Exploring the Dynamics of Cross-Cultural Collaboration in Writing Classrooms

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As teachers of writing have adopted the idea that writing should be taught as a process, from the generation of ideas to the fine-tuning of the final editing, much interest has been focused on the use of peer collaboration at various stages of the writing process, particularly in guiding students in responding to the writing of peers. Bruffee ("Conversation") an early advocate of the use of peer collaboration, argues that "collaborative learning provides the kind of social context ... in which normal discourse occurs: a community of knowledgeable peers." In this context, "students can practice and master the normal discourse exercised in established knowledge communities in the academic world and in business, government, and the professions" (644). Of course, students are not yet members of these established knowledge communities, but Gere argues that they can negotiate their way toward acceptable discourse: many of the comments they make as they respond to each other's writing begin with the phrase, "I don't know ..." or "I don't think ...". Student writers comment on and question their own work: they ask, "Does this example make sense here?" or, "I'm trying to show why Joe is so alienated from his family. Does that idea come through clearly?" (70)

The social community of the peer group also provides student writers with a real audience. Gere points out that student writers are often alienated from their audience and find it difficult to remember what the readers need to know. A peer saying, "I don't understand," forces students to respond to their audience and to find a way of stating their ideas more effectively. Bruffee ("Practical Models") notes that a student can learn to be "an astute and demanding audience before he becomes a clear, effective writer" (640). Astuteness does not happen overnight, but as students read and reread their own and each other's writing, they are increasingly able to identify lack of substance, organizational weaknesses, unclear writing, and illogical ideas. As their ability to identify strengths and weaknesses in their peers' writing develops, they are able to transfer this ability to their own writing and to begin to write more clearly, coherently, and logically. Thus, peer response groups can provide inexperienced writers with a forum in which they learn to explore the effectiveness of their ideas as they have expressed them in writing.

Although the use of peer response groups has been widely embraced in writing courses for native English-speaking students, ESL
writing instructors have been slower to make these groups an integral part of the writing classroom despite research on the composing processes of first language (L1) and second language (L2) writers, based on case studies with small numbers of students, which suggests that all student writers, L1 and L2, have similar problems in composing and revising their writing, and that they follow a similar recursive pattern of prewriting, composing, revising, and editing (Zamel; Raimes; Cumming). Instructors of non-native English-speaking students often find that using collaborative groups effectively in heterogeneous classes of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, with mixed language abilities, is often a daunting prospect: differing communication styles may lead to conflict among "collaborative" group members and differing notions about conventions of "good" writing may lead to quite different responses to writing from the responses an L1 reader might provide.

Two fields of cross-cultural research bear directly on the use of cross-cultural collaboration in writing groups: sociolinguistic research on oral interaction and the applied linguistic research area of contrastive rhetoric. The first helps us understand oral interactive behavior in groups, and the second helps explain different styles and conventions in writing cross-culturally thus relating to the evaluation and types of comments students make on each other's writing. We review these two areas of cross-cultural research briefly and then make recommendations for using collaborative peer response groups successfully with multicultural classes.

Research on Cross-cultural Oral Interpretation

Research by sociolinguists on the style and patterns of oral interaction show interethnic and cross-cultural differences that often impede communication. Highly relevant for our discussion on collaborative writing groups is the research by Scollon and Scollon, most of which took place in educational settings. These researchers studied cross-cultural interaction between Athabaskan Indians and native English speaking Americans, observing frequent conflicts in that communication. They found differences between these two groups in how they choose to speak: Athabascans typically speak less than American English speakers. Scollon and Scollon explain this difference in terms of the Athabascans' high degree of respect for the individuality of others and a careful guarding of one's own individuality (15). Therefore, any conversation can be threatening when the points of view are not known. However, once Athabascans get to know another person, they become more talkative. American English speakers, on the other hand, were observed to be talkative on all occasions, feeling that the best way to get to know a person is through
conversation. But when two people who know each other well, then

talking becomes less necessary for Americans. Misunderstandings
easily arise between the two groups; Athabascans may think that
American English speakers talk all the time, whereas, American
English speakers may assume that Athabascans do not want to talk.

In addition to the amount of talk, Scollon and Scollon observed
differences in the expected role of the speaker and listener between
Athabascans and American English speakers. For the latter group, the
person in the superordinate position is the spectator and the
subordinate person is the exhibitionist. Accordingly, students at school
and job interviewees, for example, are expected to do the showing off,
the talking. In Athabascan culture, the reverse is true. Therefore,
Athabascans view American English speakers as egotistical, flaunting
their abilities. Athabascans, on the other hand, are viewed by
American English speakers as unsure, aimless, withdrawn, or
incompetent. Further, Athabascans are hesitant to start a conversation
and typically do not provide a closure.

As a way to understand and explain cross-cultural differences
related to presenting oneself in actual utterances (speech acts), Scollon
and Scollon suggest the use of Brown and Levinson's model of
universal politeness phenomenon. In this model, the saving of face
(the public self-image) of oneself and the interlocutor is considered a
universal phenomenon, but the strategies for achieving face-saving are
culture-specific. Scollon and Scollon modify Brown and Levinson's
model, identifying two major strategy types: solidarity politeness and
defereence politeness. Solidarity politeness includes strategies that are
clear, direct statements in which the speaker claims to be part of the
same group as the hearer, assuming reciprocity, and attending to the
hearer's wants and needs. Deference politeness, on the other hand,
includes communicative strategies that assure the hearer's right to
independence and autonomy. Threatening the hearer's face is
minimized through apologizing, using ambiguous impositions, or not
stating the impositions at all.

Scollon and Scollon claim that conflict arises between Athabascan
and American English speakers because of different politeness
strategies; Athabascans use more deference politeness strategies,
whereas American English speakers rely more on solidarity politeness
strategies. Similar findings on conflicting communicative styles are
found in other sociolinguistic research (although the same politeness
terms may not be used). Gumperz has shown different cultural
expectations about how paralinguistic signals should be interpreted.
When speakers of Indian English used increased volume to get the
floor in conversation, speakers of British English thought they were angry. British English speakers typically get the floor by repeating an initial phrase until they are successful in capturing their interlocutor's attention. Tannen studied differences in conversation between male and female natives of New York and California. Her research showed that New Yorkers were much more willing to interrupt another speaker and to introduce new topics than the more relaxed Californians. Shiffrin's research on the argumentative strategies of American Jewish speakers points to argumentative habits as part of expected social interaction, which may cause communication problems with other American English speakers (311-34).

Given such findings, it is not surprising that conflict, or at the very least, high levels of discomfort, may occur in multicultural collaborative peer response groups. Peer response activities as they are usually organized would seem to rely heavily on solidarity politeness strategies (we're all in this together, so let's talk about our writing). However, Scollon and Scollon caution against imposing solidarity politeness as the norm, suggesting that deference politeness strategies are the most effective way of minimizing conflict in cross-cultural communication. As writing instructors, we cannot ignore the possibility that asking students from different cultures to participate in collaborative peer response groups is asking them to adopt communicative styles that they may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with.

Research on Contrastive Rhetoric

Writers' perceptions about the nature of good and acceptable writing are also important in cross-cultural collaborative situations. Research evidence suggests that preferred styles and conventions of writing are culturally determined. After observing problems with L2 writing of international students, second-language acquisition researchers have tested theories about differing writing patterns in students' L1 cultures. Kaplan's 1966 research, labeled contrastive rhetoric, was the first major study that attempted to analyze how one's L1 thinking and discourse structures manifest themselves in L2 writing. Influenced by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Kaplan argued that the writing of the L2 students in his study, particularly their paragraph organization, exhibited the students' L1 cultural thought patterns, and that these patterns could be studied through linguistic and stylistic means.

In the past decade, contrastive rhetoric has shifted its emphasis from examining paragraph organization to deeper levels of discourse meaning in context, assuming that L2 writing displays preferred conventions of the L1 language and culture rather than reflects L1
thought patterns. There has been an extension of contrastive rhetoric from sentence-level to discourse-level analysis and to considering writing in context, for example, in the context of a collaborative classroom. Students' L1 cultural orientation has been claimed to manifest itself in all aspects of writing, including the social context of the actual writing (Connor; Folman and Sarig; Grabe and Kaplan; Kaplan "Thought Patterns Revisited").

Alan Purves's work has been important in shaping the direction of this new contrastive rhetoric. Purves and Purves speak of writing not as a skill, but as "an activity dependent on the prior acquisition of knowledge" (178). They argue that this knowledge is of several kinds: knowledge about the material to be discussed in writing; knowledge of words and grammatical constructs; knowledge of text structure and text models for each genre (e.g., business letter vs. narrative story); and knowledge of social and cultural roles of when it is appropriate to write and how the interlocutor should be addressed.

Empirical evidence indicates that such domains of knowledge are culturally determined at least to some extent. For example, Kaplan's original research points to differing conventions of paragraph organization cross-culturally. Research on narrative story writing by English-, Arabic-, Vietnamese-speaking children suggests that content and structures of stories maintain L1 characteristics (Soter 201). Cross-cultural research on argumentative writing has shown differences in patterns of support given to back up claims made in sample essays written by high school students from three English-speaking countries (Connor) as well as differences in the levels of abstractness and concreteness of language and formality and informality of writing as measured by multi-dimensional/multi-feature syntactic analysis (Connor and Biber). Similarly, Hind's research on coherence patterns between Japanese and English texts (150) shows that the preferred Japanese expository passage follows a pattern alien to native English speakers, known as "ki-shoo-ten-ketsu" (i.e., begin argument; develop it; turn it to a subtheme where there is a connection but not a directly connected association; bring this all together and conclude). Jenkins and Hinds also show that American, Japanese, and French business letters can be analyzed on the dimension of reader-based versus writer-based prose and that the French letter tends to be writer-based, the American letter reader-based, and the Japanese letter in between (327-49). Finally, Matalene, after the experience of teaching English in China, discusses the importance of knowing about the widely different premises of rhetoric in Western and Chinese cultures (789-808). In the Western culture, we espouse originality in writing through the "authentic" voice,
we encourage self-expression and stylistic innovation. Our logic is Aristotelian, based on inductive and deductive reasoning. In Chinese rhetoric, on the other hand, "being united" (not different) and using a vast number of proverbs, maxims, and pieces of folklore based on memorization of literary and historical texts is important.

The implication of this new expanded definition of contrastive rhetoric, which includes analyses of the various stages of the writing activity, is significant for teaching practice in ESL and other writing classes with students from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Culturally-preferred conventions manifest themselves, not only in the final products, but in processes in which students engage while writing. Classrooms are impacted because of different cultural orientations concerning "appropriate" topics and audiences for writing and attitudes towards collaboration (coauthoring, workshopping, peer reviewing, and social meaning making).

Using Collaborative Groups in Multicultural Classrooms: Some Practical Guidelines

Despite these linguistic and cultural factors which may complicate the use of cross-cultural peer response groups, we have used these groups extensively in writing courses for non-native English-speaking students. Realizing that the level of comfort that students have with peer response activities is crucial to the collaborative process, we have conducted informal surveys of student attitudes and have had frequent discussions with students about how comfortable they feel with the peer response process. The overwhelming majority of students enjoy the interaction with their peers, finding the input they receive from them helpful when revising their writing.

However, these discussions have revealed three areas of concern. First, some students (mostly East Asian) state that they are uncomfortable making negative statements about their peers' writing; they would rather focus on the things that they like. Such students are likely relying heavily on the deference politeness strategies discussed earlier. Second, some students (mostly Middle Eastern) express reluctance about being asked to share their writing, particularly if it is expressive, personal writing, with other students. They feel that such writing is not appropriate for an academic context. Finally, some students feel constrained by weak language skills from making contributions to the peer response process. One student, for example, at the end of a written response to a peer's essay, wrote: "I am sorry. My English bad. I cannot say anything about your writing." Variations in English language proficiency can indeed complicate peer response activities, especially if some advanced students are writing at a level
that students with a lower level of English proficiency are not able to comprehend.

In order for collaborative peer response groups to be successful in multicultural classes, it is essential that students understand why they are being asked to participate in these response activities and that they are prepared for the activity. Gere points out that we cannot merely put students together in a group and expect them to operate successfully. This is even more true for students coming from non-Western cultures, many of whom may not be used to being asked to perform a task as part of a group.

To prepare students from diverse cultural backgrounds for participation in collaborative groups, we make the following recommendations. First, before forming groups for peer response activities, plan several group activities that will allow students to interact with each other in a non-threatening way. These activities might include brainstorming a list of the qualities of effective writing (Hamilton-Weiler, an activity that can provide a great deal of useful information for the instructor about the ideas students are bringing with them about writing; discussing readings that highlight cross-cultural differences in communication styles and how these differences may influence group dynamics; and discussing scenarios such as refusing requests, pointing out mistakes that a peer has made, or placing blame at the scene of an accident, again with the purpose of highlighting cross-cultural differences and their implications for cross-cultural interactions.

Second, provide models for ways in which students can respond to their peers’ writing (Elbow and Belanoff). Using an essay from a student volunteer, for example, read the essay aloud and provide an oral reader response focusing on the content of the essay and how clearly the writer is communicating the main idea. Bring copies of a student essay for the entire class to respond to in whole class discussion, discouraging responses such as "I think it's good" unless accompanied by an explanation of what makes it good. Emphasize that the purpose of the response is not for students to criticize or evaluate, but to provide feedback about how they perceive the piece of writing as readers. What elicits an emotional response? What elicits agreement? disagreement? apathy? Show how suggestions can be phrased positively ("more examples would help me understand your point better") rather than negatively ("you don’t have enough examples").

After explaining the rationale for using collaborative response groups, leading students through several group activities, and modeling
ways of responding to their peers' writing, allow students to choose their own response groups (you may want to stipulate that there be different native languages represented in each group, if possible). By this point, students should have had the opportunity to interact with many of their classmates at the group level and observe different interacting styles; allowing students to select their own groups give them the freedom to choose groups with which they feel comfortable. We recommend that the size of the groups be kept small, with only three or four students per group, and that the same groups be maintained throughout the semester. Maintaining small groups throughout the semester enables students to get to know their groupmates quickly. As trust builds, the deference politeness strategies that some students may depend on become less important, enabling freer interacting to take place.

The first peer response activity once the groups are established should also be as non-threatening as possible. Having students share prewriting, for example, and discuss possibilities for developing their ideas into an essay gives them an opportunity to share their writing with little risk: everyone knows that prewriting is very preliminary. Then, when they have written first drafts of an essay, they are more likely to be willing to share with their peers. At that stage, having students provide a copy of their draft for each group member to follow along and mark as they read aloud can considerably reduce the anxiety students with poor pronunciation or reading skills may have: the presence of two media, oral and written, while not guaranteeing comprehension, does reduce the chances of incomprehension.

Also, allow students to get some of their own agenda for their group sessions. For example, asking students to come prepared with a list of three to five questions that they want their groupmates to help them with (this activity also needs to be modeled) requires students to take responsibility for their group interactions and gives them the opportunity to focus on what is most important for them, helping them to communicate meaning within the context of their groups.

Conclusion

When students understand that they do not have to be critical experts in order to respond to their peers' writing, and have been provided with specific ways of responding to writing as readers, not as teachers, then the peer response activity becomes a real forum for exploring ideas about writing. In this exploration, students should be encouraged to regard different cultural orientations as assets, not as disadvantages.

Although this article has focused on using collaborative peer
responses with multicultural classes of non-native English speaking students, we feel that collaboration between native and non-native English speakers can also be highly beneficial. Native English speakers can be sensitized to differences in oral interactive styles as well as different ways of discussing a problem or supporting an argument in writing. For the non-native English speakers, collaboration with native speakers will enhance their language skills, hopefully, in a way that would allow them choices between L1 and L2 conventions that best express their "authentic" voices and contribute to social meaning making from their own perspectives.

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**Works Cited**


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