did you find the P.Q.P. activity to be helpful? Student work products—P.Q.P feedback forms from all students Interviews with focus groups	Categorize similar responses, code answers, graph data
(4) Does implementation of Author's Chair improve student perceptions of and skills for peer support for writing?	To determine if strategy improved students' willingness, perceptions, and/or skills	Interview focus groups of students  Student work products—Author's Chair feedback forms from all students	Categorize similar responses, code answers, graph data
(5) What are students' end-of-school-year perceptions of and levels of skill for peer-support for writing? a. Students' willingness to support others with writing b. Students' perceptions of others support for their writing c. Students' skills for supporting others with writing	To determine if students' willingness, perceptions, and/or skills improved between beginning and end of school year	Same survey given at the beginning of year	Tally responses and graph data Analysis of students writing responses and peer support in Vygotskiyan framework to help teachers understand the phenomenon better

## Research Findings and Literature Connections

During our research we found out that the students (76%) did not get enough feedback in writing though they believed they should give feedback because it could help them in their writing class. Since students were English language learners and came from Spanish as first language background, they were better speakers of English but struggled with concept development (Vygotsky, 1980) in writing and had less developed academic language (Cummins, 1980). Jim Cummins (1980) coined the terms BICS and CALP representing Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills and Cognitive Academic Learning Proficiency, respectively. He proposes that the communicative language learnt in contexts embedded situations is different from the context reduced academic language that is required

for academic achievements. For BICS, Cummins roughly assigned two years to acquire; however, he said it takes almost 5 years to achieve CALP skills (1980).

Vygotsky, on the other hand, has a great deal to say about language development and the psychological processes involved in his Sociocultural theory (1978). In one such explanation, Vygotsky says that “even the minimal level of development of written speech requires a high degree of abstraction” (p. 202), which means he believes written speech to be on higher pedestal as compared to the oral form of the language. His arguments are strengthening the thought that written speech has more cognitive potential than the oral speech because the former lacks interlocutor, intonations, facial expressions, and material sound (p. 202). In BICS, (Cummins, 1980) peer support, for example, the oral feedback by the students during class interactions, was collaborated well but they were unable to provide constructive written feedback, mainly because of three reasons that we found out in our interview with the focus groups of students.

Firstly, as predominantly English Language Learners (ELLs) and English as Second Language (ESLs) speakers, the students struggled with understanding what Cummins called CALP (1980). The interpersonal language skills are extremely different from those needed for academic achievements; therefore, a second language learner in academic setting would have different needs while having an academic journey. Such second language learners who have stronger interpersonal skills in a language, mastered through many language proficiencies programs, may still fall short in excelling in their academic language compared to their monolingual peers. “Problem-solving ability, a stage in language development that Vygotsky refers to as “the use of concepts,” is essentially the equivalent of Cummins’ CALP” (Bylund, 2011). The ELLs and ESLs might be in developmental stage of their ‘scientific or academic’ concepts (Vygotsky, 1987) and could face difficulty transferring their first language everyday concepts into their academic writings, which is more abstract in its nature.

Secondly, the students were reluctant to share their personal stories and relied on superficial stories which did not challenge their own creativity and failed to get any positive and supportive feedback from their peers. They either did not trust their peers to share their personal information with or dissembled because of their personal ego what Vygotsky called the ‘problem of age’ (1998). Critical age period such as adolescence is a qualitative transformation (Mahn, 1996) and “in the transition from another, the whole structure of the age is reconstructed and each age has a unique and singular structure specific to it” (Vygotsky, 1998, p.197). In this case, problem of age means they are going through transitional age, the adolescence (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders) and has a facade which wants them to show their best. They did not judge other by their writings because they did not want to be judged themselves for what they wrote (Personal conversation of a student with Lauren, 2015). Therefore, while teaching, the teachers should be aware of critical period of the students and they should provide an opportunity to the students to co-construct the knowledge (Mahn, 1997; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002) in the teacher-student collaboration, and also in peer interaction among students.

Thirdly, the students did not have academic writing rubrics to support their peers’ work because they lacked that academic language model themselves. The culture of writing and peer support needs to be developed where they could build that structure on the basis of their writing which Vygotsky says is denser and intellectually challenging for the learners (1978). Is academic, especially writing collaboration, difficult for our students in 7th grade as compared to their oral and social collaboration which is highly contextualized in the social settings like playground and class room social interactions (Cummins, 1980)? Similarly, Vygotsky’s everyday concepts in the social interactions (which are contextualized), and scientific concepts (1987) in the academics (which are less contextualized and are conscious and volitional) support BICS and CALP, respectively. During writing exercises our students found the impetus and peer support less contextualized, hence facing difficulty in effective written feedback on the work of their classmates.

It appears as if Plato considered poetry to be twice removed from reality; Vygotsky considers written words twice abstract in terms of their context. For him, Vygotsky, speech sounds are representation of concepts while the written words are representation of those sounds (1978). He says that cognitively a learner of writing “must move to abstracted speech, to speech that uses representations of words rather than words themselves” (p. 202). Furthermore, there is clear advocacy for the written language being more advanced cognitively and challenging for the learner. Vygotsky emphasizes that it is more complex and demanding as compared to the inner or oral speech. He

elaborates that the “transition from maximally contracted inner speech (i.e., from speech for oneself) to maximally expanded written speech” engages the learner in more “complex operations in the voluntary construction of the fabric of meaning” (p. 204). Vygotsky (1978) establishes higher intellectual credibility of written speech by proving it as ‘need based speech’, which means that since spoken words are mostly the responses of the need (p.203), the written speech is “abstract, intellectualistic, and separated from need” (p. 204).

### Conclusion

In the survey and interviews conducted with focus groups we concluded that they did not want to share personal stories with the class and had trouble finding such topic where they were confident of writing effective stories. Peer support, therefore was pivotal for their self-efficacy as both individual and Sociocultural perspective were dialectical and highly dependent on each other. Effective writers use *knowledge transformation*, as a strategy to develop their thoughts into richer concepts as compared to ineffective writers who merely relied on (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) *knowledge telling* which was less imaginative. Knowledge tellers do little or no planning and hence they lack the *generalization* (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 249) ability to transform the knowledge. Similarly, previous schooling, academic knowledge, and literacy skills that second language learners have in their first language (L<sub>1</sub>) are also strong determiners (Cummins, 1984, Baker, 1993). Therefore, educators, especially the English Language Teachers need to be aware of all the limitations of ESLs or ELLs in order to successfully impart the knowledge. As action researchers, we have had all these revelations while we saw the students struggle and frustrated due to their inability to write effectively. It is a continuous and dialectical process as we hope to take the research further and also invite other researchers/ educators to indulge themselves into self-reflexive and enriching form of research.

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