Experiences and perceptions in an ESL academic writing peer response group

Paul ROLLINSON

Dpto. de Filología Inglesa. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras - Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
paul.rollinson@uam.es

ABSTRACT

The following article traces the experiences of four Spanish students and their perceptions of the peer response process, both as responders and writers, during a twelve week (36 hour) EAP writing workshop. In a homogeneous, motivated and collaborative group, what comes to light is the uniqueness of the individual writers in terms of their reactions to the feedback they receive, and to the peer response activity itself. Each writer displays a different profile in terms of her willingness to accept comments, the use she makes of different types of feedback, and her overall perception of the significance and value of different aspects of the peer response process. The implications are considerable: while recent L2 writing research broadly suggests that peer response groups can perform a useful complementary function in the writing classroom, this study concludes that if response groups are to work for every writer, then current notions of preliminary peer training must be extended and personalized to take into account the ongoing needs of the individual operating within the group.

Key words: EAP, ESL Writing, peer response, peer review, peer feedback, peer training.

Experiencias y percepciones del proceso de revisión entre pares en un seminario de inglés para fines académicos

RESUMEN

Este artículo recoge las experiencias de cuatro estudiantes españolas y su percepción del proceso de revisión entre pares (peer response), como autoras y lectoras, en un seminario de Inglés con Fines Académicos de 12 semanas (36 horas). Lo que sale a la luz, en un grupo homogéneo, motivado y colaborador, es la singularidad de las autoras individuales en relación a los comentarios que reciben y a la actividad misma de revisión entre pares. Cada autora presenta un perfil diferente en relación a su disposición para aceptar comentarios, el uso que hace de los distintos tipos de comentarios y su percepción global de la relevancia y validez de los distintos aspectos del proceso de revisión entre pares. Las implicaciones son significativas: mientras que trabajos de investigación recientes sobre composición en L2 sugieren a grandes líneas que los grupos de revisión entre pares pueden desempeñar una función complementaria útil, la conclusión de este estudio es que para que un autor individual saque provecho del proceso, hay que extender y personalizar la noción actual del entrenamiento preliminar de los pares (peer training) para tener presentes las necesidades cambiantes del individuo durante el proceso.

Palabras clave: Inglés para Fines Académicos, composición en inglés como L2, revisión entre pares, comentarios de pares, entrenamiento de pares.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research in L2 writing has looked into the characteristics of peer response and its impact on revision (Caulk 1994; Connor and Asenavage 1994; Lockhart and Ng 1995; Mendonça and Johnson 1994; Rollinson 1998; Tsui and Ng 2000; Villamil and de Guerrero 1996). Although some studies have failed to note any real benefits from peer response groups or have warned about possible difficulties or limitations in the feedback produced (see, for example, Connor and Asenavage 1994; Nelson and Carson 1998), the evidence overall seems to suggest that assuming certain conditions of training and organisation, peer response in the L2 writing classroom can be a valuable means of supplementing the more traditional method of hand-written teacher feedback in the process-oriented writing classroom (see, for example, Berg 1999; Caulk 1994; Jacobs et al 1998; Villamil and de Guerrero 1998).

While most studies dealing with student preferences show that students prefer teacher over peer feedback (see, for example, Ferris 1995; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz 1992; Saito 1994; Semke 1984; Zhang 1995), attitudes of L2 students to working in peer response groups and receiving feedback from their classmates has, broadly speaking, been positive (see, for example, Jacobs et al 1998; Mendonça and Johnson 1994; Nelson and Murphy 1992, 1993; Zhang 1995, 1999). Nevertheless, the literature also shows that students have at the same time often criticised peer response. For example, the misgivings of the students in Mangelsdorf's (1992) study about the peer review process concerned the perceived limitations of their peers as critics, specifically referring to a lack of trust in their comments, the apathy of readers, lack of specificity of comments, usurpation of text, and inability to help with grammar, as well as a lack of criticism (see also Zhang 1995). In addition, some studies have noted that peer readers may also tend to adopt a prescriptive, problem-based outlook which focuses on correctness of form rather than expression of meaning or the development of the text (Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger 1992; Nelson and Carson 1998; Villamil and de Guerrero 1996). Leki (1990) has also warned that peer feedback may be too general or too uncritical to be helpful (see Carson and Nelson 1996), or it may be tactless and destructive rather than positive, and lead to clashes and a negative atmosphere, a point raised on other occasions (Nelson and Murphy 1992; Villamil and de Guerrero 1996). In addition, cultural factors may constrain the effectiveness of peer group interactions: students may feel inhibited about critiquing their peers, or may feel that they cannot properly substitute for the expert authority figure of the teacher (Allaei and Connor 1990; Carson and Nelson 1996; Nelson and Carson 1998).

A review of both successful and unsuccessful peer interactions mentioned in the literature suggests that the effectiveness of a peer response group depends on a series of factors, which can be external (the training provided by the teacher, the use of heuristics, the degree of teacher intervention, the setting up of the groups, the relationship of peer feedback with teacher feedback) or internal (motivation, the age and ability level of the participants, their personal relationships and cultural backgrounds, their perceived roles within the reader-writer relationship, and the understood purpose and importance of the feedback). Insufficient L2 research has

been done at the level of these internal factors, focusing on the participants' interactions and experiences both as readers and writers within a peer group, successful or otherwise, and even less within an academic ESL context. The purpose of this case study, part of a broader study (Rollinson 1998), was to look in depth at the perceptions, observations and revising behaviours of a group of four university-level advanced writers engaged in peer response activities, in an attempt to shed some light upon the experiences of L2 students in their dual roles of writer and reader.

2. METHOD

2.1. PARTICIPANTS

The students - four female Spanish-speaking students in their early twenties - were in the third year of a four year undergraduate degree course in English Philology in a Spanish university. According to self-report data, the students were friends and had some prior experience of peer response groups in English academic writing classes: in groups of three during their first year, and in pairs during their second year. They had also worked together in the previous two years in other courses.

2.2. PROCEDURE

During a twelve-week EAP academic writing workshop course, which took place at the beginning of the third year of their degree, the students were required to write and provide feedback on three academic essays on current social issues of their own choosing (of around 1000 words) using a standard three-draft procedure. Each draft was read by three readers, who then discussed the essay with the writer not present. The objective was to reach a consensus about what feedback to give to the writer to help her improve her essay.

All feedback provided was via comments written directly onto the drafts, rather than by immediate oral response as is more common in the writing classroom. The purpose of this was to enable both readers and writers greater time for consideration and reflection than is typically possible in the cut and thrust of oral negotiation and debate, to avoid time being wasted on unimportant issues (see, for example, Huff and Kline, 1987; Nelson and Carson, 1998) and to minimise possible friction or negative interactions. The students were similarly asked to try to limit oral interaction between writers and readers, except in the case of specific requests by the writer for clarification. The purpose of this was to encourage greater explicitness in the comments and a commitment to them as the primary medium of writer-reader exchange.

The readers were encouraged to make any kind of comment that they felt would help the writer do a "better" next draft; the interpretation of what this meant was left to them, although the readers were provided with a product-based academic writing

heuristic, reminding them of concepts they had been exposed to during a previous short course on academic writing (Appendix A). The purpose of this was to help them focus on the main areas of concern appropriate to each draft. It was emphasised that these guidelines had a supporting rather than a task function. After the first essay they were rarely consulted.

2.3. DATA COLLECTION

During the study quantitative as well as qualitative data were collected, concerning the characteristics and extent of the feedback provided by the readers and the revisions made by the writers. The quantitative data is reported elsewhere (Rollinson 1998; Rollinson in preparation), and will only be referred to here insofar as it helps provide a background for the experiences and observations of the individual students.

Two questionnaires (QI and QII), completed during and at the end of the course, were used to gather data on the students' observations and their opinions of the peer response experience. Taped interviews were also conducted during and at the end of the course, as well as informal discussions with the students throughout. In addition, the writers were required to fill out two forms - *Writer's Reactions Forms* (WRF) and *Comment Rejection Forms* (CRF) – with reference to each draft. On the Writer's Reactions Form (Appendix B) the writers were asked to note their feelings about and reactions to the comments they received from their peers on each draft. On the Comment Rejection Form, writers were required to indicate their reasons for not using or taking up a particular suggestion given by their readers (Appendix C). Further data were also gathered through several *ad hoc* open-ended interviews conducted throughout the course.

3. EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS: READERS

The group as a whole functioned effectively. Despite the minimal amount of initial training, but guided initially by the heuristic and their past experiences as recipients of teacher comments, and then following their own preferences as they became familiar with and responded to the needs of each other as writers, the students seemed overall to have little trouble reaching agreements about what comments to write and how to write them. There was no evidence here of the kinds of disruptive inter-personal conflicts and tensions originating from disagreements within the working context seen in other studies (see, for example, Berkenkotter 1984; Gere and Stevens 1985). The problems that did arise were temporary and did not lead to any significant or lasting deterioration in the students' overall relationships or performance. This was partly due to the fact that the students were friends, and had worked together before. In addition, their maturity as 3rd year University students, their high level of competence in the L2, as well as their shared cultural background must also have played a part.

3.1. ROLES AS READERS

At the outset, all the students had some uncertainty about their ability to fulfil their roles and to act successfully as critical readers. They felt that they would be, in some sense, inadequate substitutes for the teacher. As Estíbaliz noted:[1]

> … a veces te ponías allí en plan: "¡eh! El profesor, me pongo aquí a decir cosas" […] y yo lo pensaba y decía "jo, esto es un poco ridículo", en ese sentido, que ¿quién soy yo para corregir a …¿lo ves? (… sometimes you're like: "Well, I'm the teacher, I'm the one saying things here" […] and I was thinking and said "Hey, this is a bit stupid", in the sense that who am I to make corrections… you know?) (Estíbaliz: Interview)

She pointed out, as an example, that the comments they provided were in themselves flawed:[2]

> "… es que ahora mismo lo has visto, en las mismas correcciones hay un montón de errores…" (… as you've just seen, there are lots of mistakes in the corrections themselves…) (Estíbaliz: Interview)

The students were initially concerned about their lack of experience and their ability to provide useful feedback. There were also doubts about the volume of their feedback: they worried that they were offering too many comments and thus might be confusing or disheartening the writer. Because of such uncertainties, two of the readers felt that they would have liked more advice from the teacher about the quality of their first attempts at feedback.

This initial uncertainty, even anxiety, about the role of reader – what it involved, whether they could do it effectively, to what extent it was acceptable to interfere with their classmates' texts, and what might be the appropriate procedures to do the job well – was felt by all the students, despite the provision of the guidelines and a handout explaining the purpose of reader comments. Given the lack of a substantive peer response training program, this initial uncertainty is certainly understandable.

Nevertheless, as the course progressed, the students soon reported feeling more confident of their ability to give useful response to fellow writers, partly because of the rapid development of a consensus between the readers about how response could best be done, both generally:

> Of course, we took as a base the kind of essay that was expected by … the teacher. On this basis we corrected the essays. If it were another subject (literature…) we could correct other things. (Sara: QII, 8)

---

[1] All quotations are transcribed verbatim.

[2] In the end such concerns proved unfounded: the data show quite clearly that the readers were able to provide generally high-quality feedback that the writers were able to take advantage of (see Rollinson 1998; Rollinson, in preparation). However, it was interesting to note that the many examples of superficial language errors in the comments themselves did not appear to lead to writers mistrusting the overall validity of their peers' comments.

as well as in response to particular problems:

> Usually we agreed on what was important. If we didn't agree usually we discussed it and then decided. Most of the time it was obvious what was wrong. (María: QII, 8)

This "obviousness" about what was "wrong" probably followed from these particular students sharing a set of assumptions about what constitutes "normal discourse" (Gere 1987). To a minor extent this may have been the effect of the heuristic they had been given, but more significantly it would have stemmed from familiarity with the conventions of academic writing as well as from the broader academic context within which they had been studying successfully for over two years.[3] Because of their shared experiences as writers receiving feedback from (often the same) teachers, the writers may have found it easier to reach a consensus about how to respond. Emma and Sara, for example, noted that they felt that the type of comments they made and the way they made them was influenced, at least initially, by feedback they had received from teachers in academic writing programs in the past.

However, the students also felt that as time went by the group gradually developed its own particular concerns and improved its response focus. Moving from an initial over-concern with surface matters, the readers "learnt to focus on problems of organization instead of [our] first obsession for grammar and expression". (Emma: QII, q.8). Overall, the quantitative data do in fact show that the readers were able to provide comments with equal effectiveness and a similar density at both global and local levels (Rollinson 1998; Rollinson in preparation), something about which doubts have been expressed in the literature (Leki 1990).

3.2. WRITER-READER TRANSFER

María saw the group's developing ability to give more sophisticated feedback as the immediate consequence of an interaction between the students' writing and responding experiences.

> We also were learning to write better, with clear opinions and ideas, and this was reflected in the corrections (Interview)

Here she is referring to a direct transference from the skill of writer to responder: she felt that as the writers learned to write more clearly (to satisfy their readership), their written comments, made as readers, became more effective.

However, others pointed out that the interaction simultaneously went in the other direction: that reading and commenting on peer essays helped them develop certain

---

[3] Nevertheless, as will be seen later with reference to Emma, not all their assumptions about normal academic discourse were shared equally.

abilities and perceptions that transferred to their writing: "because you see many of your errors in the mirror of your peers' essay" (Estíbaliz).

Emma sums up the connection between the interaction of reading/responding and writing skills:

> In my opinion, we developed our skills as readers parallely to our skills as writers …. I think that experiences as a reader runs parallel to the development of writing skills. (QI, 7b)

The readers were also aware of the writer as the recipient (reader) of peer comments:

> … it is difficult to render what you think about an essay in clear words so that the commentary will be as useful as possible (to the writer)... (Estíbaliz)
>   I suppose we tryed more and more to put ourselves on the place of the other person (the writer) as a reader of our commentary on her essay: what would she think? Did she understand it all? (Estíbaliz)

One of the proposed objectives of the peer feedback approach is to encourage the writer to bear in mind the needs of a particular audience. Less frequently mentioned is the fact that readers themselves are communicating (by writing, in the case of this study) with an audience: the writer. The readers in this study were clearly very conscious of the possible impact of their written feedback on the writer, and were concerned about how she would receive and deal with it. It seems likely that this level of awareness could only come from the experience of being simultaneously both writer and reader-writer; that is, writer of essays and reader of essays/writer of comments (see, for example, Gere and Abbot 1985; Nystrand and Brandt 1989).

Crucially, the reader who wishes to be truly collaborative has to develop a considerable level of empathy with her audience if she wishes to persuade the writer that her comments are valid, and if she is not to alienate the writer with comments that are too harsh, critical, or unsupportive. It may be that in learning to make written comments that are helpful and yet simultaneously palatable, a peer reader may develop more quickly and to a higher degree the audience awareness skills that are held to be the result of writing compositions for a specific audience. Given that essays written for an audience (even a collaborative peer audience) often remain, to a high degree, the possession of the writer and are thus dependent on her intentions in writing, the comments written for one writer have ostensibly only one broad purpose: that of helping her to improve her next draft. In consequence, to be effective (that is, to be accepted by the writer and used as a basis for revision) comments have to be formulated and expressed very much with the individual personality and requirements of the writer in mind. There was ample evidence of this kind of focused commenting behaviour in this study.

For example, by their use of praise and supportive comments the readers showed that they were keenly aware of the emotional impact that their commentaries could have on their audience (QII, 3). Praise was used for a number of purposes; for general encouragement:

> We like your introduction very much: it is strong, powerful, and catchy (María) [4]. You are very skilful in associating ideas: every argument rolls as a snowball (Estíbaliz).

… but also to mitigate the effects of criticism:

> BUT, don't spoil your fantastic work with … careless printing mistakes (Estíbaliz)

On one occasion, after making almost 70 comments on one paper, and apparently conscious of the negative impact such a number of comments could have, the readers took pains to emphasise the essay's strengths. They pointed out to the writer that they themselves, as writers, had had similar problems:

> You have been able to be BALANCE … OBJECTIVE … OFFER MID-POINTS, which seemed impossible to do in the 1st attempt at a discussion essay for other members of the group… (Estíbaliz)

The readers also attempted to soften the upsetting effects of making so many critical comments by means of humour or personal comments:

> We can meet on Monday to comment on it with the rest of the group, it will only take another 5 hours!!! SAY YES! (Estíbaliz)
> Excuse me for the way I hand in to you the corrections. Dreadful sorry! "Un beso" (a kiss) Emma (Estíbaliz)
> Where was your head at this moment, dear? (Emma)

In other cases, readers offered praise as a reward: in the following example the readers praise the writer for having taken note of their earlier criticisms and having made acceptable revisions:

> It has been very kind of you to clarify this point to your readers: this argument gains force through clarity. WELL DONE! (Sara)
> THIS IS NOW VERY MUCH CLEARER THAN BEFORE. It is indeed a good paragraph from the topic to the end (Estíbaliz)

The above examples indicate the extent to which the readers seemed to be sensitive to the needs of the writers, something which is clearly fundamental if the writer is not to be alienated or angered by criticisms. This empathy within the group was general, but also depended to some extent on the particular writer or draft. María, as a reader, reported that she gave praise when a specific writer expressed concern about a certain aspect of her essay: "we looked at it carefully, and tried to encourage her by saying that it was not so bad". In addition, there is some evidence that the readers took into account the particular requirements of writers in

----

[4] Where examples of feedback are given, the name of the *recipient* is provided.

shaping their feedback; for example, in Sara's case, her requests for maximum criticism and response may account for the detailed and copious comments she received.

The tendency of the readers to put themselves in the place of the writers may seem a simple consequence of the dynamics of the peer feedback group; that is, since each reader knew that the two peers she was working with would soon be critiquing her essay, it would be in her own self-interest to offer the kind and quality of feedback that she would like to receive. However, this positive dynamic is far from an inevitable part of the response process. Some L2 studies, for example, have reported dysfunctional groups (Nelson and Murphy 1992; Villamil and de Guerrero 1996) in which negative comments and a lack of supportiveness generated resentment and insecurity.

In the case of the students in this study, however, their concern for the writers can be clearly seen, both in the supportiveness of their comments, but also in other aspects. The effort to make the writer's job easier included the provision of generalisable advice where there were difficulties involving content and text organisation – even to the extent of providing micro-lectures. For example:

> Why is it wrong to have so many students in one class? Of course, it seems obvious but in an academic paper you should never give anything for granted. A little explanation supports and gives coherence (Emma)
> [A] discussion … essay should present different viewpoints arranging them so as to present them individually, clearly, and completely to the reader, making use of sequence markers… (Emma)

Finally, to further aid the writer, the readers usually chose to give a very brief oral comment about the draft to the writer, in advance of their written comments, highlighting the main strengths or weakness of the essay, such as: "the main problem is organisation, we found the thesis statement doesn't fit, but it was beautifully written". (Emma). This was the only consistent oral interaction that took place concerning the comments. Although the readers knew that they could discuss issues verbally with the writer if the writer requested it, this rarely occurred, suggesting that the writers were generally content with the clarity and comprehensibility of the written feedback.

4. EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS: WRITERS

All the writers believed that they had improved as writers of academic essays during the workshop course, mentioning a variety of skills that they felt they had developed as the consequence of the peer feedback/revision process: the ability to use external source materials and to organise information coherently; the ability to analyse, persuade and argue; the ability to distance themselves critically from their writing; and an awareness of writing for an audience (QI, 18). Two of the writers – Estíbaliz and

Emma – reported that they found the comments and suggestions of their readers *essential* while María and Sara felt they were *very useful.*[5]

4.1. TRUST IN PEER COMMENTS

The literature suggests that in many L2 groups the initial level of confidence regarding the value of peer response might be low or even non-existent, which would have numerous negative consequences in terms of quality and quantity of reader input, reader-writer interaction, level of collaboration, and uptake of comments. Without such trust, the perception that peer readers are not "knowledgeable enough to make worthwhile comments" (Nelson and Murphy 1993: 136), may well lead to writers being unwilling to make the effort to understand comments, or unwilling to invest the time to engage in substantive revisions. However, in this group the data show that the writers trusted the comments they received, as the overall level of uptake indicates: almost two-thirds of comments were used by writers as a basis for their next-draft revisions (Rollinson in preparation).

Initially, the trust the writers felt in their peers' response would have been based partly on the solid friendship between the students, and the understanding that readers were motivated by a desire to help rather than to criticise. In addition, the students were also aware of the quality of each other's work.

> … there was no point at doubting that they could do it well. If I didn't follow some of their suggestions it was only because I thought, perhaps wrongly, that there was a better option. However, I think that when they point out some possible problem I always took it into consideration. (Emma: Interview)

As the course progressed, the trust the writers initially had in their readers increasingly became a function of the perceived usefulness of the comments *per se*, to the extent that one student came to feel she could learn "much more with the group's corrections" than with those of a teacher (Sara: QI, 5).

Writers valued the feedback they received for a number of reasons. Some of these concerned the specific qualities of the comments, while others concerned the generally friendly tone and supportiveness of the feedback. The writers found comments overall to be both detailed and immediately useful. Emma praises the "thorough explanation the readers provided", and Sara liked the fact that comments not only pointed out errors, but also offered possible solutions:

> … they always gave me alternatives to the arguments that they found problematic and it was really helpful (QI, q.16)

---

[5] QI, q15: a six point Likkert scale ranging from <u>essential</u> to <u>useless</u>. Nevertheless, their feelings about using peer response to get feedback on their L2 writing outside the course were more equivocal: responses ranged from *probably* (Estíbaliz) to *maybe* (Sara) to *probably not* (María and Emma). Interestingly, Estíbaliz was the writer who actually took least benefit from the feedback of her peers in terms of the number of comments she used to make revisions - just over 40% of those provided by her peers (Rollinson, in preparation).

Such comments as the following were praised for their level of explanation and for offering a guiding solution:

> Another thing is that sometimes you talk about different perspectives in just one paragraph, and we think you should treat only one of these perspectives. For example, you could focus on the perspectives of the girl, and leave in a secondary "plano" (level) the ones of the girl's boyfriend, her parents, society … One of the parts of the essay where you could consider this is in the conclusion (Sara: B/2/D1-F, 38)

In addition, the writers generally found comments to be fair, in the sense of offering a balance between criticism and support. Emma, for example, observed that the group managed to find a "middle-point" - in other words, that "negative" (i.e. critical) comments on a text were balanced with a list of good points. She describes this as a "complicity" between the group members, providing comments that were "not very academic but useful to 'swallow' the critique". Or as Sara put it, "It's good to know you do not only make mistakes!"

Although the writers were not all equally willing to incorporate reader suggestions, as will be seen later, none of them suggested that the readers were being negative or unfair or excessively critical in their feedback (QI, 14). In fact, the writers were positive about the supportiveness of their readers, and mentioned this as a very welcome aspect of the feedback they received. As María pointed out, "It encourages me a lot when I come to write another essay" (QII, q.2). Emma (as reader) also demonstrated her understanding of the need for this kind of emotional support:

> Generally, if I knew that a member of the group had had special difficulty in writing a determined essay, I gave her a mix of praise and suggestions.

Her reasoning was that, as a writer:

> I always need somebody to encourage me not to focus my attention only on the things I do wrong. There was a point in this course when I was not at my best moment and the fact that my mates knew it may have conditioned most of their positive remarks - and it <u>DID</u> help me, indeed! However, it is difficult not to confer much more importance to the "negative" remarks than to the praise. (Emma: QI, q.7b)

However, at one point Emma noted that the response she received from her readers was perhaps too generous (although it is not clear if she believes that "harder" comments would have been preferable or more useful):

> I'm sure a teacher would be harder in his comments (Emma: WRF (Writer's Rejection Form))

Estíbaliz also noted that there was sometimes too much praise:

> Over-praise again! I suspect they want something from me! (Estíbaliz: WRF)

There is a certain ambiguity in these reactions: they clearly value and trust their peers' criticism, yet seem somewhat disinclined to trust fully the praise they are receiving,

although at the same time they appreciate it. Perhaps the writers were unconsciously comparing the feedback from peers with the feedback they customarily received from teachers, which would perhaps have been less supportive and more sparing with praise. Alternatively this may have occurred as a consequence of their dual role within the group of both reader and writer: as readers, they were familiar with the position of consciously supporting one of their group (i.e. balancing serious criticism with praise); for them then as writers to receive praise might have left them slightly sceptical as to its real merit. Knowing the way in which their group functioned may have to some extent devalued the praise.

Nevertheless, although some of the comments were felt to be "too nice" - particularly the personal remarks written in the "General Remarks" section at the end of the essay - Estíbaliz, for example, acknowledged that she was grateful for these personal comments "because [they] gave me strength, me being too insecure". María had a similar reaction:

> Perhaps it is a mistake to believe what they say, but praise helps me to trust myself and be more brave when trying ways of writing. (WRF)

The positive effects of praise on learners are, of course, accepted by most teachers. As has often been noted in the literature, the peer group situation in particular has the potential to offer the kind of unthreatening, supportive atmosphere in which praise can become part of the ongoing interaction of the reader-writer dynamic. The extent to which this could be prompted through peer training, or may be a function of the friendships, cultural backgrounds, interlanguage levels and ages of the members of the group, are matters for further study.

4.2. CRITICISMS OF COMMENTS

Complaints tended to be limited to specific instances: for example, writers sometimes experienced difficulties regarding the clarity of the comments, or occasionally were uncertain about what the readers wanted them to do. In the following example, the readers criticised the wording of a quotation, which left the writer puzzled:

> line 23: "contributory" $\rightarrow$ (it is part of the quotation [so] I can do nothing. They said it was only a comment they wrote, but it confused me. (Sara: WRF)

Occasionally they found suggested revisions difficult to apply:

> They suggest me to put more examples, similar to that of "western culture" (line 67), but I find it very difficult. I need a reference for these examples, and I do not find any… in newspapers like that (Sara: WRF)

There were also instances of the writers criticising the readers themselves:

> I think the problem might be too complex for them to understand without knowing my way of working and the way I have of dealing with the material (Estíbaliz: WRF)

> I'm disappointed because I told them that I have difficulties with punctuation and instead of giving to me an orientation they have made me doubt even more with commentaries like "Check punctuation." (Emma: WRF)

When writers disagreed with their readers' comments - or felt that the criticism was unjust or unfounded - there was some evidence of frustration, even irritation[6] - a natural enough response to what may be seen as unjustified criticism, but perhaps involving a sense of frustration at not having communicated effectively enough.

> The only comment I felt annoyed about was the one in the conclusion which said that I agreed with the P.P. party, and I think it is clear enough that I disagree with the P.P. party. (María: WRF)

The writers responded in different ways to comments they just did not agree with - either by simply rejecting the suggestion

> They said it was too general, but I thought it was alright, so I did not change it (María: WRF)

or by revising the text in some way other than that suggested by the readers:

> I've tried to change some things for my final draft, though perhaps not exactly in the way they've asked me to (María: WRF)

However, in other cases the writers could be seen working hard at understanding the readers' viewpoint and finally accepting their comments:

> They told me to delete part of [the thesis statement]! Precisely the part I have worked most on! I read and read and discovered they are right (Estíbaliz: WRF)

> Firstly I felt annoyed: my essay was already too long and they told me to add more things! In a second reading I realize I haven't understood them and the corrections demonstrate to be very useful and intelligent (I haven't asked them, only read the corrections again and again) (Estíbaliz: WRF)

4.3. REJECTION OF COMMENTS

One of the characteristic advantages of peer feedback has been said to be that the writer is not afraid to reject comments that do not accord with her intention as a writer: she is freer to reject comments because of a preference for her own version of the text when the critique originates in a peer rather than in the authority figure of the teacher (see, for example, Berkenkotter 1984; Caulk 1994; Pianko and Radzik

---

[6] Only Sara never expressed any negative responses of annoyance, anger, frustration regarding the comments she received.

1980). In this study, the writers overall rejected around a third of peer input (233 of 846 comments), for a variety of reasons[7]: a preference for their own version; a sense that the comment was wrong or would lead to a deterioration in the text; an inability to generate a proper response from a particular comment, and, very rarely, a failure to understand what the comment meant. The fact that writers felt at liberty to turn down suggestions made by their peers indicates that they did not seem to feel an overbearing pressure to revise their texts simply because their readers thought that they should, as they might when faced with the rather more authoritative commentary of a teacher.

Unsurprisingly, there was variation between individuals regarding the extent to which they rejected feedback and their reasons for doing so, as will be seen later. The most common reason for not accepting a comment was when the writer felt that the revision proposed clashed with her overall viewpoint and intentions in a particular draft.

> Sometimes they asked me to change the organization of my arguments and counter-arguments as they did in my third essay. I did not agree because it would change my perspective and I did not want to change anything there. (María)

This section has discussed those perceptions and behaviours generally shared by the students, first as readers operating in a group, and then as writers receiving peer response. However, considered individually, the writers demonstrated often very different reactions, preferences and revision strategies, as the following section shows.

5. INDIVIDUAL REVISION PROFILES

5.1. MARIA: THE RECEPTIVE REVISER

María was considered by the group as an ideal collaborative peer group member because of her confidence, calmness, willingness to participate actively, and her ability to keep the group on track when problems and tensions began to arise. As the result of the course, María felt that she had improved her persuasiveness and her way of clarifying her thoughts. She believed she had also learned how to defend her ideas in a reasonable but not "rude and categorical" manner. She noted that she improved her ability to use external source material to support her arguments in a pertinent and organised manner.

As a writer, María's revising practices were characterised by a general willingness to revise on the basis of reader comments: along with Sara, she was the writer most likely to revise from reader feedback, and the most likely to take advantage of valid comments. Like Sara she seemed to value equally reader comments referring to surface matters and those concerning content or structure. At no point did she refuse to make a revision when her readers requested additional information or explanations. Her willingness to take

---

[7] Reasons are given in descending order of frequency. It should be noted that of the 233 rejections overall, Estíbaliz was responsible for 92 of these, which she categorised as "other reasons". The issue of Estíbaliz's revising practices will be dealt with in more detail in section 5.4.

reader comments into consideration was such that on several occasions she accepted comments that she did not fully agree with. In the following example, she seems to disagree with her readers, but nevertheless decides to make a revision.

> I felt annoyed with the comment they made in the conclusion, about the fact that I included new information. The sentence that was new was part of the solution I gave to the problem, so it had to be new. Anyway, I'll try to change it for the second draft. (WRF)

However, her decision here is an active response to the readers' critique. She does not follow their advice directly: instead she revises the following draft to emphasise the fact that she is presenting a solution, which she feels the readers should know may contain new information, even in a conclusion. In this case, as in many others, she does not simply ignore readers' comments that she thinks are not fully correct. In this sense she demonstrates a willingness to compromise – though she can be seen simultaneously attempting to show the readers that their initial comment was not entirely valid.

This *partial* acceptance of peer comments was characteristic of María's revising behaviour, as the following two examples illustrate:

> …I disagreed with the suggestion to write "Nevertheless" at the beginning of the first body paragraph. It seems to me it is not logic to begin an argument contrasting something of which you have not expressed the point to contrast. I've decided to change it in another way, beginning with "Although the strongest debate…". (WRF)
>   I will use all of the comments in the next draft, except the one in the thesis statement about the consequences, since I believe I have dealt with them, but in order to clarify this part of the sentence, I will change the topic sentence…. (WRF)

In the first example she does not accept the revision they suggest because it does not seem logical, yet she still revises the phrase, apparently to try to find a more acceptable alternative. In the second example she decides to modify the relevant topic sentence, rather than the thesis statement as the readers suggest. She is confident that the thesis statement is effective, but decides to clarify the topic sentences to make the thesis statement-topic sentence relationship clearer to the readers. Again, the fact that she feels that for her the point is clear does not prevent her from realising that it may not be so for her readers. This level of flexibility and receptivity – the willingness to distance oneself sufficiently from one's writing to revise on the understanding that one is writing primarily for an audience with specific requirements, rather than for oneself – is one that a collaborative peer review process can encourage.

However, despite this willingness to consider her readers' views, she nevertheless showed from time to time a strong awareness of her purposes in writing, and rejected comments that she felt would contradict her objectives and intentions.

> I disagreed with them on the comment in line 19-21. My plan of organising the paragraph was the following [….] So changing the order of the arguments was expressing them in a way that I did not intend, that's why I have not changed them. (WRF)

It is rather intriguing that a writer who was so willing to take into account reader comments (and made an average of 20 per draft) made very few of her own revisions (an average of only 3 per draft, compared to between 13 and 29 for the other writers). In addition, most of these revisions were surface corrections. Like Emma, she tended to revise on her own account only within individual sentences, occasionally restructuring a complete sentence, but never adding, eliminating, repositioning or reworking larger blocks of text, and generally focusing on corrections of spelling errors and grammatical infelicities, rather than revisions that impacted on meaning. Her own revising was, in fact, ultimately more akin to proof-reading.

There could be a number of reasons for this: she may have seen the first draft more as a finished piece of work rather than an initial rough draft to be worked on comprehensively, and thus may have spent longer on it than other writers; alternatively, she may have felt that she did not wish to spend more time on the essay if her readers appeared satisfied with it, trusting them to tell her what could be improved; or it might have simply been that she was not willing to engage in the additional effort and cost of further revision. The reason she gave was simply that:

> I was more or less convinced with what I had written … I didn't feel I had to change it (Interview).

This represents a very different feeling about her writing compared with Estíbaliz, who was never convinced that what she had written was adequate, and so made a considerable number of her own substantive revisions even on final drafts, as we will see later.

5.2. SARA: THE DEDICATED REVISER

Sara was described by the other members of the group as a writer who had a very straightforward, simple style. Her responsiveness to criticism was commended by the others as demonstrating a very positive and pragmatic attitude to the peer feedback process. In fact, Sara proved to be a very active and enthusiastic reviser, with the highest overall levels of revision. She demonstrated a very pragmatic approach to peer feedback by telling her peers exactly what she wanted: "She asked us … to be as minute as possible in our … corrections". (Estíbaliz: Interview). Sara's reasoning was clear:

> **Sara**: Because I think I will improve much better with that [intensity of feedback]. I think it's better to say "this is bad, this is bad, this is bad". Not just the positive things. Because if you only say the positive you will not learn anything.
> **Investigator**: Right … sometimes on your essays there were like fifty or even sixty comments. How did you feel about that?
> **Sara**: (laughs) I don't know, I think they were good, better for me (laughs). (Interview)

Sara preferred her audience to be as critical as possible, and even noted that she would be upset if she found errors that her readers had not corrected.

> It didn't matter to me it they told me something was wrong, if it was so, why should I be angry? I think it's not they fault being honest. Moreover, I would be angry if they didn't tell me! (Sara: QI, q.14)

As Emma pointed out, this gave the readers confidence to make their comments to Sara detailed, because: "… she knew she needed [them]" (Emma: Interview).

She appeared very satisfied with the level of feedback she obtained from her peers, generally finding it "very useful" (QI, 15), and believed that her improvements on the course were mainly the result of the feedback she had received. In fact, she felt the value of peer feedback was such that many more drafts would have been useful to her:

> … not only a third draft, but a 4th and 5th … it would be endless. In each new draft both readers and writers have comments to do to improve it. I think that it is not possible to say that an essay is perfect, even after 8th drafts! (Sara: QII, q.10)

She pointed out that she preferred the feedback she received from her peers on this course to most of the teacher response she had received during her degree. She had often found the feedback from teachers rather "disappointing", in that they did not give the kind of detailed and critical response she really felt would help her improve her writing skills and her English.

It is not surprising, then, that the data concerning Sara's revising practices showed her to be a very diligent reviser. However, an analysis of her uptake of comments suggested she was not particularly skilled at discriminating between useful comments and those that might damage the text. She clearly had a high level of confidence in her readers' opinions and suggestions - as she said: "I trusted them very much" (QII, q.5) - and accepted most of what they suggested, even when she was not convinced that they were right.

However, it would be wrong to characterise her as a writer who was willing to cede all rights to her texts. There are examples of her rejecting comments for considered reasons.

> I preferred my own analysis, that is, commenting on each of the points at the end of the paragraph (Sara: CRF (Comment Rejection Form))
> I don't agree when they say "link whole paragraph" (line 46). I think it's linked already (Sara: WRF)

In addition, other revisions show evidence of thoughtful interpretation of reader comments rather than automatic and uncritical acceptance. For example, on one occasion she accepts the readers' comment, but also changes another part of the sentence to grammatically agree with the revision, demonstrating a broader perception of the revision in terms of the entire sentence structure than the readers had shown.

Draft 2 - Original	These people claim that it is the women's right to decide for the life they are carrying.
Draft 2 - Feedback	woman's - "the" + sing (in this case for specifying)
Draft 3 - Revision	These people claim that it is the **woman's** right to decide for the life **she is** carrying.

Another example of this thoughtful application of comments is where a suggestion at one point leads Sara to correct an error of the same type mentioned in a comment, but earlier in the paragraph:

Draft 1 - Original [they] have frequent discussions about which football team is the best one or which football player is the best …

Draft 2 - Feedback [they] have frequent discussions about which football team is the best one <u>or which football player is the best</u> … Repetition. "or player"

Draft 3 - Revision People become so obsessed with their favourite football team or ~~football~~ player that…

These examples show the writer to a certain extent generalising from the comments she receives, suggesting an active and far from mechanical involvement in the revising process. As a result of this she sometimes improved on the solutions offered by the readers. In one case, her readers warn her about repeating the word "competence" three times in two sentences. She makes the revision, but also corrects the word, which is in fact misused, to "competition". On another occasion, a single comment by her readers leads to a series of revisions involving the reorganisation of two paragraphs, the development of a new thesis statement and a revised summary. In making a change in the content of the essay, Sara was often aware of the repercussions this could have on other parts of the text, and attempted to modify these appropriately by undertaking substantial restructuring. These revisions are not explicitly suggested by the readers, but are the result of Sara's interpretation of their comments as well as her awareness of how changes in one part of the text may affect those in another.

In terms of her own revisions, Sara also proved to be an enthusiastic reviser: she made an average of over 27 revisions per draft. This underlines Sara's persistence and determination to improve her text. However, more than three-quarters of her own revisions dealt with surface matters, and, as with all the writers, overall they did not achieve the same high rates of validity as the revisions she made based on her readers' comments. Although she did in fact make many successful revisions, she made almost as many incorrect revisions, so that ultimately her texts would not have improved substantially on the basis of her own revisions.

5.3. EMMA: FINDING A NEW VOICE

As her team-mates noted, Emma had the greatest difficulties of all the writers in the group because she had problems in accepting the style and canonical structures her readers insisted that she should use for English academic writing. Her own style was similar to Spanish academic discourse in being somewhat literary and rhetorical, something that her readers felt strongly was inappropriate, as numerous comments on the first draft of the first essay indicate:

Literary!

The third dimension? It's mysterious but it isn't ACADEMIC!

You're not Miss Radcliffe and this is not a gothic novel!

Emma found this feedback very upsetting:

> They tell me I'm using literary style. I think it is untrue … I'd like that (English academic writing conventions do allow me to do so (i.e. to use my own style). (Interview)
>
> I was not convinced that this was the best method to do it … and I wanted to do it in a way, perhaps more similar to what, for instance, a journalist makes, a person like that [….] I knew it was not exactly as the academic conventions say. But, well, I was frustrated because I couldn't do it the way I liked. (Interview)

She preferred a writing style that she felt was freer, more personal and less bound by conventions and the expectations of her readers:

> … it seemed to me too much cold, that way of writing, and you know, my mind was closed because I had to take into account too many things … and I think when you begin to write if you have so many constraints, you can not do it. (Interview)
>
> Perhaps if you have done it many times there comes a time when you can do things more or less in your own standard. It seems to me that with that, with so many rules, there is no difference between one writer and another. And that's why I think it's artificial… it's more difficult to gain your own style that way. (Interview)

Emma often rejected genuine reader requests for more explanation, definition, or information, suggesting strongly that she was less interested in communicating with her readership within the constraints of a particular discourse than in her own purposes and goals as a writer:

> I don't think I have to define every term I use (CRF)
> I don't think I have to be so explicit in any topic I deal with (CRF)

She pointed out:

> Other times, for instance, I found their requirements abusive. They asked me to give the meaning of some words and I thought that it was not my duty to provide a glossary. Many times, I felt as if they thought my essays were going to be read by someone out of this planet that needed explanations for everything I wrote. (Interview)

However, impelled by her readers' continued insistence, she attempted to find a way of writing that would satisfy both her readership as well as her own needs and intentions as a writer. In practical terms she gradually came to accept the fact that English academic writing required a less elaborate style than she was accustomed to using. However, she was never very comfortable with this compromise, and it seems probable that her reactions to this situation may well have conditioned some aspects of her revising practices negatively: in coming to regard her readers mainly as arbiters of academic discourse and conventions, she became less willing to accede to reader demands in areas related to content or ideas. In fact, she rejected a rather high proportion of potentially useful comments, more than half of which referred to content.

There is also evidence that Emma's confidence in herself as a writer and her motivation were damaged by the problems she had in developing this new voice. On many occasions she reacted rather defensively in the face of her peers' critiques. For example, she divided her WRF notes into "Points of Agreement" and "Points of Disagreement"; significantly, the latter almost always contained more points. In the following example she agrees to make the change proposed by her readers, although it is rather clear that she doesn't entirely accept their comment:

> **Draft 1 - Feedback** ~~behavior~~ behaviour
> They failed to realise that both [behavior, behaviour] are right (1st N.Am. English 2nd Br. English,). However, I'll change it (WRF)

She regularly critiqued their suggestions, even when she broadly agreed with them:

> My mates checked a serious syntactic problem (absence of subject). I'll change it, but I won't follow their suggestion since it'll [result] in too much subordination (WRF)

Even when the readers pointed out a weakness in one of her thesis statements, Emma argued:

> I think it needs much more improvement than they noticed (WRF)

Also, she often challenged the readers' understanding:

> The argument my mates do not consider as abstract is indeed so. Their confusion arose from the fact that it is followed by a reference, so they deduced I was paraphrasing (WRF)
> I tried to find out what they don't understand because I didn't delete information as they believed. At last, they really knew what I meant, it was only that they thought they didn't (WRF)

However, overall Emma proved that she could revise effectively, and she was particularly effective at discriminating between useful and potentially harmful feedback. Perhaps surprisingly, then, Emma did not revise effectively on her own account: in many ways she was the weakest of the four students. Although she made a reasonable number of her own revisions (over a third of her total revisions), many were incorrect and fewer than half led to improvements in her text. She also tended to concentrate mainly on surface issues, apparently seeing her own revision more like proof-reading than as an opportunity to reformulate or reconsider her text. Like María, she made minor surface corrections and adjustments, and almost never worked across sentence boundaries or made changes that affected meaning.

This may be a direct consequence of the fact that to some extent she felt dispossessed of her text, and never fully came to terms with the new discourse that her readers were demanding. She made considerable efforts to satisfy them, but she was never fully convinced of the merits of a plainer style and more systematic structure. Thus, in the end, she may have lost interest and involvement in what she was doing. She did in fact mention at one point, significantly, that:

> I don't feel that this is my writing (Interview).

By the end of the course, she believed that she had in fact managed to successfully develop a different voice, although she still felt rather ill at ease with it:

> I think I have found a middle point in which I can more or less do it my own way without violating the standard …[but] I'm not convinced I'm using my own style. That's the problem. But I think that little by little I'm introducing my own stuff. But very little by little. (Interview)

5.4. ESTÍBALIZ: THE PROBLEMATIC, SELF-DIRECTED REVISER

Estíbaliz was perceived by the other students as an analytical and critical reader, and as a writer who was interested in trying to express original and difficult ideas. However, she was by far the least effective of all the students at revising from peer comments. Despite receiving the greatest amount and the highest quality of feedback of all the writers, she failed to take real advantage of this input: almost all of the comments she rejected were in fact valid feedback. There appear to be three main reasons for this.

First, she appeared uninterested in or incapable of dealing with surface issues, although potentially she had a great deal to gain since the feedback she received was very accurate concerning the many small errors of grammar or spelling that she made. However, she was overwhelmingly concerned with the meaning and content of her writing. Second, her revising was highly erratic. Instead of working through the drafts systematically making changes suggested by her readers, and then making her own revisions, she tended to conflate the two processes, with the consequence that she often missed or skipped valuable reader feedback. Finally, like Emma, she experienced a significant amount of emotional stress in receiving criticism from her peers, which she felt prevented her from taking full advantage of comments that she admitted later were valuable and fair.

At least initially, Estíbaliz felt that surface errors were not of much importance. She made few mentions of them in her *Writer's Reactions Forms*, and commented that she "was not even looking at the little corrections in the essay" (WRF) and that she "thought the corrections were not so important after all" (WRF). She also observed that:

> I did think that all the mess about references, quotations, bibliographies was not very important. By that moment I thought I could get on without them (WRF).

Her main concern in revising was clearly at the level of content and meaning. As a consequence, she felt that first draft comments, being more concerned with global matters were thus of most value to her, because the "great flaws are there" (QI, q.12):

> I used to use more the suggestions about the 1st draft, probably because it is in it where the <u>true</u> (in my opinion) mistakes are spotted …. (QI, q.9)

Ignoring surface level errors until the second draft could have been a viable strategy. Unfortunately, she also failed to deal with these effectively on the second draft.

She was also apparently aware of her tendency to revise on the basis of her own ideas somewhat to the exclusion of her readers' suggestions:

> Perhaps, now that I … am thinking about it … perhaps I was very … very … so much obsessed with my own work, my own exposition of the work, my own errors, my own "aciertos" (successes), that I probably ignored what they were saying to me. That I don't … I was not … centered. It was as if it were my work, and I was to be responsible for that and … my own problem. (Interview)
>
> Very useful corrections, although many times I have not followed the corrections, not exactly: I follow the suggestions and then keep on rewriting and changing and discovering new flaws. (WRF)

Emma also noted Estíbaliz's tendency to follow her own path:

> She goes her own way. I think she made changes, but I'm not really sure the changes she made were the changes we pointed out [….] I don't think she did that because she considers our comments nonsense … simply because she works that way. (Emma: Interview)

However, Estíbaliz was not unaware of the weaknesses in her revising strategies. She felt that her constant revising and re-revising on her own account made her lose track of the readers' comments and suggestions, and later admitted that it may not have been the best approach, citing an incident that she felt was significant:

> In addition, many times I remember perhaps I […] only was to look for this kind of [surface] errors … in the screen … and afterwards I should have … printed it. But I […] sit in the … before the screen, and I started to change again things [….] I remember […] she [Emma] told me: "Stop! Stop! You are a "petarda" (pain), stop! You are all the time correcting and correcting. "Déjalo! Déjalo!" (leave it alone) (Interview)

Her inconsistency and lack of organisation was a major cause of her failure to exploit her readers' comments fully. In one example, she apparently randomly ignored three-quarters of the corrections in one paragraph, but then dealt with all those in the following paragraph. There are also many examples of sequences of whole paragraphs of comments which she ignored, followed by paragraphs where she took up reader comments – although not always systematically.

In addition, despite repeated errors being pointed out again by the readers on the next draft, Estíbaliz often failed to correct them. This led to her readers expressing their frustration:

> Little punishment for the next weekend: a) Write 100 times the word R-I-G-H-T-S …

This follows a sequence in which a misspelling has occurred four times in one sentence, as well as in other places in the text, and the writer has corrected some of the instances, but not all of them.

Unlike the other writers, she generally did not have a specific, justified reason for not taking up a comment. Her many "other reasons" (82 out of 95 rejections) are mainly to do with the following factors, which she specified in an aside on the CRF:

> Mistakes due to the medium / Lack of time and attention / Pacience ("Despistes" (oversights)
> I can't organize myself with … with so many things going over the table. It was very difficult for me (Interview)

It seems likely that some form of teacher intervention early in the course may have helped Estíbaliz to approach her revising in a more systematic and considered fashion.

Finally, some of Estíbaliz's inability to take full advantage of reader comments can be attributed to difficulties in coping with having her work criticised. She tended to leave a long time between receiving the feedback from the readers and starting to revise her work – something she admitted was "not an intelligent thing to do" (QII, q.10b), but which she always did because she found the whole process of receiving feedback very painful:

> When I spend too much time and effort doing something it literally makes me sick to look or to talk of it because I think it is after all not very good and therefore I retard as much as possible the encounter with the corrected drafts (QI, q.11)
> I hate, I hate to look at these things (Interview)

At least to some extent her problems seemed to stem from a very pronounced level of self-criticism, and that in her determination to perfect her writing she became so stressed and ultimately confused that this impaired her ability to revise properly. She saw this as one of her characteristics as a writer, but felt unable to do anything about it. It is interesting to note that her feelings about the feedback she received were generally very positive, although in fact she was over-optimistic about the use she made of it:

> I think I used to take all their suggestions in the draft into account (QI, q.15)

Nevertheless, uniquely among the four writers, she pointed out that the readers were not always giving her the feedback she felt she needed. She felt that she tended to write "long, complex and dense" essays and wanted to find ways to simplify her writing and make it more concise, whereas the readers tended to suggest expansions and developments of her text. She found this frustrating, but failed to persuade her readers to change their feedback:

> … there were times when I get annoyed [….] I remember I said to them: "Well, this is very long. Tell me how to solve them." And the suggestion was to make it longer, and it was, I was, I was in the border of tears. That was …horrible…. (Interview)
> I think it was actually impossible (for them to help me) because I was in fact entangling my readers in reading it as much as I was entangled in the act of writing it! The more useful suggestions were that ones that actually help me to simplify it, to disentangle, to organise. (Interview)

It has often been stated in the literature that the peer review process is partly concerned with enhancing a writer's understanding of the requirements of her audience (see, for example, Gere and Stevens 1985; Nystrand 1989; Nystrand and Brandt 1989), and helping her move from introspective, writer-based purposes to communicative purposes which take into account the demands of a specific readership. Less frequently mentioned is the importance of a degree of reciprocity within the writer-reader interaction which potentially enables the writer and her readers to establish a conceptual shared ground of preferences and priorities. In the case of Estíbaliz, this shared ground was incomplete. The lack of an effective open dialogue between the writer and the readers concerning the characteristics of the feedback to be provided left the readers defaulting to their own preferences – which in this case were diametrically opposed to those of the writer, i.e. to elaborate rather than to simplify. The importance of the writer articulating particular personal requirements about how the feedback could be done would seem to be an essential part of an effective peer response process. At this point teacher intervention could have prevented this disjunction between the writer's requirements and the readers' responses.

By the end of the course Estíbaliz felt that her awareness of the value of her peers' feedback, and of the importance of dealing with surface errors, had increased, although in fact there is little actual evidence of this in the revisions she makes in the final essay, which follow a similar pattern to those of the first two. She believed that she had learned to be more objective about her writing and had developed a greater awareness of her readers:

> In a sense I learn to distance myself of my writing, for example: in some occasion I have to struggle with a source to know what was it actually about, when finally I understood it I was very glad and decided to put it the way it was - as a quotation that my readers - naturally enough - didn't understand!!! I should think in them!!! This is what now I try to do. (QI, q.17)

She felt that the changes she observed in her writing as the course progressed came as a result of feedback: "both the one I gave and the one I received". By the end of the course she believed that the comments and suggestions of her readers were "essential", and added:

> I have no doubt now - although I acknowledge that many times I thought I can get along without it! (Interview)

Finally, although failing to take full advantage of peer comments, Estíbaliz proved to be a highly committed and rather effective self-directed reviser. She clearly spent a considerable part of her revision effort on her own changes, many of which led to improvements. Her own revisions illustrate her concern with substantive rather than surface issues: she was the only writer to make more global than local revisions. These global revisions sometimes involved major structural modifications – even, rather riskily, on final drafts – and can be contrasted with the rather superficial modifications which tended to characterise the other writers' revisions.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The students in this study shared a common cultural, social, linguistic and academic background. Superficially, their experiences during this course were similar: they all claimed to have benefited from the peer response activity, which they agreed was important and useful, and they all felt that they had improved as writers as a result of taking part in the response process, both as readers and writers. Yet their individual perceptions, experiences and revising behaviours were sufficiently different as to give pause for thought.

In reading the literature and engaging in research ourselves we should not forget what every teacher intuitively knows – that a class of students is composed of individuals, whose motivations, preferences, strengths and weaknesses are unique to each, and who may not comfortably fit into the often broad findings of research. In this study, for example, one of the students expressed a clear preference for peer rather than teacher feedback, finding it more satisfyingly detailed and thorough – an attitude which contradicts research suggesting that L2 students prefer teacher to peer feedback, even when they perceive peer response as valuable (see Zhang 1995, 1999). Another writer had a far stronger interest in substantive rather than surface level response – again contradicting the findings of a number of studies (see, for example, Fathman and Whalley 1990; Leki 1991; Robb, Ross and Shortreed 1984; Searle and Dillon 1980; Semke 1984; Zamel 1985). Although we may not often challenge the findings of well-conducted research, as practitioners we realise that these have to be balanced against the certain knowledge of the individuality of our students.

That peer feedback in the ESL writing classroom can be valuable, either in itself or as a complement to teacher feedback is by now generally agreed in the literature (see, for example, Berg 1999; Paulus 1999; Tsui and Ng 2000). However, its effectiveness seems closely related to the provision of some form of peer response training (Berg 1999; Nelson and Murphy 1993; Stanley 1992). Nevertheless, the differences between the four writers in this study would seem to suggest that something more than generalised affective or procedural peer response training may be necessary to maximise the value of the process for everyone. The potential value of detailed training activities such as those outlined by Berg (1999: 238-239. See Appendix D) seems undeniable, and yet of the writers in this study, two of them – Emma and Estíbaliz – had specific problems which even such extensive pre-training would probably not have prevented. This is partly to do with the typical focus of initial peer training on *giving* response, rather than *receiving* it. Future studies could profitably look into the effect of different types of peer training, including training writers in receiving and using feedback.

There is also a strong argument here for some form of ongoing training or intervention once the initial training is completed and the students are engaged in the process of writing and revising. This would have to take place as particular difficulties arose, and would require the instructor to maintain a close contact with the working procedures of the group, as well as with its output (using such instruments as the *Writers' Reaction Forms* and *Comment Rejection Forms*, as well as both the feedback itself and the revised drafts). Some of these problems would be self-evident because of their nature (e.g. Emma's emotional reaction to critical comments on her first essay

and her resistance to modifying her style, Estíbaliz's erratic and confused revising), while others might be less so (e.g. Estíbaliz's frustration that she was not getting the kind of feedback that she really wanted). The instructor could also deal with less critical but still important concerns (such as María's reluctance to revise her own drafts, or Sara's tendency to continue making a considerable number of her own questionable changes on the final draft) which reflect deficiencies in the writers' use of feedback that initial training may well not prevent.

Since even for this homogenous, collaborative and well-motivated group the peer review process was not unproblematic, it seems reasonable to suggest that for other less homogenous or harmonious groups more serious problems might emerge that could interfere substantially with the effectiveness of the response-revision activity. In such cases the need for ongoing instructor monitoring and intervention would be even more acute. Future research may consider investigating in detail the functioning of both successful and less than successful peer response to throw more light on how this monitoring and intervention might be done.

APPENDIX A. FEEDBACK GUIDELINES

Draft 1

*For the first draft you should concentrate on issues of **organisation** and **content**. As you work through the first draft, make sure you are focusing on the points below, as well as anything else that you think it is necessary to point out to help the writer do a better second draft.*

Organisation. Introductory paragraph. Thesis statement. Body paragraphs. Topic sentences. Supporting sentences. Conclusion.
Relations between: Thesis statement and topic sentences. Topic sentences and supporting sentences. Conclusion and topic sentences.
Content: Clarity of presentation of arguments and support. Clarity and reasonableness of the analysis. Objectivity. Equal balance of arguments on all sides. More than two perspectives / sides to the discussion. Detail adequate for topic. Use of external sources.

Draft 2

*For the second draft, you should concentrate more on **surface** issues, such as academic conventions and grammar, whilst still of course checking that **organisation** and **content** are adequate - particularly in reference to those problems you identified in the previous draft.*

Organisation (see Draft 1 Feedback Guidelines)
Content (see Draft 1 Feedback Guidelines)

Academic Conventions: Use of quotations. Use of paraphrases. Correct in-text references. Translations from Spanish. Bibliography.

Language: Vocabulary. Grammar. Usage. Proper academic register.

APPENDIX B. WRITER'S REACTIONS FORM

Please write your responses to the comments and suggestions your readers made about your essay. Use the questions below as a guideline for the kinds of things you might want to focus on, but you can write what you wish. Be as detailed as you like!

Did you feel annoyed/upset/angry/frustrated about anything they said?
How useful did you find your readers' comments, suggestions and corrections?
Which comments did you find most helpful?
Did you disagree with anything they wrote?
Did you need to go and talk to them for any reason? Why?
How many of their comments will you use on the next draft?

Please make a note of any questions you asked your readers **orally**, and whether the problem/ misunderstanding/ disagreement was resolved. Refer in detail to the essay itself (which paragraph, etc.). Write on the back of the page if you need more space.

APPENDIX C. COMMENT REJECTION FORM

Please indicate why you did not follow or take up a particular comment or suggestion, by using the categories below:

A: I thought what they said was wrong
B: I preferred my version
C: I didn't understand what they meant
D: I understood the problem, but I couldn't think how to improve it / solve it
E: Other reasons (please specify)

APPENDIX D. CONSIDERATIONS FOR PREPARING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN PEER RESPONSE. (BERG, 1999: 238-239)

1. Comfortable classroom atmosphere and trust among students
2. The role of peer response in the writing process
3. Professional writers using peer response
4. The teacher using peer response
5. Class peer response to writing
6. Appropriate vocabulary and expressions
7. The response sheet
8. Response to a collaborative writing project

9. Conversations among authors, responders, and the teacher
10. Revision guidelines

Departamento de Filología Inglesa
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
Cantoblanco
28049 Madrid
e-mail: paul.rollinson@uam.es

7. REFERENCES

ALLAEI, SARA K. and ULLA CONNOR (1990). Exploring the dynamics of crosscultural collaboration in writing classrooms. *The Writing Instructor* 3: 1928.

BERG, E. CATHERINE (1999). The effects of trained peer response on ESL students' revision types and writing quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 8 (3): 215-241.

BERKENKOTTER, CAROL (1984). Student writers and their sense of authority over texts. *College Composition and Communication* 35: 312-319.

CARSON, JOAN and GAYLE NELSON (1996). Chinese students' perceptions of ESL peer response group interaction. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 5 (1): 1-19.

CAULK, NAT (1994). Comparing teacher and student responses to written work. *TESOL Quarterly,* 28: 181-188.

CONNOR, ULLA and KAREN ASENAVAGE (1994). Peer response groups in ESL writing classes: How much impact on revision? *Journal of Second Language Writing* 3 (3): 257-276.

FATHMAN, ANNE K. and ELIZABETH WHALLEY (1990). Teacher response to student writing: focus on form versus content. In. Kroll, Barbara, ed., 178-190.

FERRIS, DANA (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly* 29: 33-53.

FREEDMAN, SARAH, ed. (1985). *The Acquisition of Written Language: Response and Revision*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

GERE, ANNE R. (1987). *Writing Groups: History, Theory and Implications*. Carbondale, Ill.: University of Southern Illinois Press.

GERE, ANNE R. and ROBERT D. ABBOTT (1985). Talking about writing: The language of writing groups. *Research in the Teaching of English* 19: 362-379.

GERE, ANNE R. and RALPH S. STEVENS (1985). The language of writing groups: How oral response shapes revision. In Freedman, Sarah, ed., 83-105.

HEDGCOCK, JOHN and NATALIE LEFKOWITZ (1992). Collaborative oral/aural revision in foreign language writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 1 (3): 255-269.

HUFF, ROLAND and CHARLES R. KLINE (1987). *The Contemporary Writing Curriculum: Rehearsing, Composing, and Valuing*. New York: Teachers College Press.

JACOBS, GEORGE, ANDY CURTIS, GEORGE BRAINE and SU-YUEH HUANG (1998). Feedback on student writing: Taking the middle path. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 7 (3): 307-317.

KROLL, BARBARA, ed. (1990). *Second Language Writing: Research Insights for the Classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

LEKI, ILONA (1990). Potential problems with peer responding in ESL writing classes. *CATESOL Journal* 3: 5-19.

LEKI, ILONA (1991). Preferences of ESL students for error correction in college level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals* 24 (3): 203-218.

LOCKHART, CHARLES and PEGGY NG (1995). Analyzing talk in ESL peer response groups: Stances, functions, and content. *Language Learning* 45 (4): 605-655.

MANGELSDORF, KATE (1992). Peer reviews in the ESL composition classroom: what do the students think? *ELT Journal* 46 (3): 274-284.

MANGELSDORF, KATE and ANN SCHLUMBERGER (1992). ESL student response stances in a peer-review task. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 1 (3): 235-254.

MENDONÇA, CÁSSIA and KAREN JOHNSON (1994). Peer review negotiations: Revision activities in ESL Writing Instruction. *TESOL Quarterly* 28 (4): 745-769.

NELSON, GAYLE L. and JOHN M. MURPHY (1992). An L2 writing group: Task and social dimensions. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 1 (3): 171-193.

NELSON, GAYLE L. and JOHN M. MURPHY (1993). Peer response groups: Do L2 writers use peer comments in revising their drafts? *TESOL Quarterly* 27 (1): 135-141.

NELSON, GAYLE L. and JOAN G. CARSON (1998). ESL students' perceptions of effectiveness in peer response groups. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 7 (2): 113-131.

NYSTRAND, MARTIN (1989). A social-interactive model of writing. *Written Communication* 6: 66-85.

NYSTRAND, MARTIN and DEBORAH BRANDT (1989). Response to writing as a context for learning to write. In. Anson, C. ed.: 209-230.

PAULUS, TRENA M. (1999). The effect of peer and teacher feedback on student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 8 (3): 265-289.

PIANKO, SHARON and ABRAHAM RADZIK (1980). The student editing method. *Theory into Practice* 19 (3): 220-224

ROBB, THOMAS, STEVEN ROSS and IAN SHORTREED (1984). Salience of feedback on error and its effect on EFL writing quality. *TESOL Quarterly* 20: 8395.

ROLLINSON, PAUL (1998). *Peer Response and Revision in an ESL Writing Group: A Case Study.* Unpublished PhD. Thesis. Madrid, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

ROLLINSON, PAUL (in preparation). The effects of written peer feedback on L2 writing and revising. Ms., Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

SAITO, HIROSHI (1994). Teachers' practices and students' preferences for feedback on second language writing: A case study of adult ESL learners. *TESL Canada Journal* 11: 46-70.

SEARLE, DENNIS and DAVID DILLON (1980). The message of marking: Teacher written response to student writing at intermediate grade levels. *Research in the Teaching of English* 14: 233-242.

SEMKE, HARRIET D. (1984). The effects of the red pen. *Foreign Language Annals,* 17: 195-202.

STANLEY, JANE (1992). Coaching student writers to be effective peer evaluators. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 1 (3): 217-233.

TSUI, AMY B.M. and MARIA NG (2000). Do secondary L2 writers benefit from peer comments? *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 9 (2): 147-170.

VILLAMIL, OLGA and MARIA DE GUERRERO (1996). Peer revisions in the L2 classroom: Social cognitive activities, mediating strategies, and aspects of social behavior. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 5 (1): 51-75.

VILLAMIL, OLGA and MARIA DE GUERRERO (1998). Assessing the impact of peer revision on L2 writing. *Applied Linguistics* 19 (4): 491-514.

ZAMEL, VIVIAN (1985). Responding to student writing. *TESOL Quarterly* 19 (1): 79-101.

ZHANG, SHUQIANG (1995). Re-examining the affective advantage of peer feedback in the ESL writing class. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 4 (3): 209-222.

ZHANG, SHUQIANG (1999). Thoughts on some recent evidence concerning the affective advantage of peer feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 8 (3): 321-326.