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# Peer-review activities: Transitioning from private to public writing

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## Abstract

Most of the written works produced by language teacher trainees while pursuing their degree are only read by professors and are meant to evaluate students' knowledge (Carlino, Iglesia, & Laxalt, 2013). Writing, then, seems to be conceptualized as a mere channel to communicating something that students already know. This does not only neglect the epistemic function of writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) but also oversimplifies the writing process (Russell, 2013). With the aim of reframing the place of writing in teacher education, this presentation shows how feedback practices can become an arena where students reflect on their own writing processes as well as enact and learn a scholarly practice such as peer review. Specifically, it shares some concrete ways of scaffolding learning (Vygotsky, 1986) by transitioning from whole-class to peer-centered revision activities. On the whole, this pedagogical stance embraces rethinking student writing as an activity in which they work not only with texts but also with their own identities (Kamler & Thomson, 2007) as academic writers.

## Introduction

While pursuing their studies, English teacher trainees produce different types of written assignments, such as exercises, exams, and papers, to comply with the demands of their courses. Frequently, these writings are addressed to professors and serve the purpose of evaluating students' knowledge on certain topics (Carlino, Iglesia, Bottinelli, et al., 2013). These uses of writing can lead to the misconception of writing as a mere conduit (Turner, 2011) that serves to communicate something that students already know. The belief that when students write, “they just put their thoughts on paper” undermines the epistemic function of writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) and oversimplifies the writing process (Russell, 2013).

This presentation intends to reframe writing in language teacher education by showing how whole-class and peer-review activities can inaugurate a space where students exercise a very common scholarly practice: giving and receiving feedback on preliminary versions of texts. By taking a disciplinary writing course<sup>1</sup> as an example, this paper analyzes how students can actually

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<sup>1</sup> The *Lectura y escritura de textos en lengua extranjera* (Reading and writing in a Foreign Language) course is taught by the author. This curricular space was designed as an academic writing workshop as it belongs to the *Trayecto de Profundización* that students in the *Profesorado de Educación Superior en Inglés* have to take towards the end of their studies. This course is offered twice a year in a teacher training institution located in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. SUPLEMENTO *Ideas*, II, 5 (2021), pp. 101-106

enact scholarly literacy practices with others (professor and peers) and gradually become better academic writers, instead of “doing exercises” to later be able to write as scholars. In the following section some theoretical concepts and their relationship with the course design are explained. Then, with a focus on the review activities proposed in this class, the importance of transitioning from private to public writing is explained. It is concluded that more pedagogical spaces that highlight meaningful reading and writing practices as well as joint actions are necessary for our teacher trainees to become better prepared professionals.

### **Learning to write by doing it with others: work with drafts and comments**

The teaching rationale for the *Lectura y escritura de textos en lengua extranjera* writing course was based on several assumptions. First, the class was conceptualized departing from a situated learning framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that conceives learning as a social activity. Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is central to this perspective; it describes how people learn by participating in a legitimate way in a community of practice by fulfilling activities which are peripheral but productive. These activities grant newcomers the opportunity to explore different viewpoints while getting involved in various social relations in the community while guided by old-timers or more experienced members. Their LPP gradually transforms both participants’ understanding of the community of practice and the community of practice itself. As a result, newcomers become part of a new system in which “the person is defined by as well as defines these relations” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). In this sense, learning implies “becoming a different person” (p. 53) since it is “an evolving form of membership” (p. 53) and, thus, it entails developing a sense of identity.

Therefore, from a situated learning perspective, it can be stated that students learn disciplinary writing practices by gradually participating in the social practices of a disciplinary community, in our case: English language teachers. Thus, writing is not a result of a social practice, but it is a social practice itself. Consequently, it cannot be divorced from the cultural and social contexts in which it is enacted (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Learning academic writing in English for a future language teacher, then, does not imply “internalizing” some objective knowledge about writing or the target language, but developing a writer identity in relation to real tasks tied to a real disciplinary community of practice (Colombo, et al., 2016). This means that students should transition from producing private writing addressed only to the class professor to producing meaningful texts that contribute to their disciplinary communities of practice.

Therefore, in this writing course students are required to pursue an authentic academic writing project during the whole term. This means that instead of turning in several written assignments, they have to become involved in only one real writing task. As academics do in real life, students have to research a topic of their choice as well as search and choose one publication venue, such as a conference or a research journal. Thus, they have to produce their paper following the guidelines offered by the chosen publication venue. Whether they finally present their papers or not, the aim is that students produce their writing keeping in mind a wider audience than just the class professor. The literacy practice they face, then, answers a real communicative event, motivating them to try to anticipate their readers’ expectations. Consequently, in this course students are expected to learn how to write an abstract, a conference paper, or a research article in a situated manner by actually doing it.

Second, in addition to facing a real-world writing task, for learning to occur students need to participate in a meaningful manner. Therefore, to learn literacy practices they do not only need to interact with academic texts and more experienced people, but they also need to do it in a certain way: engaging in LPP. Individuals achieve this by observing or enacting practices while performing a culturally meaningful activity. This process leads to a participatory appropriation (Rogoff, 1990,

2008) through which individuals change thanks to their engagement in an activity. Consequently, if we want our students to appropriate the specific ways that scholars communicate through academic writing, we have to facilitate a shared process where novice writers achieve a participatory appropriation in order to acquire effective writing strategies. This happens when a novice, while engaged in meaningful writing tasks, interacts and talks with others who offer scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1986). The participatory appropriation, thus, allows students to gradually enact academic writing practices in a more autonomous manner and, in Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms, achieve full participation in their communities of practice. Nevertheless, learning literacy practices associated with the writing-for-publishing process is not simple, and students need to be scaffolded in several dimensions. This scaffolding can be provided not only by the teacher but also by peers who are more knowledgeable in certain aspects of the writing process. The following section focuses on a specific literacy practice that surrounds the making of a publishable paper: the peer-review process.

### **Talking about text, talking about comments**

The *Lectura y Escritura de Textos en Lengua Extranjera* course was designed with the aim of engaging students in real writing practices so as to create an arena where learning academic literacy practices is actually achieved by doing them (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990, 2008). During the first class, students negotiated with the professor an authentic writing project that they would develop during the term. Once they defined their topics and publication venues, they were asked to produce and bring to class a first draft: an abstract following the requirements of their own publication venues. In the classroom, using a computer and a projector, the professor modeled how to give written feedback: she wrote comments on students' drafts making sure to verbalize everything that she was thinking while performing this activity. This is what Wells (1990) terms "to talk about text": to demonstrate and explain the literacy practice that is being enacted, making explicit why the person is doing what he/she is doing. During this class, the professor also offered a mini-lecture on different types of written feedback (e.g., global vs. local feedback, grammar vs. content-oriented feedback, etc.), explaining the advantages and disadvantages related to each way of commenting texts. Some guidelines were agreed on with the whole class on how to comment drafts.

After this demonstration on how to give written feedback, students participated in whole-class revision activities until the end of the term. These activities served several purposes. First, they broaden the text's audience since students' drafts brought to class were read at least once by everybody, not only by the professor. Second, these activities highlighted writing as a gradual process, with revising as a key component. Third, and most importantly, the whole-class revision activities opened a space for shared participation in a joint activity since they brought students and teacher together in the task of revising texts. This is, students achieved LPP in the review activity since they participated in a joint literacy activity (reviewing a draft), while being scaffolded by an expert (the professor). In different iterations of these whole-class revisions, the professor engaged students to participate: she gradually allowed them to take over more and more of the task of giving meaningful feedback to peers.

After three instances of whole-class revision and as they advanced with their drafts, students started participating in peer-review activities. They worked in pairs or in groups of three and commented each other's drafts. They first exchanged written comments via email and then, in class, they talked about those comments with their peers. At least half an hour of every class (out of 2 ½ hours) was devoted to small-group conferences where authors and reviewers exchanged ideas and, if necessary, worked on the drafts. In every class, students also continued participating in whole-

class revision activities and discussions. It is worth mentioning that, towards the end of the term, the expert role in these whole-class revision sessions was not only performed by the professor since students would participate more and more by offering interesting insights about how to improve the drafts.

In addition to the aforementioned revision activities, every class the professor would open a space where students could share any kind of resources and tips that they thought useful to advance with their writing such as: how to organize readings, how to revise drafts after receiving feedback, among other things. She also prompted students to share feelings associated with their own writing process and with commenting and receiving comments on their texts. These dialogues also serve to reflect on and suggest improvements for the peer-review activities. In other words, small-group and whole-class activities did not only allow talking about and acquiring socio-rhetorical and linguistic knowledge, but they also provided an evaluation of the feedback practices students were enacting.

All the previous activities around feedback practices contributed to the teaching and learning of feedback literacy (Sutton, 2012) because students in this class were granted LPP in a specific academic literacy practice: peer review. Classroom activities allowed them to gradually move from novice to expert peer reviewers. They started enacting a peripheral but legitimate practice of observing and then collaborating with the teacher when she reviewed a text, and later managed to come closer to full participation in their community of practice by performing peer-review activities on their own.

## **Conclusion**

In this class students transitioned from private to public writing not only by pursuing a real-world writing project addressed to an authentic audience beyond the classroom walls, but also by peer reviewing their partners' drafts. In this sense, they worked with consecutive drafts as scholars do, and someone proofread their papers before sending a final version for publication. Peer-review activities were carefully set up as to provide scaffolding to students. As a result, thanks to the LPP they achieved, students in this class learned the literacy practices of scholars in the Language Education field by actually practicing them. In addition, the way of working in this class also allowed students to share and improve their revision strategies as well as to reflect on the role that collegial critique of texts and the peer-review process play in the making of a publishable paper. They learned to write for publication by actually facing real writing-for-publication projects while being scaffolded by their professor and peers.

The course was designed with the belief that after enacting these literacy practices in a public but sheltered environment (the classroom), students would be better prepared for doing it in the real-world. This pedagogical rationale has been applied for the last 5 years and, since its inception, several students have presented in conferences. These results show that more attention should be paid to the role that writing occupies in teacher training institutions: do we want it to be a mere evaluation tool or do we want to prepare future language teachers to be valuable scholars who contribute to knowledge construction in their disciplinary communities of practices?

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